

WHY WE NEED THE CHURCH



In the life of faith, there's no going it alone.

T. M. MOORE

A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Why We Need the Church

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Waxed Tablet Publications

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Why We Need the Church

Welcome to *Why We Need the Church*

Welcome to *Why We Need the Church*, a look at critical reasons why believers must not try to go it alone in following the Lord Jesus. *Why We Need the Church* is one of our *ReVision* studies in Biblical worldview.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at not charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 We Need the Church!

And he put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1.22, 23

Keeping pace?

The increasing decline and cultural marginalization of Christianity in America and the West is beginning to be a cause for alarm on the part of many believers.

In this country *many* churches are thriving – America invented the “mega-church,” after all, with its mall-like propensity to offer all things to all people in only the hippest and most contemporary modes. And even if they aren’t thriving, *most* churches are at least managing to preserve their status quo against the changing tides of culture and moral values.

But the growth of the Church is not keeping pace with the growth of the population as a whole, and the influence of Christianity in every area of life is greatly diminished, compared with previous generations.

Efforts to “reform” the churches, by turning to more contemporary modes of architecture, programming, management, and worship, have not succeeded in making the Church more relevant and essential for contemporary life. In many ways, the gap between believers and the unbelieving world is growing, and tensions between these two communities are evident in many areas. In other ways, the Church tends more and more simply to reflect the social, cultural, and moral interests and values of the surrounding world.

The decline of Christianity in America has thus led some believers – perhaps many – to a diminished view of the Church and its importance for modern life. Some have abandoned the Church altogether, declaring that they “love Jesus but hate the Church.”

Many have so transformed the very idea of “church” that the faith community in which they are involved bears little resemblance to anything in prior American Church history.

Still others regard their church as a kind of safe spiritual haven against the storms of this age in flight from God, but they hold out little hope the Church can make much difference in the way of things.

The Church as Paul saw it

Christians in the early 21st century have lost sight of the Church as God intends us to experience and express it. For the Apostle Paul, as, indeed, for all the apostles and early Christians, the Church was the Body of Christ, the continuing incarnation of the reigning and conquering King of Glory. The Church, according to the apostles, is the centerpiece of Christ’s historical agenda (Matt. 16.18). Whatever Christ intends to do on earth prior to His imminent return, the focal point of that work will be in and through the Church.

Further, the Church is the agent and broker of the Kingdom of God. Christians have been translated from the world kingdom of unbelief, darkness, and sin into the Kingdom of Light and of God’s dear Son (Col. 1.13, 14). Where Christians are, and especially where they gather and work together, there the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit is most in evidence (Rom. 14.17, 18).

That, at least, is how the apostles understood the Church.

Jesus Christ intends to [fill the entire cosmos with Himself](#), that is, with the knowledge of God and His glory (Hab. 2.14; cf. Mal. 1.11). He has poured out His Spirit into the Church and commissioned His followers to

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make all the nations disciples (Matt. 28.18-20). Jesus is filling all things with Himself, and that fullness has its beginning and fount in those who believe in Jesus, in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 7.37-39).

The world needs the Church

Which means that we need the Church. The world needs the Church if it is ever to know the salvation of Jesus Christ and the hope of God's glory. And Christians need the Church for reasons I intend to unpack rather more fully in the installments to follow in this series.

Paul insisted that believers have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). In the mind of Christ the world must come to know the glory of God and be filled with the knowledge of Jesus and His Kingdom, and the way Christ intends to accomplish this is in and through the Church.

We do not have the mind of Christ if we are not thinking the same way about His Body, the Church. We need the Church, and if we do not think this is so, then we do not have the mind of Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. Suppose you are sharing your faith with an unbelieving friend and he responds by saying he doesn't need the Church in his life. What would you say?
2. In your own view, does the Church matter that much? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the Church in the New Testament was so vibrant and strong, while the Church in our day seems to be just sort of holding on?
4. What does it mean to have the mind of Christ? How does that relate to understanding the Church and its role in our lives?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn? How do you want to grow?

