

“Church, Why Bother?”  
Dr. Jerry Nelson  
[www.SoundLiving.org](http://www.SoundLiving.org)

When he's in town and his or his kids' athletics don't conflict, he usually attends church on Sundays.

But if I pressed him as to why he attends I'm guessing he'd have a hard time coming up with something that sounded significant. I might hear:

- “Well, I've always gone to church.”
- “Going to church is what Christians do.”
- “Doesn't the Bible say we are supposed to go to church?”
- “I want my kids in church.”

Maybe you have a better answer than that, right now, but at times even for many of us we wonder, “Church, why bother?”

Or maybe it isn't even thought – we just slowly, quietly disengage and we hardly notice it ourselves until we realize we don't really miss it when we don't go.

Church, why bother?

What I'm going to talk about this morning I think only few in this room know much about and I'm not one of the few.

I'm only ever so slowly beginning to grasp something of the significance of today's subject.

But even if I haven't fully experienced it, I can show you what God says on the subject and invite you to join me in better understanding it and living it.

And the subject today is “church”.

Not church as it is popularly defined but church as the Bible defines it.

I'll come back to that in a minute.

**Most of us want very much to be different.**

I'm not talking about being richer, smarter or more famous. We probably wouldn't mind that either but I mean that most of us know we are not, within, the kind of person we want to be and should be.

You don't have to be very old before you begin to understand that self-help programs aren't likely to make the changes we need.

We tried enough times to change with little result that we realize something is broken.

Not only do we wish we were different, but **most of us long for relationships that are much deeper than we experience.**

We long to connect at ways far deeper than the superficial we usually experience.

At a certain level we are lonely and it hurts but we have even a greater fear of trying to connect and being rejected.

And so we live in uncomfortable isolation, simply putting on a happy smile much of the time.

But according to God's Word, the change we long for and the relationships we covet are found in the church because that is the way God made us.

Now when I say, "change and relationships are found in the church," I must quickly add again that I am not defining church as the building or the institution or the program.

I am using a biblical definition of the church as God's new community – people spiritually connected to each other in committed relationships.

Something very unhealthy has developed in the evangelical church over the years – something we have adopted from the culture.

That unhealthy value is "individualism" and it has resulted in an "individualistic Christianity".

We ask, "Church, why bother?" **because we have reduced Christianity to a private affair** between God and the individual.

William Willimon has written, "American Protestantism often impresses observers as a highly individualized, privatized, psychological affair... Individual conversion experiences – in which individuals are saved from individual sins in order to have individual

relationships with Jesus – are viewed by some evangelicals as the end rather than the beginning of the life of faith. The church becomes (little more than) a conglomerate of like-minded individuals who find it useful to congregate in order to keep the flame of individual religious experience alive and to foster it in others.” (Willimon in What's Right with the Church 15)

I think he's right.

We speak and act as if getting our personal sins forgiven and getting our own ticket to heaven is the sum of what it means to be a Christian.

And furthermore we sometimes think the only reason for church is to tell others about their need for getting their sins forgiven and getting to heaven.

Church gets reduced to an assembly of individuals emphasizing an individual religion.

But as Willimon points out, individual, personal conversion is not the sum or conclusion of the life of faith but simply the beginning.

We are converted, saved, born again, **into a community** – a community of faith, the body of Christ, the church.

An Asian Indian by the name of George David, wrote an excellent little book, I came across recently, entitled, The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person.

“Community is what we in our generation, who have been socialized in a secular culture, are conscious of having lost. We need to realize afresh that we have lost community because our very personhood is being eroded by secularism. Our self-understanding has subconsciously shifted, so that we (see ourselves most importantly as) autonomous individuals.” (David 46)

We are so intent on being individuals, having autonomy, that we have sacrificed our personhood.

George David, following Paul Tournier and others, makes an important distinction between being merely an individual and also being a person.

The concept of “individual” speaks of number – you are one, alone, separate from.

The word “individual” emphasizes autonomy, freedom, independence.

In and of itself, being an individual is not wrong but when it excludes the more important aspect of what it means to be a “person” then individualism is harmful.

We are not just individuals; we are, more importantly, persons.

You say that just sounds like semantics.

