

GOD'S GLORIOUS PLAN FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Picture a typical Sunday morning in an ordinary local church. People of all ages and backgrounds gather at the appointed time and place: single adults, families with teens or small children, empty-nesters, and gray-haired saints. Some have chronic disabilities, most don't have impressive careers, and all have experienced trials or tragedies, not to mention their own faults and failures.

They take their seats, many of which will remain empty. There is music and singing—perhaps skillfully, perhaps not. A parent leaves with a crying child. There is trouble with the pastor's microphone. Then there is a sermon—perhaps very good, perhaps not. The meeting ends, people mingle for a while, and the gathering disperses.

Meanwhile, outside is a complex and fast-moving world where massively influential events are taking place. Billionaires are being made and ruined, breakthrough technologies change our way of life for better or worse, natural disasters overwhelm our resources, powerful people vie for dominance, and nations rise and fall.

It raises a question: does the ordinary local church really matter against that backdrop? Are our gatherings important, or even, dare we say, wonderful, in the big scheme of things? Most of the world has already answered “no” to that question. But the One who created the world and the church itself tells us differently.

The ordinary, imperfect, gospel-believing local church, as an embodiment of the universal church, is the most important gathering in the world. Why? Because it is the “blueprint of a broken world remade.”¹ The hope for fallen humanity is to have God our Creator dwell with us in peace and unending joy. And as we survey the Scriptures, we find that God's glorious plan has always been to do exactly that. The local church is the focal point of that plan being fulfilled.

God's plan to have a people for his own possession is first revealed in the Garden of Eden.

¹ Christopher Ash, *Remaking a Broken World* (UK: The Good Book Company, 2019), 163.

The Garden of Eden

A church (Greek: *ekklesia*) is a gathering of people called by God to himself. There is a sense in which the first *ekklesia*—the first worshipping community of God’s people and the first expression of the universal church—consisted of Adam and Eve with God in the Garden. They were the protological people of God.

Adam and Eve were made “in his own image” (Gen. 1:27) and they had no sin. They dwelt in peace with God, who spoke to them and walked among them (cf. Gen. 1:28; 3:8). And the “very good” world was given to them for their provision, pleasure, and productivity. This thriving existence of man with God is what God desires for his image-bearers. But it didn’t last. What happened? One word: sin.

Tempted by the serpent, Eve and then Adam disobeyed God’s command to not eat the fruit from one specific tree (Gen. 2:16-17). In doing that, their sin made a separation between them and their God (cf. Isa. 59:2), so vividly portrayed in their expulsion from the Garden (Gen. 3:24). Our Holy God cannot dwell with sinful man, for the wages of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23), both physical death and the “second death” which is God’s judgment (Rev. 21:8).

But God is merciful and his plan to dwell among his people in peace would not be undone. He spoke of a Savior who would “bruise” the serpent’s head, dealing a death blow to the power of evil and bringing mercy to those in its power (Gen. 3:15). God would yet dwell among a people of his choosing. This led to a people called Israel.

The Nation of Israel

God told Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). It would spring from his grandson, Jacob, who God named Israel. God made a covenant with Israel: “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God” (Exod. 29:45). If they kept the terms of the covenant with its sacrificial system of atonement for sin, God would dwell among them in the tabernacle, and they would be greatly blessed (cf. Deut. 28:1-14).

But they could not keep the covenant. Israel continually rebelled until God removed them out of his sight and scattered them to the nations (cf. 2 Kgs. 23:27). They returned to Jerusalem from exile in a season of recommitment to the covenant, but the old sin problems were still there.

God then promised that a new covenant was coming that would result in him dwelling with his people forever.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My

dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ezek. 37:26-27).

Jesus would be at the center of this new covenant, which he called “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). His death was the once-for-all sacrifice that satisfied God’s justice for his people’s sin so God could dwell with them forever (cf. Heb. 10:14). On the cross, Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*” (1 Pet. 3:18). There he obtained the *church* of God “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

We often think of Jesus’ death as saving individuals, which he certainly did, but he did more. He died to gather the people of God together so that God could dwell among them and bring great blessing to them in his presence. The local church is that gathering. This brings us to Pentecost.

The Church after Pentecost

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, Israel gathered for the feast of Pentecost. At the preaching of Peter, thousands put their trust in Christ and received “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Their immediate impulse was to meet together in the temple and in homes to worship and fellowship and witness (cf. Acts 2:44-47).

With the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, God’s people were reconstituted as the new covenant church, in continuity with the old covenant people of God but now brought to fulfillment by the work of Christ.²

This was the beginning of the local church as we know it today. We meet in church buildings and in homes, and “God’s Spirit dwells in you,” that is, in the church (1 Cor. 3:16). Every gathering of faithful believers in Christ is a blood-bought assembly where God blesses us with his presence, maturing his people, and saving sinners. There is nothing else like it on earth because the local church, with all its limitations and flaws, is nothing less than the lived-out realization of God’s glorious plan to dwell among his people.

Yet, as glorious as it is, this is only a foretaste of what is to come.

The Church in Glory

John saw a vision of God’s plan reaching its fulfillment when Jesus comes again to usher in the new heaven and earth. The voice from the throne said, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell

² Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*, “The Church of Christ.”

with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God... the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

This is "the assembly [church] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:23). This is the new redeemed humanity obtained by the blood of Christ. This is the broken world remade. God will dwell with his people in peace and unending joy. And the local church is the foretaste of it as well as the focal point where God is calling and preparing people to receive it today.

The Importance of the Local Church

Do you see why the ordinary local church is the most important gathering in the world? It may not look impressive with its crying babies, walker-bound elderly, and sin-sick people. Yet, it is the only institution that Jesus said he would build, and the only one that will prevail against all evil (Matt. 16:18). It meant enough to Jesus that he died on a cross to purchase it. What could matter more, indeed what could be more *wonderful*, than that?