Next steps: Talk with some of your fellow believers. Ask them what they understand Paul to mean in Ephesians 1.22, 23 when he says the Church is "the fullness of him who fills all in all." How would you assess the attitude of your fellow believers toward their own church? What about your own attitude? Print some copies of today's ViewPoint column and share it with your friends. Invite them to read this week's series each day, then plan to get together at the end of the week and discuss the question: Why do we need the Church?

For prayer:

2 The Body of Christ

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. 1 Corinthians 12.27

Four levels of “church”

In the New Testament the term “church” is applied at four levels among the community of believers.

The first level consists of the *house churches*, gatherings of believers, perhaps within walking distance of one another, who joined together regularly for worship, prayer, sacraments, and the ministry of the Word. These house churches, mentioned in various places in Paul’s epistles, seem to have been the most basic cellular units of the Body of Christ, having all the identity, privileges, and responsibilities of all other churches.

We are perhaps most familiar with the second way that the idea of “church” is expressed in the New Testament, that of the *whole church within a city* – as in Corinth, Ephesus, and so forth. These city-wide churches were comprised of the various house churches which appear to have joined together regularly as larger communities for worship and other duties, including the exercise of church discipline, sharing in one another’s lives and needs, and generating resources for missions and the relief of other Christian communities.

The house churches met regularly and so did the city churches, and both levels of the Church were equally the Body of Christ.

The third sense in which the word “church” is used in the New Testament is in a regional sense, the *Church within a particular geographic area*: as in the “church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria”, which “had peace and was being built up” in the early days of the Christian movement (Acts 9.31). Paul seems to have regarded the “churches in Galatia” in the same manner, addressing one letter to them all in order to clarify some doctrinal issues and instruct the Church in Galatia in matters of Christian practice.

Peter seems to be doing the same in his first epistle. Some commentators have also argued that the seven churches to which Christ wrote in Revelation 2 and 3 were regarded as one regional expression of the Church, since their geographic locations formed a kind of circle in that part of Asia Minor.

During the first Christian centuries, as house churches and city churches continued to multiply, city churches organized by geographic area as “synods” in which bishops and pastors met frequently to consider matters of importance affecting all the churches within their area.

Finally, of course, “church” is applied to the *whole worldwide body of Christians* in every place. This is the Church that represents Christ in His fullness as He is working to fill all things with the knowledge of God and His glory. That application may also be extended to the Church universal, in every age and place (cf. Heb. 12.22-24).

The church at every level

All these expressions of the Body of Christ are important, and if we fail to maintain any of these in our day, then we must provide good reasons for setting aside the counsel of Scripture and the practice of the early Church for whatever may be our preferred way of thinking about “church.”

Believers are members of the Body of Christ at all levels – in your local church (which today has replaced the house church), the Church within your community (which in most of our communities doesn’t really exist), the churches which make up the Body of Christ in your geographic and cultural region (these do not exist

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either, except in certain denominations), and the worldwide Church of the Lord. Since the Church at each of these levels is the Body of Christ, we should expect that here, by our participation in each of these expressions of the Body of Christ, is where we may hope most to *experience* the reality of the risen Christ as well as to *express* Him through our individual and collective gifts and callings.

Believers are members of the Body of Christ. We cannot possibly hope to fulfill the unique demands and opportunities of our individual “membership” unless we are vitally connected to the other members of Christ’s Body in meaningful and significant ways.

If in any way we and our churches are not working to achieve expression of the Body of Christ at all the levels indicated in the New Testament, then we are compromising our reason for being and frustrating our mission and calling to fill all things with the knowledge of Christ by making disciples of all nations.

And since this is the case with almost every church and every member of every church, it is not surprising to see the Church so compromised and lacking in this four-depth power to turn our world rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. In which of the four senses of the idea of “church” are you presently involved? Are there opportunities for you to be involved with Christ’s Body in the other levels? Explain.
2. Would you say that your church takes seriously the different levels of “church”? Why or why not?
3. Do you see any evidence that the Bible-believing churches in your community recognize one another as members of the Body of Christ? If this were more true than it is now, what would that look like?
4. Why do you think churches today are not more involved with one another and with the Church worldwide? Is it possible to remedy this?
5. What would be some advantages for the Kingdom of God if churches worked harder to realize all four levels of “church”?

