

**Series:** Vision Month 2022

**Title:** Why Church?

**Text:** 1 Thessalonians 1:8

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Contemporary culture has seen a shift away from centralized forms of leadership. People seem to have an ever-increasing distrust and dislike for organizations that are heavy on authority. Such a mindset has affected the way in which many look at the various institutions of life — home, the government, marriage, work, and even the church. There is certainly room for a critique of unhealthy forms of leadership. Indeed, Jesus had much to say about heavy-handed leadership (Mark 10:42). Regardless, one must be careful that a healthy, biblical view of the church is not lost in the midst of cultural values. It is possible that modern society's view of leadership and organizational life can warp our perspective of the church. Let's consider three distinctions about the church that can help us maintain an appropriate regard for the body of Christ.

**Universal vs. Local** — In the Bible, we see the church spoken of in two senses — universal and local. The first sense refers to what I would call “the big church.” It entails all who make up the body of Christ, every born-again believer who is a part of the family of God. In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles often spoke of the church in this way (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 5:23). The second sense of the church (local) refers to individual congregations that each play a small part in the overall, universal church. In the New Testament, we find that Paul started numerous local churches (Acts 20:17; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). Seven local churches are listed by name in the book of Revelation (Revelation 2:1-3:22). Nearly every New Testament epistle was penned and sent to a first-century, local congregation.

Thinking of the church in these two ways can help us maintain a healthy view of the church. In one sense, each believer is a part of a great, big, unified body — the universal church. As members of this overarching church, we have fellowship with believers of all walks of life, and of numerous nations and cultures. We can regard members of other local congregations as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In another sense, God has called each to be committed to a single, specific congregation. We should each identify with a body of believers to whom we are accountable and with whom we serve. Our times, talents, and treasures should be invested in a local congregation so that the gospel and glory of Christ can be made known through that congregation. When writing to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of the way in which the individual members of that local church collectively contributed to make such an impact. He said “For the word of the Lord rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out. Therefore we don't need to say anything” (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

**Attender vs. Member** It seems the more organic approach to organizations in today's culture has led to a decreased emphasis on the priority of church membership. Many have bought into the notion that they don't need to formally request membership with a local congregation. It is often argued that church membership isn't found in Scripture.

Despite such arguments, the New Testament provides many clues that the early church practiced church membership. From what we read, it is obvious it had a system for numbering who was added to the church (Acts 2:47). It is also apparent that the early church had a mechanism for dismissing unruly members (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). In addition, the early church had a practice of sending accompanying letters of recommendation with individuals who desired to align themselves with other local congregations (Acts 28:21). Such a practice was built upon the Jewish practice of sending letters between local synagogues (Acts 9:2). In fact, 2 John can be seen as a letter that discouraged a local congregation from receiving certain members (2 John 10), while 3 John can be seen as a letter that encouraged others to be received into the fellowship (3 John 5-8). On top of sending letters, the New Testament

seemed to have had an established practice of tracking those who no longer considered themselves members of a given congregation (1 John 2:19). Church membership is a thoroughly biblical practice.

**Spectator vs. Participator** The modern perspective has led many to assume that they have little to no responsibility when it comes to the church. Some have unwittingly adopted an unhealthy laissez-faire approach in which they merely attend gatherings in order to observe religious shows and presentations. The Bible presents a different picture of church involvement. It regards every believer as a member of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:12). As a member, each has been invested with a spiritual gift (Romans 12:6-8). The Lord desires for everyone to exercise his or her gifts within the context of the church so that others might be introduced to the reconciliation that is available in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18).

### **The Scriptural Basis for the Church**

As of late, it seems that the importance of the church has been greatly diminished in the eyes of many. Sure, the world has never really been fond of the church, but the situation is becoming increasingly unhealthy. There is a rising tide of apathy, even amongst God's people, toward the corporate gathering of the body of Christ. As societies become increasingly more individualized, more and more settle for a privatized faith in which they see little use for meeting with other believers. An anti-institutional mindset is firmly fixed in the minds of many. It is often displayed through hearty dismissals of anything that has an air of "organized religion." While there are unhealthy forms of corporate religion, and even corporate Christianity, one should be careful to not slight the place of the church. Three Scriptural realities can provide discernment.

