

YOUR LINK TO A RICHER EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER 3

SO FAR ON OUR JOURNEY to help you establish a connection with the E.C. Church, we have portrayed *Your Link to God's Movement*, answering the question about our Christian origins. We then helped you understand *Your Link to a Unified Faith* through the standards of Christian believe and faith. We now intersect chapters one and two with our contemporary personal lives.

As we begin to cross that bridge, we must go back to our roots—to the founder of the Evangelical Association, Jacob Albright. In the story of his life, we find that he was challenged by many difficulties that he faced—such as the death of his children and his own personal health problems—which led him on a personal search for hope. Eventually, he found the answer for these problems in Someone who could help him live in spite of these challenges—he found hope in Jesus Christ. If Jacob Albright were here today, he would certainly inform you that Jesus is the place to start in *Your Link to a Richer Experience*. So how do we get Jesus to be part of our lives. It is simple as *A-B-C* and yet encompasses a lifetime to fully grasp it all.

The Pathway to Salvation

AS WE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND the way of salvation, we must begin with asking Jesus to be part of our lives—we must admit, believe, and confess.

“A” STANDS FOR ADMIT

In order to find salvation, we must first admit that Jesus has not been a part of our lives and that we have been alienated from him because of our rebellion and disobedience. Actions and attitude that do not align with God's standards are sin. Sin occurs when we choose to live as we want without regard for what God wants us to do and be.

Because some may try to rely on their own goodness, we must also realize that we cannot provide a proper sacrifice for sin. We are still powerless to eliminate our sin. With sin attached to our lives, we cannot be brought into a right relationship with God because he is perfect. As a result, we remain separated from God, whose faultless standards we are unable to attain—“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”¹

If we try to neglect the issue, we must realize the eternal consequences—“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”² To do nothing will result in our eternal separation, because we stand separated and condemned already.³ Therefore, the first step is to admit that we have sinned. “If we claim we have not sinned, we make

1 Romans 3:23

2 Romans 6:23

3 John 3:18

[God] out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”⁴ Once we admit that we have been separated from God, and do not want to continue to live this way,⁵ we can take the next step to enter into a relationship with him.

“B” SIGNIFIES BELIEVE

We must believe in the rescue that God has already prepared for u—that Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we would no longer be at odds with him. The Scriptures hold forth his eternal hope through God’s planned rescue: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”⁶ We should remember that God did not have to offer us this gift, but instead gave us this gift because he loved us and wanted to be involved in our lives. We can accept this gift only by believing that Jesus Christ died—paying the price for our sins.

We must exercise caution, however, that we not only believe that Jesus is the Christ, dying for our sins and rising from the dead, but that we believe these things truly make a difference for us. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we declare plainly that he is the only way to remove the distance between ourselves and God. And as a result, he brings us into a relationship with himself by forgiving our wrongs and removing the eternal consequences of our sins.

“C” REPRESENTS CONFESS

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”⁷ Confession means that we agree with God concerning our condition. When we agree with God, we realize our *lostness* without him to direct our lives. We acknowledge that we are confused without his guidance. We need him to pull us out of our own destructive paths and to place us on his path for right living.

Yet confession goes further than admitting our wrongdoing. It also proclaims our allegiance to God and our desire to walk obediently with him. “That if you confess with you mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”⁸ When we confess, we are saying that we need Jesus to be a part of our lives and help us make right choices. We release the control of our lives over to him to do as he wants.

YOUR OPPORTUNITY

If you have never admitted that you need God’s help, believed that Jesus died for your sins, and confessed that you need his forgiveness and direction, how about doing that right now? Read the following prayer, especially concentrating on what it means for your life.

Yet confession goes further than admitting our wrongdoing. It also proclaims our allegiance to God and our desire to walk obediently with him.



4 1 John 1:10

5 For a broader understanding of the admit stage, see Article of Faith 107—Of Repentance, page 51.

6 John 3:16

7 1 John 1:9

Dear Jesus, thank you for loving me, even when I've ignored you and have gone my own way. I understand now that I have sinned against you, because I have lived for myself. I'm sorry about that, and so I ask you to forgive me. I realize my need for salvation and want to thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I now want you to be a part of my life. I want you to help me know the way you want me to live. Thank you for this gift of eternal life, and help me to grow to be more like you. Amen.