Next steps: Is your church vitally connected to any other churches? At all the levels at which the New Testament uses the idea of “church”? Talk with some church leaders about this. If your church is not connected, beginning locally, why not? Does it include house churches? If your connections are limited to a single denomination, why? On what grounds? What kinds of things might churches begin to do more of in expressing the reality of Jesus Christ, if they practiced more vital connections with one another?

For prayer:

3 Equipping Place

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for edifying of the body of Christ... Ephesians 4.11, 12

Saints and members

The “saints” of the Lord, according to the New Testament, are all those who truly believe in Jesus Christ and in whom the Holy Spirit is working to flesh out their salvation (Phil. 2.13). The saints are thus members of Christ’s Body, and the health of the whole Body of Christ depends upon the health and contribution of each member of the Body.

The Church at all levels exists, in one sense, *for* its members, as a context within which they are being equipped for spiritual growth and life. In another sense the Church exists, *by* its members, since, as Paul explains, the edification of the Body of Christ depends on the unique ministry contribution of each of its members.

The Church, in all its expressions, is thus a kind of forge and factory for making disciples unto the progress of God’s Kingdom. As a forge the church receives the “fuel” and “raw materials” which the saints bring, in their gifts, callings, and needs. As a factory the church equips its members with the weapons of spiritual warfare, which they use in their day-to-day ministries to advance the grace and truth of the Gospel. This, in turn, builds up the Body, as existing members are strengthened and grow and new members are won through the proclamation of God’s truth.

The mission of the Church

We need the church to function for us in this way, for we will not be able to realize our full hope and calling apart from active involvement in the forming, building, sending, and receiving work of the Church as the Body of Christ.

As members we do not come to the Body of Christ ready to fulfill our assigned roles in contributing to the strength and health of the whole. We are commanded to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18) and to work out our salvation in fear and trembling with and among our fellow believers (Phil. 2.12, 13). The mission of the Church is to make disciples, not just believers, and not just worship-and-program-attenders. Disciples are those who follow Jesus as citizens and ambassadors in His Kingdom, witnesses to His resurrection, and builders of His Church. How can we *build* the Church if we maintain the attitude which says we don’t *need* the Church?

This is not to say that the Church today, in its various forms and expressions, is functioning as it should. In a typical church today one might expect to find a variety of programs and other activities intended to address some aspect of the life of faith. Sunday schools and other teaching programs, Bible study and fellowship groups, conferences and retreats, and, of course, Sunday preaching – these are the ways churches today approach the task of making disciples.

Taking our calling seriously

But as we have seen, real disciples, and real world-changing churches, are just not the norm within the Christian movement, at least not in this country. We are holding classes, having services, and running programs, but we are not making many disciples and we are not building churches which function as the witness to Christ’s resurrection and the power of His Kingdom for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit.

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The church is not fulfilling its function as a forge and factory, because the members of the Body of Christ do not feel the need for church to fulfill this role *for* them or *by* them.

A forge consumes all the fuel available to it so as to generate the heat needed for making implements. Only when every member of the Body of Christ presents himself to the Church for instruction, formation, and sending into mission, and only when the local church takes seriously its calling, not to run programs but to make disciples – only then will the Body of Christ begin to realize the kind of unity and maturity in the Lord which will allow it to fulfill its calling as witness to Christ.

Only when churches are committed and active to equipping the saints for daily works of ministry will we be what Jesus says we should be, the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and the leaven of grace and truth in the sinful and decaying loaf of this dying age.

For reflection or discussion

1. How is the local church like a forge and factory?
2. Do those ideas describe your church? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to “make disciples”? Who is a disciple of Jesus? How would we be able to recognize a disciple if we saw one?
4. Meditate on Ephesians 4.11-16. What is the relationship between church leaders, church members, and healthy, growing churches?
5. For what “works of ministry” should church members be seeking to be equipped? Does your church provide such equipping?

