

CONNECTING
Colossians 2:2

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Paul Tournier was insightful when he declared, “There are two things we cannot do alone. One is to be married, and the other is to be a Christian.” Pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson agreed: “Our membership in the church is a corollary of our faith in Christ. We can no more be a Christian and have nothing to do with the church than we can be a person and not be in a family....[Church] is part of the fabric of redemption.”

I. Connection

Colossians 2:1-2

Paul makes clear God cannot be really known apart from the cultivation of brotherly love with the community. In Ephesians 3:17-18, likewise, Paul says that only as Christians are “rooted and well-founded in love” can they “comprehend with all the saints” the fullness of divine revelation. We can only know God when we are connected to others who know him.

Our culture, however, promotes individual spirituality. This type of renegade religion concludes that an individual’s relationship with God is no one else’s concern and a person’s spiritual relationship is with the creator and not with a community. As a result of the proliferation of personalized religion, there are many more who claim to be followers of Christ than those who actually gather with his people to celebrate on Sunday—his resurrection day.

Forsaking the community is unacceptable (Hebrews 10:25), however, because to say Jesus is “Lord” is to say “you are my sibling.” The call of the New Testament is not to become an individual, stand-alone follower of Jesus. The call, rather, it to connect to a community.

II. Family

A few years ago, we had a visitor who completed a visitor’s registration slip in Sunday School. She stated her name, address, telephone number, and continued to fill out the form. The next question was, “Are you a Christian?” “Yes,” she answered. The question that followed was “Are you a church member?” to which she candidly replied, “Little bit.”

When I received this visitor’s card the following Monday, I couldn’t help but chuckle, appreciating her honesty and yet disagreeing with her theology. To call Jesus “Lord” is to accept an invitation into the family of God. We are never called to be a “little bit” connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are, on the contrary, called to be connected to community.

In the New Testament, Christians are depicted as loving like brothers and sisters love each other. The New Testament applies language that was commonly used to describe the love shared in a biological family to the love experienced among God's people: "Now as to the *love of the brethren*, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9, emphasis added). The idea of believers sharing the love of a family is commonplace in the New Testament (Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7).

A deacon in our church was sharing his testimony. This particular young man had lost his father at an early age. He looked at his church family and declared, "When I needed a father, you were my fathers. When I needed a mother, you were my mothers. I needed a brother, and you were my brothers. A sister, and you were my sisters."

God's people are always and everywhere in the New Testament to love each other like family. So strong is the New Testament witness that we should see each other as siblings that John concluded that we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love our brother, whom we have seen. Loving one's brother is an essential element of loving God (1 John 4:20-21). This family-like love among God's people happens in the setting of a local church.

III. Images

1. The New Testament word for church, *ekklesia*, comes to Paul from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. In the Greek Old Testament, the *ekklesia* was none other than the congregation of Israel, especially as they assembled before the Lord at Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb to hear his word (Exodus 19:1ff.; Deuteronomy 1:6). Because Paul used such a vivid image for the new community centered around the crucified and risen Lord, we understand a lot about what Paul was saying about the nature and importance of the Christian community (Ephesians 2:11-19).

Paul's other images which depict the church also set forth the premier importance of God's gathered people: (2) the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25), (3) the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12), (4) the new Israel or the people of God (Ephesians 2:12-13; 1 Peter 2:10), (5) the household or family of God (Ephesians 2:19; 3:15; 4:6), and (6) the planting of God to bring forth fruit to his glory (1 Corinthians 3:8-9; John 15).

Each local church represents the covenant people of God. The New Testament, in fact, most often applies *ekklesia*, church, to a local group of baptized believers. For example, Paul often wrote, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the church in . . .," and he would name the city to which he was writing (see 1 Corinthians 1:2 or 1 Thessalonians 1:1). In the Acts of the Apostles, the local church developed as an expression of commitment to Christ. We read about the local church in Jerusalem (Acts 15), in Antioch (Acts 13:1), and in Caesarea (Acts 18:22). In the book of Revelation, we learn about the seven letters to local churches. Nowhere in scripture do "lone ranger Christians" follow Christ apart from a localized, even institutionalized, body of Christ.

