

Essential Church

Why a Vital Connection with the Body of Christ is Essential for the Christian in the End Times.

By Steve Highlander



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Essential Church

Three Problems to Acknowledge, a Revelation to Comprehend, and Some Wisdom to Walk In

We need to address a discernable trend in Christianity today Biblically. Thousands upon thousands of people are dropping out of traditional churches for various reasons—many of them legitimate.

However, the disillusionment caused by problems in the Church has created a horde of disenfranchised Christians. That is NOT good—many of the people leaving *church-as-usual* needed to do so. I do not argue that point. The typical American Church of the 21st century is not meeting the real spiritual needs of people, and people are finally tired of pretending that they do. Left without much recourse, they drop out, stay home, read their Bible, pray and try to get past the frustration and anger they feel at the failure of the Church to meet their real needs for community and purpose.

There is a danger! Many people—disconnecting from the organizational Church—are also disconnecting from the Body of Christ. I went through this for a while also. I understand the feelings, the angst, the frustration, and the sense that I was somewhat alone in the world.

It feels a little like Elijah sitting under the tree praying to God, “I am the only person left who really understands you. Just go ahead and kill me now and end my misery.” (Side note: This was just after a tremendous miracle and victory, too! None of us are exempt from self-pity.)

Of course, God’s response was the He has reserved 7000 that has not “bowed the knee to Baal.” Baal was the false religious system competing with the true worship of Jehovah God. Many Israelites were practicing both, mixing God’s pure worship with pagan worship, and some had left the worship of Jehovah entirely. But God has ALWAYS had a remnant. Today, God has a remnant too. Perhaps many Christians don’t have a clue. They are content to do whatever pleases them, regardless if it is God’s way or not. But there is a multitude who are hearing the call to something more, something different; SOMETHING REAL!

The number seven has been recognized by Bible students as the number of God’s perfection and completion, while the number 1000 often stands for His Kingdom reign. The coded message to Elijah was simple. God has a complete people that were going to express His Kingdom on earth perfectly.

Most Christians believe in some future millennial Kingdom, but Jesus said that His Kingdom had already come in the form of the Church—His Body. He IS the King. The evidence of His coronation was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Read again Ephesians Ephesians 4:13. Paul, speaking of the purpose of the five-fold ministry, says that it is to exist UNTIL **“we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ....”**

The Amplified Bible puts it this way:

“His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints (His consecrated people), [that they should do] the work of ministering toward building up Christ’s body (the church), [That it might develop] until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the [full and accurate] knowledge of the Son of God, that [we might arrive] at really mature manhood (the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ’s own perfection), the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ and the completeness found in Him.”

Paul was not referring to individual maturity. He was referring to the Church growing up corporately to the point where it expressed the perfection of Christ to the world. The verses below are undeniably corporate. You can not practice Ephesians chapter 4—the core of Paul’s revelation—alone. Hence we have the perfect picture of Elijah’s 7000 member remnant.

I have often said that God will have a Church—a corporate Body—that demonstrates the power and Kingdom of God on the earth in the last days. That has never been the question. The only question is, will you and I be a part of it?”

I titled this article Essential Church on purpose. Let’s look at the word ESSENTIAL. The dictionary defines it, in part, this way:

Noun: a basic, indispensable, or necessary element;

Adjective: absolutely necessary; indispensable:

Both of these applications adequately describe the Church of Jesus Christ. Contrary to what some are saying today, the local expression of the Church is *ESSENTIAL* to Christianity; it is *central* to God's plan for the ages and *NECESSARY* for Christians to come to the fullness of what God intends for them.

There are three problems we Must acknowledge:

Problem #1: Much of what has is called "church" today is a poor substitute for what God really wanted. That has to be acknowledged. Many people have already seen this and have decided to bail out. I, for one, decided some time ago that I could not and would not do "church-as-usual" anymore. The organizational Church operates more like a religious, social club akin to the Rotary, Lions, or Optimists Clubs. Truthfully, there is more opportunity for participation and service in the community clubs.

