

Belong to a Church

A lot of people today are down on the church. Many outside the church perceive it as narrow-minded, hypocritical, power-hungry, over-institutionalized, or irrelevant. They assume that to belong to the church, a person has to dress a certain way or can't believe in science. Or they associate the church with a particular political party or single culture that they want nothing to do with.

Even many who claim to be Christians are disconnected from the church. For some, it's because they're busy or distracted and have reduced church to a day of the week or a spiritual accessory to their individual relationship with God.

Others are disillusioned or disappointed because at one time they were part of a church and had high expectations and very particular hopes about what would it look like, and it didn't play out that way.

But maybe the most common and deepest reason people disconnect from the church is that they've been wounded by the church, whether that's from growing up in a religious context, or a specific experience they had in a church.

I'll talk some more about those things in a bit, but for now, let me just say this: Jesus has not given up on the church. Jesus is not down on the church. Jesus is not over the church. Jesus loves the church. Jesus died for the church. In fact, the first time the word "church" appears in the New Testament, it was from the mouth of Jesus.

Why Church?

In Matthew 16, as soon as his disciples began to understand his identity and Peter declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus began talking to them about the church.

He told Peter, "I will build my church," and this radical statement shapes everything that we believe about the church. In these five life-changing words we learn that the church *belongs* to Jesus and the church is *built* by Jesus as his chosen means.

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And he didn't just say he would build the church—he has. He is. History alone shows us how he's keeping this promise in incredible ways. When Jesus uttered those words, he had about twelve committed disciples and a small group following him around trying to decide if they were in or not.

Now there are over 2.5 *billion* people across the globe who use 4,765 languages to claim the name of Jesus. Far more than merely a Western religion, there are 600 million Christians in Latin America and it's estimated there are almost twice as many Christians in Africa today as there are people in the United States.

Right here in Los Angeles, not just our church, but many churches throughout this city are proclaiming the good news of Jesus, seeing lives transformed, and seeing LA impacted for the glory of God.

The scope of Jesus' geographic work during his lifetime was limited. He never went far from Israel, yet the church spread across the world. He fed thousands; his church has fed millions. He proclaimed good news to crowds; the church is bringing the gospel to the nations. He brought reconciliation between Jews and Greeks; the church is seeking reconciliation of every tribe and tongue. The work of the church is a continuation of the work of Jesus, all by his grace and for his glory.

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Imagining the Church

None of this is our work—it's God's. Scripture make an inextricable link between Jesus and the church. Consider some of the metaphors the Bible uses to help us understand the nature and scope of the church. The church is called the bride of Christ—an intimate union where we are one with Christ. When tempted to mock or slander the church, we need to remember we're talking about Jesus' bride and he will not have that.

The church is described as the body of Christ. Think about what that says about how connected Jesus is with the church. I mean, what happens if you separate a head from a body?

The church is also depicted as the temple of God, built on the foundation of Christ. What would happen to a building if the foundation disappeared beneath it. It would crumble, right?

In the book of Acts, Saul, who would eventually become Paul, is overseeing the killing and persecution of Christians when Jesus appears and confronts him, saying, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not "Why are you persecuting the church?", but "Why are you persecuting me?"

Jesus and the church are inseparable because the good news of Jesus is a community-creating event. To be saved by Christ is also to be adopted into a family, rescued into a kingdom, grafted into a tree. Any community is formed around and shaped by something in common, and the church is the community of those united in Christ.

Being part of the church is intrinsic to following Jesus. Jesus advances his mission through his people, which means our commitment to Christ is inseparable from our commitment to the church.

Which raises a really important, yet basic, question—**what is the church**

Reflect

What are some of the difficult and messy things about the church that you find hard to love?

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Defining the Church

A lot of people think of it as a place and going to church means going into a building that has an address and a roof. Many others think of church as an event that you schedule on the calendar and reduce it to that. Still others think of the church as an institutional organization, a denomination, like the Anglican Church or the Catholic Church.

But because our culture most values a me-centered spirituality based on preference, the most common understanding of the church today is probably that it exists as a purveyor of spiritual goods to prop up my individual relationship with God.

Ultimately this me-centered spirituality replaces the local church with generic community, biblical church leadership with celebrity culture, authentic fellowship with shallow digital connectedness, and covenantal commitment with the next big thing.

Instead of committing with a family-like devotion that bears with others in the midst of difficulty, we bail when it gets hard and simply move on to the next thing just like the rest of our city does. But Scripture calls us to embrace the mess instead of bailing when it gets hard.

