

Why Did God Establish the Church?

sermon digest

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Ephesians 4:1-6, 25-5:2

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As we gather for worship this morning, I would like to invite you to think along with me on “Why” it was that God established the church. When we stop to think about it, we all know that the most important reason for all of us to gather together as a church is to praise and worship God, so that would be the number one reason. Then, we know that as in the early church that we have been thinking about for the last few weeks as we have walked through Acts, we are to take what we learn and share it with others so that focus of sharing the message of God would be the second reason for the church. But is there another purpose for the church? Today we want to stop and think about yet another reason for the church to exist, that it is for us, God’s children, and throughout the service today we will elaborate on that idea.

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I subscribe to several magazines and though I thoroughly enjoy them, I don’t actually get to them in the time frame that the writers would like. I may get to flip through one quickly when it arrives but the more prevalent activity is that they will pile up on the table beside my bed or in a stack on the floor until I get some spare time to look through them. Well, it was sometime over the summer that I actually got to read the Better Homes and Gardens issue that came in April of this year. In it was an article that sparked several lengthy conversations at our house because it dealt with Friends and relationships. In reading it, I could not help but think about the church and the comparisons that could be made from the article. I laid it on the table and have used it as a catalyst for today’s sermon so here we go – a sermon of why we each need the church straight from Better Homes and Gardens. They just didn’t know they were writing a sermon introduction when they printed it.

The article is entitled, “Friends for Life” written by Michele Meyer. It starts off giving a scenario of a young woman who approaches a milestone in her life and finds that she really doesn’t have anyone with whom to share it and what a commentary this is on the American lifestyle at the moment. This situation is then discussed by looking at the results of two recent sociological studies by Duke University, one in 1985 and the same one conducted again in 2004. It seems that “they found that Americans’ social circles had shrunk by one-third in the interim.” They found that “the average person has just two close confidants (down from three in 1985), who are far more likely to be family members than unrelated pals. And that applies to those of us who are confiding in anyone at all. Fully 25 percent of survey respondents in 2004 admitted they had no close relationships – inside their families or not.” This should be of no surprise with the rise of MySpace, FaceBook and Twitter, to name a few, of the social networks acting as a substitution for many for real communication and interaction with real friends, not just online friends who are little more than acquaintances.

While I was not surprised by what I was reading, I found that it really saddened me. The song that Rodney sang a few moments ago to open our service came to mind as an example of the same thought that this article is espousing. Everyone is looking for a place where people know their name – who know them and with whom they can have a close relationship. When this song came out in the 70’s and now, I firmly believe that most of the song could be one used to define what church is supposed to be for its members. A place of belonging and sharing. That was what God created it to be.

We know this to be true of our fellowship here. It is something that we all intentionally work at, though honestly, it is an easy task most of the time. Because of the deep relationships we have forged through shared experiences, we all like being together and sharing our lives with each other. We can pretty easily come up with a list of positive outcomes for each of us that come from having this relationship in our lives. We know that when troubles come our way, we have people on which we can lean. We know that others will not only care, they will pray and then put feet to their prayers by doing whatever actions are needed to show that care and concern in a tangible form. It can be people with whom to celebrate joyous occasions and know that they truly are happy for us. It can mean people visiting a hospital or sitting with a loved one while they await the outcome of surgery. It can be a driver when one is needed for transportation to medical facilities. It can be food prepared when one is too weak or overcome to do so for themselves. It is friends with whom to share the grief when a loved one is lost or the shared grief we all have felt when one from our midst is taken. Like I said, it is pretty easy to come up with a list of good things that result from this kind of relationships.

The article too listed what can happen when one has true friends with whom to share their lives, listing maybe some things that we haven’t included on our list. Dr. Stephen Ilardi, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Kansas in Lawrence,

notes in his book, *The Depression Cure*, that it doesn't take long for camaraderie to work its magic. "Levels of the toxic stress hormone cortisol drop dramatically when we find ourselves in the company of friends and loved ones...If you layer in the physical touch of a friend, you also experience increased activity of the feel-good chemicals dopamine and oxytocin." The potentially life-saving results continue because "persistently high levels of stress hormones promote high levels of inflammation, a prime culprit in diseases such as fibromyalgia and type 2 diabetes." Dr. John T. Cacioppo, director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Chicago takes it even further with his research indicating that loneliness leads to high blood pressure as well as higher morning rises in cortisol and less restful sleep. Lonely people will adopt unhealthy habits such as avoiding exercise and poor eating habits.

These results are not just for the immediate moment it seems. University of Pittsburg researchers exposed 276 volunteers to a cold virus. Several days later, subjects with ample friendships were 4 times less likely than socially isolated people to have developed symptoms. In a more recent study, researchers gave a flu vaccine to volunteers and found that those with large social circles responded 15 – 20 percent better to the shot than isolated people and this effect was still evident four months later. In further studies, these results indicate that one doesn't have to be around their closest friends all the time to get these same effects. Knowing that there are ones on whom you can lean, even if they are only reachable by phone for a while, also can give one less stress and better quality of life.

