

back to basics : church

Ashley Stewart asks what's so amazing about church?



It's Sunday morning. You have had a busy week. The world outside your duvet is cold and all you want in life right now is another few hours of sleep. Yet your alarm is summoning you to get up for church, so why should you bother? Surely, you could listen to a sermon online, play some praise music or pray with a friend tomorrow? Anyway, today's preacher is often boring, the music feels outdated and you just don't have the energy for making conversation over lukewarm coffee! Plus, you are already involved in CU and CMF so why you need to attend church as well?

If any of this sounds familiar this article is written for you. It is also written for me. I love Jesus and I want to serve him, but if I'm honest, being committed to my local church sometimes feels more of a discipline than a delight. So, what's so amazing about the local church? Why are we called to be devoted to it? In short: your calling a Christian is to care deeply about what Jesus cares about, to love what he loves, and Jesus passionately loves his church. Once we catch a glimpse of how Christ views the church and understand that church is God's plan for us to flourish in him, then we will realise that CMF or CU, as important as they are, can never take the place of church.

So first, what is church? You might say it is a gathering of believers, the people not the building, a place to listen to Bible teaching, unite in praise and spread the gospel. It's all those things, but it's also much more. The Bible gives us various metaphors to describe how God views the church. It is the beloved bride who Jesus bought with his own blood, whom he feeds, cares for and purifies and will return to claim for his own.¹ It is also the body of Christ: the physical manifestation of Jesus on earth.² Just as we relate to the world through our bodies, the church is God's chosen method of carrying on Christ's work on earth. There is only one body, the universal church; however each local church is a tangible expression of Christ's body and is comprised of all the different but equally valuable members working together in unity.³ Speaking to all believers, Sam Allberry says 'You are a member of the body of Christ and you express that membership by belonging to the body of his local church.'⁴

The Bible also describes the church as the temple of God, with each member being like 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5) who are 'being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22). Just as the physical temple displayed God's glory to the surrounding nations so



Ashley Stewart is CMF Associate Head of Student Ministries

the church 'declares the praises of [God]' (1 Peter 2:9) to a broken world. Yet this glory cannot be displayed by individual Christians in the way that it can by the local church. When others see a diverse community of believers, with countless differences, uniting together as a family, to love, serve and forgive, they catch a glimpse of the transforming power of the gospel to reconcile us to God and to each other.⁵ Finally, not only is the church God's witness to the world, it is 'through the church, [that] the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 3:10). In a world rife with divisions, God displays his wisdom to the spiritual realms through the church; a restored humanity reconciled to God and each other through the finished work of Christ.

But why can CMF or CU not count as your church? Throughout the New Testament we see various God-ordained practices distinctive to the local church. The church is called to baptise disciples, to eat the Lord's Supper together and to appoint pastors and elders to shepherd God's flock.⁶ These practices are not usually part of CU or CMF groups. Likewise, the diverse yet unified nature of the body of Christ is not reflected as clearly in these groups comprised of believers of a similar age or profession. In short, they complement the local church, they should partner closely with the local church, but they are not a substitute for it.

So how then should I relate to my local church – my local church which is flawed, full of sinners and sometimes leaves me wishing I'd just stayed in bed? To answer this, we must look to the first church, which Luke describes in Acts 2:42-47. The disciples did not simply go to church, they were 'devoted' to being the church. They devoted themselves to meeting together for 'teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer' (Acts 2:42). They demonstrated their loving devotion to one another by sharing financially as needs arose

and God blessed their devotion by growing their numbers daily. In short, they prioritised church as a central part of their lives: central to their pursuit of holiness and their witness in the world. It is no surprise then that the writer to the Hebrews urges the believers to persevere in meeting together in order to 'encourage one another' and 'spur one another on toward love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10:24-25). If you want to grow in Christ and battle against sin then you need your church and your church needs you, because 'holiness is a community project'.⁷

Whilst working some weekends is part of a career in healthcare, generally make it a weekly priority to be part of your church gathering and intentionally seek to serve and encourage your brothers and sisters. Remember that 'service' will look different at different times: you may need to come off a rota when you are away on placement or studying for finals, but this doesn't stop you from loving and serving your church. I doubt the early church had a welcome team or a creche, but they served one another by being devoted to meeting together, building each other up in love, praying for their leaders and giving sacrificially.

Perhaps if we went to church asking 'how might God use me today?' instead of 'what can I get from this?' then our church experience and the place it holds in our hearts might radically change. We may start to understand why Spurgeon called the local church 'the dearest place on earth'.⁸ ■

REFERENCES

1. Ephesians 5:25-32, Acts 20:28, Revelation 21:2
2. Ephesians 1:22-23
3. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
4. Allberry S. *Why bother with church?* Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2016:84.
5. Dever M. The church: a family, a fellowship and the body of Jesus Christ. *Crosswalk* 16 January 2009 bit.ly/2JZuJel [Accessed 24 October 2019]
6. Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Titus 1:5
7. Challies T. Sanctification is a community project. *Challies*. 20 August 2012 bit.ly/32teg8x [Accessed 29 October 2019]
8. Spurgeon C. *The Best Donation* (No.2234). An exposition of 2 Corinthians 8:5 delivered on 5 April 1891 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England. tollelege.wordpress.com [Accessed on 28 October 2019]