Next steps: How would you describe the health of your church in terms of Ephesians 4.11-16? Download the free brochure, [“Twelve Questions that Could Change Your Church,”](#) and work through it with some friends to determine how well your church is functioning as a forge and factory for making disciples.

For prayer:

4 Witness to Christ

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. Acts 6.7

The first Church

It is unlikely that believers, even really sincere and growing believers, practicing their faith as individuals only, could have had the kind of impact in the first century that we see in the Book of Acts.

Part of what convinced so many people that the message of the Church was true was that they saw so many people participating in so many surprising expressions of a reality they had never seen before. Let's consider just a few of these.

On the first Christian Pentecost, 120 people suddenly poured into the streets from an upper room, joyously and boldly declaring the "mighty works of God." Before the morning was over, 3,000 people had become convinced of their testimony, received the word of Christ's resurrection, and united with this first expression of the Church, the Body of Christ.

So hungry were these people for the spiritual life of Christ that they began gathering day by day in one another's homes, to hear the apostles teach, to take meals and worship together, and to care for one another's immediate needs. Day by day, Luke tells us, as they gathered with joy and shared with gusto, the power of Christ, risen from the dead, began to give them favor with all the people of Jerusalem, and to add to their numbers daily such as were being saved (Acts 2.42-46).

Thousands more came to believe in the power of Christ's resurrection as they witnessed an act of never-before-seen grace upon a man lame from birth (Acts 3 and 4). Not even a threat from the local religious authorities could contain the witness of these early believers. Filled with the Spirit they continued to speak the word of God with boldness and to share generously of their possessions with one another and any who had need (Acts 4.31-37).

Unstoppable

Threats and persecution could not stop them, as the ranks of Christians continued to grow and "believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (Acts 5.14).

But in Acts 6 a crisis emerged which threatened to divide the Body of Christ and betray the power of the Gospel. Inequity had arisen in the care of widows, and the thousands of believers were becoming divided as to what should be done.

But, in a patient, forbearing, and thoughtful manner, they brought the concern to the apostles, who resolved it to the delight and satisfaction of all.

Then comes the text which opens today's column.

Consider: That great company of priests had perhaps all heard Jesus Himself. They certainly had heard the apostles, and doubtless many of their friends had become believers and were eagerly seeking to persuade them of the power of the resurrection. Not the witness of Jesus, not the preaching of a few followers, and not the testimony of an occasional believer could persuade them. But when, on top of thousands converting and bearing witness, and the whole community of believers sharing freely with one another and worshiping, the entire Body of Christ peacefully, joyfully, and generously overcame a potentially major obstacle of faith and

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life – well, that was the straw that broke the resistance of the camel’s back: “great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Not even the most determined enemies of the Lord could stand against the power of the Church, living out the resurrection life and love of Jesus Christ.

Far more power

There is power in each individual church member’s witness to the resurrection of Christ – both our lives and our words. It is the power of the Holy Spirit, making us witnesses for Jesus in the everyday situations of our lives. It is real power, and power which every believer should know and wield.

But there is more power, far more power, when an entire community of the saints, a whole household, neighborhood, city, county, or nation of believers – all these together show the reality of Jesus alive in His Body, making known His truth and filling the world with His glory.

There is real, life-changing power in the Church’s witness to Christ. And that’s why we need the Church!

For reflection or discussion

1. In what ways is your church serving as a witness to Christ’s resurrection in your community?
2. Are there conditions or situations in your community that seem especially to need the witness of Christ’s resurrection life and power? How might your church reach out to these?
3. In what ways does the witness of the early church guide you to think about how a local church should fulfill its calling to be the Body of Christ in its community?
4. In what ways do you feel a need for more equipping to be a faithful witness for Christ?
5. How can Christians help one another – and their church – to be more faithful in this important aspect of our calling as the Body of Christ?