Spiritual maturity is defined basically by how good a member you are—how many times you come to services if you tithe and generally support the vision. Very little long-term spiritual growth is required.

Problem #2: Having spent their entire Christian (and sometimes much of their non-Christian) lives in this setting, some people assume that this is, in fact, all there is to the "*church*" and don't know what to do differently. In their disillusionment, they drop out, not knowing there is a viable alternative to Church as they have known it or where to find it if they realize something different is needed.

Problem #3: Some church leaders are too invested in their positions and power to make changes in response to the Holy Spirit. When this happens, confusion and turmoil enter. Jesus corrected churches. Jesus was clear when He spoke to the churches in the Book of the Revelation. He told them they had some good things going, but they had some serious faults too. That is still true today. We have some excellent churches with leaders and congregations that love God. Jesus spoke highly of the Church at Ephesus. However, He still told them, "Repent, or else I will remove your candlestick." When leaders and/or churches fail to respond to the changes prompted by the Holy Spirit, the light goes out.

When that happens, the Church is left to operate without the power and presence of God. One of two things happens 1. The Church drags on without the anointing or 2. spiritual chaos sets in. Power plays happen. Love disappears, and a fight to control the organization ensues. Both scenarios result in many spiritual casualties and even some fatalities. It frightens me to think of all those people who will have to give an account before God for destroying churches and lives to maintain their tradition, position, and power. God help us!

The revelation we must comprehend:

When God speaks of the "*Church*," He does not have in mind what you and I typically call "*church*" today. So when I say *ESSENTIAL CHURCH*, do not assume I am making a case for *church-as-usual*. The Church, defined Biblically, is the people of God, not an organization with a 501(c) (3) tax-exempt letter, a paid pastor or two, and a building. It is not a building or even a group with some religious programs.

It is the people who gather together. The truth is the Body of Christ exists when the people gather.

It makes no difference where they gather. It makes no difference when they gather. It makes no difference if they have a designated leader or a schedule of events. They do not need a catchy name, a slogan, or a mission statement. They don't even have to have business cards or websites (gasp —don't mess with our Internet).

The true Church (the people) and the body of Christ are one and the same. You can not separate them. ***“And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church:”*** Colossians 1:18

Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Mat 18:20

Is God not with me when I am alone? Of course, He is. So what did Jesus mean when He said this?

That is the revelation we must get. *I cannot be the BODY OF CHRIST by myself.*

It takes more than one person to create the Body of Christ. ***“For the body is not one member, but many”*** (1 Corinthians 12:14). ***“Now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular”*** (1 Corinthians 12:27). ***“For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another”*** (Rom 12:4-5).

The Biblical message is repeated. The Church is the Body of Christ and requires the gathering together of the members to function as such. I believe this is one reason why Paul admonished us in Hebrews 10:24-25:

“Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.”

Notice Paul said the closer it gets to the second coming of Jesus, the more we need to gather together. Gathering together is not just a good idea—it is essential to the plan of God and the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world. You can not reveal Jesus apart from His Body. You can not fulfill the spiritual instructions in this verse alone.

Listen to God's eternal purpose!

“Then God would use the Church (the Body of Christ gathered together operating in their various spiritual gifts) to show the powers and authorities in the spiritual world that he has many different kinds of wisdom. God did this according to his eternal plan. And he was able to do what he had planned because of all that Christ Jesus our Lord had done.” Eph 3:10 – 11

The Church is not about you and me. It isn't for us to control or despise, or neglect. It is the eternal purpose of God. One major problem with church-as-usual today is that we have made it about getting our needs met rather than about meeting the expectations of God. We have developed a consumer approach to Church.

Disconnecting from the traditional Church is one thing. Disconnecting from the Body of Christ is quite another. Too many people leaving the conventional Church are NOT reconnecting with the Body of Christ. This must change.

