

Lesson 8: Church Community

Key concept

The church

Bible study

1 Cor. 12:12-31

Colossians 3:8-17

Memory verses

Colossians 3:12-14

Objectives

- ❖ Understand that the local church is a body and a community
- ❖ Demonstrate why, according to Jesus, we all need the church

Bible Study

Why does church matter?

According to the pollsters, most Americans think church isn't necessary. More than one in five Americans (22%) say they never go to church, not even on Christmas or Easter:

(www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-03-19-sin_N.htm).

According to a Harris poll, 59% of Americans do not go to church regularly, and the number is even higher (79%) if you go by the statistics from the Religious Tolerance website (www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm).

So, in essence, though Americans might not say it, their lives are screaming, "I don't need church." The Bible, in response, says, "No. You do need church. It is critical for your spiritual health." So, in this study, we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about the role of the church in your spiritual journey.

Read **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**. In 1 Corinthians 12, God boldly rebuts conventional wisdom in our culture about the church and says:

(1) Followers of Jesus need the church to flourish

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (v. 12-13). So here is what this is saying, "When you become a Christian (which is symbolized by being baptized), you become part of the body of Christ." You become a part of His physical representation here on earth—you are baptized into the body of Christ, which has a physical expression known as the local church. The church, therefore, is the body, and you are a part of that body, either as an eye or an ear or a nose or whatever body part (see also Eph. 5: 22-33 and Col. 1:24, where the church is called the body of Christ).

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But think about it. An ear or an eye can't function, much less flourish, apart from the body. Certain body parts may be kept alive for brief periods of time when they have been severed from the body, but they simply won't make it for long. When there is a car wreck, what do they often do with organ donor parts? They rush them to the hospital. Immediately. Why? Because you can only keep severed body parts working for a short time. Their only hope (and proper function) is to be quickly attached to the body.

Pretty gruesome, huh. But here is one thing that is certain from this body analogy: you won't be able to function in the way you are intended to as a follower of Jesus if you, as a body part, are severed from the body (i.e. the local church). The only way an ear does what it should do is if it is connected to the rest of the body; likewise, the only way followers of Jesus do what they should do in life is if they are connected to the church.

So, the first reason the church matters is because you can't function as you were intended to as a follower of Jesus without a life that is integrated into the local church. This means you should be using the gifts God has given you in and through the local church; that your spiritual growth is to happen in and through the local church; that your mission and the mission of the church should be bound up together.

Now we come to the second reason for why being in a local church matters. **Read Colossians 3: 8-17.**

(2) Followers of Jesus need the church to participate in the new humanity
Left to our own desires, the natural inclination of men and women is to surround themselves with people who look, act, talk, dress, and think similar to them. Sociologists call this the homogenous unit principle, and we have developed a common idiom to capture this phenomenon by saying, "Birds of a feather flock together." But Paul, in Colossians 3, says that those distinctions that keep society apart in the city should not do so in the church, where "*there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all*" (v.11).

The church is to give you a taste of the new humanity, pushing you across barriers that normally divide in the city. For example, Greeks and Jews were the two major ethnic groups of Paul's day. They didn't eat, socialize, or worship together. Inter-marriage was forbidden. And yet Paul says this is not to be so in the church. In the city, race is all and is in all you do; in the church, Christ is all and is in all you do.

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These Greek/Jew tensions (or racial tensions) still rip apart our world today (and, unfortunately, our churches). A CNN article entitled “Why Americans Prefer Their Sundays Segregated” states that less than 5% of American churches are racially integrated and half of those are becoming segregated. “[Scholars] say integrated churches are rare because attending one is like tiptoeing through a racial minefield. Just like in society, racial tensions in the church can erupt over everything from sharing power to interracial dating” (emphasis added). Hear that phrase—JUST LIKE IN SOCIETY. There is the problem. The church, according to Paul and to Jesus, wasn’t intended to look just like society, where race and class and culture reign supreme; rather, the church is to give people a vision of a new humanity, a group bound together by the Spirit of Jesus that has created a new race of people from every tongue, every tribe, and every nation.

Dr. Martin Luther King articulated this as well as just about anyone ever has. Dr. King, who fought the modern day Jew/Gentile problem of race in America, had every reason to give up on the church. Think about how bad things were in the church when he wrote a *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Dr. King, who is standing up for the rights of the oppressed through nonviolent civil disobedience, receives a letter from 8 white pastors in the Birmingham area informing him that not only was the segregated white church in Birmingham not coming to his aid, but they were calling King to repent. But, unlike most skeptics today, King didn’t ditch the church. Listen to what he said in *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*:

“I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church...Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society...Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated.”

