

*"One of the most striking features of much of
evangelicalism is its general disregard for the
institutional church."*

- GEORGE MARSDEN



ONE

The Disappointment of the Church

"Every day people are straying away from the church
and going back to God."

- LENNY BRUCE

If you do not want to go to church, you may be in good company. The reasons vary, but the net result is the same—the local church is often not the priority that it used to be. Describing the local church's perceived importance these days as "diminished" is something like describing the status of New York City as "inhabited."

The evidence of this perception is all around. One writer states that, toward the close of the 20th century, churches in North America and Europe were losing approximately 7,600 participants every week.¹ To bring it a bit closer to home, a relative recently commented, "We can't build doors big enough to accommodate the people leaving our church right now."

What is striking about all this is that it does not reveal disappointment on the part of those outside the Christian community, but rather, of those within. Professing Christians are often—at

best—confused about what the local church means for their spiritual growth; or they are—at worst—altogether frustrated or disillusioned with it, even to the point of abandonment.

As this trend unfolds, two extremes are possible for those who still consider themselves “pro-church.”

EXTREME ONE

The first extreme is (appropriately) to listen to the voices of frustration and to note what the sources of that frustration are, and then (questionably) to tailor a local church scenario that avoids all possible land mines of frustration.

A premier example of this in our day is the consumer-driven megachurch. Being a large church is not inherently bad. Charles H. Spurgeon, regarded by many as the greatest English-speaking preacher ever to live, preached to thousands every Sunday. However, megachurches that are openly consumer driven tend to adopt a willingness to do whatever it takes not only to build a new customer base (i.e., create new churchgoers) but also to maintain customer loyalty (i.e., keep churchgoers coming back). In other words, this extreme involves listening to honest frustrations, and then defining a local church's identity in terms of avoiding those frustrations.

EXTREME TWO

The second extreme is simply not to listen to the voices of frustration at all. This extreme can take all sorts of forms. It can be as common as the regular churchgoer who shrugs off a recent defector from his church as a fact of life (“You win a few, you lose a few”). It can be the college ministry staff member who has consciously decided to avoid discussions about local churches in that college's area, since even the opinions within his ministry are so diverse. It can even be the pastor who has heard members' frustrations but answers them all the same: “Try to show up anyway.”

THE ORIGINS OF DISAPPOINTMENT

To avoid such extremes, we need to do some much-needed listening. Apathy and disillusionment with a local church do not arise from a vacuum; they have some origin. Why is the local church not prioritized in the lives of professing believers the way it used to be? What are people saying about their churches?

The following scenarios represent actual comments. Such remarks may have been upon the lips of close friends or family. Perhaps, they have been upon yours.



I stopped attending church during my college years because that's when I started understanding what “church” really is about. I mean, look for yourself! Look in the book of Acts, for starters. Where are the new-member classes? Where are the services that start exactly at 11 a.m. and must be over exactly at noon? Where are the “thirty-something” Sunday school classes? And here's the real question: Where are the denominations? The answer is simple: They're not there.

Some people misunderstand me when I say this, so I want to be clear. I do believe in the Church Universal, with a capital “C.” People tend to think of it as a building with a steeple where they meet for worship. That's not it at all! The Church is a worldwide group of people who are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. They aren't connected by denominational ties or economic status or worship styles. They are a group of people connected by a living faith in Christ and by a desire to love other people, whether or not those people look like them. This Church has been around for two-thousand years and always will be around!

It was in college that I began to make the mental shift from the “institutional” church to a more biblical understanding of the Church. Ironically, this was spurred on by my trips home, when I would find myself at the table listening to my parents talk about our

local church. Squabbles over the new building, nursery duty, bringing which casserole to which event. ... Is that what a church is supposed to look like?"



Perhaps this is the most common voice of all. It is the voice of someone who has, interestingly, taken hold of a key biblical truth. When Christians worldwide repeat the *Apostles' Creed* and speak of "the holy catholic Church," they are confessing a truth that comes through loud and clear from the Word of God. It is this: the Church (with a capital "C") is, indeed, a worldwide phenomenon, and the Christian of the 21st century may truthfully speak of having brothers and sisters, not only all over the world, but down through the millennia of God's saving plan. Furthermore, we cannot deny that certain assumed practices in most local churches today (Sunday schools, for example) are absent from the New Testament, as are denominations themselves.