Next steps: Talk with some believers from other churches. How do their churches bear witness to the surrounding community? What about your own church? In what ways do the people in your community see and experience the resurrection power of Jesus Christ through the churches in your community? After you’ve talked with these Christian friends, share what you learn with your pastor. How does he respond?

For prayer:

5 Light of the World

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” Matthew 5.14-16

Jesus and light

Jesus’ audience here was His disciples, primarily. He spoke to them as a group, not as individuals, to guide them in thinking about their corporate mission in the world. The disciples, and those who would become disciples through their efforts, were to think of themselves as the light of the world. They were not merely to *shine* light into the world. They were to *be* the light of the world – together, as one Body, with one mission.

Jesus was fond of the light metaphor. He used it in speaking of Himself (Jn. 8.12). Having our lights trimmed and well supplied was in Jesus’ mind a way of thinking about being always ready to fulfill our purpose as the Bride of the Lord (Matt. 25.1-13). And He spoke of His mission in the world as having the effect of exposing the darkness of sin and unbelief (Jn. 3.16-21).

In each case the idea of light conveyed a message of truth, of a new reality, and of fulfilling God’s purposes for the world. God Who, in the beginning, spoke light into the chaos of the unformed creation, sent the Light, in Jesus and the Church, for the new beginning which is His Kingdom.

Light of the world

The Church is the light of the world. We cannot as individuals hope to have nearly the impact for truth and the Kingdom that the Church as Christ’s Body at all four levels can have when it embraces and pursues its mission as the light.

Notice that Jesus said the Church *is* the light of the world. *Being* the light of the world is not so much something we *do* as something we *are*. Filled with the light of truth and the illuminating power of God’s Spirit, we become transformed by the light in our thoughts, affections, and values. The depths of our very being are enlightened and vivified by the indwelling light of the Lord, so that we become new persons, and a new people, from the inside-out.

Paul says that, as the light of Christ rises within us, we shine like lights in the dark world of sin (Eph. 5.1-14). The way we live – all our everyday gestures, mannerisms, conversations, and ways of being in the world – enter the world each day like the flipping of a light switch. The effect of this is twofold.

First, the darkness is illuminated; sin is exposed and brought into relief. As the light of the world, Christians do not wink at sin or simply hope it will go away. The light shining in and through the Body of Christ insists that whatever is dark be illuminated, rolled back, and transformed.

Second, the entrance of light into the darkness not only exposes the works of darkness, and calls them out for what they are; it also illuminates the way things are meant to be. The Church is the light of the world not just because we renounce and expose the darkness – beginning with ourselves – but because we show the way human beings are meant to live, in love for God and for our neighbors.

Here, too, there is strength in numbers – both in becoming light-bearers in the world and in shining our light for all to see.

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Positive associations and opportunities

In the thinking of most people light suggests powerful positive associations – life, warmth, insight, discovery, certainty, perspective, radiance, brilliance, beauty, and truth. Jesus intends His Church to fulfill all these expectations by *being* the light of the world.

But we are not an isolated candle, shimmering here and there against the darkness. The Church is a light of infinite spiritual candlepower, which, as it shines continuously and consistently into the darkness of our age, brings all the fondest expectations of God and men to pass.

The Church is the light of the world! But, as the Body of Christ, she requires that all members lend their light to one another and join their lights with one another at all levels of the Church, in order to strike a blow for life and truth into the encroaching darkness of unbelief and sin.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what ways does your church currently serve as the light of Christ in your community?
2. What kinds of things can keep a local church from fulfilling its calling as the light of the world? How can we overcome these?
3. In what ways have you experienced the inward light of Christ transforming you into His image (2 Corinthians 3:12-18)?
4. What can we expect in a church which is not diligently seeking to be the light of the world? What can we expect in that church's local community?
5. What are some things you might do in order to help your church be more effective as the light of the world?

Next steps: Do your non-Christian friends or associates perceive "light" as a positive image? Ask some of them this question: What comes to mind when you think of "light"? Then ask them to talk about some situations in which they have experienced this feeling of "light." Share what you learn from them with some Christian friends, and discuss how you can help one another be the light of the world.

