

Engage in the Body of Christ
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I saw her last week. I was at a funeral with some folks in our church family who were grieving the loss of their dad and I saw her. I walked in, and there were about a dozen people from Watkinsville First Baptist already in the room there visiting with that family. I saw her last night at a wedding where about 50 folks from our church family that had all been a part of a small group and Sunday class together gathered. Girl meets guy at church, and they were married last night. I saw her back in December, when about 100 children gathered in the sanctuary to sing songs of Christmas and celebrate the birth of Christ. Parents and grandparents and friends and neighbors packed that room with standing room only.

I saw her this past summer at our annual church picnic where hundreds of people filled this courtyard out here. Multiple generations from birth to those late in life were singing together, eating together, encouraging one another, and getting to know each other. I saw her back in December when the senior adult class brought a massive spread and fed all the staff for a Christmas party. Can I get an amen? I saw her last week when dozens and dozens and dozens of people shared with me by card and by text and by email and by face to face conversations their commitment to daily feed on the word of God in this coming year.

I saw her last Sunday after church when a little girl stood timidly with her mom right in front of me after the service. I bent down and said hello to her, and then I asked her what was on her mind and what was going on. She shared with me, "A couple of Sundays ago after the adoption message that Joel did, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." Amen! That's good.

I saw her this week when I got an email from a family that said, "Our daughter just trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We wanted you to know that after she prayed to receive Christ, she took off upstairs and grabbed a letter that you gave to us when she was dedicated as an infant and brought it downstairs. We read it together about how you began then praying for her salvation." I saw her in a guy's face that approaches me Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, shakes my hand and says, "Pastor, how can I pray for you this week?"

Now if you're with me and you're following along, you ought to be asking the question, "Who is she?" Let me tell you who she is. She is the bride of Christ. She is the body of Christ, and I want to tell you this morning that she is beautiful. The bride of Christ is beautiful. The body of Christ is beautiful, and when she does what she does as God has designed, she is beautiful. This morning, my goal is simple. I want to stand before you on this first Sunday of 2019 and I want to encourage you. I want to equip you in a way that might lead to an enthusiastic engagement in the body of Christ.

Now you hear me say this about the body of Christ being beautiful. But I know that on a Sunday where it is the start of the new year, people may be in the room for a lot of different

reasons. You may have a story where you would say, "Pastor, if we could get alone right now and we could talk, I would tell you that some of my experience with the body of Christ and with the local church has not been beautiful." Can I tell you that I understand that? I don't doubt that for a second. Because when imperfect people get together with other imperfect people, imperfect people do imperfect things. And that won't change until Jesus comes back and makes us perfect.

In fact, I understand that the bride of Christ has some blemishes. I made a list of them. Do you want to hear them? I'm sure you do. I mean, I know you were wondering. I want to share them with you. I made a list of 20 of these that are blemishes today on the body of Christ.

There are divisions in the body.

There are false doctrines being taught.

There are false teachers.

There's conflict and discouragement and desertions and confusion and immaturity and legalism and disagreements and idolatry and laziness and sexual immorality.

There's a love for the world and materialism.

There's opposition and rebellion and greed and anger and drunkenness.

I'll stop there.

Do you know where that list came from? Do you know the source of that list? The source of that list is me reading through the letters of the Apostle Paul who planted churches and started churches and sought to encourage churches. All of those things are issues that the apostle Paul dealt with in the first century church. You see, even in the day when the church first was birthed, there were things about the church that were not beautiful. There were things about the New Testament church that were blemishes. But in light of all of that and in light of even this list, it comes straight from the Apostle Paul.

Paul possessed a deep affection, a high value, a glowing gratitude and a life-risking engagement in the body of Christ. Now you think about that - with all of these things that could have caused him to escape, that could have caused him to go full time into tent making - the Apostle Paul knew that there was some confusion and immaturity and legalism and the rest of the problems on that list, but as he writes around all of those things, he shows a great love for the church. He shows a life-risking engagement. He shows gratitude. I want to dive in here today as you think about engaging in a body of believers and engaging in the local church with enthusiasm.

Let's look at this together. Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians, one of the letters that Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus. As you go through the New Testament, you find letters that Paul

wrote to the church at Corinth, the church at Ephesus, the church of Galatians, to name a few. Look at Ephesians chapter one and keep your finger wet. We're going to turn some pages here and look at some different verses. I want you to get a feel for Paul's deep affection and glowing gratitude that he had for the New Testament church.

