

‘The God who wants to bless the world.’ (6)

A big, muscular man visited the minister’s home and asked to see the minister’s wife, a woman well known for her charitable deeds. ‘Madam,’ he said in a broken voice, ‘I wish to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a poor family in this district. The father is dead, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are starving. They are about to be turned into the cold, empty streets unless someone pays their rent, which amounts to £400.’ ‘How terrible!’ said the minister’s wife. ‘May I ask who you are?’ The sympathetic visitor applied his handkerchief to his eyes and said, ‘I’m the landlord’.

We all know that God won’t miraculously appear to someone who needs help these days, but one thing He will do is send His representatives who are here on Earth. In other words, He sends His people, His church to help people who are in need. And so, in a sense when you or I show up to help someone, it’s God who is showing up through us.

Now this is not a new concept, God has always been working through mankind to bless the world. One of God’s favourite virtues in man is courage. Yes, it’s true that God has concluded that all are under sin and none of us are righteous as **Romans 3:10** “There is no one righteous, not even one” tell us. But it’s also true that by God’s grace, people often pursue noble dreams and bravely make God’s longing to bless the entire world their longing too.

Take Noah for example, He worked with God, yes, he probably had his faults like the rest of us do, but still God used him to bless the world. **Genesis 6:8+9** “But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD. This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.”

Genesis 7:1 “The LORD then said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.”

Whatever his faults, by God’s grace, Noah stood where the rest fell, Noah, ‘walked with God’ and God saw the bravery of this righteous man in an incredibly evil generation. God says I’m going to use this man to bless the world. **Genesis 9:1** “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth”.

When we think about Abraham, he’s another example of a man working with God. **Hebrews 11:7-12** “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore”.

Abraham was an old man with a wife who couldn’t bear children, yet when God called him to follow a dream, he trusted God and went. Years passed without the promises being fulfilled but still he trusted and God called him His friend. **Isaiah 41:8** “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend.”

And as we know God blessed Abraham so that he might be a blessing to the entire world. **Genesis 12:1-3** “The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 18:8 “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him”. And so once again we see that God wanted to bless the world through Abraham.

Even from Abraham’s descendants, God created the Israelite nation after He had rescued them from Egyptian oppression and made a covenant with them. **Exodus 19:5+6** “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

You see loved ones, Israel became a sign for the whole world that God was seeking fellowship with all men. They were the visible proof of God's intentions toward mankind and God gave them the task of telling the world about it.

Isaiah 49:3-6 "He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour." But I said, "I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

The nation of Israel was supposed to be God's tool for reaching out to a lost world and showing them the way back into that fellowship, that friendship with God. That why when Jesus is speaking to the Samaritan woman in **John 4**, Jesus says to her in **John 4:22** "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews."

Can't we see that God longs to be reconciled to us much more than we long to be reconciled to Him? He loves us so much, He's been sending messenger after messenger with the message that says, 'God wants to live with us'. Now that's what He did in the Old Testament but when the Old Covenant had served its purpose God removed it and brought in a New Covenant through Jesus His Son. Our Scripture reading was **Hebrews 8:6-13** and the writer clearly tells us that the new covenant is superior because it's built on better promises. And the writer clearly tells us that the old covenant is obsolete and outdated and has been replaced with the new.

Speaking about Jesus' conversation with the Father, the writer says in **Hebrews 10:9+10** "Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." God took away the first Covenant that He might establish the second, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Old Covenant, which had been made only with physical Jews was replaced by a New Covenant which is now being offered to the whole human race.

And so, on the basis of that New Covenant, a new community of faith was set up. In **Matthew 16** Jesus called it His church in contrast to the Old Covenant assembly in the wilderness. **Matthew 16:18** "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it".

Acts 7:38 "He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us".

You see at first, as the prophets had foretold, it was made up of believing Jews who then took the Gospel to all the nations. **Romans 1:16** "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile".

Luke 24:47 "Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem".

Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God was determined to bless the world through individuals and He was determined to bless the world through the nation of Israel.

But what about today, who is God going to use to bless the world? Who is God going to use to reconcile the world back to Himself? He is going to use His church, but what does His church look like? How can we identify His church today?

Well in the New Testament, Paul is able to tell us in **Ephesians 4** what Jesus' church looks like. **Ephesians 4:4-6** "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

The number one way to identify the Lord's church was to ensure that all the Christians hold these major truths in common. The Lord's church see themselves, whatever their differences in culture and heritage, as **one body** into which they were brought by **one Spirit**.