So what does all this have to do with the church? While I'm not saying that church membership will make you physically healthier, I guess one could surmise that there are positive health outcomes from one's involvement in a church IF that church is one where they can express who they really are and totally be themselves. Many of us read a few years ago several books of the day on the Toxic Church, When the Church Becomes Evil, etc. all talking about how detrimental a church can be when its focus changes from its real purpose. We can easily look around us and be aware of situations where the church has indicted entire groups of people on the basis of their disagreement with them on a variety of issues. We can also quickly bring to mind the harmful effects that churches can administer when they want to pronounce judgment on one of their own who may be different from their expectations. This is different and does NOT produce the desired positive effects mentioned in the article. I well remember that during the Baptist Holy Wars of the 80's and 90's, I wanted to write a book and call it "Baptist Bruises" and recount the battered lives of those who dared to disagree with the Conservative Resurgence that was taking control in those days. And all the evil that was being inflicted on these saints of God was being done under the guise of the Church. Again, this is NOT an example of what the Church is supposed to be doing. Disagreements of opinions should never resort to personal attacks, especially when one is supposed to be wearing the mantle of God. In the book of Acts and the books that follow that we have been looking at these past few weeks, we have seen examples of all kinds of churches, some of which for sure members would not receive positive outcomes, so we must be talking about what the church is "supposed" to be. That is different altogether.

Scripture tells us in the passage that was read this morning that we are called to love one another with mutual affection, showing zeal in honoring one another while walking through all that life has in store but that is not all we are to do for each other. We are also to be strong enough in our relationships of love to be able to hold each other accountable for the life that we say we are striving to live. Proverbs 27:17 says that "As iron sharpens iron, so are we to sharpen the countenance of our friends." We are to be in such a relationship that our dealings together sharpen, enhance, encourage, promote growth, challenge us to live even better lives. To do less is to miss the mark of what true friends are to be and surely what true churchmanship is to be. It is for this reason of accountability that we hold public ceremonies of ordination, marriage, commitment, etc. We are announcing to the congregation and world the intent of the commitment we are making and literally using peer pressure as a means of motivating us to stay true to the commitment we are making so as not to disappoint those whom we love that we are making the commitment in front of.

Look also at the book of Ephesians. When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, he was writing to a group of people that were Gentile Christians. In it, he celebrated the church and what it was to be to the people who were members of it as well as what it was to be to the rest of the world around them. In the verses read this morning, we heard grand instructions on how we are to live together and how we are to act as members of the body of Christ. Paul was very concerned for the new churches that were trying to live out their witness in this new manner – sometimes very different from the life they had lived prior to their

coming into the church. For that reason Paul was very careful to instruct them on how to live and work together for he knew that others would be watching them very closely, both those who lived around them still worshipping the gods of Rome and those within the Jerusalem church who still carried a bit of suspect for any of the Gentile churches. So, it was not enough for them to have a close relationship within their congregation and take care of each other behind closed doors, it was equally if not more important that they live that life of love for each other out in front of the world so that all could see. In doing so, they were witnessing to the change that can come through a relationship with the true God and others will be enticed to want that, too.

Honestly, the same should be true for us today. While having a strong bond among ourselves is important and what we need to do and be for each other, that is not the end of our responsibility. We are to live that bond openly so as to open the doors for others to join in on what we have found. Engaging others, inviting others to join with us in this journey, giving them the opportunity to have these kinds of relationships is also part of our responsibility. It also means that living corporately is a task we must work at. Decisions of the body are to be made for the common and greater good, not for our own personal preferences. Just because we personally may not like a decision does not mean that it may not be for the greater good of the body and we have to be constantly keeping watch on ourselves to ensure that we are working for the greater good instead of our own good.

We have a dear friend who we visit with periodically. He lives alone and is somewhat isolated from his family by distance and by time for he is retired and his closest relative, his daughter, works a lot. He has mentioned to us his feeling of loneliness and how he is searching for friends with whom he can share his life. We think one day he will come with us to our church as part of that search but he reminds me a lot of the lady in the article that started this whole train of thought. Being in relationship with people is at the base of our make-up. God did not make us to live alone – we are made to be in community with people. In the early days, people lived in community for protection from the animals and dangers of the moment. Together, they could collectively fight off the bad things. So when Christ came into the world and established the church, he left them together as a group so that they could continue to fight off the evil things of the world. Christ also realized that we would need the strength that comes from each other and that to accomplish all that was needed, we would need the gifts of each one and the abilities that they bring to be able to carry on the work left for us. That is why in John 14, he prayed for us as a group – the church - to have the strength, power and grace to continue together and grow. Please understand that I am not saying that we cannot hold deep and abiding relationships with others outside the local church. Hopefully we all have them. (My family is blessed this weekend to be visited by just such a friend.) What I am saying is that the church should be the best example of those relationships and here at Grace Covenant we are blessed to have an abundance of them. Many people outside of the church, outside of this or any church, hope and dream for the kind of relationship we have and sometimes take for granted. Think about it. There are so many lonely isolated people in our area and world. For some, it may be a new experience as they are coming to grips with the departure of a loved one to death or moving, or the self-imposed isolation even from illness or retirement. What we have here, the friendships, the bonds of love found here, are what so many people are searching for – hence the song sung earlier. To be the church we are meant to be means that we don't keep this to ourselves but that we demonstrate it to others and invite them into our fellowship. While there are many ways to introduce our fellowship to others, we have to continue finding ways to do so.

So it all comes back around into a circle. While the church was established to worship and praise God, out of that worship comes the motivation to take the message out into the world as we work to bring about the Kingdom. As we do so together, we develop relationships that strengthen us as individuals giving us the energy and ability, and apparently better health, to continue the journey. With that in hand and with an attitude of gratitude for the blessings we have discovered, we are better able to worship and praise God, which in turn motivates us to even more opportunities of service which makes us even stronger mentally and physically so that we can.....well, you see the cycle here. God graciously gave us this thing called church. Apparently, we need it more than we may think. It is something that strengthens us, challenges us, encourages us, motivates us, helps us, assists us, holds us accountable, comforts us, forgives us, carries us, loves us. Thanks be to God for this incredible gift.