Ephesians 1:15 says, "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." Turn a few pages to Philippians, another letter to the church to the church at Philippi. Philippians 1:3-6 says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Look at Colossians 1:3-6. Paul writes to the church at Colossae and says, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth."

Keep turning and take a look at 1st Thessalonians. This is a letter of Paul to the church at Thessalonica. He says in 1st Thessalonians 1:2- "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." In 2nd Thessalonians, he writes again to the Church at Thessalonica and he says in 2nd Thessalonians 1:3, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."

So letter after letter after letter, the apostle Paul expresses his gratitude, his appreciation, his value for a local body of believers, for the church. And in light of his appreciation and his gratitude and thanksgiving for the local church, it speaks to us about our engagement as believers in Christ in the body of Christ. I want to ask you why? Why should you enthusiastically engage in the body of Christ? Maybe you're a teenager. You're thinking, "Hey, I'm 14 I'm 15. It's really something that the older people can do. Not much here for me." Why should you engage?

What about as a college student? You're thinking, "There are so many things I can do right now. I just finally got out from under my parents who made me go to church all the time. I'm here and I'm able to do what I want to do now. Why should I engage? I've got so many places to spontaneously go to. I've got so many parties to attend. I've got so many people to meet. So many places to eat, so much music, to listen to. So many games to go to. And there's that class thing to do while I'm a student, too. Why should I engage?"

What about a single adult? "I can go around the world right now. I have no responsibility. Why should I tie myself to engage in a local body of believers?" Maybe you're an empty nester. You say, "Finally, we've influenced the kids. We've laid a foundation. Now me and the wife (or me and the husband), we can hit the world. Now we can finally do what we want to do."

Why engage in a local church? Why engage in the body of Christ? I think if I was pressed today and you allowed me the time, I could give you 100 reasons why you might engage enthusiastically into the local church.

I read yesterday that David Platt preached at a conference in Louisville this week and he preached a 50 point sermon from the book of Revelation. And I thought, I can do 100. I can do it. Some of you are thinking, "I just disengaged from the body of Christ right there." I'm not going to do 100. I'm not going to labor these for a long time, but I do want to give you 10 reasons to engage enthusiastically with a local church. These are factors that I would ask you to consider in any season of life. There are a lot of things in that 100 that you might get to. There are relationships. There's fun. There's good music. There are a lot of things that you could come up with, but here are 10 factors I think that are important when it comes to enthusiastically engaging in the body of Christ.

We will start in Hebrews 10. I want to offer to you that there's an obedience factor. It was hard today thinking about this message and thinking about what verse of Scripture to start with. Because when you look at Romans and when you look at the Gospels and all of the books leading up to Revelation, you find again and again the church being talked about, the church being taught, the church gathering, the church being the visible representation of the Kingdom of God in the first century. And that's what we are. As the body of Christ, we're the visible representation on this earth of the Kingdom of God, fleshing out the faith as we gather together and as we go into the world. There's an obedience factor that comes through as you read passages about the church, but especially in Hebrews.

Listen to Hebrews 10:22-25:

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The exhortation from Scripture here is to not neglect meeting together. The word "church" that we throw around and use in a lot of different ways - in the New Testament, that Greek word for church is "ekklesia." It is a Greek word that describes a gathering. It's the word that the apostle Paul used to describe people who they knew Jesus Christ and would come together to hear the Word. They would come together to read the Scriptures. They would come together to speak spiritual songs to one another. They would come together to encourage one another, to pray for one

another, to meet the needs of one another. The writer here in Hebrews addresses this issue of gathering together and he says, "Don't neglect that." So one of the reasons for us to engage in the body of Christ is just simple obedience from the Word of God. We're exhorted not to neglect gathering together.

The second reason is there is an encouragement factor. It's also here in chapter 10. He says, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." He's saying that as a believer in Jesus Christ, your souls have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. You've been made clean before God because of Christ.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds." That phrase "stir up" was the same kind of picture of what happens when you have a spur on a boot and a horse is prodded with that spur to move. As a body of believers, he is saying that one of the things we do is come together and spur one another on. We encourage one another on, and say, "Don't stop right there. Keep growing, keep going, keep persevering." So one of the reasons for us to engage in the body of Christ is because of the encouragement that it provides to us. The great temptation of Satan in your life today as a body of Christ is to tempt you toward isolation. You will battle it over and over and over again.

In a church that is our size, where there are ways that you can come to different services, you can sit in different places, and you can even meet in different rooms, you can begin to believe this lie that nobody cares. Nobody knows you. I want to tell you that the reason here in Hebrews for us coming together is that when we get together, we are able to encourage one another to not give up, to not shrink back. There's an encouragement factor. Don't believe the lie that you don't need the encouragement of a brother or sister in Christ.