For prayer:

6 Salt of the Earth

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.” Matthew 5.13

Three uses of “salt”

The declining state of the Church in America suggests – even among some of its own members – that the warning Jesus issued in this teaching has begun to be realized: The Church is losing its “saltiness,” and therefore it is being rejected as no longer needed or useful.

In Jesus’ day salt was not used primarily as a seasoning to enhance the taste of food. It was used for this, but its main use was as a preservative against decay. Salt would be rubbed into meat, and this would allow the meat to remain palatable for a longer period of time. Salt’s primary purpose was to hold off corruption and preserve whatever was good. Salt that no longer accomplished this purpose was thrown out into the trash.

But there was another use of salt in Jesus’ day which, if anything, was even more important either than its role as a seasoning or a preservative. In Hebrew religious practice all offerings brought to the Lord were to be accompanied by a measure of salt (Lev. 1.13). This salt was referred to as “the salt of the covenant,” that is, the salt which represented the relationship the people of Israel had with their God.

Salt was thus a token and sign of the divine covenant, and a way of indicating agreement with and participation in God and His promises.

Salt with God’s sacrifice

The Church is the salt of the earth not only because she entices the world’s taste for the Gospel, or because she serves to hold off the advance of corruption and decay in morality and culture. These are certainly vital aspects of what it means to be the salt of the earth.

But beyond these, the Church is the salt of the earth because she is the token of the covenant, given with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in order to open the way for the sinful world to receive the promises and blessings of God. The Church is to the world today as the rainbow was to Noah and his descendants – a reminder and witness to the grace and power and promises of God.

God’s covenant offers hope, blessing, purpose, joy, and meaning to the world. Peter described the promises of God as “precious and very great” and said that by them we become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1.4). God is not content to leave the world floundering in sin and unbelief. He sent His Son to the world, so great is His love, so that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn. 3.16). And the Church is the covenantal presence of the crucified and risen Savior, to bring the blessings of God’s favor and pleasure to the sinful world.

How much saltier – and how much brighter would be our light – if we were actually working to be the Church at all the levels and in all the places the New Testament commends!

Here is a presence intended to savor and preserve every area of life, to enhance all that is wholesome and good, resist everything that is corrupt and destructive, and bring forgiveness and the newness of the risen Christ to bear on the task of making all things new.

The Church is the salt of the earth! What a high calling and rich privilege, that God would make effective the

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sacrifice of His Son by salting a people into the world to be the catalysts by which the world is transformed and filled with the knowledge of God and His glory.

A work for the whole community

We dare not take on such a purpose alone. This is the work of a whole community, a people filled with light, committed to witness, walking as true disciples of Jesus Christ, and working together to express the resurrection life of Christ at all levels of “Church” – a people who penetrate every nook and cranny of society and culture, bringing the savor of beauty, goodness, and truth in everything they say and do.

We need one another to be strengthened for this calling. We need to be the Church in all her expressions for this high and holy calling to work. The more we work together, the more consistent will be our presence, and the more effective will be our efforts.

We are the salt of the earth, and though our savor has been diminished somewhat in recent years, we may yet respond hopefully to the Savior as He calls us to “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mk. 9.50).

For reflection or discussion

1. What does it mean for a local church to be the salt of the earth in its community?
2. How does being the salt of the earth harmonize with being the light of the world and a witness to the resurrection life and power of Christ?
3. In what ways are forces of corruption, decay, and moral decline threatening your community? Should local churches be involved here? In what ways?
4. What’s involved in an individual believer living out this calling as the salt of the earth in his or her own sphere of influence? Does your church equip you well for this kind of living?
5. Suggest some ways that churches in your community might work together to be more effective as the salt of the earth:

Next steps: How do your church leaders understand your church’s calling to be the salt of Christ in its community? Ask some of them. Then give them a copy of today’s ViewPoint column and ask them to read it. Ask for a prayer request to aid them in their ministries.

