

Connecting in the Church

A culture of individualism has led some Christians, especially in the West, to think they can avoid “organized religion” and solely live the Christian life on their own. God never intended us to be “isolated” Christians. After we make a personal decision to follow Christ, we cannot sustain our spiritual walk aloof from other believers. God understands this and that is why He provided the local church as a place where we can experience spiritual growth and help others we find there.

I. Why Church Involvement?

It is not an accident that one of the best definitions of evangelism tells us that true conversion should result in involvement in a local church. William Temple expressed it this way: “Evangelism is to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that men [and women] might come to trust Him as Savior and serve Him as Lord in the fellowship of His church.”

In today’s world, those relationships are found primarily through the church. It is vital to our spiritual lives that we understand the eternal importance God places on the church and why we need to be involved.

II. What Do We Mean by “Church”?

The word translated *church* in the New Testament is from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means “called out ones.” It’s a word that simply identifies those who have separated from the world through relationship with Jesus Christ. The church is not a building and not an organization. It is a living organism made up of Christians.

The church can be understood in two ways. First, there is what is called the invisible church. By this, theologians do not mean that you cannot see it, but that it represents all Christian believers from the past, in the present, and in the future. It will be their destiny to live with Jesus Christ Himself in an eternal community of believers.

Using the metaphor of Jesus as the Shepherd and believers as the sheep, He said,

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:27–29 NKJV)

To be a Christian is to be in a relationship with Christ where we trust and follow.

The second aspect of the church may be called “the visible church.” This refers to those who can be seen actively involved in a community of faith where Christians seek to grow in their spiritual lives and serve Christ. It's so vital that each member be dependent upon the other that the New Testament repeatedly exhorts us to stay involved:

Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24–25 NKJV)

III. What Are the Benefits of Church?

When we overcome our desire for independence and become involved in a local church, we receive great spiritual benefits. Let's briefly examine some of them.

- ***A Place to Worship***

We glorify God by our lives and in our worship. And that is why worship is key in the life of each Christian and in the practice of the church as a whole. The praise and honor we express to God privately and in corporate worship will continue into eternity.

Individually, we can have an attitude of worship every day of the week, as Paul commands when he says, “pray without ceasing” and “in everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18). But if the goal of worship is to bring glory to God, worshiping by ourselves is not enough. When Christians with the attitude of

worship come together, the glorifying, magnifying, and honoring of God is multiplied many times over. When we do that, we are drawn closer to Him and to one another.

- ***A Place to Grow***

The believer is exposed to a variety of religious ideas over a lifetime. It is interesting to note that the growth process God has designed for the believer depends on being nourished by the Word, which is truly biblical content. Peter uses the illustration of a child's need for milk: "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2 NKJV).

The Greek word translated "pure" in this verse could literally be translated "unadulterated." The text of the Bible itself is the central ingredient for taking in spiritual truth. Churches that faithfully teach and preach the Word are an invaluable source of nourishment for the believer.

- ***A Place to Fellowship***

One does not have to be a Christian for much time at all before realizing that God is holy, and we have a tendency to sin. Even though we may sincerely try to obey, our wrong choices may not only inhibit our fellowship with God but also may drive a wedge between individual believers. The remedy for that is ongoing cleansing and reconnecting with God and other believers in fellowship.

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:5–7 NKJV)

The Greek word for "fellowship" is *koinonia* and means "to have all things in common with." As believers, our ultimate identity is linked through Christ with our heavenly Father and with one another. Having Christ in common is the great basis for all fellowship.

- ***A Place to Give Back***

When someone has been given a wonderful opportunity to

prosper, they often feel the need to give back to others from the resources with which they themselves have been blessed. By giving financially to the local church, we can help expand ministries of outreach and growth, assist the poor, and send missionaries into the world to expand Christ's kingdom. Central to the whole idea of giving back is the motivation God desires of us.

So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:7–8 NKJV)

As we cheerfully plan to give to the Lord's work, we have the promise that God will provide for our needs and multiply opportunities for good works.

