

# Foundations Lesson #6

## The Church

When people use the word “church” they usually mean a building, a place where people gather to worship God. But the Bible uses the word “church” to mean people. From the original Greek word for church (which is *ἐκκλησία*), we get the meaning of an assembly of people that has been called out – which makes up the first two points on our outline.

Did Jesus ever say, “Each man is like an island unto himself. Go ye therefore and live like one”? No. He never said that. Once we get saved it's God's purpose and design for us to live our faith and grow our faith together in community. We have not been created to live as islands unto ourselves. We need other believers. That's an important part of our spiritual diet, and it's what the Bible calls “church.” In the heart of God there is an intense longing that we would love one another, care for one another, support one another, and help one another. In the heart of God there is an intense longing that we would be **one**, just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are **one**. Even Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, said to his apostles, “I have **eagerly desired** to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” You can read that in Luke 22:15. With all the pressures he faced, with all the pain, the anguish, and the suffering he knew was just around the corner, he still had an incredible longing to be in community with those who were closest to him. He is our example.

In the Kingdom of God, everything is relational. Everything. The number one most important relationship that you or I will ever have is our relationship to God himself. The first and greatest commandment is for us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Nothing in all of life is more important than that. But secondarily, we are called to love each other. If we are doing that, we will **want** to be relationally connected to other believers. And that's what church is all about. More than anything else, it's a family.

How many of you as parents know how good it feels when your kids are being nice to each other, when they are going out of their way to make their siblings happy? Doesn't that thrill you? What you feel at that moment is only a little shadow, a slight tinge of what God our Father feels in his heart when his children love one another.

But **doing** this is harder than it sounds. The difficulty in all of us believers being one happy, contented family, lies in the fact that all of God's children are still very imperfect. I have a little poem:

### POEM

To live above, with the saints we love,  
My, that will be glory.  
But to live below, with the saints we know,  
Now that's a different story!

Do you realize that the person next to you in the worship service has not been perfected yet? And guess what, neither have you and neither have I! The fact is, we all have our problems. The only kind of person you will find in the church is the imperfect variety. And it's in the context of imperfect people gathering together that God says for us to love one another. So even though we may be misunderstood, accused, insulted, ignored, or otherwise mistreated **in church**, God still wants us to be a vital part of a congregation, an assembly, a family of believers. That's his heart; that's his design for you and me. So when relationships in God's family become unhealthy, we need to be committed to doing everything we possibly can to help them get restored, to help them get healed, no matter the pain or the cost.

So the church is an assembly of people, Roman Numeral number one. The Bible uses a variety of terms to describe the church. The word “assembly” is used.

### Ps. 149:1

saints.

Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the

**Ac. 15:12** The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul...

This term gives us the picture of people who are gathered, who are assembled together because of what they have in common: the worship of God. Again, they are not living as islands unto themselves, but they're joined together in a place of meeting. Also, the term "congregation" is used, which is similar.

**I Co. 14:33b** As in all the congregations of the saints,

**Heb. 2:12** He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."

Then, Scripture uses the word "fellowship" to describe the church.

**I Co. 5:2** And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

When I think of a fellowship, I think of a bunch of people who **want** to be together. And then there's the word "family".

**Gal. 6:10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

**Eph. 3:15** ...the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

**I Pt. 4:17** For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

We who believe in Jesus Christ are a family. We are designed to have great love, care, and support for one another. So the primary issue is not one of church services or church attendance, but one of church **relationships**. A lot of people, when they talk about going to church, are primarily thinking of attending a service. Even some leaders in the church, when they think about the church, are mainly concerned about the services: the preaching, the music that's sung in worshiping God, making sure the sound system is functioning properly, and so on. I'm not saying those things are unimportant, but the emphasis as far as God is concerned is on the relationships. We can have beautiful music, inspired preaching, clean bathrooms, and great food, but if we are not focused on our relationships to the people of the church, we've missed the whole point.

In the **Additional Resources** section of this web page, you'll find a document that gives all the occurrences in the New Testament of the phrases "one another" or "each other" as they apply to the church. I invite you to download that document and to study how we are each called to treat one another. And I'd like to encourage you, when you attend a church service, get there early. Stay late. Talk to people. Get to know them. You might even want to meet with members of the church family for purposes other than attending a church service. You may also find that there's some way you can help out, something you can do to contribute to the work that needs to be done. There are some jobs in a church family that need to be done which don't require any special training or spiritual maturity. It doesn't take special skill to mow the lawn or clean the bathrooms. God has called each one of us to serve one another. And however you choose to serve, remember you're doing it first and foremost because you love God and you want to please him, and secondarily out of love for the **people** of the church.

