

The Local Church and Why It Matters

Scripture: Acts 2:47

Code: B130111

I love the church. It's the center of my life and has been since childhood. My father was the pastor of a church when I was born, and I grew up in the church. It's the place where I was led to the knowledge of God, where I learned about the Person and work of Christ, and where I gained the knowledge of saving and sanctifying truth. It's where I learned how to pray, how to sing, how to worship, how to love, and how to serve. And it was in the church that I experienced the leading of the Spirit of God directing me to a life of ministry.

I met my wife in the church. We raised our children in the church, and now our grandchildren, too. It's where I've made lifelong friends and partners in ministry. The church touches every part of my life—in fact you could say it *is* my life.

People sometimes ask me why I write so much about issues in the church—why I can't just be quiet and enjoy my ministry. The answer is, I love the church so much that I can't stand by and watch it struggle. I want to help it be all God wants it to be, and that means I need to be a pastor. I love the church too much to do anything else.

And frankly, I can't understand people who don't have a similar love for the church—who aren't eager for every opportunity to worship together with other like-minded believers. I can't understand people who go to church on Saturday nights so they don't "mess up" their Sundays. Why are they so eager to get away from the church? Where else would they rather be?

There was a time when coming to Christ meant coming to His church. As far back as the New Testament, salvation brought you into union with the visible, gathered Body of Christ (cf. Acts 2:47). Becoming a Christian meant entering into fellowship with the people of God.

That's changed. The contemporary emphasis in evangelicalism is a believer's *personal* relationship to Christ. Individual faith is the pervasive theme, and rarely is there any discussion of how believers are supposed to fit into the church.

When was the last time you read a tract or heard a gospel presentation that ends with a discussion of the believer's relationship to the church? At best there is a very low emphasis on church involvement, church membership, and being a part of the family of God in the visible, gathered household of saints.

And in the massive effort to make salvation personal, the church has been left behind and overlooked to the detriment of many souls. Too many people today tend to be ecclesiastical consumers. They're only interested in what they can get out of their church, and they bounce from congregation to congregation as their whims and interests change. They don't have any particular commitment or loyalty to a specific assembly of saints.

In fact, they have little to no attachment to the church at all, and are under no obligation for regular attendance—if they make it, they make it; if not, it's no big deal.

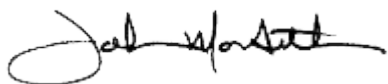
For people like that, their faith is completely anchored in their personal relationships with Christ—there is no corporate commitment or responsibility to the people of God. Their Christianity exists completely outside and apart from the church.

But the idea of believers living independently of the church is totally foreign to the New Testament. The Holy Spirit addressed almost every epistle to a local church, and other books like 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon were addressed to key leaders in the church. Even the book of James—which was written to believers scattered by persecution—assumes the recipients are still meeting together and deals heavily with life in the context of the church.

Throughout the New Testament the assumption is always the same: that the people of God are faithfully gathering together in a local assembly where the Word of God is being disseminated. That unified gathering—not just the invisible worldwide church, but the local, visible congregation—is at the heart of Christianity. The church is the only institution the Lord established and promised to bless. Why would anyone who claims to love the Lord want to keep His people at arm's length?

The widespread lack of commitment to the church shows up in many other ways as well—the rampant neglect of baptism and communion, the explosion of parachurch ministries, and the forsaking of the biblical qualifications for church leadership are just a few examples.

For now, we're going to focus on our responsibility to the church and the role each of us is called to play in our local congregations. It starts with the important step of submitting to your local church in membership, and that's where we'll pick up next week.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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