Listen, and I think you will hear a real difference in the distinction.

As I just said, the word “individual” refers only to number – the number “one” and by definition “individual” emphasizes our separateness from others.

The word “person” speaks of relationship and “personhood” doesn’t exist apart from relationship.

“The ‘I’ can have no real knowledge of itself apart from others. When two selves interact mutually they develop common attitudes, interests, beliefs and goals. When the interaction is such that the individuality of each is not lost but rather respected by the other, they (each) develop a relational self. It is (this relationship) that transforms an individual into a person... A person possesses not only an individual self, but also a relational self, which is possessed in common with another, making them persons to each other.”<sup>(David 43,44)</sup>

Yes, God made us individually but he created us to live in relationship.

Genesis 2:18 “The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.

God created human life to live in fellowship (not just alongside but in relationship) with him and with others.

Derek Kidner writes, “(A person) will not live until he loves, giving himself away to another on his own level.” Derek Kidner Genesis 65

And when God created us to live in relationship, to be persons, he was mirroring his own personhood.

Genesis 1:26-27 "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God, as "three persons in one", is central to who God is.

Even before we existed God was love.

It is not just that God is love in some abstract conceptual way but that God loves and love necessitates relationship – in this case the relationship was between the three persons of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is interesting how Islam defines Allah; of the 99 attributes given to Allah in the Koran, never is there a mention of love.

In great contrast, **the CENTRAL self-revelation of God is that he is love.**

Love is impossible alone.

Love is only meaningful if there is some other to love. (David, 49)

To be fully human, to be "person", is to live as God created us to live.

And thus to be truly human or fully human we must live in relationship with others – again, not simply among others but in genuine connectedness to others.

That is why Jesus prays to the Father in John 17:11 "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so **that they may be one as we are one.**

We have too much adopted the culture's priority of autonomy.

We have placed individual freedom as the highest value to be achieved and sustained.

We are so convinced that autonomy must have priority that we will sacrifice everything else to have it, including the sacrifice of true community.

**When** that happens “church” becomes merely a congregation of individuals, each striving to maintain his or her freedom, and being part of a congregation only to serve their own interests.

We don’t really give, serve or love others for others, we just act in certain ways to get for ourselves.

And when it is merely a collection of individuals bumping up against each other in self-serving ways there is no community, no church.

Sin has done that.

Sin has turned persons into merely individuals.

Sin has isolated us and keeps us apart and keeps us from being fully functioning persons made in the image of God – connected to one another, living in real community.

And that is what Jesus came to change.

- He came to give us worth, based not on what we do but who we are by his grace.
- He came to change us, to free us from our self-protecting individualism.
- He came to set us free to be persons, persons who are loved and who love.

Ephesians 2:19-22 “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

It’s important to notice that the Apostle Paul here is not writing merely of a Christian as an individual but of Christians in relationship with Christ and each other; he is addressing the church.

We, together, are God’s temple.

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul speaks of our bodies individually as temples of God **but** in 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is describing the church – God's new community:

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”

Here Paul is not describing your individual body but the church – the body of Christ.

And in 1 Corinthians 12:27 he writes, “Now you are the body of Christ, and **each one of you is a part of it.**

Christians are not just born again individuals, we are born into a family. We become the new spiritual (“ethne”) ethnic group, the new people of God in Christ.

The only context for being Christian is the church – the community of believers.

Paul Tournier wrote “There are two things you cannot do alone. One is to be married and the other is to be a Christian.”

Some may say, my church is watching Charles Stanley or James Kennedy on television.

Or others may say, my church is standing on the top of peak 8 at Breckenridge and praising God for all he has made.

I hope they don't mean what they are saying.

It would be like saying my marriage is watching videos by Gary Smalley or James Dobson.

The church is God's people living in relationship with each other.

This is where the definition of church gets “down and dirty”.

It is not church when all it includes is individuals attending the same programs.

It's church when the individuals, as persons are connecting, knowing each other, caring about and for each other, investing in each other.

And that is where it gets hard because who could object to the idea of church, of community? - But people – that's another matter!

It's a variation on the old Charlie Brown theme - "I like church, it's people I can't stand."