Roman Numeral two on our outline says that we have been called out.

**I Pt. 2:9-10** But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people

belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We can picture in these verses that at one time, each of us was in darkness. And then, gloriously, God saved us; he called us out of that darkness and brought us into his wonderful light. As a result, we declare his praises. We are *in* the world but we are no longer *of* the world, because God has called us out. Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). We are Christ's ambassadors (II Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador is one who represents the interests of his homeland on foreign soil. We represent the interests of the Kingdom of God, and we live in this world, which is foreign soil to us because our citizenship is in heaven. Peter calls us "strangers in the world" because our passions and our desires have nothing in common with those of this world. We have been called out of darkness into his wonderful light. We have been called out of sin into his great holiness. We have been called out of greed and lust into his wonderful contentment. We have been called out of anger and hostility into his wonderful love, peace, and joy. And our inheritance is out of this world, literally.

## Foundations Lesson #6

### The Church, Part Two

Roman Numeral three on our outline deals with metaphors that are used to describe the church. God will often speak in types, symbols, parables, and metaphors to give us insights into the truth he is communicating to us. In Scripture, each metaphor of the church gives us a bit more revelation and understanding into how the church needs to function as it has been designed to function by God.

The first one is that of a family, with Jesus Christ being our elder brother and God being our Father.

**Heb. 2:11-12** Both the one who makes men holy [Jesus] and those who are made holy [that's us] are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."

**Mt. 6:9** "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

The primary way that God has revealed himself to us in the New Testament is that of "Father." We believers are his sons and daughters. In a healthy family, it's safe to fail. In a healthy family, there will be love, protection, and acceptance; yet there will also be discipline and correction. The same holds true for the church.

Then the church is compared to a body, with Jesus Christ being the head.

**Ro. 12:4-5** Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

**I Co. 12:12** The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

**verses 14-16** Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the

body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.

**verse 18** But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

**verse 27** Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

**Col. 1:18** And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

**Eph. 4:15-16** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

If you or I saw a human body and the head had been completely severed from the rest of the body, we'd quickly recognize that that body had no chance of survival. In the same way, we need Jesus, our head. We, the church, are incapable of functioning without him. Yet we're also his hands and his feet here on the earth. The body metaphor also shows us that in the church, we are quite different from one another, but we are called to compliment one another and to work in cooperation with one another. We each have fingernails, kidneys, eyebrows, cartilage, a brain, a heart, muscles, ankles, and much more. Each body part has its own function to perform and each one needs all the others. Just like in an orchestra, where there are many different types of instruments, yet if they all play their assigned part under the direction of the conductor they can make beautiful music, so also in the church beautiful ministry can result when all the people of the church flow together in submission to the Lord and in harmony with one another, even though we are quite different from each other.

Next, we are an army of soldiers, with Jesus Christ being the commanding officer.

**II Tim. 2:3-4** Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.

**Eph. 6:10-17** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

**Ro. 13:12** The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

**Rev. 19:19** Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse [Jesus] and his army.

What does the army metaphor show us? For one thing, it shows us that we have an enemy. An army fights. Like it or not, we are at war, and our enemy the devil doesn't play fair. He prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. It's our job to resist him, standing firm in the faith. The good news is that God has equipped us with every bit of armor we need, and with weapons of divine power with which we can demolish strongholds. Jesus said that we shouldn't rejoice in or focus upon the fact that the demons submit to us, but rather that our names are written in heaven. Jesus has given us authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm us, but we should never think we will have a struggle-free existence.

Wars are not pretty or neat.

In order for an army to be successful, each soldier has to undergo rigorous training so that he has the strength, the skill, and the stamina to fight well and courageously in the worst of conditions. Soldiers also have to acknowledge that there are people of higher rank whom they need to respect and obey. The goal of all this is for the army to fight like a disciplined unit with great resolve and not like a haphazard mob. And let's never forget that our struggle is **not** against flesh and blood. We are not at war with **people**. We are to love people, even though we have to fight to see them set free from the bondages that have taken them captive.