They joyfully share **one hope** for the future and serve only **One** as their **Lord** and His Name is Jesus. They firmly hold to one body of truth which they called **the Faith** and everyone knew they submitted to **one baptism**. They recognise no god but **One**, and He was the **Father** of Jesus Christ.

Another way to identify the Lord's church is by asking who their mediator is. You see in the Old Testament Moses was Israel's mediator but this New Testament church has Someone else. **Hebrews 8:6** "But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises." Mary the mother of Jesus isn't the church's mediator, Jesus Christ is the church's Mediator.

You see loved ones, the New Testament church held on to all the abiding truths of the Old Covenant and gently laid the rest aside as belonging to a former age. **Hebrews 8:6+7** "But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." In other words, God's new people are now bound by God's new covenant.

Now we are living in times when the world doesn't seem to think that the Lord's church is relevant anymore. Some think that the 'church' is somewhat old fashioned and isn't needed anymore. **So where does the nature and place of the church fit in, in today's society?** Well the church is the body through which Christ moves in the world today.

Colossians 1:18 "And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." The New Testament speaks of the church as the body of Christ. And until Jesus returns, Christ lives in the world through His people, the church. His mission in the church is the same as it was when He was here in His personal body.

And so, His mission needs to be our mission and **what is His mission?** **Luke 19:10** "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." His mission is to seek and save the hurt, the weak and the lost and church that needs to be our mission at all times. Our mission is to keep profound truths about our God before the eyes of the world.

In the New Testament, when a person wanted to become a Christian he submitted to being immersed in water as a confession of his faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And like we mentioned in the last lesson, baptism is a visible proclamation of the Gospel.

When Christians met each Sunday to share Holy Communion, they were confessing their faith in the living Christ who communed with them there until He returns. **1 Corinthians 10:16+17** "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf."

1 Corinthians 11:26 "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes".

Do you know what we're doing when we partake of the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day? We are demonstrating a visible proclamation of Christ's dying and living again. In other words, we're declaring to each other and to the world that we acknowledge that Christ lived, died and rose again and one day, He's going to return to take us to be with Him forever.

And it's these truths, said Paul in **1 Corinthians 15** that are 'of first importance'. **1 Corinthians 15:1-4** "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

The church by its very existence shows that life with God is possible for sinners. The church doesn't save itself, it is the saved community. It doesn't proclaim its own goodness, it proclaims His saving grace. The church's life is part of God's witness that Christ is alive and not dead. In other words, it is His life that keeps her alive, His life is her life.

The church has greater strength than any individual. 'The church' is the sum total of all who have submitted their lives to Christ as Lord. The believers as a body are able to help individuals stay alive.

If you love your country and go to a noble-spirited and patriotic meeting, you come away loving and believing in your country more, **don't you?** And it's the same with Christ and His church, if you love Christ and worship with noble Christ-loving people, you come away loving Him more. **2 Timothy 2:22 "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."**

Hebrews 10:24+25 "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 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."

There was a preacher who was having a cup of coffee in a restaurant across the street from the church building. He was reading his paper when a guy next to him noticed his clerical garb and asked what church he was with. The preacher pointed across the street to the Methodist church building and the guy said, 'why that's the church I go to.' At this the preacher perked up and said 'That's strange. I've been preaching there for five years and I don't believe I've ever seen you.' The man responded, 'Come on now, preacher. I didn't say I was a fanatic.'

Now remember 'the Day' mentioned in the **Hebrew** letter isn't talking about Judgment Day, He's talking about the Lord's Day. And out of all of the days of week, the Lord's Day is the Day when we can really express that love towards each other. That's the Day when we can really find out about people needs and in a spirit of love, help meet those needs.

And so not only does the church have greater strength than any individual, the effect of the church on the world is greater than that of any individual. In **Philippians 2:1+2** Paul says, "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, with any fellowship with the Spirit, with any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

Now think about this loved ones, we all have our common unity to Jesus Christ, we've all been united in Jesus Christ, we all put Him on in baptism, we're all united with His death and resurrection, and we've all been washed in His blood, that's something we share.

We all have the comfort of His love, we've all know the love of Jesus Christ poured into our hearts, we've all felt that. We all have the fellowship of the Spirit, we were all baptised by the one Spirit into the one body, we are all partakers of the empowering of the Holy Spirit who leads us and guides us. We all have the compassion that comes from being saved by the mercies of God. In other words, the power of any community lies in its unity.

You go out on the street and ask any crime gang and they will tell you that organised crime is more powerful when crime is organised, when it bands together. This is one of the reasons God does not save individuals in isolation. As people are saved, they are added to the believing community. **Acts 2:47 "Praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved".**

And notice who does the adding, it's God who does the adding. You don't join the church like it's some kind of bingo membership, you're added by the very Person who's been pursuing you since the creation of the world. Christians have been made into one body because this way they can better serve God and the world He loves so much. And for the life of me I can't understand why anyone could love Jesus but don't want to be a part of His church.