For prayer:

7 The Church as Celebration

*What shall I render to the LORD
For all his benefits to me?
I will take up the cup of salvation
And call upon the name of the LORD
I will pay my vows to the LORD
Now in the presence of all his people.* Psalm 116.12-14

A festive people

Trying to hold a festival by yourself is about as successful as the sound of one hand clapping.

God calls His Church to be a festive people, a community of members who celebrate with joy and solemn vows the high calling and great privilege of being the Body of Christ in the world.

The Church is a party, and seasons of celebrating together before the Lord are integral to our existence and mission. The Lord Jesus Christ is even now preparing an eternal feast of glory and blessing, to enjoy forever with His Body and Bride. Our celebrations – our worship together – serve a twofold purpose.

First, they renew us in our relationship with the Lord and the mission He has appointed to us, individually and as His Body. And, second, they create in us anticipation of the coming Day of celebration in which we will rejoice forever together with the Lord in glory.

Drink it down!

One of my favorite images of the Church at worship is contained in the verses that begin this column. “I will take up the cup of salvation, / And call upon the name of the LORD.” The image here is that of offering a toast. The celebrant raises his glass, and, as he does, he calls others to join him in this gesture of honor and commitment. Together they raise their glasses, each with its own contents and amount, to honor their host and to extol his goodness and generosity. All join together, by raising their glasses, in acknowledging the good gifts and graciousness of the one who has brought them together. He, their esteemed host, is the focus of honor and attention, not they.

Then, having invoked blessing on their host, they drink the fruit of his generosity all the way down, becoming dizzy with the generosity of their host and inebriated with his kindness and largesse.

Finally, they renew loyalty to their honored host, declaring themselves his friends and rededicating themselves together to his service.

How like a service of worship is this situation! God calls His people to come together so that they might enjoy His presence and blessings, celebrate His greatness and kindness, and be renewed in their relationship with and commitments to Him. In worship we hoist our glasses, as it were, filled with praise and thanksgiving for God’s many benefits, as we sing and pray and raise our hands to acknowledge the greatness and goodness of the Lord. The exuberance of every worshiper, celebrating together, increases the devotion and enriches the experience of all.

Then one, speaking for the whole assembly, declares the excellencies of the Lord in a message derived from His Word, to which all declare the “Amen!” as a token of their determination to renew their vows and commitments to Him. They drink down the message of salvation and press into the presence of their Host in the sacrament of His Supper.

Why We Need the Church

Thus, filled with the Spirit and drunken with the presence of God and His salvation, the assembly departs and is disbursed to carry out its commitments in the power and presence of their Lord.

We need to celebrate

Celebration is essential to the wellbeing of the Body of Christ. We cannot fulfill our calling to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth apart from regular seasons of glorious worship of God. The Church should strive to maintain corporate worship at all four levels of expression, from the house churches to the Church universal. Such worship is not only a personal obligation, but it is part and parcel of the life of the believing community.

We need the Church because we cannot worship God, we cannot enjoy our proper seasons of celebration, apart from lifting our glasses of praise and thanks together with the other members of the Body of Christ.

We are the Body of Christ, and each of us is a member thereof. We deceive ourselves, deny our true identity, and betray our mission in the world if we think we can get by in the Christian life without, or with only minimal involvement in, the Church.

Jesus is building His Church, and He intends to do that through each one of us.

If we love Jesus, we will love His Church.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what ways should a service of worship be a time of community celebration? Why? How?
2. Do you think most people experience worship as a time of celebration? Why or why not?
3. How do the different components of your church's service of worship work together along the lines of Psalm 116:12-14?
4. How should a Christian prepare for worship, so that it will be a true time of celebration?
5. What have you learned from these studies about why we need the Church? How has this affected your own participation in your church?

Next steps: Has your view of the Church and why we need it been affected at all by this series? Take some time in prayer to think through the role of the Church in your own life, and what you should be contributing to it for the benefit of the Body of Christ. Share your thoughts with some friends, and seek their support in prayer as you begin to make the Church a more important part of your walk with the Lord.

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.