Continuing on our outline, the church is compared to a flock, Jesus Christ is the shepherd.

**Lk. 12:32** [Jesus speaking] "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

**Jn. 10:11-16** [Jesus speaking] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

**Ac. 20:28-29** [Paul speaking to the elders at Ephesus] Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

**I Pt. 5:2-4** [Peter writing to the elders] Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears [that's Jesus], you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

This metaphor isn't all that complimentary to us, because sheep go astray pretty easily, they are readily frightened, and they often act just plain dumb. They also have to stick together because they're pretty defenseless animals. Sheep do best when they follow the shepherd closely. There's much teaching in the church about being a good leader. I don't want to be critical of those who are trying to help leaders be better at what they are called to do, but the **greatest** need is not for good leadership; it's for good followership. All of us need to learn to follow the King of kings and Lord of lords better and better. I'm personally convinced that no one will ever become a good leader until they first learn to be a really good follower of God. All of us should strive to learn to follow our shepherd, the Lord, to know his voice, and to live in his presence.

The Good Shepherd also cares deeply for those who have wandered off. We've all known people who have wandered from the truth. To him, they're still valuable; they're still precious. They had everything they needed. They had no legitimate complaint while they were a part of the flock, but still they wandered off. The Good Shepherd doesn't say, "You made your bed, now you lie in it. Too bad, so sad." He still has a heart that longs for the one who lost their way because they made some really bad decisions. So he safely leaves the 99 sheep in the flock and searches tirelessly for the one that wandered off. We in the church are called to have the same heart that our Shepherd has.

In Psalm 23, King David acknowledged that the condition of the flock is a direct reflection of the skill and care of the shepherd. He boasted that he was not in want, that he was lying down in green pastures, that goodness and love were following him, and that he had a host of other great blessings. Why? Because the Lord was his shepherd. With perfect skill and the most tender care, God

oversees each member of his flock. So as we, the church, excel in following him, our existence will be extraordinarily blessed.

Then, the church is compared to a bride, with Jesus Christ being the bridegroom.

**II Co. 11:2** I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

**Is. 62:5b** as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

**Mt. 9:14-15** Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

**Rev. 19:7-8** Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

What does the bride metaphor show us? The church's relationship to her God is not just a matter of duty, faithfulness, sacrifice, and service. It's also a romance. Our King is in love with his bride, the church, and he is delighted to have her by his side, because she is precious and beautiful in his eyes. We don't live by our feelings, we live by faith. But nonetheless we do have feelings. God himself has created us that way.

**QUOTE** "I wouldn't give you a nickel for a religion that's all emotion. But neither would I give you a nickel for a religion that has no emotion." - Almon Bartholomew

For those of you who are married, how many of you are glad that your spouse has some feelings towards you? And isn't it nice to have some wonderful and intense feelings toward your spouse? That's a part of how God has designed the marriage relationship to function. In a healthy marriage, we need qualities like trust and commitment, but feelings have their place, too.

In the Song of Songs, we have a great love story between King Solomon and his bride. But I believe that that book of the Bible can also be taken symbolically as a love story between King Jesus and his bride, the church. So next time you read the Song of Songs, you might want to keep that in the back of your mind, and you may find yourself gaining some insight into your relationship to your Lover-King. And, while you're at it, you may want to ponder how deeply the Lord loves Brother Objectionable and Sister Irritable who are a part of your church family and who annoy the daylights out of you. He loves them lavishly and intensely. I know it may be hard to believe, but it's true. Trust me on that one.

The next metaphor is that of a building, with Jesus Christ being the foundation or the cornerstone.

**I Pt. 2:4-6** As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

**Eph. 2:20-22** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

**I Co. 3:11** For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

A building can only be as large and tall as its foundation is able to support. Fortunately for us in the church, our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation which supports the rest of the structure. He is our rock. As the old hymn says, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." He is steadfast, solid, reliable, and he remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. Psalm 40 verse 2 tells us that the LORD has lifted us out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he has set our feet on a rock and has given us a firm place to stand, and he has given us a new song in our mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

Then, Scripture compares the church to a holy nation, with Jesus Christ being the king.

