

LESSON 6

THE PRIORITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Instructions:

1. Read through the handout 3 times this week.
2. Write out the 3 things that stood out to you most. These may be things that were new to you or possibly things the study helped you better understand. The goal is to help you dig into the study and better understand the information. Be prepared to discuss these things next week in class.

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3. What are your thoughts on formal membership in the local church? Why is it necessary?

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4. In your own words, what is fellowship?

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5. What are your thoughts on Growth Groups? Why isn't Sunday morning enough?

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## THE PRIORITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

### I. Why is the Church Important?

When it comes to the Christian life, the question of the church's importance is perhaps one that is too often overlooked. How often do we stop and think, "Why is the church so important? What is the purpose of the church?" The answer to such questions will provide us both direction for how churches should build the body of Christ and encouragement to be faithful as we play our part in it.

In this lesson, we will explore the critical role that the local church plays in God's glorious purposes, as well as the overall vision of this particular local church. We will find that our relationships with other believers are a tremendous means of blessing, both for ourselves and others. God never meant for us to live the Christian life alone. Instead, he gives us the marvelous privilege of traveling on this journey together.

A. The ultimate purpose of the church is the glory of God.

1. The Bible clearly reveals that mankind stands in rebellion against God.

However, throughout history God has made Himself known to people, called them to Himself, and gathered them together to worship Him and bring glory to His name. Because the church is uniquely God's, we are to be distinctly different from the world.

*Exodus 19:4-6: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*

2. Believers living after Christ came to earth have the even greater privilege of joining together to enjoy and proclaim the pinnacle of God's saving acts: the death of Christ on the cross for our sins.

*Ephesians 1:3-8: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which he lavished upon us..."*

B. The church's role is exclusive.

The church is God's chosen means for carrying out His purposes until He returns. He has ordained no other organization or structure for this purpose.

*Matthew 16:18: "...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

*1 Timothy 3:15: "...if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth."*

C. Our true nature as the church, and as Christians, is corporate.

Throughout the history of redemption, God has been acting to save a people, not a disconnected group of isolated individuals.

*1 Peter 2:9-10: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

There are many aspects of the Christian life that we typically think of as involving our personal relationship with God: our response to the gospel, our growth in godliness, our love for doctrine, and our empowerment by God’s Spirit. While all of these things are critical for our personal lives, it is possible to understand them, incorrectly, as involving only our personal lives.

It is a key assumption of New Testament teaching that the Christian life is to be lived out in relationship with other believers in the context of the local church. Although we enter into a relationship with God as individuals, we nevertheless enter into something greater than our own individuality: the church—the community of God’s people.

## **II. Why Should I Join a Local Church?**

Why go to all this trouble to learn about this church? Does it really matter if I actually join a church? Am I not already a member of “the universal Church?” Isn’t my personal relationship with Jesus what really matters? Such questions are common, and not altogether surprising given our individualistic culture and natural tendency toward independence. However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God’s purposes in and through the church. The Scriptures make it clear: God’s specific purposes for His people are accomplished as individuals join themselves to and participate in local churches.

### **A. Local church membership is biblical.**

The primary New Testament metaphors for the church – body (1 Corinthians 12:27), temple (Ephesians 2:21), household (1 Timothy 3:15), and flock (Acts 20:28) – have as a key characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single entity. While all genuine believers are members of the universal body of Christ, they are to express this tangibly through membership in a specific local church.

### **B. Local church membership is vital to our spiritual health and growth.**

Without being joined together with other believers, we will lack the strength and nourishment that each member—including ourselves—is to supply.

*Ephesians 4:15-16: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”*

### **C. Local church membership is sharing life together.**

Far from so many of our modern misconceptions, the biblical picture of the church can best be described as community: a group of people, joined by a common life, united by common values and a common purpose, devoted to living out this life together within the larger society. This is the type of church life to which God calls us—a life that shines as a testimony to His work in us. His intention for our lives together is more than simply attending the same Sunday meetings and believing the same doctrines.

*Acts 2:42-47: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.”*

“Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship...They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ they were formed into a spiritually organic community...We must grasp the idea that fellowship means belonging to one another in the Body of Christ, with all the privileges and responsibilities that such a relationship entails.”—**Jerry Bridges**

### **III. Fellowship: The Foundation of Our Relationships**

Because the Holy Spirit has joined us together as a community, our relationships are to be marked by this reality. We don’t simply attend the same service, or enjoy the same interests—we have been united at the deepest level by the Spirit of God. The New Testament characterizes our relationships with each other by the word fellowship.

“We should not think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotions. Fellowship is one of the great words of the New Testament: it denotes something that is vital to a Christian’s spiritual health, and central to the Church’s true life...The Church will flourish and Christians will be strong only when there is fellowship.”—**J. I. Packer**

#### **A. What is fellowship?**

The word often translated fellowship in the New Testament (*koinonia*—cf. Acts 2:42) is also rendered participation, partnership, and communion. The word expresses the idea of sharing something in common, or joining a mutual endeavor (often with sacrifice involved).

1. Biblical writers took up this word to describe the relationship believers have with God through Christ.

*1 Corinthians 1:9: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

2. It was also extended to describe the relationship believers have with each other.

*1 John 1:3: “...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”*

3. Our fellowship with God is what makes our fellowship with other believers unique. The richness Christians experience in their relationships with one another is human relationship at the deepest level possible.