If you agree with the thoughts in that prayer, then you have set a course that includes Jesus in your life—you have accepted Jesus into your life and have changed your eternal destiny. Not only have you exchanged heaven for hell, but your current life will take on new meaning and purpose as a result of it.

What we described above is just the beginning! As we have already discussed, the next part of the journey takes a lifetime to learn. The next section of this manual will provide a road map to assist us in that journey. If we choose to remain at the crossroad without journeying on, then we probably have deceived ourselves about the seriousness of this issue.

We must take the opportunity now to get to know God better—and not just facts about him either. We are talking about developing and increasing the level of intimacy in our personal relationship with God. When we possess a real, living, growing relationship with God, we spend more time with him by creating habits that establish and deepen our relationship with him and experience a new found freedom in him.

The Pathway to Freedom

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE calls us to move beyond the superficial issues of life into the liberating effects of a relationship with God. The struggle for most people involves devoting the time to develop a consistent devotional life with God. However, the spiritual disciplines are intended to assist all believers—even those who have challenging jobs, manage a household with children, and are active within their communities or possess other social obligations. We do not need to be well-versed in theology but simply responsive to the deep calls of God.⁹ In this way, beginners are welcome.

THE PATHWAY OF MEDITATION AND PRAYER

“Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his Word.”¹⁰ The Scriptures highlight several examples of God’s communication with his people. The wonderful news is that God has not ceased to act and speak with human beings today. “In meditation we are growing into what Thomas a Kempis calls ‘a familiar friendship with Jesus.’”¹¹ Through meditation, we provide the spiritual space for Christ to build an inner sanctuary in our hearts. Our emotional and spiritual engagement with Christ transforms our inner personalities as believers. We find our true north for life’s moral compass.

9 Psalm 42:7

10 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 17.

11 *Ibid.* p. 19

Prayer develops a learning process of understanding the Father whereby we are changed.



Although a variety of forms of meditation exist, meditation upon the Scriptures is probably the most popular for Evangelicals. Meditation differs from study in that when we study Scriptures, we examine the passage for the external truths it reveals. In meditation, Scripture becomes the central reference point to internalize and personalize the passage. As we read the passage, we can become the prodigal, the one anointed with oil, or the healed one receiving a touch from Jesus. In this way, we are no longer passive observers but active participants.

As we meditate on Scripture, we inhale spiritual truth from God's Word. Prayer provides our opportunity to exhale in the spiritual sense. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus went away by himself for prayer many times during his busy and hectic schedule.¹² Many people have struggled to obtain a consistent prayer life. New and long-standing Christians alike do not realize the importance of this pathway to freedom. Taking time in prayer and meditation can bring us peace in a world that is pulling us from all different directions. Using times of silence can actually refocus our attention from the world and its problems and bring our attention back to God's perspective. Many of the times when we languish over the idea of prayer or how to pray we miss the fact that prayer simply develops our relationship with God.¹³

Because prayer begins with a relationship with God, we must realize that we are communicating with someone who loves us. Since communication is the foundation to any relationship, we must converse often with God through prayer. Prayer launches us into the aspect of continual connection with the Father.

Prayer develops a learning process of understanding the Father whereby we are changed. God slowly and graciously sets us free from our own evasive and deceptive tactics that we use to excuse our thoughts and actions. We are learning every time we pray to develop the mind of God and to desire the things that he desires.¹⁴ We can pray in every circumstance for anyone we know. "Flash prayers" provide opportunities for us to pray for people we encounter throughout the course of our daily lives.¹⁵

Real prayer is something that we learn through practice and experience. When we approach prayer as a lifelong learning exercise in relationship with Christ, we are rescued from the dismissive thoughts of prayer's ineffectiveness. We can become discouraged when prayers go unanswered after a few attempts. In these times, we must persist to understand where possible blocks exist and adjustments may be needed. Whether we are afraid that we do not possess enough faith, that we are praying for too simple requests, or that we are praying for selfish reasons, we can be assured that when we commune with God he will adjust our thinking to become a reflexive action of his initiative. In this way, people will find liberation in prayer when they can get away from all the rush of life, and in quietness spend time in prayer.