The local church is as much a part of the teaching of the New Testament as the deity of Christ or the creative powers of God.

IV. Purpose

The New Testament is clear that churches were organized bodies and not temporary or loose groupings of individuals. The church at Antioch, for example, had much more than a passing purpose. The churches at Rome, Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonica were permanent and definitely organized bodies. The church is called to fulfill its Christ-given agenda, the evangelization of the world. We are commanded to go, make disciples, baptize them, and teach them (Matthew 28:18-20). Believers everywhere have organized in order to fulfill the commands of Christ's commission.

V. Christ

Jesus believed that the church was closely connected to him. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, "I will build *My* church" (16:18, emphasis added). The connection between the church and Christ is made even more evident, however, in the writings of Paul. At times, Paul almost identifies Christ with the church. This super-identification occurs as the church and Christ undergo suffering together, hold a shared unity, and experience a common resurrection.

First, to persecute the church is to persecute Christ. The church is so connected to Christ that on the road to Damascus, as Paul was persecuting the church, the resurrected Christ asked the question, "Why are you persecuting Me?...I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4, emphasis added). Paul's inflicting suffering upon the church was equivalent to causing Christ to suffer. The church is, after all, the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:27).

Secondly, we can also see the close connection between Christ and the church when we learn that to divide the church is to divide Christ. The church in Corinth was split into four parties—the party of Paul, the party of Apollos, the party of Cephas, and the party of Christ. Though it was the church which was divided, Paul wrote, "Has Christ been divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13, emphasis added).

Later in this letter, as he described the variety of gifts found within the church, Paul used the image of the human body. There is a variety of members of the human body—eye, foot, hand, etc.—and yet only one body. Paul then wrote, "So also is Christ" when we expect him to write "church" (1 Corinthians 12:12, emphasis added). The church is so connected to Christ that sometimes Paul used the words interchangeably! To be "in Christ" is to be in the church.

VI. Service

The New Testament church offers more than a baptized version of feel-good pop psychology which promises to help us deal with our depression and succeed over our stress. The gospel contains more than instruction about parenting or supportive suggestions that help us deal with our difficult past. Historic Christianity proclaims the earth-shattering message that the Messiah has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ — that somehow, God was at work in his death and resurrection in such a way that our sins have been forgiven and our eternity made secure as we both die and live with him.

Archbishop William Temple perhaps said it best when he declared, "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members." The church must

be more than a vendor of various religious goods and services which seeks only to gain and retain more members with the latest menu of ministries. We must go on mission to make disciples, to serve others. We must understand ourselves as called and sent by the God of the Good News. The church must focus more on its God-given mission to others and less on amusing itself. We are called as a church to reach out to a decaying and dying world, carrying the hope-filled message of the Christ. We gather for worship and we scatter for service.

VII. Support

We all need a place where we belong and find the support of the saints. We are to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and to encourage the faint-hearted (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Henri Nouwen told of a young minister who had nothing to offer an old man facing surgery except his own loving concern. "No man can stay alive when nobody is waiting for him," wrote Nouwen. Yancey agreed, "Everyone who returns from a long and difficult trip is looking for someone waiting for him at the station or the airport. Everyone wants to tell his story and share his moments of pain and exhilaration with someone who stayed home, waiting for him to come back."

VIII. Boundaries

Without a community, we are each left to our own individual spirituality, adrift on a sea of subjectivity. Robert Bellah and his colleagues described such individuality as "Sheliamism" after a woman who decided that she would live by her own private, individually-tailored religion. To try to interpret the Bible apart from a church, apart from a community, amounts to no less than each reader creating his or her own individual religion. In church, we listen to the testimony of the saints and hear the ancient words of faith. We are guided, challenged, and called to walk a common path. Scriptures were written for churches — "Paul...to the church in ..." — to be read and reasoned among the gathered people of God.

