

Thoughts on the Church: God's Plan for This Age

A preacher was once asked, "What is it that has kept your church from becoming all the church it could be for Christ: ignorance or apathy?" His reply was a terse, "I don't know and I don't care." Unfortunately, behind the humor lurks a tragic reality. Far too many believers either do not know or they do not understand the importance of the local church. Even worse, too many do not care!

This article on the centrality of the church—including both the people and the place—was born out of my deep desire for God's best for His people. It is time that we recognize that in order to stay biblical in our walk with Christ we must understand the importance of the local church. We cannot be right with God if we fail to understand and apply the essential plan of God's church in our lives. I'm talking not exclusively of a place but also of a people. As has been His practice through the ages, God uses people to get His message out. He had used Israel in a spectacular way in a previous era, similar to how He now uses the church. God has called out a people to display His grace and mercy. Whereas He formerly used Israel to show Himself and to display His glory to the world, He now uses the church to accomplish this purpose of showing forth His excellencies (1 Pet 2:9). In order for us to be effective in His work, we must understand and implement the fundamental priority that the New Testament places on the Church.

Vince Lombardi, Hall of Fame coach of the Green Bay Packers, became notorious for his emphasis on fundamentals. His team won championships because the players could block, tackle, and execute moves better than anyone else. When frustrated by his team's performance, Lombardi held up a football and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football!" He is also popularly noted as saying that winning isn't everything, but making the effort to win is.

The Apostle Paul knew the importance of winning—being true to the task God called us to. The age of law was on its way out and the church age was being ushered in as a new "mystery" (i.e., an old truth that is being revealed). Now that Jews and Gentiles would serve together as one body, the church, I can almost see Paul saying, "Folks, this is the church...here's what it is and how it is supposed to operate." He fleshes out the fundamentals of the church, especially in the Pastoral Epistles. As we study together about the significance of the church, I trust you desire to be faithful to being the beacon of truth that God desires every part of His Bride to be.

Paul sounds a refreshing call for us to get back to the fundamentals on the significance of the church in his epistle on the church's structure in 1 Timothy. In three short verses (3:14-16) he expresses the centrality of the church in the Christian experience. It was the notable, quotable A. W. Tozer who exclaimed that "the church is the highest expression of the will of God in this age" (*The Vital Place of the Church*). If God used one of His apostolic messengers to record God's central plan for the ages and uses present day teachers of His truth for the same purpose, why aren't people getting it? What is the problem?

The problem with believers' indifference towards church life can be clearly seen through observable symptoms such as lack of faithful attendance and diligent service. A common attendance equation looks like this: cut the number of morning

worship service attendance in half and that figure is what you have for the evening attendance (if there even *is* an evening service). Cut that number in half again, and, if you're lucky, that's how many might show up to the midweek service of prayer and Bible study. No, we're not looking to promote religion (i.e., merely outward symbols of spirituality), knowing that folks can be present, though not engaged, but we are seeking vibrant fellowship, involvement, and engagement in grateful service. There is no guarantee that just because a person is in the church building, that they are in fellowship. But by not being there, they are indicating they are not interested in fellowship with other believers or the Lord through singing and the Scriptures. Yes, each member of the body is to be actively fellowshiping, serving, worshipping, and learning *as part of the body*.

Deficient attendance is not the only visible symptom of apathy. What about supporting the church through prayer, financial giving, and serving in all aspects of ministry? There are believers who attend church and enjoy all the blessings that their local church provides but who have not become an active, growing part of the church by joining as members.

There's a story about a church that was having air conditioning installed in the sanctuary, and the pastor was meeting with the contractor. The man asked the pastor a number of questions about the seating capacity, square footage, usual attendance, etc., all the while taking notes. Then in the midst of his calculations, he suddenly crumpled up the paper he was figuring on and started over. "What's wrong?" the pastor queried. "I was figuring for a theater instead of a church," replied the contractor. "What's the difference? Wouldn't they be the same?" inquired the pastor. "No, not really," answered the contractor. "You see, in the theater with all that's being projected onto the screen, there are certain biological changes that take place: heart rate is elevated, blood pressure increases and body temperature can begin to climb. In other words, there is a greater need for cooling when people get excited. In a *church*, on the other hand..."

