

Riverside Reflections – Week 1 – Why Church Membership?

These are not meant to be abstract concepts, they are truths meant to be lived out. It is in the context of a covenant community that we *reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ* (Colossians 2:2). We find nurture here in the local church so that we may be a witness out there in the rest of the world. The church is the place where discipleship happens, where the “one another’s” of the Bible are fulfilled. Our prayer is that you will become convinced a local church community truly is “your own people” and the place where God would have you put down deep relational roots.

1) **The example of Christ’s care for local churches** (Revelation 1:13, 20, chapters 2 and 3) – Jesus was speaking to specific, localized churches. How do we think we will be a part of the visible kingdom of God in heaven when we will not be a part of the visible kingdom on earth? How can you say that you care about the body of Christ, the universal church, when you won’t even go to a local assembly, its visible manifestation?

2) **The Apostles’ practice** (Acts 13:1-4, 14:23-28, 20:7) – they were planting churches, ordaining elders for those churches, and coming back to these churches, who met regularly, together. Modern day missionaries also practice this; they plant churches, they train and develop leaders for those churches, and they visit those churches again, while those churches plant other churches as well. Why do missionaries start churches? Why don’t they just make converts and let it be? Obviously it is because believers need to be strengthened with and worship with other believers. We are not just to grow as individuals but as local units, we each grow upward but together we grow into each other so that the whole grows upward together.

3) **The early Christian’s example** (Acts 2:42 / Galatians 1:2) – Jesus didn’t just die for an amorphous idea known as the church, as if the local church was only our idea. The early Christians assembled together at first daily (Acts 2:46), and then weekly (Acts 20:7). If church assemblies didn’t matter then Paul wouldn’t have written the Pastoral Epistles, and churches would not have been founded. It was not just about getting saved but also about being gathered into groups for worship, fellowship, and growth. It is the same today as then. If you don’t want to go, that is indicative of your spiritual condition. Something is wrong with your heart if you don’t desire to be involved with your brothers and sisters on a regular basis.

4) **The focus of the New Testament epistles** – In the first 11 chapters of Romans, Paul talks about the gospel, God’s righteousness, our sin, our salvation, our sanctification, God’s sovereignty, and enough theology to last a lifetime. Then Paul gives this amazing doxology in 11:33-36. In light of all of that, Paul then goes on to tell us what to do with all that knowledge. First, in vs.1-2 he says we must give ourselves to God, and not act like the world, but be transformed by a new way of thinking. However, Paul doesn’t leave us there with that command without giving us an outline of what that looks like in practice. What does gospel-transformed thinking look like? He goes on to describe life in the local church.

In Ephesians chapters 1-3, Paul describes the glories of the gospel, and the wonder of the Universal Church, the whole body of believers in the world. In chapters 4-6, Paul then goes on to describe the functioning of a local church. Chapter 4 starts by telling us that we must walk

worthy of the gospel and speaks of our common faith. Then Paul speaks of ministry gifts, with pastors equipping the saints for ministry, members building up the body, unity, maturity, speaking the truth in love so the body can grow, and each individual part working. Vs.11-16 makes it clear that a “worthy walk” is not as full as it should be if we are not connected to a local body. Paul expects that a “walk worthy of the calling” is a walk lived in the local church. Chapter 5 speaks of walking in love, discerning God’s will, and being continually filled with the Spirit in terms of a local assembly (vs.1-21). The way we are to continue to be filled with the Spirit in the context of community. Paul teaches that marriage, church, and God are all connected. The commitment to one and the others are all mirrored by each other (vs.22-33).

In Philippians Paul says we must conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and speaks in terms of “striving side by side for the faith” (1:27). He then develops that further in chapter 2 (vs.1-4), exhorting us to be like Christ in so doing (vs.5-11). In chapter 3, Paul urges us to follow those who are walking in obedience and tells us that we will be given more light as we fellowship with those who are doing what they know is right and staying away from those who use grace as a license to do what they want (vs.15-19). In chapter 4, Paul teaches us that even in church disputes God can bind us together in peace (vs.1-9). He shows that corporate giving is important (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:2-3), it is a sign and a means of blessing (vs.10-19). God supplies needs through the local church.

Certainly private, personal bible study, worship, and prayer, etc. are all very important things for each individual believer to be doing outside the corporate church, in daily life. Yet the local church community is every bit as vital for the life of each believer. People that spend their lives on the fringe of local church life, without making biblical commitments to a local church, need to be exhorted and encouraged to walk in a manner worthy of God who has called them.