12 Mark 1:35; Mark 14:32-35; Luke 5:16; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28

13 For further development on the concept of prayer, see *The Christian's Pattern for Prayer*, page 31.

14 1 Corinthians 2:11-16

15 *Flash prayers* are spontaneous silent prayers offered for people that we encounter: "To see anybody will be to pray! To hear anybody as these children talking, that boy crying, may be to pray!" For further exploration, consider reading Frank C. Laubach, *Prayer the Mightiest Force in the World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1946).

THE PATHWAY OF SUBMISSION AND SERVICE

As we consider the world in which we live, the relationship between submission, service, and freedom seems to unravel. An incorrect emphasis of the term *submission* has led many people to exchange its religious freedom for religious abuse and bondage. However, when approached with correct attitudes, submission and service can be incredibly freeing.

The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view others. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We learn to love people without condition. We lay down our rights to get our own way or even to demand a return for our love. It means that we are able to break free of the vicious law of mandatory return. We never have to keep score or wonder if someone is going to help us or pay us enough in return.

“Submission is an ethical theme that runs the gamut of the New Testament. It is a posture obligatory upon all Christians: men as well as women, fathers as well as children, masters as well as slaves. We are commanded to live a life of submission because Jesus lived a life of submission, not because we are in a particular place or station in life.”¹⁶ As Foster points out, the standard for a biblical understanding of submission comes from Jesus: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”¹⁷ Jesus calls us to a lifestyle of self-denial—the freedom to give way to others and elevate their interests above our own interests.¹⁸

The willingness to submit and serve others is a choice that frees us. We are actually taking control of the situation by decisively choosing submission. “But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”¹⁹

Submission and service function in tandem. In service, we are able to say “No!” to the world’s system of promotion and authority. Just as Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, spiritual authority does not come in the form of a position but a towel.²⁰ However, some forms of service can become self-promoting. They are limited by personal human effort, and their participants are impressed with their own rewards and results. They are affected by their moods and feelings at the time and are often lacking in sensitivity.

However, the grace of humility accompanies true service. Service takes root in our lives through the hidden aspects of a deeply embedded change in our spirits. Our attitudes toward people change—we sense compassion, acceptance, and connection with those that we may have formerly regarded as outcasts. Lasting spiritual transformation occurs as we yield ourselves to this regular discipline. Jesus calls us to the ministry of the towel. When we follow in service and submission, we are freed to live a grace-filled life.

THE PATHWAY OF STUDY AND DEVOTION

The apostle Paul emphasizes our need for spiritual transformation in his letter to the Romans: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the

Our attitudes toward people change—we sense compassion, acceptance, and connection with those that we may have formerly regarded as outcasts.



16 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 117.

17 Luke 9:23

18 Philippians 2:3-4

19 Luke 14:10-11

20 For a fuller description of servant leadership, see *Servant Leadership*, page 89

As meaning is understood from the Scriptures and applied to our lives, we will experience its life-changing power.



renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”²¹ The spiritual discipline of study is very important for us in that it changes our patterns of thinking in regard to our surroundings. This is why Paul writes to the church in Philippi. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praise worthy—think about such things.”²²

Just as the ancient Israelites were commanded to write God's laws on their gates and doorposts,²³ we too must readily allow God's truth to infiltrate our habits of thinking. The discipline of study becomes more than just gaining more information; it focuses upon changing the heart. As meaning is understood from the Scriptures and applied to our lives, we will experience its life-changing power. As Dallas Willard suggests, “Our prayer as we study meditatively is always that God would meet with us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking.”²⁴

Although study is vital to the life of the disciple, it can be considered one of the most challenging spiritual disciplines. When we undertake the task of studying any book, we must answer three essential questions: Do I understand what the author is saying? How do I interpret the meaning of his or her words? Is the author right or wrong about the subject? Once we have engaged the author's approach to the subject, we can then evaluate it in the areas of our own experience, other critical resources, and within dialogue with others.