**God has a People.** It is hard to read Scripture without seeing the emphasis God places on His people. In the earliest pages of the Bible, the Lord is depicted as creating humanity for Himself (Genesis 1:26-27). After creation, His intent to establish a special nation for Himself was revealed. The Lord's purpose in creating such a nation was so that "all the peoples on earth" would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord spoke of His zeal for His people, saying, "Bring my sons from far away, and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who bears my name and is created for my glory. I have formed them; indeed, I have made them" (Isaiah 43:6-7). Through the coming of Jesus, our Lord provided a way for non-Jewish people to become a part of His people as well. Jesus spoke of these realities when He said, "I have other sheep that are not from this sheep pen; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). In the end, eternity will bear witness to the Lord's passion for His people. Individuals from every people group will fill the New Heaven and New Earth. The apostle John was told, "Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God" (Revelation 21:3). How can one not have a strong regard for the people of God? The story of Scripture is one that tells of God's passion for creating and preserving a people for Himself. The church now constitutes the gathering of God's people.

**God has a Day.** As a part of the fabric of His creation, the Lord set apart a single day each week for special use. He ordained the seventh day as a day for rest, rejuvenation, and reflection (Genesis 2:1-3). In His Moral Law, He instructed humanity to honor His principle of Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:8-11). For Israelites living under the Mosaic Law, there were sometimes strict penalties for not honoring the seventh day of the week (Numbers 15:32-36). When Jesus was on the Earth, He upheld the value of a weekly day of rest. He said, "The Sabbath was made for man" and "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). As the early church was established, the first day of the week became the new Sabbath (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Revelation 1:10). The reason was simple — Jesus was raised from the dead on that day (Matthew 28:1). Now, Christians of all nations are called to gather and worship the Lord on Sunday (Hebrews 10:24-25). Considering the Lord's vehement zeal for a

weekly day of rest and rejuvenation, how can one be justified in continually slighting the Lord's Sabbath? The gathering of the church is now the means of observing the Lord's special day.

**God has a Mission.** Before Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving His disciples on Earth, He said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The Lord left the Twelve with an indelible sense of purpose and mission. Such mission was intended to be fulfilled through the body of Christ. The Bible describes the church's commitment to its purpose by saying, "...speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part" (Ephesians 4:15-16). God's mission is not fulfilled apart from God's people. Can you see why the church is important?

### **The Scriptural Benefits of the Church**

Many have a cynical attitude toward church nowadays. Experiences with hurt from other members, moral failures amongst church leadership, and frustration over the apparent unhealthiness and ineffectiveness of many congregations have led many to think, "What's the use?" It is worth noting that every epistle within our New Testament was written to address some sort of problem or difficulty within a local church. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Jesus spoke highly of the church. He said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18).

Church will always be messy and broken until Christ makes all things new. One should not dismiss the importance of church on account of its imperfection. The old saying really is true — "If you find a perfect church, don't join it, because you will make it imperfect the moment you join!" That observation solicits a chuckle from most, but it underscores an important reality — churches are imperfect because they are made up of imperfect people.

Perhaps many would regain an appropriate appreciation for the church if they would get their eyes off of what's wrong with the church and place them on what is good about the church. When we read Scripture, we discover three benefits we receive from being active in a local congregation.

**Accountability** When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he had to spend a considerable amount of time talking about one immoral church member. There was a man within the congregation who was involved in an immoral, sexual relationship. To make things even worse, the relationship was an incestuous one (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). Considering the man's heinous sin, Paul advised the church to expel him from their midst (1 Corinthians 5:7). Knowing that his advice may have seemed harsh, the apostle later explained his rationale for giving such advice. He indicated that the goal of church discipline was to restore a sinning brother (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Paul's instruction reveals that accountability is a core function of the church. God has given the corporate gathering of His people in order to provide a mechanism for correcting individual members who go astray. It is for this reason that John said, "If anyone sees a fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn't lead to death" (1 John 5:16). It is also for this reason that Paul told the Galatians, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Jesus ordained and outlined a method for church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20.

**Encouragement** We live in a discouraging world. There are a lot of people and problems that seem to have a way of taking the proverbial wind out of our sails. Fortunately, God has designed the church to provide help. Paul told the church of the Thessalonians, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). The word translated "encourage" carried ideas of help, assistance, and

comfort. The word rendered “build each other” was taken from the world of construction (Luke 6:48, 17:28). Used figuratively, it spoke of a process of spiritual growth and development. Spiritual comfort and construction can be gained from the church. Within the gathering of the body, one can be cheered up and built up!

**Gospel Ministry** The church is driven by a mission that comes directly from Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). That mission cannot be accomplished through lone rangers who operate in isolation. By divine design, it is intended to be fulfilled through a cooperation amongst the body of Christ. Through Christ’s Spirit, the Lord has given differing gifts to each believer (Romans 12:6-8). Each gift is necessary to the establishing and building of the church, so each member is necessary to the health and effectiveness of the church. No one member can function alone, believing that he or she doesn’t need the other members of the body. This was Paul’s point when he said, “But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (1 Corinthians 12:18-21). God has given the body a mission, so every member ought to value the body of Christ!