One author wrote, "When it comes to the religion called Christianity, it's the scandal of particularity that bothers us. The thing that sticks in our craw is not that the gospel is about love, peace, freedom, liberation or any other loveable abstraction. What sticks in our craw are the particulars, the messy side of Christianity, imperfect people and an imperfect church. Many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the particulars. It was the romantic poet Southey who said, 'I could believe in the Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church.' Jesus has many admirers who feel that he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved." (William Willimon in What's Right with the Church 2-3)

Rarely does the Bible speak of the church abstractly.

Almost always the word church is a reference to a specific group of people in a specific location – E.g. the church in Rome, Ephesus, or Phillipi.

These were real people with all kinds of real differences, conflicts, hard-to-get-along-with personalities, questionable pasts, annoying habits, and the rest that drive people apart.

**We** are a church.

A church made up of professionals and laborers, highly educated and barely educated, short and tall, slim and not-so-slim, kind and selfish, liars, thieves, adulterers, gossips, murderers, the gentle and the angry – all kinds, those you'd love to spend time with and those you wish you never had to be around.

But it is we with all of our abilities and warts and brokenness that God has called to be part of this church – to be in relationship with each other.

Larry Crabb has written, “A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who turn...toward each other because they know they cannot make it alone. These broken people journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, but are able to see beyond the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole” (in each other, by God’s grace) Crabb p32

Robert Saucey wrote, “It is in fact, God’s purpose through the miracle of redemption to weld together a divided and estranged humanity into a living unity where differences of gender, race, nationality, and position are all transcended in Christ.” (The Church in God’s Program p102)

There have always been some who have understood what church is about but **for too many of us we have seen church as something we attend rather than a people we are truly a part of.**

The Bible’s definition of church is not a building or a program but a community.

This is not a YMCA where you simply pay your dues and keep the rules.

The church is people who are asking you to become part of their lives.

### **Becoming part of each other’s lives takes time - time together.**

We have hundreds of people who call this their church home who show up only once or twice a month or even less frequently.

In fact only about 55% of those who call SGC their church home are present on any given Sunday.

Now to be certain there may be some who have job or health issues but it doesn’t change the fact that you can’t build a relationship with such infrequent contact.

One word you can’t help but notice that describes Jesus’ relationship to his disciples is the word “with” – he was constantly with them.

**Let me quickly but importantly mention how this community begins.**

### **It starts with conversion.**

John 1:12 “To all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

We believe firmly that only those who are “born again” (to use Jesus’ term for conversion) are part of the church.

But equally firmly we believe that those who are born again are part of the church.

Again, I Corinthians 12:27 “Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is part of it.”

One author wrote, “Any idea...of enjoying salvation or being a Christian in isolation is foreign to the New Testament writings.” (Alan Stibbs in God's Church 92)

Phillip Yancey wrote, “Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in community. Perhaps for this reason, I have never entirely given up on church... At a deep level I sense that church contains something I desperately need. Whenever I abandon church for a time, I find that I am the one who suffers. My faith fades, and the crusty shell of lovelessness grows over me again. I grow colder rather than hotter. And so my journeys away from church have always circled back inside.” Yancey in Church, Why Bother? 23

**Conversion is the qualification for being part of Christ’s body, the church.**

**And where there is true conversion other things naturally and necessarily follow.**

Among those other things initially are baptism and membership in the local church.

Acts 2:41 is only one example of what the Bible teaches throughout:

Acts 2:41 “Those who accepted his (Peter’s) message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

**I want you to see the three actions of this verse:**

**First**, they accepted the message – they believed, they trusted in Christ, they were saved, converted, born again – as we have already seen, they became part of the family of God.

**Secondly**, they were baptized.

Baptism was the primary symbol of the believer's connection to Christ.

Jesus had commanded it, the disciples and the early church practiced it and thus it was inconceivable that a person would call him or herself a Christian and not be baptized.

NT scholar, FF Bruce said, "The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the NT." (FF Bruce The Book of Acts 77)

Alfred Martin wrote, "We glean from the record in the Acts of the Apostles that conversion and baptism are the inside and outside of the same experience." (Alfred Martin in Worship in the Early Church p60)

Bruce Shelley of our own Denver Seminary writes, "The baptism of a believer in water is extremely important. Baptism as a public act takes the inward experience...and gives it concrete expression. What may appear to be a passing mood of the convert, a moment of excitement, becomes a public event that no changing emotion can afterward erase. Baptism thus lifts faith out of the uncertain sands of inward religious moods and roots it in an act of commitment and obedience."

