

Chapter Twelve - Keep Meeting Together

I no longer have to leave my house in order to do my weekly supermarket shop. I can stay inside where it is warm and cosy and simply order what I want online. It will arrive at my door and I don't even have to put my shoes on. All the hassle of finding a parking space and walking around the aisles and pushing a trolley and loading it in my car is gone. Of course, if I prefer and it suits me, then I can still visit the store, but I don't *need* to any more.

Similarly, I no longer need to leave my house to get my weekly dose of Bible teaching and singing. I can live-stream a church service of my choice from around the globe. I can stay in the comfort of my home and listen to my personal favourite preacher and get all I need. It's highly convenient. Of course, if I prefer and it suits my diary, then I can still visit a church, but it's no big deal if that is a hassle.

In our convenience-obsessed culture, why would I bother dragging myself to church every Sunday (not to mention all the extra stuff that goes with it)? It adds to our already overcrowded diaries and we can easily become pretty frustrated with another meeting, another problem, another rota. When church isn't meeting my needs, what am I supposed to do?

The danger is that we either give up on church and find something a bit more low-commitment. Or we soldier on with an ever-increasing sense of frustration and disillusionment. That can hardly be described as the joyful option.

Is there a better way?

It probably won't surprise you that this is a matter of obedience.

Commanded to meet

God really does command his people to meet together and to be committed to one another in local churches. It is not enough to say that we belong to the universal church of God and don't need any more than that. The universal church is expressed in local gatherings of Christians who are serious about meeting together.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards 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. (Hebrews 10 v 24-25)

The church gathering is not an optional extra—it is part of what it means to obey God. It seems that right from the start Christians have been tempted to give up on meeting together, but God commands us to keep at it.

This is reinforced by powerful images that the Bible uses to describe what it means to be church.

The church is a body that needs all its members (1 Corinthians 12). The church is a building that needs all its bricks (1 Peter 2). The church is a new humanity that God is building (Ephesians 2). The church is God's household where we hold up and hold out the truth (1 Timothy 3). And, perhaps most commonly, the church is a family. You only have to notice the repeated use of "brothers and sisters" to refer to Christians.

Those are not low-commitment pictures. They hammer the message home again and again that church really matters. That all sounds fine in theory, but sometimes the reality of church can feel very different.

What we need is a bigger view of what church really is. We need to let God show us just what he is doing in our world and why it's wonderful.

Disappointing church

Sometimes, what I read in the Bible doesn't match up to my experience of what I see around me. And that bothers me. Take this for example:

*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. (Ephesians 3 v 20-21)*

Those are great words. They really do sound fantastic. It's the sort of thing we might put on a poster (with a picture of a cute kitten, or a dolphin, or both) and stick up on our wall. But to be honest they are also words that have troubled me.

When I put my mind to it, I think I can imagine quite a lot. I sometimes walk past big buildings in London and imagine what it would be like for our church to grow and fill a huge auditorium. I imagine a vast crowd of people singing God's praise. I imagine my neighbours on my estate hearing about Jesus. I imagine hundreds turning to follow Jesus.

And God is supposed to be able to do *immeasurably more* than that.

Either I have a better imagination than God was expecting (unlikely), or something else is going on here. It can't simply be that God is *able* to do immeasurably more but has no intention of doing it. That's like asking if someone can pass you the peas at dinner and them replying, "yes". I'm not interested in your theoretical pea-passing ability. I'm interested in you doing it.

Similarly with God, his ability to do immeasurably more is surely matched by his intention to act.

But it doesn't always feel that way.

If you look around at your church family gathered together on a Sunday, I wonder if you would say that in the past year God has done immeasurably more than you could ever have asked or imagined.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that church can sometimes feel a little disappointing. Even frustrating. In the light of falling church attendance and the obvious weaknesses we see, it seems fair enough to ask what exactly these words from Ephesians 3 are getting at. We need to back up a bit and see what has come before it in the book of Ephesians. Just give me a couple of minutes and I will show you what "immeasurably more" really means.

A fresh vision

Back in Ephesians 1, Paul lays out God's plan for the whole of creation. It is summarised in verse 10 (in bold below):

*With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – **to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ**. (Ephesians 1 v 8-10)*

God has revealed his plan. It is to bring everything in this universe together under Christ. Currently that's not the way our world is. Things are a mess. There is disorder and chaos all around us. Human sin has devastated our world.

But God has a plan.

It is a bit like building with lego. You go the toy store with your birthday money to buy an exciting new model. The front of the box shows you the awesome castle that lies inside. You pay your money and take the box home. When you open the box what do you find? Chaos. It looks nothing like the castle. It's just hundreds of random pieces. But if you listen very carefully you can hear the lego pieces groaning. "We were made for more than this. Please help us. We're not what we were made to be. We need someone to put us together." The picture of the castle causes the lego bricks to groan for what they're supposed to be. They need to be brought to unity so they can be what they were created to be.

Our world is like that mess of lego bricks. Human sin has brought chaos. But God has a great plan. Ephesians shows us the front of the box. And here is what you find: *All things will be brought together under Christ.*

That's the big plan. What has that got to do with the church?

The Plan has started

God has begun to put his great plan into action and he has started it in the church.