When we approach the Scriptures for study, we must place a high emphasis on proper interpretation. One of the dangers is to read only a few verses out of context. We must develop the habit of reading larger sections of Scripture in order to grasp the overall thought and occasion of the writing. Once we have the author's frame of reference, we can better understand each selected verse's meaning.

The key to the pathway of study is to experience what you read rather than to merely accumulate knowledge. Other exercises for helping in our study of Scripture include repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection. When we repeatedly read the same passage for a period of time it helps to direct the mind onto a focused course that centers our attention on the subject. As we concentrate on the text, we can move to a new level of growth and freedom as the truth emerges. After experiencing the newly found truth, we can reflect on its significance to our daily lives. Jesus shared with his disciples, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”²⁵

Ultimately we understand God's truth in relation to the activity of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts and minds. “A person cannot understand spiritual truths unless the Spirit of God reveals it.”²⁶ Jesus revealed to us that “when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”²⁷ When God's Spirit reveals his truth, we are encountering God himself.

21 Romans 12:2

22 Philippians 4:8

23 Cf. Deuteronomy 6:6-9

24 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 177.

25 John 8:31-32

26 Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 1990), 164.

27 John 16:13

THE PATHWAY OF WORSHIP AND CELEBRATION

“To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community.”²⁸ When Jesus entered into humanity, he proclaimed the year of jubilee, and the social implications of this concept are profound.²⁹ We are invited to participate in this same joy through celebration and worship. In this way, worship is our response to our Father’s heart of surpassing love.

In the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, the term *worship* literally means to bow down or to lay prostrate before. “To worship is to see God as worthy, to ascribe great worth to him.”³⁰ Paul emphasizes this concept, when he writes: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”³¹ When we carry this image into our relationship with God, we place all areas of our lives before him.

Worship begins in our daily experiences long before we enter into any sanctuary. Brother Lawrence knew the reality of worship even through his work in the kitchen. He writes: “I cannot imagine how religious persons can live satisfied without the practice of the Presence of God.”³² When we live out the demands of our days, we can focus on God’s activity in our lives and respond to him with grateful and thankful hearts. We can live through the turmoil of life as an heir of God’s kingdom and approach corporate worship with expectation.

When Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman, he proclaimed, “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. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”³³ Worship is the human response to what God has done in our lives as a sincere expression of our appreciation for his divine providence upon our lives.

When we have developed a proper approach to worship, we can prepare our hearts for communion with God in the midst of his community. Not only are we gathered together in the sense of physical location, but we are drawn into the unity of the spirit—becoming one in mind, in body, and in purpose.³⁴ God’s dynamic presence unfolds as God’s people unite in worship, and we experience things that could not have been known by ourselves.

In terms of celebration, we can take our prompts from the expressions of children. They make joyful noises; they dance with bursts of energy; they sing, laugh, leap, and shout. For the believer, true examples of joy can be expressed through singing, dancing, and even shouting. As we celebrate the goodness of God in our lives, the negative aspects of our lives will diminish and evaporate. In this way, the presence of God becomes real in the lives of believers, and they experience perpetual freedom in the Lord.

God’s dynamic presence unfolds as God’s people unite in worship, and we experience things that could not have been known by ourselves.



28 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 158

29 Luke 4:18-19

30 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 177

31 Romans 12:1

32 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 32

33 John 4:23-24

34 Cf. Ephesians 4:4-6

THE PATHWAY OF FELLOWSHIP AND DISCIPLE MAKING

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 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.”³⁵ Fellowship is derived from the Greek word—*koinonia*, which means to share in common. God has brought us together for a common purpose—to honor one another, accept one another, offer hospitality to one another, love one another, be kind and compassionate to one another, submit to one another, serve one another, encourage one another, carry one another’s burdens, and greet one another with a holy kiss.³⁶

God uses the analogy of a body to describe the relationship of believers with one another and with Christ. As believers come together, they form the revealed body of Christ—the Church—with Jesus Christ as the head. Within this body, believers come together for support and mutual sharing under the direction of Jesus Christ. In the same way, the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts among his people and demonstrates his presence in the midst of the body through the activity of these gifts.

