

The Church as Community

Various Scriptures

BI: The God who adopted us into His household calls us to live in a kind of community that magnifies the glory of His name.

Being a Christian is not something we are supposed to do alone. Yes, it is a personal matter, but it is not to be a private one. When you and I were born again, we were adopted into a family. God's family. And that family is not only a great big network of people that stretches all the way around the world, but also a small nuclear family that lives together as a particular congregation.

The church is very much like your family. You, no doubt, have relatives in places you have never been, some of whom you have never met. But you also have a nuclear family, the people who share the same last name, live in the same house, and with whom you interact at some level almost every day. That is what the church is like. While its true that we have extended family all over the world, we live in a nuclear community of people *for* whom and *to* whom we are accountable every day.

Last week we considered the glory of the church. This time I want us to consider the community of the church. A local church is not simply to be a weekly collection of individuals who have no connection to one another the other six days of the week. No. God has called us to live in community. To be a Christian is to be a member of God's family not simply at a theological level, but at a very personal level.

Let's say your family consists of five people. There is dad and mom and three kids. One evening you sit down to dinner and someone asks, "Where's Bobby?" Dad looks over at mom and says, "You know, I don't think I've seen him at the dinner table in days. You'd think a 10 year-old would be reluctant to skip dinner." Mom says, "Huh! Come to think about it, I haven't seen him in the home-school room for a while either. Have either of you kids seen Bobby?" Jenny, the 13 year-old says, "You know, I bumped into him when we went to the mall the other day. I asked him how he was doing and he said everything is fine." Is there something wrong with this picture?

On the one hand, something is wrong with Bobby that he feels the freedom to wander around and do his own thing. On the other hand, there is something wrong with Dad and Mom that they haven't even noticed that Bobby has been missing for days. This is not how a family is supposed to function. And, beloved, this is not how the church should function either. We are a family.

Now, let's take a few minutes to think about this. The Bible has some important things to say about this issue. First of all, the Bible teaches that...

I. The Church is the Father's Household:

1. Turn with me to 1 Timothy 3:15. Here Paul is instructing Timothy about how to lead a church. For our purposes, however, I just want us to take note of what Paul calls the church. He writes, "but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God..."

2. You see, the church is God's household. We are God's family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and that makes our relationship something very special and very important.

3. The N.T. is very explicit about our relationship with one another. Turn with me to Romans 12. In this passage Paul is confronting the believer's sense of individualism. Let's read Rom. 12:3-5.

4. Now in the first two verses of this chapter Paul cautions them about letting the world dictate how they relate to one another and to God. Their problem was that they thought of themselves too highly (3). Each individual thought of himself as kind of a lone-ranger who had a relationship with God, a spiritual gift, and a place to show off that gift; namely, the church. But Paul is teaching them (and us) that this is precisely the *wrong* way to think of the church.

5. The church is not a loose collection of independent individuals. We are less like a spiritual club and more like a human body. Read v. 4. "For just as we [the church] have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we [the church], who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."

6. "Members of one another." What does that mean? It means that God has designed the body of Christ in such a way that the members are dependent upon one another for spiritual health and growth. The heart only lives so long as it is organically related to the lungs. The eyes can only see so long as they are organically connected to the brain.

7. So it is with the church. Show me a Christian who is not intimately connected to the other members of a local body and I will show you someone whose spiritual health is iffy, whose spiritual maturity is stunted, and whose battle against temptation and sin is frequently (if not usually) marked by defeat. The point is, we were never intended to live the Christian life alone. We need one another by design.

8. Turn with me to Eph. 4:25. As we saw last week, the golden thread that ties everything in this book together is the church. In the first three chapters Paul explains how the church came into being and who belongs to the church. The last three chapters explain how we are to live as a church. Here in chapter 4, Paul is explaining that God has gifted the church with certain men who are to feed, lead, and protect the church so that we will (14) no longer be like children, tossed here and there by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine..."

9. Rather (15) we are to "grow up in all aspects into Him who is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

10. You see, God has so designed it that there is no such thing as a healthy, spiritually productive, Christ-exalting “lone ranger” Christian. If we are going to be protected, nourished, healthy, fruitful, and strong, we must be functional parts of a local body of Christ.