Those who say that they do not need anyone, but Jesus do not understand the revelation of the Body of Christ: it is essential to God's plan for us, for the world, and particularly the last days. Unfortunately, many coming out of the organizational style church still have the bad taste of the previous experience fresh in their mouths. That being so, they are reluctant to want to jump back into something right away. This is normal and probably a part of the process.

Some Wisdom we must Walk In:

In his latest book, [From Eternity to Here](#), Frank Viola discusses the four aspects of God's Eternal Purpose. At one point, he reveals a key bit of wisdom that pertains to this very subject. He states that when God moved the nation of Israel and even individuals, he often took them through a wilderness from one spiritual place to another. (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Jesus, Paul, etc.).

The most obvious example of this is when the Children of Israel left Egypt and headed to the Promised Land; a trip that would have typically taken less than a month. In fact, it was just a few days journey by another route that did not include the Red Sea or a Jordan River crossing.

Viola points out that God was trying to prove His power and faithfulness to Israel in the wilderness. He indeed brought them into situations that required miracles, but then He was ready to perform those miracles as His people responded in faith. Some people erroneously think God was testing them. This is not true. In Psalms, Hebrews, and 1 Corinthians, God tells us, ***“they tested and proved me and saw my works for 40 years.”*** The fact of the matter is that God set up the situations to prove Himself to Israel.

The main point Viola made was the wilderness time was necessary to change some things. To use a modern phrase, we might say God required a paradigm shift. We have ample evidence in the experiences of God's greatest spiritual heroes that transformation happened in the wilderness.

The Children of Israel had to break out of their *slave mentality* to become free people. It was in the wilderness that this happened. It was also in the wilderness that they struggled with the change. They complained, they balked, they were scared, they were confused. We experience many of the same emotions when we sense the impending change and have no clue where it will lead us. We have a longing to be free but have no idea what that freedom really entails. Most of what we've known for our whole Christian lives must change, but God does not usually give us the whole picture in advance, only bits and pieces. Our spiritual lives are called a journey. The Christian life is called a “walk.”

Paul described this frustration when He said, ***“Now we see through a glass darkly.”***

Abraham experienced it when God said, ***“leave your homeland and kinsmen and go to a place I will show you.”*** The Bible tells us Abraham went ***“not knowing where he was going.”***

In the wilderness, we learn what needs to be left behind. The Children of Israel kept crying for the stuff they left in Egypt—the leeks and onions—comfort food! Too often, when people come out of a *spiritually dead* church they immediately want to start a new church with all of the same old stuff. That doesn't make much sense, does it? It was the same ol' stuff that caused the problem in the first place.

Albert Einstein said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

The wilderness is also a time when we refine the vision of the future. Witness our heroes, Noah, Abraham, David, Paul, and even Jesus, during their wilderness experiences. Jesus's life was divided before and after ministry by forty days in the wilderness. What do you think He was learning there?

Paul testified that during His three years in Arabia—before he was released into his ministry—God gave him the revelation of the eternal purpose of God which he preached. It was here Paul got the revelation of the Body of Christ. Paul needed to leave some things behind and get a vision of something new.

It is not enough to know what is wrong with the Church. We must also get the revelation of what God has purposed and where we fit into the grand scheme of things. What is our individual purpose in light of God's eternal purpose in and through the Church, which is His Body?

The wilderness is the dividing line. The wilderness is the transitional time—much like spiritual adolescence. We are not what we were, but we are not what we are ultimately destined to be. The wilderness is the crucible where God breaks off the old and blends in the new. The wilderness is where true transformation takes place. And oh, how we hate it.

We hate the confusion and the frustration. We are afraid because much of what we have known and thought we were sure of, has come crashing down around our ears. We experience a critical spirit as we see the glaring problems but feel convicted because of it. We are in flux, but we are in transit.