- ***A Place to Serve***

The local church is a place where gifted leaders can provide training so we can find a place to serve the Lord. Paul describes it in this way:

For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12–13 NKJV)

The Greek word translated “equip” is a fishing term used for sewing up holes in fishing nets. The connotation is very significant. Many of us may feel inadequate in teaching others, using our musical talents, or helping out in some other way. You might say we feel a gap in our training. That is why God has provided gifted leaders to provide training so we can have our gaps filled in.

IV. The Picture of Head and Body

The primary analogy the New Testament gives to help us understand God's intention for the church is that of a body with Jesus Christ as the Head and all believers as various body parts responding to the leadership of the Head.

Paul explains this as he speaks of God's honoring of Jesus: "He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22–23 NKJV).

When Jesus left this world, He promised His followers that He would send the Holy Spirit to live inside them and, in that way, His presence would be magnified in this world through Christians. The Holy Spirit, alive in us, is what gives life to the body of Christ, which is the church, and control of the various parts of the body is through the Head, Jesus Christ Himself.

Again, Paul helps us to understand this when he says,

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and all have been made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13 NKJV)

One of the implications of the body analogy is that we as Christians are united. In describing the church, Scripture not only says that we are members of one body, the body of Christ, but also that each part of the body has a particular function that works in conjunction with the other parts. Paul specifically says that just as our physical body has eyes, ears, nose, hands, and feet, so the members of the church have varying but complementary roles, designed to support and work with the other parts (1 Corinthians 12:15–27).

An example Paul gives is that if one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts (1 Corinthians 12:26). We know this to be true with our physical bodies. When we cut our hand, the hurt is felt in the hand, but the entire body responds. Our mouth cries out in pain. Our white blood cells get busy fighting off infection, and the cells organize to form a scab and to heal the wound. Many parts of the body work together to make this happen. In the same way, Paul indicates, we as members of the body of Christ rush to the aid of a member who is suffering. In short, the members of the body work together for the good of the whole and for the accomplishment of God's work in this world.

V. Spiritual Gifts

God has promised He will assign to us a function in the body and, in doing so, He will give us the abilities to perform that function to benefit the body and to glorify Him. He calls these special abilities *spiritual gifts* because they are given by the Holy Spirit. When we put into practice the gifts God gives, we are able to do things we could never even dream of doing on our own. When we rely on the Spirit's gifts, we find that what we do and what we say have power and effectiveness that we don't have in any other way. We are supernaturally gifted to do supernatural work.

What are some of the gifts or abilities the Spirit gives?

We find lists in Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:8–10; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:10–11. These gifts include serving, faith, teaching, prophecy, evangelism, giving, leading, showing mercy, wisdom, knowledge, and healing. They are all to be used to strengthen the church and to share the message of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:4–5,26; Ephesians 4:11–13).

As we look at these gifts, we begin to see that if the various parts of the body exercise the functions they have been given, the needs of the church, as a whole and as individual members, will be met. For example, those who have the gift of teaching teach God's Word, and all the members benefit.

Those with the gift of evangelism are eager to bring others into the body by introducing them to Jesus, its Head. Those who have gifts of administration take care of the organizational leadership of the body, and those who have gifts of mercy lead others in meeting the physical, financial, and emotional needs of the members of the body. Those who have the gift of faith take us to new levels of service both in the church and in the world around us.

How can we know which of these gifts are ours?

First, we ask the Holy Spirit to show us. He may draw us to a particular gift as we pray and as we observe needs among the believers with whom we worship and serve.

Second, we try out our gift by serving in areas of interest or where we sense a tug. If that service results in a good response from those with whom we work, and if there is an echoing approval from the Spirit within us, we can move forward, expanding our use of that gift to the glory of God.

VI. A Beacon of Spiritual Light

The local church is an imperfect institution because it is made up of imperfect people. Invariably, there will be some discord at times in the fellowship of the redeemed. Yet our mission to be a light to the world and providers of spiritual truth must outweigh any minor differences we may have with others.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.”(Philippians 2:14–16 NKJV)

When, instead of complaining, we ask God for positive solutions, we can make progress toward being a spiritual beacon to those who have not yet found the Savior.