**I Pt. 2:9** But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

**Jn. 18:37** "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.  
Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

**Rev. 17:14** They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

A nation consists of a whole lot of people. We have to remember that no matter what trials we may be facing, we are not alone in our struggle against sin. Peter had to remind his readers that they were to resist the devil, standing firm in the faith, he says, "because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

**Heb. 12:1** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

The Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:13,

**I Co. 10:13** No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.

When you are tempted to think that no one knows what you are going through, think again. Your king, Jesus, knows, since he was tempted in **every** way, just as we are – yet he was without sin. And your temptation is **common** to man. Many others have faced and are facing the same issues. Don't ever forget that you're a small but important part of a great nation of people who love God, serve God, and who want to please God.

Lastly, the people of the church are compared to branches, with Jesus Christ being the vine, and God the Father being the gardener.

**Jn. 15:1-8** [Jesus speaking] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is

like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The branches that Jesus describes here clearly have a will of their own, which is why he says, six times, that we, the church, are to **remain in him**, and we can see that the consequences of not remaining in him are quite severe. The branches are sustained, the branches have **life**, only by being connected to the vine, Jesus Christ. But just as the vine causes the sap to flow into each branch, so also our Lord Jesus Christ makes sure that we, his church, are properly nourished and cared for.

## Foundations Lesson #6

### The Church, Part Three

When the word “church” is used in the Scripture it can refer to one of two different groups of believers. It can refer to all believers throughout the world – the universal church, or it can refer to the believers in an individual congregation – the local church. The next two topics on our outline cover those two uses of the word. So let's look at Roman Numeral number four which deals with the universal church.

**Heb. 12:22-23** But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,

**Eph. 5:23-25** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

**Col. 1:18** And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

God has a huge family, with millions upon millions of sons and daughters world-wide being a part of that family. The book of Revelation tells us that in this family there are people from every tribe and language and people and nation. God's church is culturally, linguistically, and ethnically very diverse. But, turning our outline over to Roman Numeral number five, the word “church” in the Bible can also refer to an individual congregation. We call that the local church.

**Ro. 16:23a** Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

**I Co. 16:19** The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.

**Pp. 4:15** Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;



**Pm. 2** to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

Again, we get a picture here. God's **church** is made up of lots of smaller **churches**. Some of those churches meet in beautiful buildings, others under trees, in mud huts, in homes, storefronts, catacombs, or in other places. The location is not that important, but the relationships are vitally important. The Lord has promised that wherever even two or three people gather in his name, he himself will be there with them. You can read that in Matthew 18:20.

The next section on our outline deals with reasons to belong to a church family. The very painful reality is that not everyone who has accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior makes the right choice to get themselves rooted, grounded, and planted in a family of believers. Now I suppose it's possible that in some parts of the world there are so few believers that meeting together is very difficult, but for most Christians, established congregations are available. Why should we join ourselves to a group of believers? Our outline gives us several reasons.

First, God says that those who dwell in his house are blessed.

**Ps. 84:4** Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. *Selah*

Also, it is good and pleasant.

**Ps. 133:1** How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

Scripture says we can sharpen one another.

**Pr. 27:17** As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

This aspect of church life is often overlooked. In an area where you may be strong, you can help me get sharper in the Lord. But in an area where I have been given strength, I might be able to help you become more keen. And this can happen not just by encouragement. Sometimes it happens by exhortation, or even by correction. At other times it may happen by example, without anyone saying a word. In the church family we might see someone who is deeply burdened to help the needy, and their sacrifice in helping those less well off prods us to do better in that area. Or perhaps someone else has a depth in prayer which inspires us to become more intimate with the Lord. However it happens, if we don't meet together we'll miss out on the benefits of being sharpened and helping others become more sharp. Then also, God will teach us his ways in his house.

**Mic. 4:2** Many nations will come and say, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

In most church gatherings that I've ever been a part of, there has been some measure of God's truth which has been proclaimed. Usually there is preaching, but the message of God can take the form of Bible study, testimony, or even the reading of Scripture. There have even been a few times in my life when someone was preaching and God took a phrase they spoke out of context and spoke to me about a completely unrelated matter using those words. God is the finest teacher there ever has been, and he has great creativity in how he will teach us his ways in his house. Next, God promises his presence where his people gather in his name.

**Mt. 18:20** [Jesus speaking] For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It's important to note that many people are not required. From what I've observed, God has been far more concerned with the level of consecration of the believers at a meeting than he has been with

how many were present. In the verse we just read, two or three are all that are necessary in order to experience the blessing of the nearness of God. I can testify that there have been times I have been alone, in prayer and adoration of God, where the Lord has visited me strongly with his presence. But most of the occasions when I have experienced the richest, most powerful, or most awesome sense of God's presence have been in meetings with other believers. God seems to have a special delight in his children gathering together.