*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*³⁷

Because this body is composed of disciples who have been gifted differently through the Spirit of God, and no one person is gifted with every spiritual gift, believers become dependent upon one another.³⁸ Within this relationship, the stronger brothers and sisters should encourage, support, and develop the faith of their weaker siblings. The Navigators³⁹ call this process “life-to-life” disciple making— “the practice of giving away your life to others from the overflow of your relationship with Christ by investing in them from the Scriptures, through your walk with God, and from your life and ministry experience in a way that encourages and empowers them to invest their lives in others also.”⁴⁰ When believers utilize their gifts and invest in the lives of others, individual believers receive confidence in their faith and are empowered for service in new strength, and the whole body is built up together.⁴¹

When believers utilize their gifts and invest in the lives of others, individual believers receive confidence in their faith and are empowered for service in new strength, and the whole body is built up together.



35 Hebrews 10:24-25

36 Cf. Romans 12:10; Romans 15:7; Romans 16:16; Galatians 5:13; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:2; Ephesians 4:32; Ephesians 5:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Peter 4:9

37 1 Corinthians 12:7-11

38 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

39 The Navigators are an interdenominational, nonprofit organization. The Navigators are dedicated to helping people navigate spiritually, *to know Christ and to make him known* as they look to him and his Word to chart their lives. Their ultimate goal is to equip them to fulfill 2 Timothy 2:2—to teach what they have learned to others.

40 Taken from the Navigator’s Discipling Others Seminar; originally adapted from Rev. Edmund Chan, Covenant Evangelical Free Church, Singapore

41 Cf. Ephesians 4:14-16

As we develop these spiritual pathways, we will experience the freedom of God's life-giving purpose for our lives. It is possible, however to turn these disciplines into a set of life killing, joy-sucking laws. It is possible to zealously pursue these pathways and perform them in dutiful rigor and turn them into external righteousness just like the scribes and Pharisees. Nor should the opportunity to practice spiritual disciplines ever denigrate into manipulating or controlling others from a righteous position. We must exercise caution that pride does not overtake us and convince us that we have become more acceptable to God because we obediently practice these disciplines.

"Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people... Let us be among those who believe that the inner transformation of our lives is a goal worthy of our best effort."⁴² We must allow our growing faith to influence our relationship with God, family, church, and community.

Linking Our Personal Faith to Where We Live

AS WE READ THE EXAMPLES of faith found in Hebrews 11, we can learn the significance about living out an active personal faith. As real people such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and others held onto an eternal unseen hope, we can see the reality of their faith displayed in real actions. Abel offered a pleasing sacrifice. Noah built an ark. Abraham left the comforts of home. Moses relinquished his privileges. Rahab saved the lives of the Hebrew spies. In each case, faith was demonstrated with a corresponding action.

When it comes to living in the twenty-first century, our faith can become evident in tangible ways. Just like these notable characters from the Bible, people will be looking at our lives in order to discern the expression of a living faith. Your life does not have to look like a dramatic departure from the normal activities of an ordinary life. You do not need to wear your faith on your T-shirt as much as you need to demonstrate it within your relationships and daily activities. You do not necessarily have to travel to exotic lands and help disadvantaged people as much as you must live as a Christian where God has placed you and help those who may be hurting in your midst.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

The importance of family is grounded in the relationship between a husband and wife. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."⁴³ In the same way that the Trinitarian Godhead exists in indivisible unity, so husbands and wives are to remain inseparable.

By taking vows before God and human witnesses, husbands and wives commit to a life-long relationship in union with one another. As a result, marriage is the most intimate relationship into which men and women can enter. Within this relationship, husbands and wives are directed to love and respect one another.⁴⁴ When faithfulness and respect are exhibited in

42 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 11

43 Genesis 2:24

44 Ephesians 5:22-32

Activities and discussions become teachable moments for the family to learn Christian principles as they eat a meal together, travel in the car, or get ready for bed.



marriage, they become testimonies to God’s grace and Christ’s success.