11. This is God’s design and it is (for our well-being) God’s command, because we are God’s household. He is the Father, and we are his children. So the church is the Father’s household. But how does the Father’s household function at the practical level.

II. Community is the Father’s Priority:

1. At the heart of community in the church is the biblical concept of fellowship. What is fellowship? Well the GK word is one that many of you already know. It is the word *koinonia*. In the NT it is variously translated as “participation,” “partnership,” “sharing,” and, of course “Fellowship.”

2. Fellowship is the difference between your relationship with your nuclear family and your relationship with your extended family. Your out-of-town relatives may be people that you like and you accept them as your aunts, uncles, and cousins. You may even look forward to the occasional holiday or special occasion when you get to reconnect with these men and women. You love them and you share a relationship with them that is different than your relationships with the rest of the world. They are your extended family.

3. Your nuclear family, however, is quite different. These are the people with whom you live in community every day. These are the ones with whom you share a life of interdependence. And so it is with the church.

4. This is by God’s design. God created us with the intention of showing the world what He is like. And as the three Persons of the Trinity live in interdependent unity, so we — the church — are to live together in interdependent unity.

5. What does this look like in the local church? Well, we could spend several weeks looking at all of the things the N.T. teaches on this subject, but today it may be helpful to narrow our study down to what we might call the “one-another” commands of Scripture.

6. What kind of community does God intend us to share? Let me offer seven descriptors: The church is to enjoy the kind of community that:

A. Authenticates our witness (John 13:34-35). Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

B. It is the kind of community that enables us to solve personal problems. In Rom. 15:14 Paul writes, “And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.” (i.e. Competent to counsel).

C. It is the kind of community that is marked by caring for one another. In 1 Cor. 12:24-25 we read, “But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, ²⁵ so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another.” In practical terms, this means serving one another. It means keeping your eyes on the prayer requests that come through on the email to know the needs of others and then get busy meeting those needs.

D. It is the kind of community that is marked by supporting one another. Galatians 6:2 reads, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” This goes beyond watching the emails. This requires getting into one another’s lives deeply enough to know the heart-aches, personal struggles with temptation, and disappointment they face so you can minister appropriately. You can’t do that if you are detached from the community.

E. This is the kind of community that protects us from unbelief. Hebrews 3:12-13 is a critical text on this subject. The author of Hebrews writes, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another [how often?] *day after day*, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

When someone calls me or comes for counsel because they have fallen into sin, one of my first questions is, “Are you an active, functioning member of a good local church?” Most of the time the answer is no. You see, the community of the church is designed by God to protect us from the unbelief that justifies sin. It is a tremendous protection against disastrous choices.

F. It is the kind of community that motivates us toward Christ-likeness. Once again, the author of Hebrews speaks to this. Heb. 10:24-25, “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Wow! Can it get any clearer than that? Its no wonder you are struggling with your walk with the Lord. You’re denying yourself the means of grace God has established to motivate your faithfulness! Disconnecting yourself from the community of the local church is not only sinful, it’s bad for you. You can’t keep yourself motivated to be faithful all by yourself. You need the church.

G. It’s the kind of community that preserves our holiness. James 5:16 says, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

Listen, the only people you are going to feel the freedom to confess sin to are the people with whom you enjoy a deep relationship of confidence and trust. These are people who understand the gospel; who know how to apply it to you life; who are not afraid to hold your feet to the fire and are committed to praying for you and with you about your struggle with sin. This is the community of the local church.

7. You see, beloved. The church was not created to be a loosely connected bunch of independent individuals. It was created to be the kind of community that shows the world what God is like.

8. How is your relationship with Christ's church? Have you been holding yourself aloof? Perhaps you've been making excuses to justify keeping a comfortable distance from the community. If this is you, I just want to encourage you right now to repent. Confess to God that you have had a low view of His church and that you want to honor Him by becoming all that He wants you to be for the good of His people in this church.

BI: The God who adopted us into His household calls us to live in a kind of community that magnifies the glory of His name.