So far, we have focused on the blessings of being a part of a church family, but it's not just a blessing; it's also a requirement!

**Heb. 10:25** Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The problems that result from God's people not being in community are, unfortunately, not new. In the verse we've just read, it's clear that some even back when the New Testament was being written had gotten out of the habit of meeting together. The author of the book of Hebrews here makes it plain that we shouldn't be doing that. Whether anyone likes it or not, the truth is that we need to be meeting together, and that if we're not, we're disobeying God. Certainly, there are benefits to being a part of a church family, but we also suffer the consequences of disobedience if we choose not to get connected. David, a great worshiper, musician, warrior, and author of Scripture, shows us by example how we should view the assembling of the saints. He writes,

**Ps. 27:4** One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

**Ps. 26:8** I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells.

**Ps. 122:1** I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

And in a psalm written by the sons of Korah, it says,

**Ps. 84:10** Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

Godly men and women from every generation in the past have had a love for God's house and God's people who assembled themselves together. But the greatest example of all is that of Jesus, the Son of God himself.

**Lk. 4:16** He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

Jesus was a regular attender at the Synagogue in Nazareth. That was his custom. We would do well to follow his example.

## Foundations Lesson #6 The Church, Part Four

The next point on our outline, Roman Numeral number seven, deals with the primary obstacle to

belonging to a church family. In roughly 40 years of pastoral ministry, I have known literally hundreds of people who claimed to be Christians (and whether or not they really were Christians I'll leave in God's hands) but they claimed to have received Christ and yet they chose not to join themselves to a family of believers. Out of all the reasons given for making such a decision, **by far** the most prevalent reason was that they were offended. Most people who claim to believe in Christ but don't attend church today, **used to** attend church. But church people hurt them, and they don't want to get hurt again, so they don't go any more. They have made the sad mistake of placing a higher priority on not getting hurt, than on obeying God.

On our outline, I have defined "offense" as *my choosing to feel angry or upset over what another has done instead of my obeying God and loving them from the heart regardless of what they do.* Some would say, "that's not a very nice way of putting it." My response is, "Is it true?" Let's remember, it's the **truth** that will set us free. If we don't want to own up to our faults and wrongdoings because it doesn't feel good, we won't grow up in the Lord. Love and offense are mutually exclusive. We can't love someone and be offended by them at the same time. Learning to overcome offense is a huge issue in the body of Christ.

Several years ago, there was a friend of mine who, through lack of communication and some extenuating circumstances having to do with timing, had occasion to be offended at a decision I made. If anyone ever had valid reason to be offended, this man did. Initially it stung, but after a few days he got over it. A few weeks later, I was able to look him in the eye, place my hands on his shoulders, and say to him, "You have proven yourself to be a man who does not get offended." That, to this day, is one of the highest compliments I have ever paid anyone. Being unoffendable is huge in the Kingdom of God. In order to become unoffendable we have to die to self which is very difficult and often painful, but it's worth it. All of us will have opportunity to be offended. The issue is, do we deal with it God's way or do we stay offended. Staying offended will destroy our relationship to God like a cancer destroys the body.

Some people say, "I'm not offended, I'm just hurt." I've heard that often. "I'm not offended, I'm just hurt." One author has said this:

#### **QUOTE**

Think of the incident that was hurtful to you. Replay it in the theater of your mind. What do you feel? If the first thing you feel is the pain of that incident, then you are offended and you need to repent. If, instead, your primary feeling is a genuine love for the person who caused the pain, or you feel great joy over God having allowed the pain and how he used it to make you more Christlike, then you're OK.

The truth is that when our pain exceeds the love we have for the individual who has caused the pain, we are offended. Let me say that again. The truth is that when our pain exceeds the love we have for the individual who has caused the pain, we are offended. Having an offended heart is nothing God can't change, but we have to ask him to change us and let him change us. And, if we're truly committed to pleasing God, we'll fight every thought and every attitude we have that doesn't please him. I can understand why Christians get offended. I can't understand why they put up with it.