5) The implicit imperative (Hebrews 10:25) – see our sermon “*This is How to Stay Faithful*” – When God called you into fellowship with Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:9), He also called you into fellowship with the whole family, the body of Christ (1 John 1:1-3), and He called you into a local expression of that fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:4). The New Testament uses many metaphors for the gathering of a church through its local expression: a family and a fellowship, a body and a bride, a people and a temple, a lady and her children. Never does the NT conceive of the Christian existing on a prolonged basis outside the fellowship of the church. We join a local church because a local church is the expression of what Christ has made us – a member of the body of Christ. Yes the NT does in some places refer to the universal church (all Christians everywhere), but the bulk of the references have to do with the local church – those who gather together to sing and worship together, to hear the Word preached, to pray together, to live and grow amidst each other and together, and to practice baptism and the Lord’s Supper together.

The relationship between our membership in the universal church and our membership in the local church is a lot like the relationship between justification (the righteousness God gives us through faith) and sanctification (the actual practice of righteousness in our daily lives). Those whom God justifies will also be heading toward sanctification. Those whom God calls into His family will grow in fellowship with that family. A person who happily goes on living in unrighteousness calls into question their salvation (cf. Romans 6:1-18, 8:5-14 / James 2:14-15 / more on this in sessions 4, 8, and 9). So it is with those who refuse to commit to a local church.

6) **The church's community benefits** (Romans 12:3-6a) – You believe (vs.3), you belong (vs.5), you are worth something (vs.4), and you are competent (vs.6a). That doesn't mean that your gifts cannot be or do not need to be developed. That doesn't mean you are in absolute charge of their demonstration (you want to “do them” at this certain time or in this certain way). That doesn't mean you are distinct (the only one with such gifts). It means you show your devotion to the church by the use of those gifts (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7). To not be involved in a local church means that you are depriving the church of your gifts.

What's my ministry? How can I serve? What is my spiritual gift? How can I make a difference? We encourage you to simply build relationships with those in the church. Make an effort to get together with others during our lunch after church. Begin cultivating true friendships that will lead to accountability. After making such friendships, one will be drawn into the ministry network of friends. Even if that doesn't happen, being a friend is a very needful ministry in itself. It is about giving first. If you try to make people be your friend, you're going to have trouble finding friends. If you look to be a friend, you'll find them everywhere.

7) **The providence of God** (1 Corinthians 12:11, 18 / Galatians 6:1-10) – it is God's will that believers assemble together, and learn to love and depend on each other for growth. He has orchestrated the idea and biblical implementing of what a local church is. It is where you can develop actual relationships rather than imaginary ones. Weak as some churches are, they are still made up of living people who come together. The believer who becomes engrossed in media for ministry isolates himself from other believers while imagining relationships that are actually not there. Media ministries have their place, but they will not be able to be there when your child experiments with drugs, or your spouse dies, or your business goes down the drain. They cannot pray for you as well as someone who actually knows and lives among you.

8) **The commitment to family** (Colossians 1:17-18, 2:2, 19, 3:10-16) – Colossians is a parallel epistle to Ephesians. In chapter 1 (vs.28) Paul says that he is warning everyone, teaching everyone, and desires maturity for everyone. He toils mightily for this (vs.29). Looking at verse 1-4 of chapter 2, we see “hearts being encouraged, reaching all the riches, full assurance”, etc. The more intimate our communion with other believers, the more spiritually rich we will be. Now then you can clearly see the context here, warning and teaching for maturity in every person, struggling so that they all might be on the same page, strengthened (encouraged, confirmed) by being instructed in love (a good rendering of “knit together”), and coming to a more full understanding of just how marvelous Christ is.

Knit together in the riches of Christ, and sharing it with others. Church makes you stronger. Yes it means we will have to struggle, you can't be knit together without having to be twisted and turned and united. The result of this being knit together is to be able to reach a full, or wealthy, assurance. However, to reach these riches, to reach a full assurance you *must* be knit together, can you see that? As an individual, you can have an assurance of your salvation, of course, but it reaches its fullness in the context of community. Even John the Baptist lost his assurance of who Jesus was when he was isolated (Matthew 11 / Luke 7).

Colossians 3 uses second person plurals (“you” as a group rather than “you” as an individual). It is easy to see that in the verses following verse 11, but indeed, it is all about a community effort,

a building up of the new man; the corporate body of believers in Christ. The ideal for individual growth in grace is centered in the reality of a well functioning community of believers growing together. Your local church may not be ideal but that doesn't mean the concept isn't real. The local church is God's ordained vehicle for your growth. God has not only ordained a Body but a community for that Body to grow in, all of us growing as individuals, and as a unit. Focusing on individual spirituality without paying proper attention to the corporate community is like weight training only one body part. A church isn't simply a place to go to learn about stuff and pool money for missions. The church becomes your identity, with you as one part of the larger body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). That sounds foreign to America, but not the Bible.

