

Finding Faith in Community

How God's Called-Out People Live When They Follow His Plan

The COVID pandemic could be considered a mass trauma, defined as a disaster or other life-threatening event impacting a large sector of people simultaneously. In the case of COVID, the sector happened to be the whole world.

The Center for the Treatment and Study of Traumatic Stress in Akron, Ohio has established interventions for victims of mass trauma. They include: a sense of safety, calming, a sense of efficacy, connectedness, and hope.¹ These very factors are some of the benefits people derive from church. And yet tragically, just when people needed church the most, many closed.

But some would not be deterred. The Food for the Heart Bible Study began in an effort to create a church environment for quarantined people. It continues today simply because it has burgeoned into a beautiful, biblical community.

God's covenant community, the church, takes a lickin' and keeps tickin', doesn't it? Once people find love, they don't want to let it go. As we study the nature of this covenant community, we discover that its resilience comes from the Spirit, and that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). We read that the bride will ultimately come forth "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as an army with banners" (Song of Solomon 6:10). What are some of the defining characteristics of a biblical church? For now, we'll look at three: it lives in covenant, knows it is called out, and engages in spiritual conquest.

The Church Lives in Covenant

The church was not our idea, it was God's. He has always had a people on earth. On the great mountain of Sinai God said the following poetic words to Moses of the children of Israel:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19:3-6

Notice that God takes full credit for carrying Israel out of bondage. Then he elicits that they "obey" His voice and "keep" His covenant. Interestingly, obey, *shama*, means "hear" and keep, *shamar*, means "preserve." God is not telling His children to generate their deliverance. He's reminding them He has already done it, and that they should therefore tune into him and cherish what He has already accomplished.

¹ <https://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/psyc.2007.70.4.283>

But later the Israelites said, after hearing the law for the first time: “All that Thou has said we will do” (Exodus 19:8). Only a short time later they cast away every fetter of restraint, dancing naked around a golden calf. Human promises tend to end like that—in abysmal failure.

Yet we humans are hard wired to try to be “good enough,” to measure up. The irony is that this very over-confidence leads to failure. As we trust our own strength, we lose access to the Source of strength. The needle on our moral compass points the wrong way, and impulse displaces principled action. Soon we ourselves join the orgy. Yet it is in the swamp of failed human promises that the lily of God’s never-broken covenantal promise appears.

Covenant love takes initiative. Even when the beloved fails to respond, it “never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:8). It makes another way forward, as God did in once again giving the idolatry-tainted children of Israel another chance. Covenant love alone can weather betrayal over and over. Thank God He loves us unwaveringly!

Jesus is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:17). He is its cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). And He is the rock upon which it rests (Matthew 16:18). He is over His chosen people to protect, beside His chosen people for them to lean into, and beneath His chosen people, their firm foundation. He is like the strong father building a house for his brood, working his fingers raw, while the little ones pretend-hammer. Who at last provides the structure shielding them from the storm? The father. Do they somewhat believe they helped? Yeah. Once mature, do they realize they didn’t? Uh-huh.

More precisely, we are the building. God is building *us*. “The whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22). We form the raw materials of the Master Builder’s grand spiritual edifice. Reverence for the physical church building is all well and good, but not in exclusion of what God is doing in the lives of His children. In the face of that masterpiece, we step back in awe.

The Church is Called Out from the World

Scrolling back from Moses, we hear God’s call to a seeker named Abraham:

Get out of your country, from your family, and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Genesis 2:1-3

Again, God lays out His covenantal plan to build Abraham into a powerful nation, and make it great in the earth. But in order for God to fulfill that plan, Abraham had to tear away from his previous life. We don’t remove sin to persuade God to make room for us, but we remove it to make room for God. We cannot serve God and mammon (Luke 16:13). Out of a basic recognition of this utter incompatibility between Christ and idols, the church must be a sanctified, set apart community.

Jesus “loved the church, and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27). God wants to purify and perfect us, but He does this in community. Growth into the image of God comes as we love one another effectively. And as we mature in love, God entrusts us with the management of the church as an organization. He calls us to create an environment in which divine love can flourish in the hearts of His children. Jesus said that whatever we bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven (See Matthew 18:18). Such is His trust for us that He who is the Head put the power of church governance in the hands of the people.

The Church Engages in Spiritual Conquest

God has called us “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people” and has given us the call to “proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). God has not raised up a mere social club to comfort the members, but has set us on a mission to share the benefits of the gospel with the world.

Sociologists have noted that families may be inward focused, outward focused, or somewhere between. While outward-focused families may neglect the relationships within the family, inward-focused families may neglect to cultivate relationships between the family and the larger community. A healthy church will realize that their relationships with one another will only grow stronger as they seek and save the lost.

Jesus said,

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen. Matthew 28:19-20

Love does not rest satisfied with its own comfort, but ventures out to rescue the dying. Knowing the pain and peril of humanity, we engage in a kind of spiritual warfare, “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). In order to bring souls into God’s safe harbor, we voluntarily set ourselves at odds with the dark forces of the world. To do any less would be to stagnate in self-serving.

In this way, the church engages in a conquest of love. Rather than rest passively in the good news of the gospel, we actively seek to share it. The early church did this, and 2000 were converted in a day at Pentecost (See Acts 2:38-42). God has chosen us as the vessel through which the gospel goes out to the world. And He would like His wisdom to be made known “by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10).

The Takeaway

God has called His followers both individually and collectively to follow Him. Following His lead in how the church functions, we will understand ourselves to be His covenant people, growing in the sunshine of His promise to us. We will follow Him out of the world, not to make room in His heart for us, but to make room in our hearts for Him. Finally, we will go back into the world, armed with the gospel, to engage in spiritual conquest for the souls of His children all over the world.

Quiz

1. Victims of mass trauma seek a sense of safety, calming, a sense of efficacy, connectedness, and _____.
2. God said to “obey” His voice and “keep” His covenant. Obey, *shama*, means “hear” and keep, *shamar*, means “_____.”
3. Our determination to rely on ourselves for what only God can do for us will, ironically enough, lead to _____.
4. Jesus is the _____ of the church, the cornerstone, and the firm _____. He’s above, beside, and beneath us!
5. While we like to build fancy edifices we call churches, according to biblical analogy, we, the worshippers are God’s _____.
6. Knowing the pain and peril of humanity, we engage in _____ warfare to seek and save the lost.
7. When the early church unselfishly committed to bring the gospel to the world, _____ were converted in a day at Pentecost.
8. In order to bring souls into God’s safe harbor, we voluntarily set ourselves at odds with the dark forces of the world. To do any less would be to stagnate in _____.

Answer Key

(Cover these answers while you fill in the blanks.)

1. Hope
2. Preserve
3. Failure
4. Head, foundation
5. Building
6. Spiritual
7. 2000
8. Self-serving