So if the church *is not*—or is at least more than—a place, an event, an institution, or a preference, then what, exactly, *is* it? Let me give you a simple, brief working definition:

The church is a family of sinners saved by grace who are led by qualified leaders, gather for worship, scatter for mission, and do everything for the glory of God.

The church is a **family**...

As we've seen, the Bible uses many different metaphors to depict the church, but the most powerful and fitting image is probably that of the church as a family.

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We all long for family. Some of us especially feel that longing because we don't have family or we're not connected with our families or we just don't have family in the city where we live. Some of us have wounds from family that make it difficult to hear the church described that way. Yet we still have a longing because we're meant for family—one that functions in a healthy way.

Scripture answers this longing by telling us we are adopted by the blood of Christ into the family of God. He is our father and we have one another as brothers and sisters. That's a fulfillment of God's promise from all the way back to Genesis 12, where he said he was going to draw people from all the cultures and families of the earth and bring them together as one family in Christ.

Ephesians 2 describes the church as the household of God. "Household" means a house and its occupants regarded together as a single thing. It's about the people, but it's more than just the people. "Household" implies order and structure.

Every household has a code, a way things operate. At the simplest level, this could be "Don't sit there, that's Grandma's chair," or "This is your place at the table during dinner," or "This is bedtime," or "This is how we deal with conflict."

For Christians, the Scriptures are our household code. We deal with conflict through confession, forgiveness, and repentance. We bear one another's burdens. We put others before ourselves. We pray for our enemies. We give thanks in all things. We use power to serve and bless others. We respond to hate with love. We are not a static, insular family, but one where there's always room at the table for others. That's our family's household code.

But it's not enough to just say the church is a family because we're a particular kind of family. We are a family of sinners saved by grace.

The church is... **sinners saved by grace...**

When I say Jesus loves the church, I don't mean he loves the *idea* of the church. He loves the *actual* church, the you-and-me church. Jesus loves *us*. As we are right now, in all our beauty and all our messiness and pain and sin and brokenness.

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Most people who are disconnected from the church are not in that place because of theology, or because they have a different interpretation of Matthew 16, but because they've encountered shallowness, or had a Christian betray them or hurt them deeply, or been let down by a leader or had a pastor who used their power and authority to shame or belittle them.

And it's true that the church clearly has its issues. Full of messy, broken, and difficult people, the church can be a messy, broken, and difficult place. We can acknowledge that hypocrisy is rampant, authority has been abused, and political agendas have crept in. But the Bible refuses to accept any of these as grounds for rejecting the church.

Because, while we all want a perfect church, that's not actually what we need. Part of our healing process entails helping others in their healing process. Even if you found a perfect church, if you went there you would mess it up. Any of us would.

What we need is a community of sinners saved by grace, who are broken but being put back together by Jesus. That is what the church is. While we're completely forgiven of our sin, we are works in progress learning to live out of our new identity in Christ.

Yes, the church is a mess. But it's a mess that Jesus loves, a mess that he died for, and it's a mess that's worth committing to, because it's not perfection that ties us together, but grace.

When we call ourselves sinners saved by grace, it's not because "sinner" is still our identity, but so that we never forget where we've come from. So we're reminded we're all in this together and we're all here by grace. None of us need the grace of God less than anyone else. And none of us has access to the grace of God any more than anyone else. We are in this together.

Reflect

What are some of the messy parts of your life that you bring to the church?

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*The church is a family of sinners saved by grace who are **led by qualified leaders**, gather for worship, scatter for mission, and do everything for the glory of God.*

Once together, God didn't just say, "Okay, now figure out how you want to do leadership. Do it however you want." The Bible gives us both leadership structures and qualifications for who should lead in what ways. In this biblical model:

- Jesus leads the church.
- Elders oversee and shepherd the church (it's from the Latin word for shepherd that we get our modern word "pastor").
- Deacons serve by addressing practical needs.
- And the members of the church do the work of ministry, which is making disciples of Jesus.

The church gathers for worship...

We gather for worship—which includes the preaching of the word, receiving of the Lord's Supper, celebrating baptism, praying together, singing together, and giving together. The church gathered for worship is a very public display of who we are.

Scatters for mission...

But we don't just gather—we also scatter for mission. The key to this is that we don't scatter *from* the church, we scatter as the church to go out and proclaim good news to others, to love our neighbors, to learn how our vocations are a part of our calling and part of loving this city.

Gathering without scattering creates an exclusive community, scattering without gathering creates a fragmented movement, but gathering and scattering together creates a family on mission.

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All for God's Glory

Finally, we do all of this for the glory of God. Because it's not about us, it never has been, and never will be. The church doesn't exist for itself. It exists for God and his purposes in this world.

