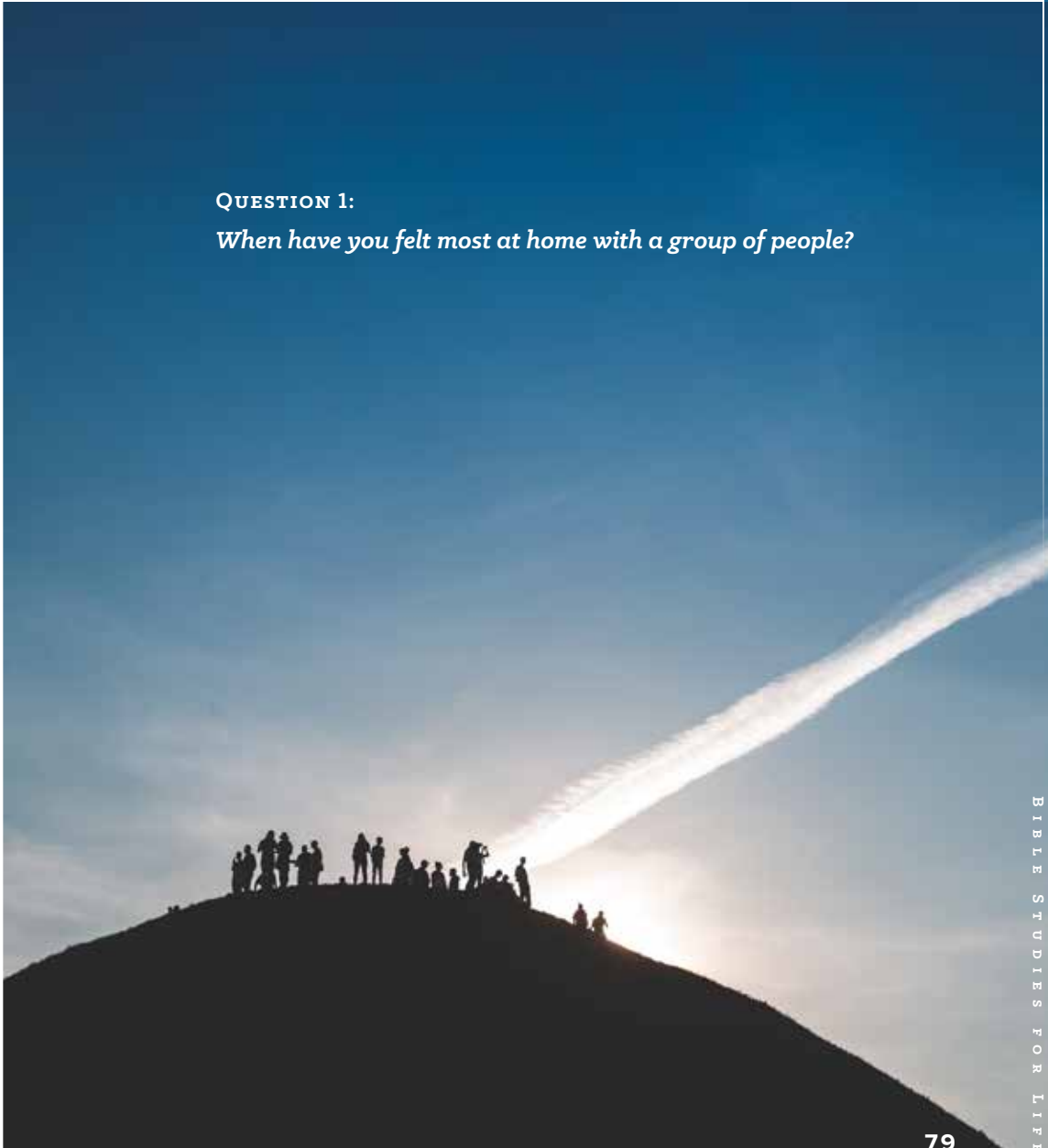


Session 1:

We Are Joined Together

QUESTION 1:

When have you felt most at home with a group of people?



THE POINT

When we come to Christ, we also become a part of the body of Christ.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

A few years ago, I visited Muir Woods National Monument—known for its beautiful California redwoods. Dwarfing other tree species, redwoods can grow to over 350 feet high and can be as wide as 24 feet in diameter.

Yet, as massive as these trees are, redwoods possess remarkably shallow root systems. But the roots overcome their lack of depth by extending outward more than 100 feet from the tree's base. Each tree's roots then intertwine with the roots of other redwoods. By joining together, the individual root systems create a forest of trees with staggering strength.

The simple reality is that redwood trees were not created to exist in isolation—and neither were we. Just as a redwood tree requires a forest of other redwood trees in order to stand, so also the Christian requires a spiritual family in order to grow. The church—the body of Christ—is that family. Being a part of Christ's church is not an option. Through Jesus, God designed us to live and serve together as His body.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

EPHESIANS 1:20-23

²⁰ He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens— ²¹ far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

The New Testament writers used various metaphors to describe God’s church, such as flock, temple, household, gathering, and so forth. But the most frequently used metaphor is “the body.” Through this picture, we learn that each Christ-follower is a member (or part) of the body, while Jesus Christ is the head. Bodies can have multiple hands, feet, fingers, toes, and even kidneys. But a body possesses only one head. So, if the church is considered a body and that body can have just one head, then it only makes sense that Jesus would be the head.