After reading a story like that, you almost have to laugh to keep from crying. Too often, I'm afraid the contractor has been right. The number-one spectator sport in America isn't NFL football...it's church. Somehow we've lost our perspective and view the church as a sanctified slumber party rather than a vibrant opportunity to praise the name of Jesus Christ and submit our lives to the scrutiny of His Holy Word.

This brief sketch should show rather succinctly that one's attendance and participation is a fair indication of one's interest in church. Furthermore, one's interest in church is a fair indication of one's interest in Christ, the Lord of His Church.

The Bible seems to distinguish two aspects of the church: it is both an organism as well as an organization, with neither to be disassociated from the other. Paul, in his address on church organization, as well as in his other epistles, identified the local church as the visible functioning unit of the universal church. All individuals are made part of the 'universal' church when they repent of their sins and trust Christ as personal Savior and Lord. Then all who are part of the universal church are to become members of the local church. Notice that pattern in the record of the early church: folks got saved, baptized, and joined the church (Acts 2:41). It is

the local church that is to be the guardian and propagator of the mystery of godliness to its particular location. It is her job to proclaim the truth of Christ's incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the necessity of a believing faith.

"I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 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, the pillar and support of the truth. By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:14-16, NASV)

It is this group called the church that Paul addresses in the above passage. He shares the main theme of the letter in the text we will look at. His message talks about how believers, who make up the Church, should conduct themselves as a local church.

Behavior/conduct—Paul hits hard at the issues of living two lives. You cannot have a life you live at work or home and another that you live at church. The issue here is a way of life, a consistent pattern of living. Christians who are part of the local church, who have been made part of the universal Church, the body of Christ, when they came to Him as Savior and Lord, are to show the change that took place in the way that they conduct their lives.

For instance, Paul reflects with the church that was in Ephesus about how their lives had changed. "Among them we too formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as the rest. But God...made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with Him...that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace...for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph 2:3-10).

House of God—This implies a family; not a place, but a people. This helps us to understand that when we speak of church, we are first and foremost speaking of the body of Christ, an organism that breathes and gives life. This is what we refer to when we speak of the universal church, that which the Holy Spirit makes everyone who trusts Christ a part of. Many references in the New Testament refer to this living "house" consisting of people who are saved (1 Pet 2:5; 4:17; Matt 16:18; Eph 5:25; Heb 12:23). Church ought to be a way of life, something that demonstrates authentic Christianity. When someone gets to know you, do they get to know the Lord? When someone sees your life—how you conduct it and behave—do they see your Savior that you represent?

Church of God—Here's where Paul introduces the organization. He never stresses the universal church as being sufficient apart from the local assembly. As you begin to understand this aspect of the church, you'd have to agree with A. W. Tozer that "whoever scorns the local church scorns the body of Christ."

The Greek word *ecclesia*, which means "a called out assembly" is used for church(es) in the NT 115 times. As has already been stated, this refers to two categories: the local church, with a specific geographical location and the universal

church, which includes all believers from Pentecost to the Rapture. Of the 115 references, four have no direct application and only sixteen are applicable to the universal church. So it is impossible to misconstrue where the stress of the NT lies. God's plan and desire for us once we are saved is to join and become an active part of a local assembly. It is our responsibility and privilege to show our obedience to His plan for the age in which we live.

I am so grateful for the home in which I grew up. On Sunday mornings we did not wake up and decide whether we should go to the church services or stay home and sleep in—it was not a choice. Sunday, the Lord's Day, was the day that the body of Christ in my local area would gather together as a church to fellowship, serve, and worship through singing, prayer, and the ministry of the Word. After all, isn't this what my parents were supposed to teach me, as dictated in the Word of God?

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 instructs parents to diligently teach their children about God's ways. However, this is not just an Old Testament injunction. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul exhorts fathers to take the initiative to raise their children in the training and admonition of the Lord. That training takes place formally in two places: in the home, where most living takes place, as well as at church, which is God's educational institution here on earth where He gave pastors and teachers to equip the saints, to perfect them in their walk with God (Eph 4).