In Ephesians 2, we discover that God takes dead, deceived and disobedient people and makes them alive, raises them up and seats them with Christ. Do you see it? The plan has started.

And then you discover that God is not simply interested in individual lego pieces. He is not just saving individuals. He is bringing those pieces together. In the second half of Ephesians 2, we discover that God takes Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews)—who were deeply divided—and smashes down the walls to create one new humanity. The plan is happening now and it is happening in the church. All sorts of people, from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of divisions and differences are being brought together by Jesus.

But still there is more to this plan. God is taking this one new humanity and making us into his temple, where he himself comes to live by his Spirit (Ephesians 2 v 21-22).

And as you read on, you discover even more. It is through the church that God is putting on display his wisdom to the whole of the heavenly realms.

Immeasurably More

When Ephesians 3 v 20 says that God is doing immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine, that is what we are talking about. It turns out my daydreams really are too small. Even my wildest imagination would never conceive of a plan this great.

This is what is happening in your local church. This is what we are part of. This is why God says we must be committed to one another. His plan is great and your little local church is part of it.

Here are some things to remember when you walk into church on Sunday next week:

- this is something God has done
- this is a foretaste of God's great final plan
- this is a place where walls are smashed down
- this is where God lives

If only we could turn up at church with that sort of a view of what is really happening. The church is no small and pathetic little thing. It is remarkable.

What difference does this make to how you view church? What will you keep in mind, and what will you pray for, the next time you meet together with your church family?

Two wrong attitudes

In 1 Corinthians 12, we read about the church being a body. It's a great image that backs up all we have seen so far from Ephesians. But look at what we read and spot the two dangers for a church body.

Danger One:

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12 v 15-20)

The foot and the ear are suffering from the same issue here. They feel inferior and assume that they don't really belong. They look at the other parts of the Bible and feel bad about themselves. Do you relate to that as you look at the church? You feel fairly useless. Other people are so gifted and useful. No one would even notice if you weren't there. This is the problem of an **inferiority complex** and it stops many people from being committed to church. *I am not needed.*

Danger Two:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... (1 Corinthians 12 v 21-22)

Here is the complete opposite. The hand and the head feel superior and as if they really are far more important than the rest of the body. They want to be noticed and treated with honour. They don't value the other parts of the body, and they certainly don't feel like they need them. Do you relate to that as you look at the church? Perhaps we look around and feel negative about the other people in the church. We feel that we deserve better than this. *I need to be in a church with more people like me.* This is the problem of a **superiority complex** and it is highly toxic within the church. Church becomes a places where some people are valued more highly than others.

We can all be tempted to one or other of these dangers (and perhaps find ourselves swinging wildly between the two). The church must not operate that way.

Instead there is to be a deep and profound sense of our need of one another. We should look around our church family and say, "I need you".

Many of us prefer to be self-sufficient. We prefer to be independent. We like the idea of others needing us, but would rather not be needy ourselves. The problem is that this is a fundamental undermining of what it means to be church.

Four Steps

I CAN'T

How do you feel about church? It can be easy to get stuck in a rut of frustration or disappointment.

How do you react when things don't go your way? Do you ever feel as if no one appreciates what you are doing?

Be honest with God. Tell him your feelings and frustrations about church. Admit where you find it hard to be committed. Or where your commitment has become a grudging service rather than a joyful obedience.

Do you ever feel useless and that you have nothing to offer, or even that no one notices you? Or are there people in church who you look down on and ignore?

Don't rush past this stage. Ask yourself honestly about your commitment to meeting together, loving together and serving together with your church family.

I'M SORRY

Jesus loves his church. These are the people that he bought with his own blood. Jesus did not simply die for me. He died for *us*. It's always tempting to make being a Christian into an individual thing and forget the bigger plan. Take time to confess the wrong attitudes you have towards church.

Say sorry for times when you have found yourself being proud or pursuing a position of status in the church. Or for the times you have been irritated with people and treated them unkindly. Do you ever find yourself grumbling about how things are? Or perhaps we are just not that bothered about our church family.

Find joy in the forgiveness that Jesus extends to you. Find joy in the remarkable truth that Jesus has made you part of his great building project. Praise God for his patience and kindness.

PLEASE HELP

And now begin to ask that God change your heart towards the church. We need God's Holy Spirit to enable us to see past the frustrations of our local church and see the glorious thing God is doing. I know it often doesn't seem glorious. But we need to look with the eyes of faith. We need to see what God sees when he looks at his church.

You may have deep hurts and issues that have lurked in your heart for many years. God has the power to heal those and change your heart. Will you ask him? You may find your heart hard and unmoved by your church family. God has the power to soften your heart and create within you a deep love. Will you ask him?

God commands us to be committed to church and then he enables our obedience by his powerful Holy Spirit.

LET'S GO

I am a church pastor. Can I tell you the people who bring joy to my heart? It's the people who encourage others. It's the people who look for what is good rather than what is wrong. People who have ideas and share them humbly. People who speak truth to me when I get it wrong, but do it out of love not out of bitterness. People who work hard to serve the church, who come when they are tired, and smile as they work. How could you be one of those for your church family?

I'm not saying that you need to take on a million new responsibilities, rather I'm saying let's be people who do what we do out of love and joy. Not serving because we have to, but rather serving because we love Jesus and love his church.