But the "big-C" Church's international nature may present some unique challenges if you resonate with the scenario above. It may seem a simplistic question, but consider this: If your "church" is to be made up of people who are to exhibit and share real love, how do you tangibly practice such love with someone ten time zones away? In other words, saying, "I am part of the worldwide body of Christ, a body that loves one another," becomes a mere platitude without some sort of concrete expression of it somewhere. Where, then, will you give and receive such concrete expressions of love? (Keep reading.)

Similarly, some say that the Body of Christ should not be connected by denominational or creedal ties, but only by Christ Himself. Again, this—at face value—is hard to dispute. However, we must also ask a key question: Who is Christ? Is He God, or man, or both? Did He come primarily to teach a way of living socially? Morally? Environmentally? Did He come to save each

and every individual on earth, or did He come to save a particular people?

Such questions (and there are many more!) are difficult for someone who might say, "I am simply a Christian," or, "I have no creed but Christ." The difficulty is that, all over the world, people understand Christ in diametrically different ways. In reality, they can believe in wildly different ideas of Christ and might find it hard to sit in the same meeting together.

If this is the case, then each of us must refine our idea of "Christ" and "Christianity," seeking to be as biblical as possible. As you do this, it is likely that you will identify with a particular subset of Christendom. In other words, there are instances in which you are willing to define yourself in terms of like-mindedness with particular Christians. Those particular Christians are the raw material of a denomination, or an association of churches.

Our "catholic Church" by necessity is becoming more local. We are moving from the upper-case "C" church to the lower-case "c" local church.



My church? It's the outdoors. I've always loved nature, but it wasn't until college that I actually understood from a biblical point of view why this was appropriate.

When I reached the campus, I ended up becoming involved in a ministry that really prioritized biblical teaching. Something I heard there that I had never thought about before is that God rules over everything that He has made, and, therefore, everything that we do is to be part of worshiping Him. So often, Christians live their lives divided into two big compartments: "sacred" and "secular." But that isn't what Scripture tells us. It says, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

It suddenly hit me how relevant this was to my perception of God's presence when I was outdoors. Now I know why I've never

felt closest to God in a church. I don't have to be in a sanctuary on a Sunday morning to worship God—all of my life is to be worship to Him! I can worship God just as much when I'm mountain biking with friends as when I'm sitting in a pew singing a hymn. One of my favorite passages is the beginning of the nineteenth Psalm: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." There are times when I'm outside lying on my back, looking up at the stars, and it does something for me that no church service has ever been able to do.

When I get away on the weekends, I still try to make Sunday mornings a special block of time by having a sort of private worship service. I usually read a passage of Scripture—sometimes aloud—and pray and sing to God. I can honestly say that, when I get back from those trips, I feel refreshed down to my bones. I have no gripe with people who choose to be in church on Sunday. I just hope they go home feeling like I do.



It is hard not to be envious! To be ruthlessly honest, sitting in a comfortable spot outdoors somewhere, overlooking a beautiful expanse, does seem to beat the prospect of sitting in a pew or chair—perhaps with tone-deaf worshipers on either side—for an hour or more. As our nature lover reminded us, Scripture does speak glowingly of the ability of the Creation to draw our minds and hearts to the Creator.

However, there are certain things that the Creation is not able to do for our spiritual well-being. For instance, Psalm 19, mentioned previously, begins on the note of how the Creation evokes praise to God, but it goes on to say what Scripture alone is able to do. "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (v. 7). Are quiet lakes and mountain trails beneficial? Of course. They can-

not, however, provide us with the particulars of the Good News that sinners so desperately need.

Our outdoor worshiper still expresses a laudable need to read the Bible. It is interesting, though, that when professing believers are left to themselves, certain portions of Scripture tend to be read and reread, while other portions go neglected, if not utterly ignored. If all the Christians over the last hundred years were polled about their devotional reading, the prophecies of Zephaniah and Nahum would make a rather poor showing.

But according to Jesus, all the books of what we now call the Old Testament are about His person and work (see Luke 24:27, 44). If the essence of Christianity is who Jesus is and what He did for needy sinners, and if that information is conveyed in every book of the Bible, then we need not only *exposure* to all of it, but *teaching* from all of it. This is a tall order, one that the Creation itself—and even individual reading alone—cannot achieve. We need to hear from those whom God has especially gifted and instructed to teach us His Word.