The third factor would be that there's a growth factor. Engaging in a local church provides the opportunity for growing in our faith. 2nd Thessalonians 1:3 says, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."

Paul is celebrating that within the local church there in the body of Christ at Thessalonica, they were growing in their faith. And not just gradually, but there was abundant growth in their faith. It might be as we say that "they were growing by leaps and bounds." They were growing because it was a growth environment.

The hope is that as you gather as a believer in Christ with other believers through the fellowship of other believers, through the iron sharpening iron with one another, through the singing of songs and the praying of prayers and the serving that goes on in the body and the teaching of the word and obeying the spirit as He leads and speaks, that there's growth in your faith. So if you become a part of a church when you're 14 and you're sitting here today and you're 84, it would hopefully be the possibility that someone could look at your life and say, "Wow, you're a person of deep faith. You're a person of strong faith. You're a person of mature faith." And what's

happened then over time as you've charted through life and you've journeyed with a church family and you've journeyed with the word of God, your faith has grown. And when storms come, a person sees in you the ability to withstand those storms. When bad circumstances come and there's still joy in your voice and joy on your face, people look and they say, "Wow, how'd that happen?"

A man shared with me this morning and said, "I didn't tell you last week about my reading plan in the word of God, but I want to share with you today. About 40 years ago, I got involved with The Navigators. From that time with that involvement all the way to today, I've been reading and recording about a chapter a day from God's word. I've got books and books stacked up where I've read and wrote and read and wrote." And I just thought, "Wow." It greatly encouraged me to keep pressing on. It was a testimony of faith that had grown through the years. If you want to grow in your relationship with Christ, that sanctification process takes place within the body of Christ.

There's a fourth factor, and that's the love factor. 2nd Thessalonians 1:3 says, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." One of the great evidences that Christ is ruling and reigning in our hearts and that Christ has been exalted in a church is that individuals in that body love each other with increasing measure. It shows up in practical ways that we serve, practical ways that we communicate, practical ways that we minister to one another. The vertical relationship with Christ, if it's right, always impacts the horizontal relationship with other people. Within the body of Christ, as we engage with the body of Christ, we have the opportunity to grow in our love for one another. There's no way for you and I to know and love each other if we're never around each other or if we never interact with each other.

How do we love one another? I think the best way to define how we love one another is to look at the "one another" statements of Scripture. There are about three dozen of these in the New Testament where writers of God's word talk about how to relate to one another. You forgive one another. You bear with one another, you're patient with one another. You encourage one another. You pray for one another. You do not lie to one another. You serve one another. Over and over again, the way we love one another is to be in relationship with others.

There's a fifth factor for engaging the church, and that is the perseverance factor. 2nd Thessalonians 1:4 says, "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring." One of the great gifts of being engaged in the local church is that we persevere. We find the opportunity and the ability to show patience and to keep pressing on because of the surrounding of others and we realize we're not the only ones suffering. We're not the only one dealing with persecution.

There's a sixth factor. It's the others factor. We've mentioned encouraging others. Earlier when I spoke of encouragement, I primarily was talking about how we receive encouragement. But a big reason for you to be engaged in a local body of believers and the body of Christ is for God to use you in the life of another person to encourage them. If you're not engaged in a local church with a group of other believers, then you're not going to be able to be the encourager in the lives of others.

When Satan lies to you and says, "They don't need you there. They don't even know if you're there; they won't even miss you." One of his great victories in that is that he is removing a person from the scene that God has placed there to be an encourager in the life of someone else. There are stories that God has written in your life where you've grown in your faith and you've battled through strongholds. You've overcome sin and you've dealt with suffering and you've dealt with persecution. You've dealt with heartache and pain. Do you know that those stories are in your life because God, as He has comforted you, can turn that around and give that back to others to provide comfort to them? There's no way you can serve in that role if you disengage from the body of believers. Notice what Paul said here. Paul says, "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness." Paul is saying to the church at Thessalonica, "We've been out here talking about you. We've been going to other churches telling them about the faith of those in Thessalonica."

Maybe somebody might say, "Yeah, the church at Thessalonica, they've got it made; they're on easy street over there. They can grow in their faith because it's not too hard." Paul says, "No, they're suffering persecution. There's suffering afflictions." Paul says that the church at Thessalonica was full of strong givers. Others may have thought it was because they were rich, but they gave out of their poverty. One of the roles for us of in engaging in the local church enthusiastically is that it puts us in a position to be one that puts wind back the spiritual sails of a person.

