

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn't Optional

The last six months have been an unsettling and disruptive time for millions of people around the globe. The impact of COVID-19 on our ordinary routines and daily habits has been, in many cases, bewildering. The ways in which we would usually connect have had to adapt to these new and strange times – and it seems we're not out of the woods just yet. Our lives may not return to normal any time soon, if, in fact, at all.

COVID-19 Discloses A New Reality

COVID-19 has also brought to light just how busy and frantic *normal* actually was and, for many people, the slower pace and limited ability to travel too far afield has come as a welcome relief. This has been an unexpected opportunity to slow down and 'smell the roses', enjoy time with family, working or learning at home and passing lazy afternoons with nowhere particular to be; apart from in the garden or buying essentials at the supermarket!

For others, however, the sense of isolation and abandonment has been acute. Loneliness, anxiety and depression have been constant companions, with no assurance of when things might return to normal. Being able to still connect, albeit in the online space (hello Zoom!), has been critical for many people to support their mental health and maintain a sense of community and belonging.

For many Christians, however, the inability to 'go to church' (ie to gather physically together in a building) has uncovered a new reality; one that has perhaps laid hidden and undisturbed beneath the surface of our busy, ordered, *normal* lives.

What has been exposed is the troubling reality that when habit or routine no longer forces us to physically show up to church, we quite often stop showing up emotionally. Our connection to church – to the local expression of the body of Christ – is revealed to be a shallow, top-surface connection, driven and maintained only by habit. As soon as the opportunity to exit has materialised, we've opened the door and welcomed it with open arms. Physically, we may have been attending church, but emotionally, we've been long gone.

Is Church-Going Important?

The necessity of finding other means to connect as a church and the resultant disconnect for many Christians has highlighted important questions: Why do Christians gather anyway? Is 'going to church' even important?

Nearly 50% of Australians believe that church-going is no longer relevant. Out of a list of 13 facilities and 10 services that people agree a community needs, including foods and cafes, parks, libraries, local childcare and sports facilities, relationship seminars and support or social activities for seniors, a local church comes in at 13 and 9 respectively (only just ahead of English classes and migrant support, in the case of the latter).

Clearly, for many people, church-going is not only personally irrelevant, but it's also considered practically superfluous to a community's needs. At a time when the ability for gathering together in person has been greatly limited, increased disconnect from 'church' has been, for many Christians, a sobering reality.

Yet the Bible tells quite a different story. It describes [the church](#) as an essential reality, in vibrant, organic language; as a body, a vine, a family, a woman, a building of living stones, a kingdom. It describes the church as a single identity, made up of many individuals, with the ability, as a

corporate reality, to affirm and give shape to the lives of each Christian who becomes a member. It reminds us that when we choose the King, we are also choosing the King's people.

“The starting point of the Christian life is an unqualified trust in the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection to save humanity from sin, a trust that comes to individuals through grace and by faith. Once that trust in Jesus has been born in us by the Spirit, then our baptism signifies our willingness to commit ourselves to God, to submit to the lordship of Jesus, and to identify ourselves not just with the church but as the church.” | Lucy Peppiatt

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about the connection between the individual and the church. He comments in the book of Corinthians that “God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it”. This body of believers is governed or directed in all its functions by the head, who is Jesus.

It's remarkable that God has designed the human body – every part dependent on every other part – as a working model for understanding our lives together as a community of believers (1 Corinthians 12:27).

How Do We Identify Ourselves Not Just With the Church But As The Church?

Why is it important for a Christian to feel like they not only have a local church they call 'home' but that they truly belong there? How does a Christian identify not just with the church but as the church?

“A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.” | Jonathan Leeman

Acts 2:42-47 describes not only *how* but *why* the first Christians began gathering themselves together. They were a new organic identity, citizens of the kingdom of God, 'called out to follow and serve King Jesus'. These new Christians regularly gathered together to honour God and His Son, to grow in community, to grow together spiritually, to give themselves in service and to share and witness to the good news of the risen King. We describe these collective [Christian activities](#) as 'worship', 'fellowship', 'discipleship', 'ministry' and 'evangelism'.

The local church is the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom of God. Church people are [kingdom people](#), living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that "are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity" (Ecclesiastes 3:11) (Matter Of The Heart).

Gathering together as a local church is therefore a public declaration, to both fellow Christians and to the world, that an individual has submitted to the rule of King Jesus and that their allegiance has been transferred to him. It affirms that each person gathered is a person of the kingdom, for whom Jesus is Lord. It's how one Christian says to another Christian: "*What! You too? I thought I was the only one.*" (C S Lewis)

Through Christ's work on the cross, Christians have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. But they only become these things collectively, never individually. "*Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. Try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.*" | Rachel Held Evans

The Christian life, as it turns out, is a package deal. If you choose the King, you must also choose his people.