Immediately after advising husbands and wives about their relationships, Paul turns to other family relationships: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ - which is the first commandment with a promise— ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”⁴⁵ Once again, respect is central to relationships within the family.

With respect as the focal point of their relationships, parents will be able to pass along important moral and religious values, such as loving God and others. The Scriptures emphasize the importance of this process— “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”⁴⁶ From the central base of the family home the values of loving God and our neighbors can be essentially demonstrated and lived out.

A relationship with the Lord should be at the heart of every family. In several instances today, families consist of step-parents with step-brothers and sisters, children being raised by grandparents, as well as single-parent homes. Although often more difficult, these homes have marvelous opportunities to demonstrate the redemptive values found in Christ. Just as in every home, activities and discussions become teachable moments for the family to learn Christian principles as they eat a meal together, travel in the car, or get ready for bed. When forgiveness, restoration, and patience are pursued, our families are better equipped to understand God’s grace, mercy, and love. “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”⁴⁷

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

The idea of living a Christian life in isolation has become prevalent within the throes of our culture today. Many abandon regular participation within a church body out of convenience, neglect, or avoidance of previously unresolved issues. However, it is virtually impossible to life out the elements of forgiveness, patience, submission, and service without a group of fellow believers to help one gauge his or her own spiritual condition. It is also unlikely for the spiritual gifts of such a believer to be enlivened and used for God’s purposes apart from a community of faith.

Individual believers need the church. This was apparent among the early disciples. In the book of Acts, we find a strong interdependence among believers. “[T]hey were all together in one place.”⁴⁸ “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”⁴⁹ “All the believers were

45 Ephesians 6:1-4
46 Deuteronomy 6:7
47 Psalm 127:1
48 Acts 2:1
49 Acts 2:44-47a

one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”⁵⁰

Some beautiful pictures emerge from the Scriptures about Christ’s relationship with the Church. In them, the Church is portrayed as the bride of Christ, and Jesus is viewed in intimate connection with his people.⁵¹ Christ is also identified as the head of the body and in command of the Church’s operation throughout the world. From this relationship Christ empowers his Church through the Spirit’s activities among believers to support those within the body and to move beyond the threshold of the church with the gospel.

Today the Church continues to be the essential agent of God’s plan to reach the world. As believers who have come to know Christ, we are enjoined to his Church, and become part of his mission to change the world. In the church, we are encouraged in our Christian walk, shaped through discussion around God’s Word, supported during trials and difficulties, and prepared for service in this world. We just cannot serve him effectively apart from the church. “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”⁵²

As we grow spiritually within our homes and churches, we must learn to live out our faith within the communities of which we are a part. The areas around our homes—our neighborhoods, workplaces educational settings, and other places where people gather present opportunities to engage nonbelievers. In these settings we take on the role of being local missionaries or ambassadors. We live as people from a different kingdom. We represent a homeland that will never experience the social injustices of this world. We become the link between these people and the kingdom to which we belong. “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”⁵³

To live an active faith within our communities means that we do not isolate ourselves from their way of life. We can learn a great deal about another ethnic or religious group by discussing and understanding their traditions. We can embrace new friendships through our children’s school and sports activities or the events of our local civic organizations. In these arenas, we can build friendships and establish trusted bonds with groups of people.

When we develop connections within our communities, we will be in a better position to engage in healthy dialogue about our faith. Because we are trusted, people will ask questions and enter into a search for the answers with us. We will have the opportunity to present our Christian worldview and address the important issues that are talked about in our world.

When we develop connections within our communities, we will be in a better position to engage in healthy dialogue about our faith.



50 Acts 4:32

51 Revelation 19:7; Revelation 21:2; cf. John 3:29; Ephesians 5:25-27

52 Ephesians 3:20-21

53 2 Corinthians 5:20