This morning, during the first hour I sat down on this front row and I felt somebody sit down beside me. I glanced over and it was Vic. He put his hand on my back and I heard him in my ear praying that God would use me as I preached today. There's no way that could have happened if Vic was disengaged from the body of Christ.

There's not only this encouraging others that is needed, there's also the salvation of others. Part of being engaged in the body of Christ is to fulfill the mission that has been given to us. The commission of missions, the commission of being witnesses flows from the life of the body of believers and from the body of Christ. When Paul and Barnabas were getting ready to go to the world to spread the Gospel into new lands, it was the church gathered in Antioch who heard the Holy Spirit while they were praying and fasting. They sent out Paul and Barnabas to take the Gospel of Jesus to the world. A big part of you being engaged with a group of believers is for you to gather together and serve together and love together and grow together so that when you leave out of here, you're encouraged to talk about the goodness and greatness of Jesus Christ. You're able to be His witnesses in the world because of the encouragement that you've received from Christ. We've said it over the years that in many ways that the church is like this great aircraft carrier. We're out there flying on mission all week long, but on Sunday we come in and we land, we refuel, we refresh and we get back ready and Monday we launch again into the world.

Being engaged in the body of Christ allows us to fulfill this others factor. Don't see a local body of believers and the body of Christ as something that you engage in just because of how it

benefits you. Yes, there are benefits. We're talking about these, but a major part of engaging in the body of Christ is for you to be a benefit to others.

Number seven: there's a gifting factor. 1st Corinthians, chapters 12 -14 and 1st Peter 4 speak of spiritual gifts that we're given as followers of Jesus Christ. Do you know that you know that as a believer of Jesus Christ that you receive spiritual gifts? These are ways God would use you in the body. Don't miss that.

1st Corinthians 14:12 says that these spiritual gifts are for the building up of the body of Christ. You can identify your spiritual gifts. You may say, "I have the gift of service" or "I have the gift of helps" or "I have the gift of leadership, so I'm using that gift of leadership in my workplace." Well, that's okay, but that really wasn't what that gift was given for. You may say, "I'm using this gift of service in my career," but spiritual gifts were given for the building up of the body of Christ.

Let's say you give your son or daughter \$100 and you say, "Go buy yourself some clothes. Get yourself some jeans." And they walk back in the house the next day with new earbuds. And you're like, "Hey, what'd you do with that money?"

They say, "Excuse me? What'd you say?"

"What did you do with that money?"

"I bought new earbuds!"

How does that feel? How does it feel for a child of God to receive spiritual gifts from the Father and us use them in other places in other ways instead of using them for what He has designed them to be used for? They are for the building up of the body of Christ. What a glorious service it is to take those spiritual gifts that God has given to you and use them in the life of a church family to build up the body.

There's a purpose factor. In 1st Peter 4, we learn something about the purpose of serving the body of Christ. Look at 1st Peter 4:7-11:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Why should you engage in the body of Christ? Because it gives you the opportunity to the very purpose that you have breath in your lungs - to bring Him glory.

There's a value factor. Ephesians chapter 5 is a passage of Scripture that we know. If you're familiar with the book of Ephesians, the chapter that talks about wives submitting to husbands and husbands loving their wives. It also has a passage about submitting to one another. But in the context there of the husband and wife relationship, Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church." And here's the value factor: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Yes, the body of Christ right now has blemishes, but don't miss the value factor of who the church is. And if you hear nothing else from this place this morning when you walk out of here and you're considering, "How should I step up my engagement in the body of Christ?" Remember this, how valuable is it?

Jesus Christ died for her. Amen? He died for her. He gave his life for her, and how can you and I neglect the body of Christ? How can you and I neglect and say it's not important to be engaged in the bride of Christ when Jesus Christ Himself says, "I have given myself up for her, and My purpose in that is that she will become more and more and more holy, to the point of that day where she will be without spot or blemish."

And that's the last factor. Why should you at any age engage in the body of Christ? There's the eternal factor. When you go to the book of Revelation, you see that Jesus Christ brings the church to Him. Listen to chapter 19:6-8:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

"Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure"—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Christ is coming for His bride, the church. So when you think about investing, when you think about engaging enthusiastically in the church, the bride of Christ, remember there's an eternal factor. You're investing in something that matters forever. So this morning, how about it? How will you engage? Right now, as a believer, be asking the Holy Spirit, who lives within you as a believer, how can I engage with enthusiasm in the body of Christ?