

CHAPTER 3

WHY DO WE HAVE TO BE PART OF A LOCAL CHURCH ANYWAY? WHAT IS IT FOR?

²⁵not 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.

Hebrews 10:25 (NASB)

Why do we have to be part of a local church?

The simplest reason why we need to be part of a local church is because the Bible commands us to be. So, if you wish to be brief that settles it. Therefore, we have no alternative but to try our best to find, and maintain, genuine biblical churches with sound doctrine and honest leaders, no matter how difficult that may be, because, as we see in Hebrews 10:25 above, all Christians are commanded not to forsake meeting together.

It is not a matter of personal choice, therefore, as to whether we bother to belong to a local church. God has expressly told us to be part of one. The real Church as a whole is the body of Jesus Christ, i.e. all truly saved believers. However, the real Church as a whole is invisible. You cannot meet with it. You cannot even point to it. It isn't just in one place. It does not have a building or a headquarters.

The real Church consists of all genuine Christians, dotted around, here and there, throughout the whole world. It also includes all those truly born again believers who have ever lived and died in the past. All those individuals, no matter what denomination they belong to, or wherever they live in the world, whether today or over the past 21 centuries, are collectively **the** Church.

Therefore, when we become a real Christian, but not if we are just a phoney one, we become part of that real Church. It spans true Christians living in the whole world today and throughout all of the last 21 centuries. That entire group of people is the Church. They are alternatively known as the 'body of Christ' and also the 'bride of Christ'.

However, for us to be able to relate to other believers and to learn alongside them, we have to become part of that real Church at a local level with other living people whom we can see and touch. We cannot meaningfully do anything at a worldwide, century spanning macro level.

That means that to function as part of the Church we have to meet up with other Christians locally for worship, prayer, teaching, Bible study and fellowship. There is no other way. Church can only be experienced at a local level with living people who are physically present with you in the same room.

You cannot validly choose only to operate as part of the overall worldwide Church and separate yourself from all the local Christians near to where you live. I emphasise that because there are many people who think they can opt out and either do nothing or just watch church services online. That may be alright for those who are ill or elderly and are housebound, but it is not acceptable for the rest of us.

Some opt out because they have become so traumatised and discouraged by their experiences within churches that they feel allergic to church and see no alternative but to go it alone. I sympathise with them and can see why they think that is the only option, but they are still mistaken.

Without having genuine face to face personal relationships with other Christians who live nearby, we will not grow properly as disciples. The internet can be a help (and also a danger) in finding teaching and information, but we still need to relate to real human beings locally. Otherwise, you become like a solitary piece of charcoal on the outer edge of a barbeque. It will just go grey and then eventually stop burning and go out. We are exactly like that. We need the other 'coals' to keep us burning.

Likewise, we can only survive as Christians if we have fellowship with other human beings locally. We have to operate together as a local church engaging in real relationships. There is no getting away from that need, and that duty, even if we have had some very bad experiences of church in the past, as far too many of us have.

Some positive things which are still true about being part of a local church, even today.

I have painted quite a bleak picture of the way many churches are today. But it would be wrong not to look at the positive side of things as well. From 1983 when I left the Catholic church until about 1998 I had, on the whole, a relatively good experience of church life and gained very much from being part of it. I can think of two churches in particular which were welcoming and, on the whole, passionately committed.

In both of them it was possible to form some genuinely deep relationships with other sincere believers. I was in one church for nine years and another for seven. In both I learned a lot and experienced real friendship and support in many ways.

Those are just some of the things which a local church is meant to be and to provide. When it functions properly, and where the people are sincere, committed and loving, then it can give you a level of intimate fellowship and community that no secular group can match. It also provides a setting within which to bring up children as Christians and to make it possible for them to form wholesome friendships. That is increasingly difficult, or even impossible, for them to do in the secular world.

The local church also provides for the practical needs of its members (and non members) like no other organisation. On many occasions I have seen people face crises such as illness or bereavement. They have received from the local church a remarkable amount of help and support, i.e. practically, emotionally and financially.

For example, I can think of a number of families where a child or parent has been taken seriously ill and the local church has rallied round for weeks or even months and organised a rota of people to cook dinners, visit people in hospital and help with housework and even finances. I can't think of any group or organisation which would do all that other than a local church. No other group would have the motivation to do it.

I can also think of a particular man aged about 70 whose wife was suddenly incapacitated by a brain haemorrhage. She had to go into hospital and then a care home. He couldn't cope with the pressure of it all, but a group of Christians from his local evangelical church worked together to provide food, lifts,

visits, and even to come and do his gardening. Such are the things that real Christians do, even today. But there's even more to it than that.

The local church is meant to be the place where, despite all our faults, and whatever our past life may have been, we can be accepted and valued, and where we can change and grow into mature disciples. It is the God-ordained setting in which we are supposed to learn how to operate in the various ministry gifts and also in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is no suitable way, or place, in which these gifts and ministries can be properly developed other than in a local church.