The problem is that we just don't know it—which is why I am telling you now. How can a young teen really comprehend what adolescence is about? They are so caught in the middle of it that they can't see that it is temporary (or should be). Sometimes an adult can help a teen understand that the time is just a brief transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence should be when a young person starts finding his or her identity and place in the world. When they understand and grasp it, they manage it better.

Perhaps your experience at present is best described as “spiritual adolescence.” This kind of hurts the pride of those of us who pride ourselves on being mature. None-the-less, it is an accurate representation. This was what Paul was referring to in Ephesians chapter four when he said that we must **“not be children any more”** and that we **“should “grow up,”** into the fullness of the body of Christ. Adolescence, my friend, is a necessary part of life. It will end, and you will become who God meant for you to be.

I need to share one of my own stories with this important concept. My wife and I are missionaries in Papua New Guinea. Like most other people, the events of the year 2020 threw us off our planned track with some spiritual things, especially ministry-oriented things.

About eight months ago (August 2020). My wife and I went to a prophetic conference just looking for some confirmation on some things. The man ministering there spoke to Brooke and me. He was quite accurate in what he told us from the Lord. One thing that stood out to me, though, was this statement. “You have been on training for thirty years, not ministry, training; now your ministry is about to start.”

Wow, what do you do with that? I have been a pastor of four churches. I have done church planting and extensive prison ministry. I have ministered on the Internet for twenty years. I have written several books as well as curriculum for Bible colleges. I have done mission work in several countries, in addition to my current assignment living in the South Pacific on an island as a missionary for the past seven years. What does he mean, my ministry is just getting ready to start?

The truth is our past experiences are training for our eternal purpose. I am excited about what God has in store for our future ministry. It is a bit humbling to find out we are not as far along spiritually as we thought we were.

I went through a few wilderness times both in my life and ministry. There were times God separated me from close association to a local church. There were times when I was ministering that nothing much seemed to happen. I thought I was wasting my time and everyone else’s too.

It was all training. In training, we lose some contests, but the longer we train, the more battles we win. God has a purpose in the wilderness—but know this—it is always transitional.

God did not bring Israel out of Egypt to leave them in the wilderness. He brought them out of one thing to bring them into another—a promised land flowing with milk and honey.

Likewise, God did not abandon you to the wilderness. Although the wilderness is a necessary time, His intention all along is to bring you into a vital, living, loving relationship with the Body of Christ in its genuine expression.

There is one last sobering thought we must consider. A whole generation of covenant people died in the wilderness. It was not necessary. They chose to stay in the wilderness. They refused to go to the Promised Land because it seemed too difficult. There were giants to overcome.

Oh, the testimonies were great. ***“It is a good land the Lord our God does give us,”*** was the report of the spies. We long to think of freedom in the spirit, body ministry, real relationships, and the power of God touching lives and transforming people all around us. Those things we know *should* be happening.

Perhaps we could rephrase it a bit; “Truly the body of Christ (God’s people living and working together by the power of the spirit) is a good thing God wants us to experience, but there are too many giants ever to live there.”

The problem is the *giant changes* that have to be made to allow those things to happen. You see, if what we had been doing before was working, we would be seeing those things good things happening already.

We are left with the undeniable fact that we have to change. The giants are often in our own lives: our self-centered approach to Church; our lack of commitment, the cost of developing and maintaining genuine relationships. The sacrifices of prayer and service and the real biggie—a new humility, without which the Body of Christ does not and can not operate.

Other giants include figuring out a new way to gather and worship. What to do with kids and worship; how leadership needs to be structured; etc. And of course, there are always those on the other side of the Jordan telling us how wrong we are and how we need to come back across the river where it is safe. After all, we are told, we've been doing it this way for hundreds of years. We have it all figured out already (it doesn't really work—but it is traditional)!

It is often easier to stay in the wilderness of seclusion than to trust God to part the Jordan. It's easier to watch our favorite preachers on TV than pick up our spiritual swords and slay the giants that stand in the way of true, authentic Christianity and a living expression of the Body of Christ that the world so desperately needs today.