IX. Everybody

Church should be the one place on earth where everyone feels equal and everyone is treated the same. In the book of James, we are told we should not judge people by appearance. We should not be prejudiced. Our Lord's brother said that if we give the rich the seat of honor while pushing the poor to the floor, then we have played favorites (James 2:1-3). We should not honor the rich and disgrace the poor. Church ought to be the one place on earth where everyone, rich or poor, should feel as if he has a place among all the people of God.

We are to think of others more highly than ourselves (Romans 12:3), and we are never to approach the place of worship like the haughty Pharisee, but, rather, we come as the humble sinner, barely lifting our eyes to heaven (Luke 18:13). Church is the one place where we gather with people of various political persuasions, generations, and cultural backgrounds — all committed to a common Christ.

Fred Craddock remembers growing up poor when his family had even lost their farm. As they gathered together in the fall on the first day of school, all the children were sharing their summer vacations as an ice breaker. One student had been to Florida; another to Niagara Falls; and another

off to Washington, D.C. to experience all the historic monuments. Saved by the bell, Craddock went home downcast because he was going to have to share his summer vacation on the next day. He had only worked on the farm all summer.

His father encouraged him to weave a tale from the best parts of other students' stories because it wouldn't be appropriate to say he had done nothing but hoe sweet potatoes all summer long. The truth was Craddock felt like a nobody because he had gone nowhere and had nothing to share.

With some guilt and under compulsion from his father, Craddock started to "tie them on. 'I went up to New York and Washington....' I was somewhere on this side of Niagara Falls when the teacher called me into the hall and said, 'You didn't do all that.'"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, why did you say all that?"

"Because I was embarrassed."

"Why were you embarrassed?"

"Because I worked on the farm all summer long."

He remembers it was not a bad summer, and he wished he had told the truth — that he had thrown sweet potatoes at a squirrel, knocking him off a limb, and kept his sister screaming by tossing the potatoes her way.

One day a group of women from the Central Avenue Christian Church in Humboldt, Tennessee, visited the Craddock home. They brought things for the children to wear, and among them was a pair of Buster Brown shoes that were just Fred's size.

"Good," Fred's mother said, "now you can go to Sunday School." Craddock later learned they were girls' shoes, but it did not matter at the moment. He didn't want to go to Sunday School because he figured it would be the same: What did you do on vacation? Who are you and how much do you have? But from the first day, wearing those charity shoes, Fred Craddock found out that church was a different kind of place. "I was never, ever embarrassed in church. I don't remember ever feeling any different, any less, any more, any different from anybody else in church. And from the age of nine until now, I have had this little jubilee going on in my mind: There is no place in the world like church."

Conclusion

Fred Craddock remembered that his mother took him to Sunday School every Sunday, but his father never accompanied the family. Rather, his father would stay home and complain when the Sunday dinner was late. The preacher would call, and his father would always say, "That church doesn't care about me; all that church wants is another pledge and another name, another pledge and another name. That's what church is all about."

Sometimes when an evangelist would come through to do revivals, the pastor would bring the evangelist over and say, "Sic him," but nobody was ever able to get to his father, for he had a cold, cold heart. "The church doesn't care about me," his father always said.

The son said, "I heard my father say, 'All they want is another name and another pledge,' more than a thousand times."

But there was one day he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They had taken out his throat and said, "It's too late." They had put in a metal tube, and treatments had burned him to pieces. Fred Craddock flew in to see his dying father who, by now, could not speak and could not even eat.

Around the room there were potted plants and cut flowers sitting on all the window sills. Stacks of cards two-feet tall covered the tray where they would put the food for a patient they were hoping to strengthen with nourishment. All the flowers, every card, every blossom, represented a person or a group from the church that his father had never acknowledged.

Fred picked up one of the cards and read it. His father, who could not speak, reached for a Kleenex box and wrote on the side a line from Shakespeare. "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

"What is your story, Daddy?"

"And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'"

If we miss the church as the people of God, as the covenant community of the Lord, then we will be wrong, too.

To connect to Christ is to connect to His people.