You see 'church membership' isn't optional loved ones, because we can't have Christ as our Saviour and then refuse to have Him as the Head. **Ephesians 1:22+23 "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."** Now let me just say a few things about 'placing membership'.

'Placing membership' is one of those vague expressions that isn't very useful unless it's filled out with Biblical understanding. At best, it should mean that a Christian commits to a specific congregation of people to contribute their giftedness as we see in **1 Corinthians 12**. In other words, a Christians commits to that congregation's needs and effectiveness as a witness to Christ's redeeming life, death, resurrection and exaltation and coming again.

No Christian is gifted by God to spend their gifts in isolation. **1 Corinthians 12:7 "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."**

Now I know Paul is speaking about miraculous gifts but the principle is the same. And I believe that it's ignorance and maybe even selfishness that leads people to refuse to commit to a congregation that is in Christ. In addition to that, identifying with a congregation of God's people means we come under congregational discipline.

Congregations help each part of the body to maintain their place and function within the universal body of Christ, this kind of truth is assumed everywhere in the New Testament. 'Bring him before the church' in **Matthew 18:15-18** assumes that he is part of the assembly. 'Put him out' in **1 Corinthians 5:1-13** assumes the same thing and church government texts in **Timothy** and **Titus** take it all for granted. The person that refuses to place themselves under the discipline of the entire congregation as a corporate whole is either selfish or ignorant or both.

But is it necessary to be a member of a local church? Is it the will of God that whenever possible the Christian should be an active member in a local congregation? Is a person required to be a member of a local church? Can they not be just a Christian, without a 'church' affiliation?

Before we address this question specifically, let us lay a broader foundation concerning the use of the term 'church' in the New Testament. The English word 'church' is derived from the Greek 'kurikon', which means 'belonging to the Lord.' The actual word in the original New Testament text that stands behind the modern rendition, 'church,' is 'ekklesia', signifying 'called out.'

It is now generally conceded that the basic sense of the term is 'assembly' or 'congregation.' In a non-religious sense, the word was used of a public assembly as we see in **Acts 19:32+39+40**. In a spiritual sense, 'ekklesia' is employed in the New Testament in **three major ways**, with serious responsibilities associated with each usage. 'Church' is used of the people of God universally and so when a person is immersed in water, they are automatically 'added' to that body of saved people who constitute the 'church' like we read earlier in **Acts 2:47**. There is no such thing in the Christian age as being 'saved,' and not being a member of Christ's spiritual body, the church. In **Ephesians 5:23**, Christ is described as the Saviour of the body, which elsewhere is identified as the church.

In the New Testament 'ekklesia' also refers to the Lord's people in a certain locale. For example, in **Acts 5:11** you have the church in Jerusalem, in **1 Corinthians 1:2** you have the church in Corinth and like we looked at last year you've got the seven local churches in Asia Minor in **Revelation 2+3**.

When Paul and his companions travelled about, preaching the good news regarding Jesus, wherever men and women surrendered to the truth in Gospel obedience, local churches were established. These new Christians banded together for the purpose of corporate worship and fellowship in serving their Master. This was not some optional plan improvised by the whims of the missionaries, it was a divinely orchestrated pattern of organization.

Ask yourself, **how could a Christian ever be rebuked for forsaking an assembly**, like we looked at earlier, **if he or she is not even obligated to be a part of a local church?** God structured the individual congregation around an organisation plan. **If Christ did not intend for His people to be a closely-bonded Christian family, why did He organize the local body the way He did?**

It's such a shame that so many people just want the 'name' Christian, without the commitment that goes with it. It's so sad that some Christians simply don't want to be in an environment where they might be subject to the discipline of the local congregation.

And it really is a shame and very sad that some people have this attitude because they may entertain the illusion that they are serving God but they aren't. **Ephesians 5:15** "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

How can any genuine Christian say they love Christ but they don't love what Christ loved and died for? How can anyone say they're a Christian but at the same time they won't come and worship the very One who died for them?

You see God has been working with mankind and mankind has been working with God since the beginning to get that message out to the world that God loves them and wants to be with them. He worked with and through Noah, Abraham and the nation of Israel to get that message out. And now He's working with and through His church to get that message out to the world.

And so, if you're not a Christian this morning, then please know that God loves you and longs to add you to His body, His church. He won't force you to love Him, but He says His church is here to tell that He loves you and He deeply desires to have a relationship with you.