The profound importance of the worldwide Church as a whole and the privilege of being a part of it

We also need to realise the immense importance of the wider Church worldwide, at a macro level, and the extraordinary privilege of belonging to it. We are part of a group which is:

- a) the '*body of Christ*' - i.e. the group of which He is the head
- b) the '*bride of Christ*' – when Jesus returns to the Earth, after the Judgment Seat of Christ, He will '*marry*' the Church, which He regards as His '*bride*'. The wedding ceremony will take place in Heaven after the Rapture and the Judgment Seat of Christ. However, there will then literally be a huge wedding feast which will take place on the Earth. This will happen after Jesus' Second Coming when He returns to the Earth bringing the entire Church with Him. Every member of the real Church will be at that banquet. We will then spend the rest of eternity as part of that uniquely privileged group. We will enjoy an intimate relationship with Jesus and the opportunity to serve Him.
- c) made up of individuals, every one of whom is a priest - not just a select few. Biblically, there is no such thing as 'clergy' or 'priests' in the sense that we see them in most churches. We are all priests, in the correct sense of the word, because we all have a direct right of access to God Himself. We do not need any man to act as our priest and to go to Him on our behalf, or act as an intermediary for us. That role has already been taken by Jesus Himself who serves as our High Priest "after the order of Melchizedek" and He does it all by Himself. Therefore, contrary to what the Catholic Church claims, we do not require any man to serve as our priest. Indeed, no such role exists in the New Testament.
- d) one day going to judge the angels
- e) going to be physically resurrected
- f) going to be allowed to assist Jesus Christ in ruling and reigning in His future Millennial Kingdom. Each of us will be given specific tasks and roles, according to Jesus' assessment of us. (See my Book 4). What an exalted status that will mean, even for the lowest of us, let alone those few who are rewarded with the very senior positions.

The vital need to protect, bless and support the genuine worldwide Church and every person in it.

If we can realise what a privilege it is to be part of the Church as a whole, it will actually alter our view of the local church as well. If the whole Church is Jesus' body, then each individual Christian, and each local church, is a part of that body. Therefore, try to see it from God's perspective and consider what infinite importance and significance they each have.

The Church is a unique and precious institution and Jesus values it very highly. He wants us to do so too, and to love, help and support every one of its members, i.e. whichever ones we happen to come into contact with, or are capable of helping, even if only from afar.

Jesus does not want us to disparage or undermine fellow Christians

Jesus has not called us to despise or condemn other Christians:

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brethren.....

James 4:11 (a)

On the contrary, we are commanded to love, encourage, help, support and build up one another. We belong to a very special and uniquely privileged group. Accordingly we all have the duty to assist each other, wherever we can:

¹Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (NASB)

²⁵Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbour, for we are members of one another.

Ephesians 4:25 (NASB)

³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

Philippians 2:3 (NASB)

¹² So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ¹⁴ Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Colossians 3:12-16 (NASB)

So, this is how we are meant to be with one another, and there are still some churches in which this kind of behaviour and these kinds of relationships do exist. I've seen it and experienced it in more than one church, though I have to say that it was very much easier to find such churches in the 1980s than it is now.

The truth is it's now rare, and getting rarer, to see traditional denominational churches operating today with that kind of genuine love, warmth, encouragement, sincerity, freedom and mutual support. We shall look below at some of the things that are wrong with the Church. However, before we go further into those things, we need to emphasise that every genuine Christian, and every genuine local church, needs to be treated with respect.

We are dealing with people whom Jesus sees as precious. That individual person, or that local church, or at least some of the people in it, i.e. the ones who are truly saved, are part of Jesus' body. One day those genuine individuals, even if they are part of a traditional church, will be part of His bride. Therefore, they each have infinite value and must be spoken to, and spoken about, with great carefulness and respect.

⁹Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.

James 5:9 (RSV)

It is as if we knew a King or President, and came into contact with his wife and children. They may well have faults and sins. They may even be a disappointment to him. However, he would still not wish us to criticise or condemn them, and he certainly wouldn't want us to despise them. He may wish to criticise, or even rebuke them himself, but it would not be our place to do so.

Therefore, if we were to get a job on his staff we would need to learn to hold our tongues and refrain from saying anything which could undermine or dishonour his family. That is pretty much how it is when we say or do things which insult or diminish genuine fellow Christians. At the very least we may wound or discourage them.

More importantly, we would grieve, and even anger, Jesus. It is just as it would be if the President of the United States heard us criticising his wife and children. None of us would dream of doing that. Yet, even as I write this now, I feel convicted because I know that I have done all the following things:

- a) criticised fellow Christians
- b) judged fellow Christians (in the wrong sense of the word, i.e. 'kreetace' rather than 'diakrino')
- c) become estranged from particular Christians over trivial disputes
- d) made what must have been unfair judgments of certain Christians, without being in full possession of the facts
- e) looked disparagingly at some of the things Christians have done for Jesus when He may, perhaps, have been pleased with them. Whether He was or not, He did not want me to disparage His people.

I have done all of these things. So have most, if not all, of the Christians I have ever met. We all seem to have a talent for wounding and undermining each other. I have wounded others and been wounded myself many times. That grieves Jesus. He wants every part of His body to be in harmony with the rest of His body, not to be in discord or disarray. That needs to make us take greater care about how we treat His precious body and every person who is part of it.