

Training Session 8 - The Foundation: Church

Objective

Demonstrate why, according to Jesus, we all need the church

Key Scripture

1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Colossians 3:8-17

Introduction: Does church matter?

According to the pollsters, most Americans think being involved with a local church isn't necessary. Not just that it isn't a foundational element, but it isn't necessary. More than one in five Americans (22%) say they never attend a local church, not even on Christmas or Easter.¹ 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.² Even among Americans who might not say it, their lives are screaming, "I don't need a local church."

Why? For starters, unless you are very young or very new to Christianity, you have experienced church hurt. Church hurt comes in many forms and fashions. Church splits, gossip, sex abuse scandals, trails of broken relationships and unresolved conflict, people in positions of spiritual authority acting manipulatively to build their own little kingdom, hypocrisy, judgmental spirits, and on and on.

Church hurt leaves many shaking their heads saying, "I've got enough guilt on my own. I don't need you wagging your finger at me in judgment and I don't need you hurting me anymore. No thanks." In modern sound bites, you hear, "I like Jesus, but not the church. I'm a spiritual person, but not religious. I'm not into the institutional church."

Despite all the challenges, Jesus seemed to think gathering to worship as a local church was critical. He himself made it his regular practice to go to church. In Luke 4:16, we read, "On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, **as was his custom.**" His custom was to gather with a local body of believers in a particular place to worship God. Why? Why did Jesus do this? Because He seemed to think it was critical for His journey and for our journey, so much so that He commanded us in Hebrews 10:25, "Do not give up meeting, as some are in the habit of doing." So in this training session, we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about the role of the local church in your spiritual journey and why it matters in building a rock solid foundation for our lives.

We'll begin with one of the seminal texts on the church. Read **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**. In I Corinthians 12, God boldly rebuts conventional wisdom in our culture about the church and says:

Followers of Jesus need a 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.” Now continue the metaphor. 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 unattached 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. 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, without a life that is integrated into the church, you can’t function as you were intended to as a follower of Jesus.

Read Colossians 3: 8-17.

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 ourselves with people who look, act, talk, dress, and think like us. Sociologists call this the homogenous unit principle, and this phenomenon is captured by the saying: “Birds of a feather flock together.” But Paul, in Colossians 3, tells us that those distinctions which 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 gathered expression of the local 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.

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).³ 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.

“Yes, but the opposite is happening in my local church,” you respond. “My local church is segregated and seems to perpetuate racism more than the new humanity.” Listen to the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King before you check out. He, if anyone, should have given up on local, racist churches. He didn’t.

Think about how bad things were in local churches when he wrote a *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Dr. King, who was standing up for the rights of the oppressed through nonviolent civil disobedience, received 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.

Unlike most skeptics today, however, King didn’t *give up* on the church but instead called the church to *rise up* and be 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.”⁴

Despite all of the water the local church was taking on, Dr. King didn’t abandon ship. He stayed, hand on the wheel, and called the church to be the church, where Christ is all, and is in all. Rise up, church, rise up, and be the church. Even if your gathered expression of the church is white or black (as King’s was), you can, like King, prod and plead and pray that your local church will be a thermostat that adjusts the racial climate, not a thermometer that simply measures it. King preached in a local, black church and in the universal church, calling the universal Church to have countless representations of the true body of Christ all over the world, some white, some black, and some cross-cultural. King wasn’t calling local churches to be JUST LIKE SOCIETY (a thermometer measuring and mirroring societal racism), but rather to CHANGE SOCIETY (to be a thermostat) by giving flesh to the body of the new humanity, even if your local church (as his was) is primarily one race. Oh, that we would become a Jesus-intoxicated colony of heaven here on earth, a church where Christ is all, and is in all. We can’t do this alone--we need other

white-hot, Spirit-filled followers of Jesus in our lives to help fan the flame of our love for Christ and the new world that He is forming.

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.

Followers of Jesus need the church to refuel

We're in a battle. We have an enemy who is fiercely opposed to the kingdom of God advancing and taking more enemy-occupied territory. Currently, he is holding a large number of hostages and God has called us to go and liberate them with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. True enough, Jesus saves (we don't save ourselves), but the crazy thing is that He has chosen us as His soldiers to carry out His mission of seeking and saving the lost who are being held hostage by the enemy.

The work, however, extends far beyond saving the souls of those who are being held hostage. Our King is making all things new (Revelation 21:5) and in doing so He calls *all* of us to give *all* that we are to the renewal of *all* things. As a student, as a parent, as a mom or dad, as a butcher, baker, or candlestick maker, we're called to think hard, work well, and love strong. Giving your very best and working with excellence in all these spheres of life is demanding and will leave you spent at the end of the week. Yes, our work can be life-giving and fulfilling at times, but our work and our relationships are also filled with thorns and thistles and at the end of six days it can leave us feeling poured out and used up (Philippians 2:17; Romans 12:1).

Enter the role of a local church. At the end of a long week, we need to be refueled. A local church, rightly envisioned, is a refueling station that (re)fills us with the good news of the hope and joy and victory of Jesus Christ. We've been battling all week and we need the church to help us remember that our Commanding Officer won the decisive victory on the cross. We need to eat the bread of life and drink the living water in songs and in sacraments. As a mentor often said, "We leak the gospel," and he is right. The gospel leaks out of us, for better and for worse, so it is critical to be refueled for the battle ahead. We need to be encouraged and equipped to head back out there with swords drawn and shields at the ready. Maybe this is one reason Jesus kept saying to Peter, "Feed my sheep." Do what? "Feed my sheep." If you love me, Peter, feed my sheep (John 21:7). Church is about being fed for the battle. It's about being equipped "for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:12).

Sadly, many churches act as if the real battle is Sunday. It's all about getting you to come build their thing. There is little if any focus on equipping you to head out to the front lines of battle to serve and love a beautiful and broken world. If this is your experience, don't give up on the church. Keep hoping and keep searching until you land in a local church committed to feeding you and equipping you to serve, love, and go to battle.

Finally, don't let a building (or the lack thereof) confuse you because a church has nothing to do with a building and everything to do with a body or a group of people who function as a city on a hill who are letting the light of Christ shine (Matthew 5:16). The term used to describe a local church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which means a gathering of people who are "called-out" and "set-apart" (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 4:17), but that begs the question. Set apart for what? Set apart for God's mission of loving Him and the world to life. We can't accomplish this mission alone. We need a local refueling station. We need a local church.

Discussion Questions

1. Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?
2. The poll results at the beginning of this lesson indicates that many Americans don't think church is necessary in their lives. Do you think church attendance is necessary? Why or why not?
3. What is the thing you struggle with most in the local church? What do you love most about the local church?
4. 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 local church?
5. Has it been your experience that the local church is a place where distinctions and barriers between people are broken down? Why or why not?
6. 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.
7. 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.

Endnotes

1. www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-03-19-sin_N.htm.
2. www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm
3. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/08/04/segregated.sundays/index.html>
4. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-from-birmingham-city-jail/>