9) **Corporate Worship** – this is very important to God (Ephesians 5:19 / cf. Colossians 3:16 / 1 Corinthians 12-14). It gives us a taste of heaven (cf. Revelation 4-5). There is church in heaven, of course, but there is also church and church membership right up until the end, people will gather together to worship, etc. Corporate prayer and corporate worship is made authentic in a live local community rather than through a vicarious viewing of worship. God promises benefits and blessings to corporate worship, yet isolated virtual Christians only imagine themselves worshipping with others as they sit before the monitor. Someone who only participates through media only disobeys God by not participating in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper or the corporate experience of Baptism. We will discuss this more in session 6.

10) **Church Discipline** – Jesus says we need spiritual church discipline (Matthew 18:13-20). The local church is to be involved in administering discipline, promoting discipleship, and settling disputes (1 Corinthians 5, 6, 7). In the NT we come across numerous "regulations" concerning church discipline, a practice that is moot in the absence of covenant and commitment between believers in a local assembly (cf. Romans 16:17-19 / 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 / 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 / 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 / 1 Timothy 5:17-20, etc.). We will discuss this more in session 8.

11) **Accountability and Submission** – 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14 – All Christians are responsible "to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you". There is no evidence to suggest that a Christian can exempt themselves from the responsibility of accountability and submission to the authority of duly appointed leaders in a local assembly. There is no standard within the pages of the NT for a Christian "revolutionary" who follows Jesus independently of the life, accountability, and nurture of a local church. The Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus), along with Hebrews 13:7, 17, James 3:1, etc. indicate that we are supposed to be under the watch and care of spiritual leaders. 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 instructs us to be in subjection to servant leaders (support their service). In the local church, if you stray from God, someone is there to bring you back. If you are not a vital member of a local church, you may stray deeper and deeper into sin even though you may have periodic church attendance or religious media fixes. Rather, you must subject yourself to the accountability that comes from engaging with real people. If you understand the deceitfulness of sin, you know you need that (Hebrews 3:12-13). We will discuss this more in session 7.

12) **Communion** – This is included in corporate worship, church benefits, and commitment to family, but it is so important that we have included it in a separate category. As Christians we are to be sharing in the fellowship of the Spirit (Philippians 2:1). We are to be communing with Christ, but also with one another. A major facet and the visible expression of this communion is

manifest by taking the Lord's Supper. Consider the fact that the Bible never mentions having the Lord's Supper outside the context of the local church community. Communion is with Christ, the Head, but also the Body, as those who are joined to the Lord are one with Christ and others (1 Corinthians 6:17 / Romans 12:5). He is the Head of His Body, the Church.

You are not supposed to take Communion by yourself, although there are many who do and are taught just that. Unfortunately it is not just those who don't attend a local church, but also those who think daily Communion outside of church is a good thing. However, that is actually selfish. You cannot have communion with God and take the Lord's Supper without ever having to partake with other people. In 1 Corinthians 11:29 Paul tells us that those who take Communion unworthily are drinking damnation to themselves. Paul describes that unworthiness as failing to discern the Body of the Lord. Does this mean failing to recognize the elements as His Body? Reading the context of the passage, Paul is saying that failing to discern the Body is failing to consider the members of that Body, all the members.

We cannot take Communion with all the believers across the world at the same time. But the local church is the expression of such a communion by which we respect the other members. To fail to discern this, to think we can have communion without fellowshiping with other local believers is to disrespect people that Christ died for. To take Communion outside the local assembly in that fashion is to drink unworthily. When we are taking Communion unworthily, it is because we are failing to discern His Body, and His Body is the Church! Again, think about the context here in this passage, it is about respect for the fellow members of a local body.

This obviously isn't about people who cannot go out because they are shut in because of age and/or health. However, if a person was/is a member of a local church, that church can come to them. They may be at death's door, but we can still help them to be communing with the Life of the local church in that way, and we can pray for them and ask them to pray for us, etc.

In 1 John 2:9-11, the word "brother" means believer. If you say you know God but you do not desire to love, to have a growing relationship with other believers, darkness has nullified your light, and you are a liar. One of the greatest tests of faith and means of assurance is our love for other Christians, and this means actively, not in theory, but in deed (1 John 3:18). Church is not what saves you, Jesus is, but Jesus saves people into His body, and that body is manifested on earth within local churches. Communion says we believe and we belong to Jesus, but also that we believe and we belong to each other. How is it that we think that we will participate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Matthew 26:26-29 / Revelation 19:6-9) when we won't participate in the proclamation of it in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:26)?

Despite the church's flaws, we are wrong to reject it. Whether or not the church is satisfying our personal tastes or expectations, we are responsible to be part of it simply to be obedient to Christ. Depending on where you live, you might have to compromise on some things. You may have to go to a church that doesn't have the "programs" that you want in order to find appropriate, God-glorifying doctrine and practice. No church is perfect, but you have to decide what is most important in a church and sacrifice the less important things. If there are truly no good churches around, perhaps it means God is calling you to start one. Do you meet the criterion God sets for that? If not, you are called to help make another church the best it can be.