

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Together Today and Forever

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If you ask a Christian how to grow as a disciple, you may hear a wide range of suggestions: personal Bible study, one-on-one discipleship, small-group discipleship, men's and women's groups, attending conferences, campus ministries, community Bible studies, and so on.

Within the past two decades, the Internet has grown to offer an abundance of additional resources. Audio and video presentations of sermons, seminary courses, and entire worship services are at our fingertips. We can all be grateful to God for these resources.

To the degree that faithful, doctrinally sound study of God's Word is taking place, all these endeavours will bear spiritual fruit. We are able to share in the gifts and graces of the church universal like never before.

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A word of caution is in order, however. While God's providence affords us unprecedented access to the teaching of the church universal, God intends our discipleship as Christians to be expressed in the church particular.

When Jesus told His disciples that baptism was integral to the Great Commission, He was establishing the priority of the local church and Lord's Day ministry in discipleship.

Baptism signifies entrance into the visible church, and the most fundamental activity of the visible church is worship on the Lord's Day. If we are not committed to a particular church, we cannot receive ministry nor give ministry as the New Testament envisions.

Consider some of the unique discipleship blessings that we find in committing to worshipping on the Lord's Day with the local church:

A Foretaste of Heaven

It is wonderful to stream your favourite teaching with a cup of coffee in the comfort of your own home. It is sweet to meet at a friend's home and study the Bible together. But neither private

listening nor small-group study give the foretaste of the world to come as corporate worship does.

The corporate worship of the church is a foretaste of the future glory that awaits us in Christ. We hear God's Word read, sing His praises, confess our sins, receive His grace, join our hearts in prayer, receive the Lord's Supper, and place ourselves under the proclamation of His Word. And we do this together.

What is happening spiritually when we gather like this? "[We] come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God" (Heb. 12:22). In this corporate worship, the church is like a mother, providing weekly shelter and refreshment from the wilderness of the world until the Lord Jesus Christ returns and makes all things new. Without this weekly gathering, we shrivel and die in the wilderness.

A Context for Love

An abundance of solid food does not ensure that any of it will be digested and used for nourishment. We need commitment to the local church to grow spiritually.

The goal of Christian discipleship is love (Mark 12:29-31; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; 2 Peter 2:5-7). The local church is the place where we grow in love over the long haul.

Being a faithful church member is difficult. The people are not all like you. But, you grow to accept one another in love. If you spend any time among the same group of people, they will eventually disappoint you in some ways, or perhaps positively harm you. But you grow to forgive one another in love.

If you leave a church because the people are not like you or because you have been wounded, you have cut short the discipleship process before it has begun.

The only legitimate lure that Jesus says we have for the world is the love that we manifest in our corporate life as a church: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love

for one another" (John 13:35). This visible expression of love is rooted in gathering on the Lord's Day as one body.

A Place to Give and Receive

God puts us in a local body of believers to share in the gifts and graces of that body, and this sharing (communion) is essential to discipleship. The local church is your spiritual family; you share mutually in burdens and blessings with one another.

The local pastor is your pastor-teacher. He is God's gift to you, and God will use him uniquely in your life when you receive his ministry regularly with faith and prayer. The elders and deacons are your elders and deacons. They are God's gift to you to care for your body and soul. All these gifts are from God. How dare we say to any, "I have no need of you"? (1 Corinthians 12:21).

I don't think many Christians actually intend to neglect Lord's Day worship. It just happens as we let other things draw us away from God's people and God's worship on Sunday. Before we know it, we are missing half of the corporate services of worship, waning in our love for Christ, and feeling disconnected from the church.

Pastors can be reticent to speak about the Lord's Day, fearing perceptions of legalism or self-aggrandizement. But we need to be reminded through teaching and the example of

church officers of the importance of the Lord's Day for Christian discipleship.

As Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27). The Lord's Day is designed by God to bless us. It is foundational to our Christian discipleship.

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