

Re-Connect to the Church
Romans 5: 1-11; 12:3-21
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Introduction:

Early in the last century, the young Welsh preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones made the statement,

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.

Such honesty is refreshing. Lloyd-Jones reminds us that we never motivate people to be mere attenders of churches. No, people must be captured by what the Church is really all about. People must come to see the Church as *essential* to their spiritual well-being, not merely *optional*. Yet for many, that is exactly what we think. I bet some of your stomachs churned a little when we read our confession this morning which asserts that apart from the Church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Huh?

In that same article quoted in the front of your bulletin this morning we read,

Here's what Bono, Oprah, and the guru speakers on PBS won't tell you: Jesus believed in organized religion and he founded an institution. Of course, Jesus had no patience for religious hacks and self-righteous wannabes, but he was still Jewish. And as Jew, he read the Holy Book, worshiped in the synagogue, and kept Torah. He did not start a movement of latte-drinking disciples who excelled in spiritual conversations. He founded the church (Matt. 16:18) and commissioned the apostles to proclaim the good news that Israel's Messiah had come and the sins of the world could be forgiven through his death on the cross (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:14-36).

(from Church: Love It, Don't Leave It, By Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck,
http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2009/07/church_love_it_dont_leave_it.html?referrer=emailink)

Obviously, if Jesus started the Church He must have thought it to be essential to our spiritual well-being. Yet do we?

The idea of the church is pretty simple. All those who believe in and follow Jesus are now *connected* to his body (12:4-5). That's what we call the Church. Therefore, the Church is not some invisible, nameless, faceless, only spiritual entity. Rather, it is as real and visible as Jesus is and was on this earth. This is why Paul calls those to whom he writes, “brothers” in 12:1. If you were to ask Paul who was a part of the church in Rome, he could have told you. This was no “virtual” community. Those who believed in Jesus in Rome were connected to one another for one reason only; they were connected to Jesus.

Nevertheless, we, today, believe we can get by as Christians without the aid of the institution of the Church. I wonder; can Romans 12:1-16 convince us otherwise? I think it can.

Now I recognize that many of us have heard sermons from Romans 12. It breaks down into the three areas: the implications of grace (1-2), the mission of the Christian (3-8) and the priority of love (9-16). The problem, though, is that we haven't heard these verses taught in their context. And the context of Paul's words is the Church. In other words, these verses are not about “me” the Christian, but “we” Christians, together. **If we leave the Church out, we misunderstand**

Paul's words. Therefore, it is not just about grace, but the **connectivity of that grace**. It isn't just about the mission, but the **connectivity of our mission**. It isn't just about some sentimental idea of love, but in the particularities and demands of **connective-love in real relationships**.

Key Idea: This is why we have to Re-connect to the Church. If we leave the Church out, we can't understand the Christian life. It is that simple and that hard.

So, let's begin.

1) The Connectivity of Grace

Well, reasons abound for not believing in the importance or relevance of the local church; don't they?

- **Immorality and hypocrisy of church members, and especially leaders**
- **Fundamentalist rigidity on the right and theological compromise on the left**
- **Sentimental nonsense and empty ritual, for the sake of attracting or keeping a crowd**

For these reasons, and I'm sure many more, people decide that they don't need the institution of the Church. We'll say we need Jesus, but we don't need the community. After all, it is so corrupt, immoral, rigid, dead, or whatever mark of failure we have chosen to focus on at the moment.

Will verses 1-2 allow us to separate our individual lives from the lives of those around us who also seek to follow Christ? Well, again, Paul is writing to the "brothers" who are in Rome. But, the first thing he calls our attention to is what he has already written about earlier in the letter. We know this because of the word, "therefore". It harkens to what Paul has already written.

- a) He summarizes his message with the words, "**by the mercies of God**" (1). Up to this point in the letter that is really all Paul has been talking about—God's grace for sinners. We read earlier from Romans 5:8, which I think most clearly explains how God solves the riddle of sin:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Through Jesus, God loves us and dies for us. Jesus received the **penalty** for what our sins deserve. Far from avoiding us because of our sin, Jesus draws near to us and takes to himself what our sins deserve—death itself. Jesus' death was the deathblow to the penalty of sin.

Now, how does this affect our decision to leave "church" out of the Christian life? Well, what do we do? We think the church is full of sin and sinners, so I shouldn't be a part of it. However, clearly our passage overrules such a conclusion. If Jesus died for the Church because he loves us so much, how much more ought we to be patient with her. **After all, he has already dealt with sin's penalty! Because of grace we no longer have to penalize those in the Church who aren't perfect. If Jesus loves them, then so ought we.**

- b) It also means we can have confidence and patience that he is dealing with the **presence of sin in the Church**. Jesus isn't turning a blind eye to our sin. In fact, this passage is one of the most quoted in the whole of the NT for focusing our attention on the implications of the Gospel. We don't have time to dig deep into all of what Paul is saying, but his point is fairly straightforward. Our lives ought to be fully devoted to the Lord. We ought to set aside worldly habits, being transformed by the enlightening influence of God's holy word. Theologically, we call this our sanctification.