The fresh air will be invigorating, and the view will be enviable, but our outdoorsy friend will also miss certain sensory experiences by not attending a local church: the sight of a new believer's face as baptism is received; the sound of God's character being celebrated corporately in song; the touch of an older believer's handshake or hug.



To be honest, I would say that, as things stand now, my campus ministry is my "church." My first year, I suppose I did the typical freshman thing for someone from a church background. I hit campus and began enjoying my newfound freedom, and part of that freedom involved sleeping in regularly on Sunday mornings. I can't help but feel a little bit justified, though. You have no idea how often my par-

ents dragged all of us to church—if the doors were open for a church activity, we were there.

After a while, however, I began to miss the—I don't know what to call it—the rhythm of a weekly meeting with other Christians. And, honestly, my churchless schedule left me feeling guilty, too. So, one Sunday morning, I finally dragged myself out of bed and started visiting some local churches.

The problem was that—and I hate to say this—attending those churches gave me the opportunity to see what I had been missing, and it wasn't very pretty. Each church I attended—and I visited a cross-section of denominations—was basically the same. Everything was geared toward the folks who were already involved. The sermons didn't connect with me or my life in school, and no one—and I repeat, no one—invited me or my friends to eat lunch, or even paid us much attention. If I were in their shoes, I hope I would have tried a little harder.

Then a friend invited me to a campus Christian fellowship, and after a few visits I was hooked. Now my week doesn't feel right if I miss it! Every week the speaker seems to know exactly what I need to hear. For the first time, I'm excited to hear about God's Word. And the staff and students who attend seem really interested in reaching out to others.

My campus ministry is my congregation. I'm sure at some point I'll reconnect with a local church, but I feel that God understands where I am right now.



Many Christians have had a similar experience. Perhaps for those further along in life, the frustration has been the same, but the remedy was a weekly Bible study or fellowship group. The local church was tried and—at some personal level—found wanting.

Despite that fact, here is someone who is now involved in the lives of fellow believers, hungry to learn more about God's Word,

and even desiring to reach out to others. Why in the world would we want to second-guess this person?

There may be certain questions that are going unasked, though. For example, does this person ever have meaningful interaction with believers of other ages or economic brackets? If this individual is, say, twenty years old, how likely is it that he will experience fellowship with an elderly Christian widow—someone who has lived more than three times longer than he has and experienced wars, the loss of a spouse, grandchildren, and decades of wrestling with the gospel? Such women are rather scarce on university campuses, or even a young mothers'—or an office—Bible study. But they are to be found in the local church.

Also, the fellowship and good biblical teaching that this student is receiving are commendable, but what about other avenues for spiritual growth? For instance, what about the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper? We underestimate the need for these in our spiritual growth. But Christians throughout the centuries have considered them indispensable for becoming godly men or women, though not just any person should receive them. For example, Paul had dire things to say about inappropriately partaking of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 11:30).

If the sacraments are to be administered uniquely by ordained clergy of local churches, as this book will contend, what will this believer do about Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of Me"? This divine, loving command is for our spiritual development. Will this be addressed?



Actually, we attend several churches in town. Don't get me wrong—I don't mean that we attend all of them each Sunday or each week. What I mean is that after visiting around, my wife and I found different needs being met at different churches.

The one that we primarily attend has an absolutely wonderful music ministry. The music minister seems to share our tastes. Honestly, Sunday morning worship now feels like a little slice of heaven for us.

On the other hand, our children desperately need a vibrant youth ministry. The church where we worship on Sunday mornings has a weak youth program, but, fortunately, another church close to our house has the youth group in town. A lot of our children's friends attend the youth group there as well. It's exciting to see them be a part of it.

Another area church has great midweek Bible studies that are arranged according to age group. So, while our children are at Wednesday night youth group, we attend a home Bible study. It gives us the solid Bible teaching we know we need.

It would be wonderful to get all this at one church, but right now this seems the best way to meet our different needs.



This is a different sort of voice. This person has not neglected the local church. Instead, he has expressed an admirable willingness to go the extra mile—quite literally. Furthermore, he and his wife have realized that their subjective experience in worship is ultimately not enough for their spiritual well-being. There must also be objective truth in the form of, as he said, “solid Bible teaching.”

