

Christian Community

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Acts 2:40–47 (NKJV) *“And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.”⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common,⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”*

Jesus said He would build His church: *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”¹*

Historically, there are three marks of a local church and three works of a local church. The three *marks* of a local church (three O’s) are:² 1) Orthodoxy: the proclamation of the central truths of the Christian faith regarding God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and salvation; 2) Order: the positions of biblically qualified and properly appointed leaders; and 3) Ordinances: the practice of baptism as the rite of initiation into the covenant community, and the Lord’s Supper as the rite of sustained fellowship. The three *works* of a local church (three E’s) are:³ 1) Evangelism: gathering others to God by the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; 2) Edification: growing believers toward maturity in Christ through teaching and discipline in genuine community; and 3) Exaltation: glorifying God through adoration and service.

In our contemporary world, there is a lot of confusion about the question, “What is the Church?” Is the church a building? An organization? A denomination? A social club? A praise and worship center? A teaching and preaching center? A coffee and donut hangout? A supermarket of spiritual groceries? A social justice movement? A handful of believers getting together in a living room or restaurant? Or is the church something more? Our *conception* of the church will determine our *relationship* with the church. What is your relationship with the church?

As He did during His earthly ministry, so Jesus is overturning wrong conceptions of His church today: *“Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.¹³ And He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” but you have made it a “den of thieves.”’¹⁴ Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.¹⁵ But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant¹⁶ and said to Him, ‘Do You hear what these are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, Yes. Have you never read, “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?”¹⁷”¹⁴ Jesus re-ordered His house as a House of Prayer. God always begins judgment at His house: *“For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?”¹⁵**

The church is a spiritual family. The apostle Paul said: *“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,¹⁵ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man,¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,²¹ to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”¹⁶ Our relationship as brothers and sisters is rooted in our common relationship to God as Father and to our relationship with Jesus Christ His Son. We are brothers and sisters “in the Lord.” Our relationship to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is real even if not experienced.*

The church is a Christian community. The church is the visible manifestation of the family of God on earth. God’s family is called to live together in Christian community (not communism): *“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common,⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,⁴⁷*

¹ Matthew 16:18 (NKJV)

² Michael J. Savigel, *Retro-Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 155.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 156

⁴ Matthew 21:12–16 (NKJV)

⁵ 1 Peter 4:17 (NKJV)

⁶ Ephesians 3:14–21 (NKJV)

*praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*⁷ Christians are not called to live isolated lives in seclusion from other believers. Christian community is found through Christ Jesus and in Christ Jesus. We belong to one another because we belong to Jesus Christ. We are united for eternity. As a Christian community, we belong to one another and need one another by God's design. We need one another's presence, love, affirmation, edification, exhortation, and even accountability. We need to grow in the expression of our love in community: *"But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;*¹⁰ *and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more.*"⁸

Christian community is a privilege and not a right. We must not take it for granted. While in this world, we live among our enemies. Jesus lived among His enemies. In the end, even His closest disciples abandoned Him. On the Cross He was alone. Not all Christians enjoy such community. These include the sick, the imprisoned, the quarantined, the homebound, those living in non-Christian countries, missionaries in foreign lands, among others. It is by God's grace that we are permitted to gather in Christian community to worship, to learn God's word, to pray, and to enjoy a common fellowship in Christ. Yet, how easily we neglect it! How easily we take it for granted! How eagerly we long for it when deprived of it!

Christian community must be protected from artificial ideals. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed under Hitler's reign, said of Christian community: "Those who want more than what Christ has established between us do not want Christian community. They are looking for some extraordinary experiences of community that were denied them elsewhere. Such people are bringing confused and tainted desires into the Christian community. Precisely at this point Christian community is most often threatened from the very outset by the greatest danger, the danger of internal poisoning, the danger of confusing Christian community with some wishful image of pious community, the danger of blending the devout heart's natural desire for community with the spiritual reality of Christian community...Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. They stand adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the community. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. When their idealized image is shattered, they see the community breaking into pieces. So they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves."

It is time to restore true Christian community in the church. We must remember that we are one family in Christ and that we are brothers and sisters through Christ and in Christ. Together we make up the Christian community. We must not imagine that Christian community is our right but a privilege. Many live out their Christian life without this privilege. We must not take it for granted. We must not allow idealism to ruin Christian community. We must protect it from all who try to impose their own visionary ideals. We must not neglect the assembling of ourselves together. We must seek to grow in brotherly love. We must seek to faithfully express Christian community through our gatherings, prayers, worship, edification, exhortation, words, care, and service to one another.

If you are not a Christian, then commit yourself to Christ in saving faith to enter this Christian community. If you are a Christian, recommit yourself to full participation in the Christian community. Christian community is the essence of the church that Jesus came to establish.

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⁷ Acts 2:44–47 (NKJV)

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:9–10 (NKJV)