Is it easy to become unoffendable? No. If it was easy, everybody'd be doing it. But those who love the Lord their God will do whatever it takes to please him, to put a smile on his face, to bring joy to his heart, and to be completely rid of offense. I know of one man who went on a seven-day fast, because he tried to shake an offense in his heart and he just hadn't been able to do it. He had a remarkable testimony. He had no food or drink except water for seven straight days. On the morning of the eighth day after he'd had a small glass of orange juice, he felt the feelings of resentment and bitterness starting to well up inside of him again. In a passionate moment, he slammed his fist on the table and said, "No! My God has taken care of that!" From that very moment on he never struggled with offense against that individual again.

Many years ago after a prayer meeting, I was in my car getting ready to leave but still talking to a friend with the window rolled down. I said to him despondently, "Randy, I don't know what to do. I've tried everything. I've prayed. I've fasted. I've trusted God as best I can. But I still have bitterness in my heart against these people. I just can't seem to shake it." And then the strangest thing happened.

I heard words coming out of my own mouth that said, "I guess all I can do is keep on praying and trusting God." At that moment it was like spiritual sirens going off in my head as I was speaking. God was telling me to persevere, and he was using my own mouth to speak to me. I drove away encouraged that at least I knew what needed to be done. So I continued praying and trusting God, and within just a few days I was able to look those people in they eye and tell them sincerely that I loved them, because the offense had been overcome. I may not understand why the breakthrough takes longer some times than others, but I do know that if we don't give up, God will make us victorious over offense.

In getting rid of the bitterness, the anger, the offense we carry in our heart, there's a part that belongs to God and there's a part that belongs to us. We cannot do God's part and he will not do our part. We are responsible to have the passion, the commitment, and the dedication to be pure-hearted, unoffended, and full of God's love towards everyone we come in contact with. God's part is to change us. Just like mud is incapable of cleaning itself, we are incapable of making ourselves unoffendable. God, because he is completely pure and holy, is able to transform us into people who are pure and holy. So he does the changing, not us. But he **responds** to our desires, our requests, our petitions and our commitment to being unoffendable.

Because both we and God have a part to play, we cannot become prideful or lazy. What I mean is that, if everything depended upon us, we would fall to the sin of pride at our accomplishments. But if everything depended upon God, we could sit back, be lazy, and expect God to transform us with no effort on our part. But neither of these are valid because both we and the Lord have a part to play. As we do our part and trust in God's great faithfulness to do His part, we can overcome any offense that we might be tempted to harbor.

Richard Owen Roberts, in his book entitled Revival, says this: (page 140)

#### **QUOTE**

Keep your eyes on Jesus. No one else is your pattern. If you keep looking to Jesus, you will never be disappointed. He won't fail you! There is no danger of Christ being two-faced! He is no hypocrite! He doesn't stumble and fall! He doesn't set a bad example! He doesn't engage in questionable activity! He will never lead you astray! He is always the same!

If you are a people-watcher, you are in danger of disappointment. Even the most devout Christians sometimes seem to be incorrigible, thankless, and unlike Christ. If you watch saints, you will see variety. Sometimes you will be deeply impressed with their saintliness, and at other times you will wonder how they can even name the name of Christ and be so sinful. In watching other Christians, you may occasionally be inspired to great heights, but as often as not you will be driven to the pit of discouragement. Saint-watching is a dangerous business, but watching Christ is not.

Jesus is the great example. There is nothing you are called by God to do that Jesus cannot show you how to achieve. He is the "express image" of God's person. All the good and wonderful things we find in God are reflected in Jesus Christ. All that God calls his followers to be, Jesus is already. Fasten your eyes upon him. Let his life be your pattern and his wonderful power your strength.

Every person is responsible for his own conduct. If a brother falls into sin, that is no excuse for you. ***If you see hypocrites in the church, that does not give you an excuse to stay away. You will never be called to answer for their sins.*** It is between you and Christ. Keep your eyes fixed upon him at all times and in all places.

By the way, it shouldn't surprise us too much if we find hypocrites in the church. In Matthew's gospel chapter 6, Jesus mentions two places where hypocrites can be found: in the synagogues (that is, in places of worship) and on the streets. So if you want to find a genuine, true-blue, card carrying, registered hypocrite, a church gathering might be a good place to look. The much more difficult problem is for us to be completely free from hypocrisy ourselves. Hypocrites are people who, primarily, expect and declare that others should act as devoted followers of God, but they don't act that way themselves. The hypocrite is characterized by Psalm 36:2, which says, "For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin." May God help all of us not to fall into that trap.