However, my point is this. This is a process. Christians are far from done. We all have a long way to go. And, if this is the case, then it stands to reason we have lots of reasons to learn patience with one another.

Do you see? Grace deals with both the penalty of sin and its presence. If that's true then that removes almost all of the reasons why I get frustrated and want to leave the Church. Now, that doesn't mean Church is perfect or great; it just means I can't give up on her. **Because of grace, I have to stay connected! While there are reasons for leaving a church when it no longer maintains its confession of Christ, we cannot sever our relationship to the church out of sanctimonious, religious pride. The Church is a hospital for sinners.**

2) Connective-love in real relationships (9-16)

Grace forms the basis for our remaining connected to the Church. However, that basis will not be very meaningful unless it begins to take shape in very particular ways in the very real relationships, which comprise a congregation. And this is what Paul is getting at in the latter verses of our passage, verses 9-16. Here he describes the **connective-love that ought to characterize our lives together**. John Stott counts twelve components of this love:

- Sincerity (9a)
- Discernment (9b)
- Affection (10a)
- Honor (10b)
- Enthusiasm (11)
- Patience (12)
- Generosity (13a)
- Hospitality (13b)
- Good will/blessing of others (14)
- Sympathy (15)
- Harmony/peacableness (16a)
- Humility (16b)

There are only nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. Now, we have to deal with the 12 components to love! We don't have time to go through all of these. But Paul's words and the depth of detail he gives ought to stir us in at least three ways.

- a) Love is difficult / None of us are good at it**
- b) Love is necessary / Without it we will not be able to be the Church for very long**
- c) Love is not one-dimensional / There is no such thing as sentimental, sappy love when we describe the Church / Love will take many different expressions depending upon the circumstances**

Let me suggest that one of the reasons why our common life together is so shallow and superficial is because we have idealized too much what it ought to be like. If we assume what the Apostle teaches us about sin and about grace, then we ought also to be wrestling with learning how to love one another. And, like marriage, for those who hang around long enough to wrestle they gain the rewards of intimacy.

Here's the thing: the connectivity of grace gives us the resources to stay connected through visible and tangible expressions of love.

Illustration: Two ticks/no host. It doesn't work. However, when we are living in and through the resources of the Gospel, we can then give (not suck) life/love to those around us.

3) The Connectivity of Mission (3-8)

Sandwiched between verses 9-16 describing the manner of our life together and verses 1-2 describing the grace that makes such life possible, are verses 3-8 describing the mission God has given the Church. And, just like everything else in this chapter, we cannot understand our mission apart from understanding the connection and dependence upon one another.

Here Paul does not explain fully what the mission of the Church is, however, we can be sure that he believes it to be Christ's command in the Great Commission given at the end of Jesus' ministry on this earth. Christ's command forms the background to Paul's comments. But his focus is on the connectivity that exists as we fulfill Christ's command.

a) Diversity of gifts given ensures each person's dignity (3)

- While grace of the Gospel has been given to all, the grace of spiritual gifts is divided according to God's purpose (3-5). Paul denotes this diversity of gifting as having received a "measure of faith". This diversity guarantees a certain privilege that all have received. Everyone is important!
- Broadly concerned, gifts in the church correspond to leading/teaching gifts and serving gifts.

b) Diversity of function strengthens our connection (4-5)

It is only when we receive the benefit of others fulfilling their calling in the church that we ourselves realize the full blessing of the Church. The implication of this is profound. Put simply, it means that I cannot grow unto maturity unless I am receiving the benefit of your gift. If I go without your gift; I go without growth. How can that be true? It is because God has wed the means of my growth to his blessing of his people with gifts of graces.

Paul says something similar to the Church at Corinth, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." In other words, gifts are for the edifying of the body of Christ—our maturing. Paul highlights two implications of this diversity of gifting:

- **The need for humility (not more highly).** We can't think we have gifts we don't have or denigrate gifts we need.
- **The need for courage (sober judgment).** We have to exercise the gifts given or we will impoverish the Church

Conclusion

It is time for us to realize that Christianity is not a "me and Jesus" thing, but a "we and Jesus" thing. At every point, what Jesus has done he has done for us so that we might live together and realize his mission together. So, what would happen if we...

[gave] the church a chance—a chance for the church to be the church, not a coffee shop, not a mall, not a variety show, not Chuck E. Cheese, not a U2 concert, not a nature walk, but a wonderfully ordinary, blood-bought, Spirit-driven church with pastors, sermons, budgets, hymns, bad carpet and worse coffee?

You know what we would probably discover something new, something we had never experienced, but also something that we could never live without. Yep, the Church. God intends for us to discover her, connect to her and live with her!