Finding Yourself in the Book of the Revelation

We need to adjust our terminology somewhat. It is the Book of the Revelation (singular), not Revelations (plural). The first five words of the Revelation are, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” It is a single revelation.

Likewise, it was not “the revelation of the devil.” Although many people spend more time talking about Satan, the antichrist, the beast, and the number 666 than they do about Jesus.

The Revelation is about the final showdown between righteousness and wickedness. But it reveals Jesus from start to finish. The word “*revelation*” is *apokalypsis* in Greek, and it means to disclose, reveal, manifest, appear, and be revealed, among other things. It is the word from which we get apocalypse.

I propose you take some time and consider a possibility.

Jesus is going to appear, be disclosed, revealed, manifest, etc., during this time. If language means anything, we must conclude it is going to be visible. Now, most people point to Christ's visible return and call it good. I suggest another thought.

How can Christ be revealed, manifest, appear, etc., without a body? Could it be that the Revelation is not just about Jesus coming back, but about the Church—the Body of Christ—also being revealed in the power of the Spirit in and through us?

We discussed Ephesians chapter four earlier.

And [Jesus] gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of

God, **to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.** Ephesians 4:11-13

Notice Paul did not say, *unto perfect men*; instead, he said, “*a perfect man.*” Then he defines it further—the measure of the stature of the FULLNESS of Christ. I love the Amplified version of this passage.

[That it (the Church – the Body of Christ) might develop] until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the [full and accurate] knowledge of the Son of God, that [we might arrive] at really mature manhood (the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ’s own perfection), the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ and the completeness found in Him. Ephesians 4:13 AMP

Paul is holding out an extraordinary promise here. The fivefold ministry was given *until* something happened. “*Until*” is a time-related word. He did not say, “until Jesus returns.” It was until the Church—the Body of Christ—arrived at something. What was it? Mature manhood. Nothing less than the standard of Christ’s perfection. The fullness of Christ. To Experience the completeness that is found in Christ.

Wow. Do we understand the import of Paul’s revelation? I do not think we do. At least we do not act like it or talk like it. It should be easy to see that this passage has not been fulfilled yet. I am not satisfied with or convinced what I see happening in the Church is the fullness of Christ Jesus. I believe we have something exciting to look forward to. I expect The Body of Christ to say and do the things Jesus said and did. He even said we would do greater things because He was going to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit (John 14:12).

I said all of that to say this: The Book of the Revelation promises the manifestation of Jesus Christ. I believe we will also see the manifestation of the Body of Christ in its **measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ** at the same time.

There is one last verse to consider along these lines.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.
Romans 8:19

Or, as the Amplified Bible puts it.

For [even the whole] creation (all nature) waits expectantly and longs earnestly for God’s sons to be made known [waits for the revealing, the disclosing of their sonship].

Notice the words “*revealing*” and “*disclosing*” in their expanded version. These connect this verse with the one in The Revelation.

All creation is eagerly awaiting a time in the future when the “son’s of God”—the body of Christ—will be revealed.

Conclusion

I want to encourage those who read this to understand you are somewhere in the transition: Don't stop along the way. Don't despise the wilderness, but don't make it last longer than necessary—it is not your final destiny.

Ask for advice from those who might be a little farther down the path than you are. Get rid of the critical spirit as quickly as possible. Start to focus on where you are going instead then where you have been. You will have a hard time getting to your destination, always looking over your shoulder.

Above all, study what the Bible has to say about the Body of Christ. (Romans chapter 12, 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, Ephesians chapter 4, etc.). *Refuse to do "church-as-usual" but do not refuse to reconnect with the Body of Christ.*

Being a vital part of the Church—whatever that may look like—is essential to your life.

Your destiny (fullness, completion, maturity, and final revealing) is tied to the Body of Christ. Do not miss it. Do not die in the wilderness.

AMEN!

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