We also need to understand that how easily we get offended reveals how immature in Christ we still are. The longer we follow God, the longer we worship the Lord, the more he will be changing us to become increasingly Christlike. Our God is committed to our good. If you're interested in more teaching on the subject of offense, I would like to recommend the book, The Bait of Satan by John Bevere. It's the best treatise on the subject of offense that I have ever come across.

Before leaving the matter of being offended, I'd like to point out that God allows things that would offend us to come into our lives for a reason. He has a purpose, and it's a good one. Michael Card has written a song entitled, Scandalon. Scandalon is simply the word in the original Greek New Testament that is translated into English as "offense". The song starts out:

### **SONG**

The seers and the prophets had foretold it long ago  
That the long awaited one would make men stumble  
But they were looking for a king who was to conquer and to kill  
Who'd have ever thought He'd be so meek and humble?

He will be the truth that will offend them one and all  
A stone that makes men stumble and a rock that makes them fall  
Many will be broken so that He can make them whole  
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul

Along the path of life there lies the stubborn scandalon  
And all who come this way must be offended

When we encounter this scandalon, this rock of offense, we have a very important choice to make. We can choose to remain bitter, irritated, angry, or offended. If we make that choice, we have stumbled and fallen. The other option is to handle the rock of offense God's way. We choose to forgive; we choose to cry out to God for him to change us; and we refuse to allow any anger, resentment or bitterness to dwell in our hearts. Once we've successfully overcome the offense, the rock which created an opportunity for stumbling now becomes a stepping stone bringing us to higher ground in the Lord. Please understand, every time you encounter a rock of offense and you refuse to remain offended, you have just attained higher ground. God *desires* for you to climb higher in him. You *can* attain new heights in the Lord. So when you encounter an opportunity to be offended, remember: God wants you to rise to a higher plane than you have ever lived on. The choice is yours, but he has great things in store for you.

### **Pr. 19:11**

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

### **Mk. 6:1-6**

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.

When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

Do you realize that when we're offended we miss out on receiving blessings God has for us? The people of Nazareth did not receive Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, that he truly was. As a result, they didn't receive the light in their souls or the healing in their bodies or the miracles in their circumstances that they could have had. Sad, but true.

The primary obstacle to belonging to a church family is still offense. And usually the people who

are offended don't want to hear that **they're** the ones who need to deal with their own attitudes before God.

Moving on to the last section of our outline, we come to the mission of the church, which is threefold. It deals with our responsibility toward God, toward the lost, and toward other believers. Our responsibility toward God is that we worship him. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is highly exalted. He knows all things. He is all-powerful, and he is absolutely pure and holy. He is completely worthy of every bit of adoration, praise, and honor we can possibly give him. It is proper, it is fitting, it is appropriate for us to bow down before him in worship.

**Jn. 4:23** [Jesus speaking] Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

**Ps. 96:9** Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

**Ps. 95:6-7a** Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

**Heb. 12:28** Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,

When we sing songs in church it's not just so that our hearts are prepared to receive the message. We sing songs to **The Almighty** because he is exalted and he is worthy of our worship. So the first and primary mission of the church is to worship God. But then we must also evangelize the lost.

**I Pt. 3:15-16** But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

**Mt. 28:18-20** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

**Ac. 1:8** [Jesus speaking] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Those who do not believe need to hear from us that God loves them, that he has carefully designed a plan and purpose for their lives, that it cannot be improved upon, and that it's their duty to submit to God. There is no other way that exists for them to be who they were created to be. Then, lastly, our responsibility to other believers is that we are to help them become more and more Christlike.

**Ro. 8:29** For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

**Eph 4:12-13** to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

**verse 16**

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

**II Co. 3:18**

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

In the building where our congregation meets, the top of the pulpit says, in beautifully wood-carved letters, "God is in the life-transformation business." That statement serves as a reminder to all of us that one of the ways God manifests his love and power is by changing us from who we are to who we are called and created to be. God is perfect. The church is **not** perfect, but God is making us more and more like Jesus as we let him do his work. Let's not give up meeting together; let's learn to worship God in Spirit and in truth; let's make sure we get every offense dealt with; and let's not forget to enjoy life while we are living together in community with other believers. Amen. God bless you all.