C.J. Mahaney defines fellowship as “the communication of our current relationship with and experience of God himself.” Biblical fellowship is not merely “socializing”—it is sharing our common life in Christ: life that is rich, enduring, and eternal.

## B. The biblical example of fellowship

The Bible describes fellowship in concrete terms as actions we do with or for “one another.” Here is a sampling:

1. Worship God together (Ephesians 5:18-20).
2. Pray for one another (Ephesians 6:18).
3. Carry one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2).
4. Encourage one another (I Thessalonians 5:11).
5. Confess our sins to one another (James 5:16).
6. Correct one another (Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15).
7. Serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

We must recognize our responsibilities as members of the body and position ourselves to serve others. In short, we must give ourselves to purposeful involvement in each others’ lives.

## IV. The Fruit of Our Fellowship

Genuine fellowship profoundly enriches our relationships within the church.

- A. Growth in godliness. Sanctification is a group project. We simply cannot make the same progress in isolation that we can make in community with other believers.

1. We need the consistent encouragement of others. Consistent, intentional, and specific encouragement is to be a mark of those who serve “the God of encouragement” (Romans 15:5).

*I Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”*

2. We need others to help us resist sin and to strengthen our resolve for godliness.

*Hebrews 3:13: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*

3. We need the input of others to help us see our sin and repent from it. Because we are naturally blind and deaf to our own sin, we desperately need the correction of others. When given and received humbly, correction is a true expression of biblical love.

*Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”*

4. We need to confess our sins to others so as to weaken sin’s power and invite accountability. Few things are more effective in cultivating humility and promoting fellowship than confessing our sins and pursuing evaluation from others.

*James 5:16: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”*

- B. Providing mutual care. We live in a fallen world, and the effects of sin —our own and others’—are all around us: pain, sorrow, sickness, death. God has promised to care for us, and much of his care comes to us through other believers. Indeed, Christians are to be distinguished by their sacrificial love for one another.

*1 Corinthians 12:24-26: "But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."*

- C. Benefiting from the diversity of gifts. The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to build the church. But God has also made us dependent upon one another—no one person has all the gifts necessary. To mature as a body, we need one another and the unique gifts each one brings.

*Ephesians 4:16: "...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."*

*1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

- D. Presenting a compelling witness. Ultimately, our lives together are intended to show the world a compelling picture of the grace of God. Our unity and love for one another is one of the most powerful testimonies we can give to unbelievers who are lost, isolated, fragmented, and ultimately without hope.

*John 13:35: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

## **V. A Means of Fellowship: Growth Groups**

One of the primary ways we build relationships and cultivate fellowship with each other here is through our network of small groups—what we call "Growth Groups." While we are joined to all believers in the local church, Growth Groups allow us to relate more deeply with a small number of people. Growth Groups are an integral part of our church's ministry, they provide an important context for accomplishing a number of biblical priorities.

"The value of the small group is that it can become a community of related persons, and in it the benefit of relatedness cannot be missed nor its challenge evaded. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, therefore, that small groups...are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity."—**John Stott**

### **A. The purpose of Growth Groups**

1. Application of God's Word to our lives. Merely hearing God's Word is insufficient; we must apply it to our lives for there to be fruit. Growth Groups enable us to do this together. We seek to apply the Bible's teaching, review Sunday messages, discuss Christian books, and use a variety of other resources with the intention of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Pursuit of biblical fellowship. Genuine fellowship isn't practical in a large crowd. Growth Groups provide a place where we can build intimate relationships, care for one another, and help each other grow in our relationship with God.
3. Ministry to one another. God has made us dependent on each other, and Growth Groups provide a context where we can minister to each other with the gifts that God has given us. Meetings often include times of prayer for one another and opportunities for individuals to use their gifts to bless and serve one another.

### **B. Participation in Growth Groups**

Membership in this church assumes active involvement in a Growth Group. We encourage those in membership class to discuss and ask questions about these groups during class discussions. In the elder interview process, one of the elders will assist you, if necessary, in locating a Growth Group that you can attend.

### C. Our responsibilities within Growth Groups

Each member is important to the group, and should seek to contribute to the group's health and success. We each have the responsibility in our group to:

1. Faithfully attend meetings and functions. We're much more likely to benefit if we are actually present!
2. Willingly participate. Come ready to contribute, to serve, to share, and to open yourself to others. When the group has an assignment, diligently complete it. Both you and others will benefit from your participation.
3. Build relationships with other members outside the meeting. Don't confine your investment to the Growth Group meeting—let this be the springboard to rich, enduring relationships.

## VI. The Church: Dear to God and Dear to Us

Our main concern is not whether you become part of our church, but that you become a part of a church. Ultimately, this is not an issue of our personal preference or convenience, but of the glory of God. We exist for His glory, and Scripture is clear that God desires to make His glory known through the church. This is why the church—the gathering of God's redeemed—is so dear to him. We trust it will become dear to you as well.

“If I had never joined a church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us.”

—**Charles Spurgeon**

As we see in the New Testament, this life is one that is to be shared with others. The church—with all its imperfections—is to be a foretaste of our fellowship with the saints in heaven (Hebrews 12:22-24). May this amazing privilege be our ongoing experience as we “continue the journey together.”