Reflect

How do your experiences with family shape your hopes or concerns about engaging church as family?

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How Community Works

Now, Reality Church of Los Angeles is not “the” church, the universal church. We are “a” church, a local church. This is a helpful distinction—all Christians are members of the universal church, but that membership is expressed by committing to a local church. Learning to love and function as a family can’t be done in a single group of two billion-plus people.

Any of us only has so much relational capacity. It’s not possible to be best friends with everyone or have deep, loving relationships with thousands or millions of people. We each have to acknowledge our limits and ask, “Where am I going to invest my relational capital?” When we commit to a local church, we say, “These are the people that I’m committing to and focusing my relational capacity on.”

If you want to make a difference in the world, you can start by getting involved in a local church. When you join a local church, you are stepping into a stream of the Lord’s constant work of bringing his reign on earth as it is in heaven.

The church is not a building you go to; it’s a people you go with. The church is not an event you attend; it’s a mission you join. The church is not a club you sign up for; it’s a family you’re a part of. It’s people. And God most often ministers to us through his people, the church.

If God wants to comfort someone, he usually does so through the comfort of one of his children. If God wants to correct someone, he usually does so through a Christian speaking the truth in love. If God wants to encourage someone, he usually gives words of encouragement for his people to share.

God works through his people, including you, which is one of the reasons committing to a local church and the people who comprise it is so important.

Commit to Something Bigger Than Yourself

In our culture, commitment can be a revolutionary choice. Maybe even a scary one. We live in a noncommittal culture where everyone wants to keep their options open.

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But if you don't commit to anything in life, then you're committing to doing nothing with your life. And if you're only committed to something as long as it's good for you, then the only thing you're really committed to is yourself. Keeping your options open all the time turns out to be another form of slavery, a bondage to the latest thing that is not freeing but fleeting.

Our noncommittal culture is built on a lie—that you can be free of commitment and still have deep, meaningful community. That's not how relationships work. We are called to commit to the church and, like all commitments, this requires sacrifice and a focusing of our resources.

We choose to covenant with *these* brothers and sisters. We choose to submit to *these* leaders. We choose to give financially to *this* community and mission. This type of commitment is very different than listening to podcasts of your favorite preacher, giving sporadically when needs arise, and trying to be a close friend to everyone in your life.

In an age where digital connectedness short-circuits relational depth, we need to focus our commitments, and the church is the primary place to start. The kingdom of God calls us out of our puny selfish ambitions and into something bigger than we could imagine.

Be a Contributor, Not a Consumer

Think of it like this: on any cruise ship, there are two groups of people. There is a small group of people who do all the work, and then there is a large group of people who are there to kick back, relax, and enjoy the ride.

Sadly, many people think the church is like a cruise ship. There's a small group of people who should do all the work, perhaps the pastors or the staff or the "super Christians." The rest are there just to enjoy the ride and, of course, to evaluate the quality of the service.

But the church is not a cruise ship; it's a battleship. On a battleship, everyone on the ship is there to work, to contribute to the mission of the ship. There are not two classes of people: those who minister and those who receive. All are

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engaged in the work of moving the ship in the right direction, and all play their distinctive roles in the mission they've been given.

We are all in a battle. The nations rage. The enemy attacks. The storm is swirling. In a battle like this, a cruise ship will quickly be submerged. But if we understand that we serve on a battleship under a powerful and victorious commander, we can rest assured that the battle will be won. The only question is this: Will we play our role? Will we commit to the work of Christ in and through his church?

The church in America has long been plagued by something sociologists call *consumerism*. Consumerism is a mentality that sees the world through a transactional lens and is driven by the question, “What do I get out of it?”

When consumerism is applied to the church, it takes the form of “church shopping.” We “shop” for a church where we can be “fed” by the pastors. We show up on Sundays to evaluate the performance of the paid professionals, and we make our giving decisions based on whether we think we’re getting our money’s worth.

Jesus did not say, “Go therefore and make consumers of all nations.” He said, “Make disciples,” and disciples are not consumers; they are contributors. The church is not a spiritual mall that offers goods to consumers; it’s a redeemed people who are on a mission to make disciples of Jesus.

At our church we like to say, “Most people come to Los Angeles to take. We’re here to give.” Wherever God has called you, he has put you there to contribute—to give your time, your talents, and your treasure to a work bigger than yourself.

But as I call you to commitment to Christ and to his church, may we always remember that our commitment to Christ is a result of his commitment to us. He has sought us, and redeemed us, and washed us, and he is building us up as his family on his mission as his church.

Reflect

In what ways does it come more naturally to contribute or commit to the church? Can you identify ways you’re tempted to come to church as a consumer?