Again, however, key questions remain. For instance, what are these parents modeling to their children about truly being a part of a body of believers, i.e., a local church? If they never become members of any one particular congregation, then the children are unwittingly being taught by example that it is acceptable to participate in church activities without giving back to that local church through active membership.

On the other hand, if the family does choose to join one of the churches but continues its involvement with the others, what

are the children learning in regard to church membership? If the parents continue to “make the rounds” of various church bodies, are they communicating that their membership commitment is merely a “rubber stamp”?



In the early part of last century, a young Welsh preacher named Martyn Lloyd-Jones made the following statement to his small congregation:

People complain about the dwindling congregations and how the churches are going down. Why are people ceasing to attend places of worship? Why is it that last Sunday night I noticed that, while the places of worship in Cardiff were only sparsely attended, the trains coming from ... seaside places were packed out? Why did these people spend their day at the seaside and in other places rather than in the House of God worshipping? Well, the answer is perfectly plain. They obviously prefer to be at the seaside and feel that they get more benefit there than they do in their chapels and churches. Now it is no use our arguing with people like that, it is no use our telling them that they really do not get greater benefit there, because they honestly believe that they do.²

Lloyd-Jones's honesty is refreshing. Present attitudes about the local church within the Christian community necessitate the same sort of honesty. Forget a grueling train ride to a beach somewhere. Today's professing believer can sleep to a comfortable hour on Sunday morning; brew a perfect cup of coffee; sit down in front of a monitor (still in comfy attire); e-mail family and friends; and then head off to a relaxed lunch somewhere. All the while, he can congratulate himself that he understands Christianity well enough not to feel any hang-ups about not attending a local church. Cornering such an individ-

ual with the admonition that “you-ought-to-be-in-a-church-on-Sunday-if-you-value-your-soul” will probably sound something like static and be met with a blank stare. Such individuals deserve honest, forthright feedback to their honest and forthright frustrations.

But such individuals also likely could use some helpful, clear distinctions in terminology. For starters, a most basic definition of “church” is the convenental bond that one believer has with the person sitting next to him in the pew. The Greek word translated “church” in the New Testament, *ekklēsia*, originally meant “public assembly.”

We can see that “having church” alone at home seems incongruent with God’s basic plan; *ekklēsia* is not possible alone; nor is it very feasible without a specific effort to assemble with other believers. Though *ekklēsia* is used in the New Testament to reference not only the local church, but also the world-wide Church, we believe Scripture and experience teach that the best way to build the world-wide Church is for individual Christians to throw themselves into a local church. This is also the way we grow!

In the chapters that follow, we speak to the previously mentioned frustrations by addressing a deceptively simple question: What role *could* the local church play in my spiritual well-being?

We will be talking about ecclesiology, that is, the study of the nature and work of the Church Universal, composed of all true Christians throughout the ages, and of the local church, God’s appointed gathering for believers to grow and for God’s work to be done in one place and time. Do not let terms put you off. We will be talking about the world-wide (or global) Church and the church on your street. The subject matter of this book is as relevant as your weekly planner and as urgent as outreach to the needy.

Chapter Two will lay the groundwork by establishing what we mean by the idea of the “church.” Most people do not con-

template this idea because they do not know what to think. Some biblical categories can help our thinking.

Chapter Three will then bring what may have sounded like abstract concepts into more concrete terms. It will examine how the Church manifests herself via the local church. Church “membership”—a term not used *per se* in Scripture—will also be considered.

Chapter Four will address this question: Given that there are so many areas where a local church could focus her attention, where *should* she focus it? Does the Bible provide the local church with a job description? If so, what is it?

Chapter Five will consider the identity of the local church: What does it mean that God identifies with a church on earth? With whom (humanly speaking) is a church to identify?

Chapter Six will consider the authority structures that exist in the local church (“Just who’s in charge here anyway?”). If the Bible is the ultimate authority for a church, what does that look like in practice? Furthermore, what do the officers of a church have to do with the people in the seats, and vice versa?

Chapter Seven will paint a picture of a local church as a loving body of people. It sounds like a platitude, but this love involves real, tangible activities. What are they?

Finally, we will conclude in Chapter Eight by discussing the future of God’s *ekklēsia* across the ages in the short-run and long-term.

Are you frustrated with the local church? You may be in good company, and it may be that you are asking just the right questions.