Ironically, one church proposed to have a "no-excuse Sunday." To make it possible for everyone to attend church they organized this special Sunday. They proposed, "Cots will be placed in the foyer for those who say, 'Sunday is my only day to sleep in.' There will be a special section with lounge chairs for those who feel our pews are too hard. Eye drops will be available for those with tired eyes from watching TV late Saturday night. We will have steel helmets for those who say, 'The roof would cave in if I ever came to church.' Blankets will be furnished for those who think the church is too cold and fans for those who say it is too hot. Score cards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present. Relatives and friends will be in attendance for those who can't go to church and cook dinner, too. We will distribute 'Stamp Out Stewardship' buttons for those who feel that church is always asking for money. One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature. Doctors and nurses will be in attendance for those who plan to be sick on Sunday. The sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who never see the church without them. We will provide hearing aids for those who can't hear the preacher and cotton for those who say he is too loud."

I trust that by now you understand the similarity as well as the importance of both metaphors in the Bible about church. It is an organism, a spiritual union of believers made possible through salvation in Christ Jesus. It is also an organization, a working union of believers. The organizational church has been defined as "a body of believers immersed upon a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ, having two offices (elders and deacons), sovereign in polity, and bonded together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances, and the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel." Notice please that this is called the church of the Living God. The church should be thriving, seeking through the Holy Spirit's power to show a dead world a living Lord.

Paul doesn't conclude his message here. He goes on to share the mission for the church. How is it to function, primarily? He uses architectural language and calls it the *pillar and ground of truth*. It is the church's primary function to hold up God's truth in the world. It is the church that offers the world a foundation not built on sinking sand but on the bedrock foundation of God's truth. As the church is faithful to preserve, preach, and practice the truth, God's work during the age in which we live will prosper.

Does this sound like *works*? You bet! The ministry of the church is part of the works He has saved us unto (Eph 2:10). God left us here to work for Him and with Him until He returns or calls us home. It is the unfaithful Christian, who either is ignorant of God's plan or disobedient to it that is wrecking the very foundation of God's truth in the world. As a teacher who observed this kind of carnage for over thirty years in the pastorate, Charles Scheide records, "Unfortunately, there is a lot of wrecking going on today. Many churches are afflicted with an unbelievably high percentage of unfaithful members who manifest little or no interest in the mission of the church. They meander merrily on their way, ignorant and unconcerned of the spiritual damage they leave in their wake."

If only more Christians had the testimony of a certain little old man who was seen every Sunday morning walking to church. He was deaf, so he could not hear a word of the sermon or the music of the choir or the hymns sung by the congregation. A scoffer asked, "Why do you spend your Sundays in that church when you can't hear a word?" That old saint's humble reply was, "I want my neighbors to know which side I'm on."

I wonder, is that your desire? It is time *all* who claim the name of Christ started believing in the importance of the local church and started supporting with every fiber of their being this "pillar and ground of truth" that Jesus died to establish and promised to build. See, it's all about Him. He is its living, exalted, and sovereign Head. He bought it with His blood. He planned it before the foundation of the world. He gets first place. He established it (Acts 20:28; Eph 5:23; 1:4; Col 1:18; Matt 16:13-18).

In conclusion, it is of utmost importance that the followers and learners of Christ be instructed and exhorted on how to live the joy-filled Christian life. At the local church we receive the milk of the Word for growth (1 Pet 2:2); the pastor-teacher feeds his flock in knowledge and instruction (Jer 3:15); fellowship is provided (Acts 2:41-47); preaching and teaching grows faith (Rom 10:17); and saints are trained and equipped for ministry (Eph 4:12). With so many blessings and motivations, why should anyone not want to be an active part? May I suggest that the reason, in several cases, is a willful disobedience to the clear injunction of Hebrews 10:24-25 to faithfully and actively gather for the mutual edification of fellow believers, as we exalt our Great God. I trust that is not the case with you.

If you are part of the body (universal church), you should be functioning in ministry (local assembly) according to your giftedness. We need lives centered around the church. Our priority should be church, fitting in the rest of life's ambitions around it. We need to be there and fulfill God's plan for body life and service, according to our giftedness. If you are sporadic in attendance or inactive in

service, you will miss out every time you're not there, either by not receiving a blessing or not being a blessing (but probably both).

Let's go to church to be the Church and help the body function appropriately. Let's engage in the worship, the songs, the prayers, the preaching—not by spectating but by participating!

Soli Deo Gloria,

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