

LOVE YOUR CHURCH

WEEK 1 - BELONGING: A GOSPEL-CENTERED FAMILY

What comes to your mind when you hear the word church?

Tony Merida begins the first chapter with the following statement.

"As image-bearers of God, people are made for community. The triune God is a relational God and he has created us for relationships" - Merida

How do we see this reality play itself out in popular culture?

Culture reveals our need for community. The reason is that God has given us a need for community. He has also given us that community in the church. What is unique about the church is that it is founded upon the gospel. When, not if, we sin we damage our relationship with God and with each other. The gospel restores us. God unites us but we have to be committed to this community which God has given.

The challenge we face is that any community especially the church requires commitment. Commitment is difficult. We have to do the hard work of showing up on Sundays, home groups, men's/women's groups. Being vulnerable, working to reconcile when relational conflict occurs. This is hard especially today with our consumeristic culture. We must not approach church as a consumer, or a customer being served. Rather we should be here committed to serve and invest ourselves.

SELF REFLECTION: How do you view church? Are you a consumer or a committed servant?

THE CHURCH FROM JESUS' PERSPECTIVE

Merida talks about how he became a believer in college and had little value for the church. He was more excited about events and movements. He felt like the church had too much drama. He then began to realize that **he was failing to see the church from Jesus' perspective**. We need to see it from a biblical perspective.

He says this regarding a biblical view of the church.

"Belonging to a church means investing your life in a gospel-centered community of believers who joyfully serve one another and advance Jesus' mission together." - Merida

He goes on to quote *D. Martin Lloyd-Jones*.

"The greatest need of the hour is a revived and joyful church ... Unhappy Christians are a poor recommendation for the faith ... The exuberant joy of the early Christians was one of the most potent factors in the spread of Christianity." - D. Martin Lloyd-Jones

It is the gospel that should lead us to "exuberant joy" even in the midst of sorrow and suffering.

2 Corinthians 6:10 (ESV) 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

How have you seen gospel-joy testify to others or yourself?

Merida goes on to talk about the "privilege" of belonging to the new-covenant people of God. What are some privileges of being a part of the church? [*salvation by faith in Jesus, Holy Spirit's indwelling, local gathering, hear the word, corporate worship, spiritual leadership, Lord's supper, Baptism, practicing the one-another passages, fulfilling the great commission, making disciples, etc.*]

Now when we talk about the church there are two ways we can speak about it. We might talk about the universal church, which consists of all believer's everywhere past present future, alive or dead. The completed bride you might say. But in this book Merida is concerned more with the *local church*. That is a local church like ours. And the many others all throughout the world. When the New Testament talks about the church this is its primary sense.

Merida says this about the church.

"The word "church" (ekklesia) generally means "gathering" or "assembly," but the church is more than a gathering. The church is a local community of believers who gather for worship and scatter for witness. They share life together centered on Jesus for the good of one another and for the good of the world. This idea of community is everywhere in the New Testament; the Bible knows nothing of "lone ranger" Christianity." - Merida

How do the following verses speak to the communal aspect of the church?

Titus 2:14 (ESV) ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

1 Peter 2:10 (ESV) ¹⁰ 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.

ELEVATING OUR CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

Merida points out how the book of Ephesians has some very important things to say about the church both universal and local.

Ephesians 1:23–23 (ESV) ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 2:14–16 (ESV) ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:19–22 (ESV) ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:1–6 (ESV) I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:11–13 (ESV) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Ephesians 5:25–29 (ESV) ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,

The church is not just a club or a casual gathering. It's the blood bought people of God. A people being built up and transformed into the image of Christ. A people commissioned to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

OBSTACLES TO COMMUNITY

Merida presents to us four obstacles we must overcome if we are to, as he puts it, "*live out this vision of gospel-centered Spirit-filled community in the church.*"

Sensationalism:

Merida describes sensationalism this way,

"We get excited about huge conferences, someone else's pastor, or the latest controversy. Thrill-seekers simply don't find life in a local church stimulating enough to really get involved and stay involved." – Merida

Just like any family church life has many mundane aspects that simply aren't exciting. Serving in the nursery, in children's Sunday school, listening patiently to someone's struggles,

reaching out to the elderly. What the church needs desperately is not thrill-seekers but humble dedicated servants.

How have you seen this type of mindset in the church?

Mysticism:

"When it comes to life in the Spirit, many think of mystical, miraculous, or private experiences." – Merida

In the ancient church some would take on the life of a hermit, living in the desert to get away from all distractions in communing with God. But when we look at the emphasis of Scripture Jesus is not just concerned with individuals but with churches.

Revelation 1:13 (ESV) ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

Revelation 2:1 (ESV) "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands."

Jesus "walks among" the churches.

Idealism:

Merida quotes from Bonhoeffer regarding idealism in the church.

"He who loves his dream of community more than the community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial" - Bonhoeffer

The fact of the matter is that we all have proclivities, emphasis, and experiences that drive our ideal for the perfect church. We can be very passionate and believe that our vision of things is the right way to do things but in the process do damage in the church or to our own spiritual health.

Merida writes, *"I often chuckle when wish dreamers say, 'I wish the church could just get back to the way it was in the first century; those people had it all together'"* Merida goes on *"I want to say, 'Have you read the new testament?'"*

The first century church had many problems. In fact, it has been observed that much of the New Testament exists because Paul and others were addressing those problems. The Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians and others were filled with controversy and strife, even outright apostasy.

Let's be a people who lay aside our preferences and commit to being an active participant in your local church.

Individualism:

Merida writes, "Many (without realizing it) live isolated lives, especially in the West, never experiencing the satisfying joy of biblical community."

One of the down sides of modern technology is the ease with which we can live our lives in isolation. We can engage in digital community but lose the benefits of face to face community.

2 John 12 (ESV) ¹² Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

He quotes again from Bonhoeffer

"It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing... The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer ... The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God ... It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."
(Bonhoeffer - Life Together, p 18-19)

ACTION STEPS

Merida offers some next steps as we consider this chapter.

- **Elevate your concept of the church.** Don't treat the church as unimportant, unnecessary, or a hindrance to doing great things for God. The church is imperfect but indispensable to faithful Christian discipleship.
- **If you're considering relocating, make joining a local church a priority.** Be eager to unite with a gospel-centered, Bible-believing community.
- **Never forget that it's a privilege to belong to a local family of faith, and to be part of the larger universal church!** It's a gift to be a part of a local church and to be a part of the global and universal church as well.
- **Pray for your church regularly.** Don't underestimate the importance of praying for the people of God, for its leaders, and for the advancement of the mission.