

1. A Special People

In my experience, most young people have one of two impressions of the church. For those who have grown up in the church, it is simply a given. It doesn't require much thought: at worst, it's a chore; at best, it simply is. For those who haven't grown up in the church, it is often seen as "that thing those people do." Likewise, arriving at this conclusion does not require a lot of intellectual strain. There is actually quite a bit of overlap in the two positions: the young person growing up in a Christian home doesn't think much about the church because they don't have a choice; the unbeliever doesn't think much about the church because it's out of sight and out of mind.

Therefore, in this little book, I want us to do something that might be completely new to you: let's *think* about the church. And let's make sure we have our thoughts guided by

what the Bible says. The Bible actually has quite a lot to say about the church—a lot of *wonderful* things, in fact. I hope to unpack for you what I have come to learn over the years: the Bible presents the church as the greatest place on earth—and *it really is!*

DISCOVERING CHURCH

That realization began to dawn on me in my freshman year of college. I had moved far from home to study film at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I knew practically no one at the school. I grew up in a small town and most of my graduating class stayed around to attend the local community college, or to go to the gigantic Penn State campus which was only about thirty minutes away. I opted to go to the other end of the state, and quickly discovered I was not up for it. I was terribly homesick. I had never spent much time away from home—I had never even been in a city before! For a while, all I wanted was to drop out and go home.

There were two things I had going for me: a recommendation of a solid church to attend, and a friend who would brave the scary subways with me to go each week. Although college is often a time of spiritual drifting for

many young people, the Lord graciously did an opposite work in my life. Okay, there was still spiritual drifting at times (!), but it was never a church-less drifting. Although Monday through Saturday were quite hard the first semester or two, Sunday was always a highlight. I made friends immediately; I joined a choir (not really my thing, but it was a great way to connect); I even showed up early most weeks to attend both morning services. The Lord had made me hungry for His house: I wanted to be with the people, singing praises, and studying God's Word. My friend and I would prepare for a long afternoon, usually hanging out in one of the parks in Center City, so that we could return for the evening service and do it all over again. It was a long day, and logistically difficult, but it was the best day.

What I discovered was a felt reality of what the Bible teaches: *the church is the greatest place on earth*. That is because the church has a very unique relationship with God. The church is His special people. Indeed, I felt a special blessing from the Lord when I was in His house on His day with His people. Admittedly, this was sort of a surprise to me. Something that was just a given growing up was now great. To be clear,

the church *is* great. Always. But now I saw it to be the case. In this book I want you to see it, too.

BOUGHT WITH THE BLOOD

What makes the church such a unique institution and the place of preeminent blessing is its relationship to God by virtue of the work of Jesus Christ. In Acts 20, we are told that the church belongs to God because He paid for it with the blood of His dear son: “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (v. 28). Peter writes something similar when he says, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Immediately, our estimation of church should be raised when we consider it could not even exist were it not for the death of Christ on the cross. The value of the church demands that we hold it dear and precious to us. Admittedly, that value may not be apparent from our human perspective, but this is why we need the Scriptures: we need to see the church for how God sees it. And to God, we 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" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

The church, therefore, is the people of God who belong to Him, not by virtue of creation, but by virtue of salvation. We could say that, although everyone belongs to God because He is their Maker, the church *doubly* belongs to God because He is their Maker *and* their Savior. Although this should enforce a sense of indebtedness to the Lord and instill within all believers a desire to serve and obey Him, it should also give a sense of privilege, dignity, and worth. Moses told Israel the same thing: "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD" (Deut. 33:29). The heart is full and the head held high when you belong to the church, as it is the special society of those who have been saved by the Lord.

CALLED-OUT ONES

The Greek word that is translated "church" in the New Testament underscores this idea. It literally means "the called-out ones." The church is the people that God has called out from this world which is fading away and has

instead brought into His eternal family. The church is the people who have been especially chosen by God for “blessings without number and mercies without end.”¹

My four-year-old daughter’s bed has helped me understand this privilege. Let me explain. She has countless stuffed animals (“stuffies”) at the foot of her bed—seriously, there are far too many, and she may be soon at risk of drowning in plush! But even so, it’s only her precious white stuffed doggy that gets to come up to the head of the bed, snuggle under her arm, and “sleep” with her. They have been called out from the rest, and it’s a sign of my daughter’s love for these particular few that she bestows such a privilege on them. This idea of a gracious choice is built into the very word *church*: they are the people that God has set apart from the world, called out of sin and hell to enjoy the blessings of salvation with Him forever.

Theologians will sometimes clarify further this idea of the church—which is synonymous with the elect—by referring to it as *the invisible church*. This simply means it’s the church that is invisible, or hidden, from human perception

1 Michael A. Perry, “O God beyond All Praising,” 1982.

(since we do not know who is truly saved or not), though it is known entirely and eternally to God. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that the invisible church “consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” Calling the church the “spouse” of Christ is a nod to Ephesians 5:25 where we read, “Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*” When used in this way, the term “church” speaks of all Christians (see also Acts 20:28).

But we can also speak of *the visible church*, which describes the church as you and I see it. This is the church that is found the whole world over, in any denomination, wherever people faithfully confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Though the invisible church only consists of true believers, the visible church consists of all those who *say* they are believers. Paul writes about this universal expression of the visible church: “all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2).

CHURCH

So, if you are looking through your theological lens, zoom out as far as possible, get a panoramic view that encompasses all eternity, and you will “see” the invisible church. Zoom in further to capture the globe, and you are looking at the visible church. But we can zoom in further still, to a particular city or town, and we find *the local church*. Another term for this is congregation. You probably have more than one wherever you live. When Paul writes, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he is writing to a local church (1 Thess. 1:1). The local church is a discernible group of people that meet in a specific location. The story I just relayed about my experience with a church in Philadelphia was a story about falling in love with a *local* church. That’s what we are going to be focusing on in this book, too.

The local church is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. It’s where everything that the Bible says about the church comes to life. So, in the pages that follow, we are going to consider the mission of the local church, the way it functions, and the role you are to play in all of it.

MAIN POINT:

The church is the special people of God who belong to Him because Christ died for them. There is no privilege greater in all of life than to belong to the church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What is your experience with church? Did you grow up in one?
- Is the idea of church exciting to you? Why or why not?
- What makes the church so precious in God's eyes?