(Bruce Shelley in What is the Church 69)

In the Scriptures the first indication of the genuineness of a person's conversion to Christianity was their willingness to be baptized.

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ as saving-Lord and have not been baptized, that is your next step.

We are conducting baptism services on Feb 16 and May 18.

If there are too many who wish to be baptized that we need to turn the entire morning over to baptisms, we will do that.

But I also want you to see, **thirdly**, in the Acts 2 text that those who received the message and were baptized were also added to the church.

They were recognized as part of that particular church.

They somehow indicated their identification with that church as opposed to a church in another location.

They joined the church.

Just exactly the form that joining took is not described but that they did belong to that particular church and that they and everyone else knew it is quite obvious.

Did they become a member of the church so they would go to heaven when they died? No!

Did they need to be a member of a church so they could participate in the programs for themselves and their kids – a kind of religious “Costco” where you have to show your membership card to get in?

Of course not!

But belonging to the church universal, simply saying “I’m a Christian – part of God’s world-wide church” is largely meaningless apart from belonging to it locally.

Belonging to an abstraction - the church universal - is clearly not the same as belonging to flesh and blood fellow-believers.

We don’t belong to or have a relationship with a concept or an institution, we belong to people.

And just as baptism is the visible expression of the invisible “new birth”, so the act of joining the local church is the outward visible expression of the inward commitment to that group of people.

I have for years likened joining a church to the marriage ceremony.

What makes a marriage? A ceremony?

I have asked that question of those who questioned the need for a wedding.

And the response I usually get is that the ceremony doesn’t make the marriage; it is love that makes the marriage.

I have responded that that is true but marriage is more than love, it is committed love and committed love is publicly declared, publicly vowed love.

**Felt love is not the basis of a marriage;  
Commitment is!**

And this is very similar to being part of a local church:

Being present is not enough. **What is needed is a declared commitment.**

As with any relationship, **foundational to the trust that is essential to build the relationship is the commitment that you will be there tomorrow whether you feel like it or not.**

Trust is built on permanence, the permanence declared in commitment.

Vows (public commitment) are what protect a marriage and the vow of declaring your commitment to this group of people in joining the church are what protect relationships in the church.

Membership doesn't create the relationship but it can make it responsible and public. (Cf. Bruce Shelley What is the Church 59)

Only 40% of the regular attendees of SGC are members.

Less than 50% of the teachers in our church are members.

I now publicly apologize for not communicating sufficiently through the years what it means to be part of the body of Christ.

If you are trusting in Jesus as your saving-Lord then we need you and we need you to commit yourself to us as we commit ourselves to you.

We need you to make that commitment by joining us – by vowing to be part of us.

**We have been “engaged” to some of you for years, it’s time to tie the knot – to make the commitment.**

Conversion, baptism and joining the church are not the end of what it means to be a Christian – but the Bible says they are the beginning.

I began this message by saying most of us desire to be different.

Within each one of us there is a spiritual battle going on – a battle for our souls – and that battle will only be won with the help of other Christians.

That is how God made us – to be persons living in community, real community where people not only know your name, they know your heart.

Larry Crabb has written powerfully of this need in his book, The Safest Place on Earth:

The cry from the heart is to “be part of a true church, to participate in spiritual community, to engage in spiritual conversations of worship with God and of co-journeying with others. You yearn for a safe place, a community of friends who are hungry for God, who know what it means to sense the Spirit moving within them as they speak with you. You long for brothers and sisters who are intent not on figuring out how to improve your life, but on being with you wherever your journey leads. You want to know and be known in conversations that aren’t really about you or anyone else but Christ.”

The Safest Place on Earth 19

That is what I want for you, for every one of us.

It begins with conversion and continues with the commitment of baptism and membership.

And it continues beyond that through relationships at the deepest level.

Will you become part of that at Southern Gables?

Communion is another expression of our relationship to each other.