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn't Optional

The biblical imperative of belonging to a local church is an important and often neglected conversation. The idea of committing can seem uncomfortable, even legalistic for some people. For many Christians, the experience of church has been one of hurt and disillusionment.

Not every church hurts people, but most churches have hurt someone at some point, simply because churches are made up of imperfect people. This reality can leave people reluctant to re-engage, afraid of being hurt again, wanting to protect themselves, and questioning the place of the church or even God in their lives.

“Christians need relationships to grow. We don't grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship.” | Rick Warren

Yet despite all the imperfections that can be found within a church or the fact that a church can (and will) mess up and get it wrong, it's the way we're supposed to 'do life together' as Christians.

Jesus didn't say that he would 'build Christians', but that he would build 'his church', purchased with his own blood and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive and corporate. His church, as an instituted organic reality, has authority and governance that an individual Christian simply doesn't have

Church isn't just something we go to, it's the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom. Church isn't just an event we attend, it's a fellowship we belong to (1 John 1:3, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:9). Choosing a church home –

choosing to belong to a local church – isn't optional but essential for a Christian.

'The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God's people and see an authentic painting of Christ's love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.' | Jonathan Leeman

What If I Don't Feel Connected to My Church?

The church was born from the death and resurrection of Jesus and He continues to be the source and lifeblood of the church. Any life or energy a church possesses must flow from him, the risen King. Christ's rule – in the life of the church and in the hearts of its members – is absolute. Jesus is Lord.

If you're struggling to feel a sense of connection or belonging to your local church, we'd suggest there are two possible reasons for this:

1. Jesus is Lord of your heart, but unfortunately, he's not the Lord of the church you're part of. This is a difficult situation to be in but not without hope. Our suggestion is to pray about this and then engage in open and genuine conversation with the members of your church. Gently voice your concerns and suggest ways to encourage the church to 'return to its first love'.

One of the seven churches named in the book of Revelation, the church at Ephesus, faced a similar situation. They are commended by Jesus for being diligent in good works and for their perseverance, their intolerance of heresy, and their endurance of many hardships in his name; but they had lost their warmth and zeal for Jesus.

"Relationship had simply become religion and passion little

more than cold orthodoxy. The first love which characterised the Ephesians was the zeal and ardor with which they embraced their salvation as they realised they loved Christ because he first loved them (1 John 4:19) and that it was, in fact, his love for them that had made them "alive together with Christ." So overwhelmed were they by the joy that came from understanding their former state—dead in trespasses and sins—and their new life in Christ, that they exhibited the fruit of that joy (Ephesians 2:1-5). Because of God's great love for the Ephesians, they were "made alive in Christ" and that new life was exhibited in the passion of gratitude." | [Got Questions](#)

2. Jesus is Lord of the church you attend, but not the Lord of your heart. This is a more challenging situation and perhaps the place to start is where your Christian life first began: with the reality that *'greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends'* (John 15:13).

Supreme love was demonstrated and made visible in Jesus' death on the cross and it's in this sacrifice that we also see the love of God, that *'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'* (Romans 5:8). Remind yourself that you are deeply loved and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God. You are His dearly loved child and a citizen of His kingdom, saved by grace through faith alone and not because of anything you have done. As Christians, we belong to God and He loves us with the love of a perfect Father (John 14:18, 1 John 3:1).

Give your heart entirely and with no hesitation to the King who died for you and everything else will flow from there.

If you're struggling with your identity as a Christian or want to understand more about God's work of grace in your life (and how that causes radical transformation), I would highly recommend reading the following two books: "What's So Amazing

About Grace” by Phillip Yancey and “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero.

The Christian life isn't always easy and the next step isn't always clear. Sometimes we need courage to take that step and sometimes we just need to stand still and watch God go to work for us.

A Glorious Reality: The Church of Christ And It's Local Expressions

“Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little embassy of light. It's a gathering of Christians, gathered together in the name of their King, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two, then four, then eight, and so it goes.

A new nation is growing, a nation set inside the nations. The new nation leaves the boundary lines on the map where they are, but it cannot be contained by the map's lines.

The line makers don't have the authority to stop these unworldly citizens. The points of light cross all boundaries, spreading everywhere like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens.

These are the churches of Christ and their members. The world has never known anything like them.” | Jonathan Leeman