

We Need A Church Family

There was some startling news that came out last week. For the first time ever, church membership has fallen below 50% of the U.S. population. This comes from Gallup which has been tracking church membership since 1937.

In 1937, church membership was 73%. It peaked after WWII at 76%. Then it stayed at 70% or above for 50 years until the year 2,000. Then, over the last 20 years church membership has been steadily declining until last year, the year of the pandemic, it fell to 47%.

It would be easy to blame the pandemic. Covid provided a convenient opportunity for many people to simply quit church. Some of that may be temporary as some come trickling back in. But remember, this is how these people identify themselves. It's not just that I'm not attending church right now, but I no longer consider myself a member of a church.

This reflects a deeper, ongoing, permanent trend.

We must be able to answer a key question – why church? Why is church important? Why do I need church in my life? What good is church?

A part of that answer is this – church is family. We need church because this is home.

I. The Church IS Family

The Bible uses lots of metaphors as a word pictures for the church. We are the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. We are a flock, the sheep of his pasture. We are a temple, living stones being built into a spiritual house for God. We are an olive tree – a wild branch grafted into the chosen people of God. We are grapevine – pruned and tended by the Master Gardener himself. We are a royal priesthood – God emissaries of forgiveness to a world that needs grace. We are a kingdom. We are body. We are the bride.

But one image stands out above all others. We are family.

2 Corinthians 6:18 says, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Ephesians 2:19 says, "You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family (NLT)."

Family isn't just a metaphor for the church. The church isn't like a family; the church is family. It is part of the essence of who we are. God is our heavenly Father. We are his adopted children. He chose us to be a part of his family. Jesus is our older brother. And we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is the language of family that the early church uses to describe themselves. Early in the book of Acts, when the church first started, the word *disciple* is used to describe Christians. A *disciple* is a follower, a student. That much is true. We follow Jesus. We learn from him.

However, when we get into the New Testament letters – the letters of Paul, of Peter, of John and others, which came later, after the book of Acts, the disciple language disappears. That's not how these early Christians referred to themselves. Disciple is replaced by the words brother and sister. We are dear children. We are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. We are family, and it is this language of home that describes who we are as the church.

Jesus defined his family, not by bloodlines, but by spiritual ties. As believers, our deepest relationships are not biological. In Luke 8:21, when told that his mother and brothers were anxious to speak to him, Jesus said, *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."* Jesus left no doubt as to which relational bounds he believed should be strongest.

II. This is Our Temporary Home

Church is our family. Church is home. Now, it isn't our ultimate home. This isn't our forever home, but it is our temporary home while we await our dream home.

Most of us started out in a tiny one-bedroom apartment, or a ramshackle rental. It wasn't everything we wanted, but it was a start. It was home. You could give the grand tour in about 10 steps, but it was yours.

The very first place Teresa and I lived in was an old 6 room house. The most recent updates had been done in like 1973. The house had settled so much everywhere you went in the house you were either going uphill or downhill. If you spilled something in the kitchen, it immediately ran under the stove. When you fried eggs they all ran to one side of the pan. And it got worse depending on the time of the year. For half the year, we couldn't even lock the door because the door and the frame no longer lined up.

But oh the memories. That's where we started. We grew close in those days. We bonded as a couple. We dreamed together. We took our first baby steps learning how to be husband and wife. It was home. We needed it and it was good.

Think of our church home in those terms. This isn't the dream home. That happens when Jesus comes back. This home is just temporary, and this body is just a rental. But for right now, this is our place. This is our family, and we need each other while we're waiting for our dream home.

Family is still important even if you're living in an apartment temporarily while your new place is being built, or you are saving money until you can get into the place you want. In fact, when you're in a temporary home, family is more important. You depend on each other. You have to work with each other to make it work. Everyone has to pitch in to pursue the dream. You have to encourage each other. Help each other remember why you're doing this. You have to love each other. You have to show a lot of patience. Space is cramped. You don't have everything you want. Money is tight, but you've got each other.

III. An Individualized Faith is not Enough

One of the biggest lies Satan has told the modern world, and way too many Christians are believing this lie is that faith is personal thing. It's a private matter between you and God. We have made a relationship with God a very individual thing. We have privatized faith.

And it makes sense because we live in a very individualistic culture. It's all about me. It's about what I want and how I feel. It's not a surprise, then that we have individualized our faith. I can worship God on my own. I can explore my own faith. I don't need church to be spiritual. I don't need corporate religion.

We no longer see church as necessary, or even important. It's become optional. Sometimes, it even feels like church gets in the way of our spiritual growth. I get that. But ultimately, this is to our own detriment. Satan separates us from each other, he isolates us, attacks us, and destroys us. And then we think the church has failed us, that God has failed us.

This is not what God intended. When you follow Jesus, you're not just saved. Yes, your sins are forgiven, your guilt is removed, your future destiny in eternity is secured, but if we leave it at that, we're leaving out a huge part of what God does in salvation.

Sin isolates you, not only from God, but from others, so When Jesus saves you, He brings you into community, into community with himself, and into community with others. He makes you a part of a body. You become a part of a family. And we need this family.

Church family is a blessing and it is a benefit we all need. Gathering as a church family is so important that God actually commands that we do it. Hebrews 10:23-25 says,

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let us not give up meeting together. Why do we act like this doesn't matter? Why do we pretend like God doesn't know what he's talking about?

A churchless faith is something the New Testament writers wouldn't recognize. And neither would the early church

Let me share with you a story that comes out of the early centuries of church history, Augustine tells a story from when Rome was still in power and pagan idol worship was still the dominant faith of the day.

Marius Victorinus was a renowned Roman philosopher. His statue stood in a place of honor in the forum. As a pagan thinker, he vigorously defended the Roman gods and their worship.

Even as he defended idolatrous paganism, he began studying the Christian scriptures, and he

became convinced of their truth. Victorinus converted to Christianity and was baptized as a Christian.

However, his fear of his of old pagan friends kept him from openly worshipping with the church. He didn't want to offend them or draw their ire.

Quietly, though, Marius Victorinus approached a church leader named Simplicianus and confided in him of his faith, "Did you know that I am already a Christian?" he asked eagerly.

Simplicianus' reply sounds shocking to modern Christians. "I shall not believe that or count you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ." Your faith isn't Christian faith until you are a part of the church family.