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Dr. King didn't abandon the local church. He was a pastor, rooted and grounded in the local church. His solution wasn't to give up on the church. No, he called the church to really be the church, where Christ is all, and is in all. He called the church to be a thermostat that adjusts the racial climate, not a thermometer that simply measures it. King wasn't calling the church to be JUST LIKE SOCIETY (a thermometer measuring society), but rather to CHANGE SOCIETY (to be a thermometer) by fleshing out the new humanity. Oh, that we at Harbor would become so Jesus-intoxicated that we would be a colony of heaven here on earth, a church where Christ is all, and is in all. You need to be a part of that—we need you to help us live into this heavenly calling here on earth. You can't experience the fullness of the new humanity alone. You need the church.

(3) Followers of Jesus need the church to keep them from being theologically arrogant

Here is another reason you need the church: if you don't have a local church, you are in danger of becoming theologically arrogant. Why? Because you never have to submit to anyone else. Ephesians 5:21 says, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" If you don't have a local church, you are a denomination of one and you submit to no one. It is literally "Just Jesus and Me." You are the sole arbiter of truth. And Jesus never supports a "Just Jesus and Me" approach. Think about all the Biblical metaphors—a body with many parts, a family, a flock, a community, a church. He always calls you into a community, a church, where the rule of the day is mutual submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(4) Followers of Jesus need the church to develop character

"Therefore, as God's chosen people [i.e., as the church], holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). Clothe yourself with these character attributes. But those of you who are (or have been) skeptical of the church should rightly ask, "Why do I need the church to develop my character?"

Here is why. Character development only happens over long periods of time where you have people who are committed to you—for better or for worse. Colossians 3:13 says, "*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" In the church you have people who are bound by the command of Jesus to bear with one another, to forgive as He forgave, to not just walk away and cut off relationship when a friend sins against you. Why? Because Jesus has done this with us when we sinned against Him; when we forgive, we get to be like Him and as we do this over time, His character is being formed in us.

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Many of us try the seminar route for character development. This is the approach of going away to a seminar or a camp retreat to get all fixed up in one weekend. But, conferences and Christian camps, as good as they are, aren't enough. Some of you have experienced the "high" of a Christian camp. It is like the best kind of buzz. You go away to some idyllic setting in the mountains. You get away from the dirt and grime of the city and broken relationships, Christian music is always playing, and you see everyone there in the most ideal light possible because no one has the normal stress and strain of life. Everyone is a happy Christian putting on his or her happy Christian face. Then you come back to the valley of life and you start to wonder if you are even a Christian anymore because the mundanity of life settles back in.

What do you need to do? Go back to a camp or conference? No. You need a church committed to Colossians 3:13-16 for life. You need a church committed to *forgiving/bearing with* (v.13), *loving* (v.14), *peace* (v.15), and *teaching and admonishing one another in the gospel* (v.16). If you have this, then verse 12 happens—your character is being formed. You're putting on the clothes of Jesus.

Those of you who are skeptical are thinking, "Can't I get this in other areas?" In part, yes, but not in full because the church is the only thing that won't allow you to run. Here is why. In every other area of your life you simply leave when things get tough. If you don't like the way you are being treated at work, you resign. If you have a friend that doesn't treat you well, you just don't hang out with them anymore. Marriage is, sadly, no different—we get divorced like we open and close bank accounts.

But inside a local church committed to the Gospel, Jesus doesn't allow you to just walk away when the going gets tough. He says so in Matthew 18, where He outlines a process for how we handle conflict in the church. Jesus doesn't allow you to just walk away when you get ticked. No. He says relationships matter. Go to that person. Repent and be reconciled. And if they won't listen, then step 2—bring in one or two witnesses. Listen to Matthew 18:17, "*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*" Jesus didn't say tell it to your lawyer. He didn't say tell it to all your friends so they know what a jerk your friend is. No—He says get the elders of the church involved. The local church, according to Jesus, is the crucible that creates character in followers of Jesus.

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Memory Verses

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

-Colossians 3:12-14

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Individual Study and Group Discussion

Opening Question

Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. The poll results at the beginning of this lesson indicate that many Americans don't think church is necessary in their lives. Do you think church attendance is necessary? Why or why not?
2. 1 Corinthians 12:21-26 makes some surprising claims about the value of different parts of the body. How do you interpret these verses to apply them to the body of Christ, the church?
3. Do you agree that the church should be a place where distinctions and barriers between people are broken down? Why or why not?
4. If you have one, share an experience from your life when you realized that submitting, or being accountable, to other people in the church was more important than going it alone.
5. Do you see yourself and others in the church becoming part of "the new humanity" described in Colossians 3:12-17? Share a specific example.