Through His power, God pronounced Jesus as the infinitely superior Ruler of all things—including His role as head of the church. This means no human leader stands as the ultimate authority in your local church. Although God has ordained offices to exist in the local church, no pastor or board serves as head. Only Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God in the seat of ultimate authority as head of His church. All leaders are to look to Jesus, follow His example, teach His Word, and submit to His leadership.

In the ancient world, the head was considered the life-giving member of the body—one that both controlled and sustained it. This is exactly what Paul told us in verse 22: Jesus is “head over *everything* for the church” (emphasis added). Jesus is not the head over *some* things for the church; He is head over *all* things. The church can do nothing of spiritual significance apart from Jesus. And since every Christian is a member of the body, it means that, as individuals, we can’t do anything significant apart from Jesus.

The word *everything* also teaches us that believers cannot compartmentalize life so that Jesus is head over some things and not over others. Whether we’re obeying Jesus all alone in our workplaces or serving Jesus together through our church, we need the life-giving sustenance that only He can give.

QUESTION 2:

How is being a part of a church different from being a part of any other organization?

As its head, Jesus holds ultimate authority over the church. His authority is not dictatorial, oppressive, arrogant, or abusive—but it is absolute. Jesus’ authority was neither received by democratic vote nor granted by a council’s affirmation; His authority has no root in human decision at all. Jesus received His authority as a demonstration of God’s power. In other words, Jesus’ authority is all about who He is as the Son of God.

EPHESIANS 2:8-10

⁸ For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—
⁹ not from works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

In most clubs and organizations, you sign up to become a member. You pay the dues. You attend the meetings. Then, you go to work on the club's agenda. Unfortunately, we're often tempted to approach the church with a similar mindset. The Bible teaches us a radically different method for membership in His body. Membership in the body of Christ is not about what we do to get in. Instead, it's about what Jesus has done to bring us in.

QUESTION 3:

What do these verses teach us about God's grace?

Few passages of Scripture sum up Jesus' work on our behalf like Ephesians 2:8-9. Follow Paul's train of thought in these two verses:

- ▶ **We are saved.** Because of sin, everybody enters into the world spiritually dead. Accompanying that spiritual state is a nature opposed to God. In that condition, we face God's wrath. Against the backdrop of this bad news, Paul gave us good news: God is merciful and loving toward us!
- ▶ **We are saved by grace.** *Grace* describes God's undeserved favor toward sinful humanity. The One we've sinned against initiates the salvation we need. That's other-worldly! It's definitely countercultural—and it's utterly undeserved. That's grace

at its heart. Salvation (and entrance into His church) begins with God's benevolent initiative toward us.

- ▶ **We are saved by grace through faith.** Faith is accepting the truth about who Jesus is and what He has done. What has Jesus done? He lived the perfect life we were required to live. He died the punishing death sin required us to die. God approved Christ's sacrifice and raised Jesus from the dead; He gained victory over death and offers us eternal life. Trusting these truths to make you right with God is saving faith.
- ▶ **Every aspect of our salvation is God's gift to us—not work done by us.** Twice in this passage Paul reminded us that no work on our part can earn salvation. Rather, God's sovereign, merciful, and gracious work on our behalf enable us to be saved and to come into His church.

Why does God save sinners like you and me? We might think it's because He loves us. God most certainly loves us, but He saves us for a bigger reason than just to display His love. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Do you see that distinction? God doesn't save us *by* our good works; He saves us *for* His good works. Through our redeemed lives, He displays for the world His character, love, and glory. And the local church is the place where He does that best.



“YOU ARE NEEDED IN THE CHURCH ...

BECAUSE IN AND THROUGH YOUR MINISTRY,

GOD’S GRACE IS RELEASED AND HIS PURPOSES ARE FULFILLED.”

Bruce L. Bugbee

EPHESIANS 2:19-22

¹⁹ So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.

God has always had a people. The Old Testament records God calling Israel (the Jews) to Himself. They were God's chosen people among the nations (the Gentiles). God set His people apart from the nations to be a witness to the nations. But rather than obeying and believing, Israel continually disobeyed and disbelieved.

"no longer foreigners and strangers." Although foreigners and strangers possessed some legal rights, they lacked the full rights of citizenship. Spiritually, the Jews felt superior while the Gentiles felt inferior. But Paul shattered both of these feelings by pointing to the uniting work of the gospel. God's people come from many backgrounds, but we are one in Christ.

QUESTION 4:

What are some benefits and responsibilities of being a member of God's household?

Fast forward to the New Testament. Both Jews and Gentiles populated the streets of the first-century world. This reality presented a dilemma for missionaries like Paul. As he preached the gospel, the message fell on different ears.

- ▶ If you were a Jew, you'd likely think the gospel was just for you; after all, you were offspring of the covenant people of God!
- ▶ If you were a Gentile, you might hardly believe this message included you. Spiritually, your people had been on the outside looking in for generations.

Because of their faith in Christ, the Gentile believers were brought near and were

QUESTION 5:

How has the church played a significant role in your life?

The church is not simply about me or my needs. The church is not a club we can take or leave. Fellow church members are not spiritual acquaintances we should keep at arm's length. The church is God's household—His family. It's the body for whom Christ died. And for the Christian, the church is a nonnegotiable need. When we come to Christ, we also become a part of the body of Christ. Just as the California redwoods grow by the united togetherness of their roots, so also Christians grow by the united togetherness of our souls.

PART OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

Is being part of God's church greater than any of the traits that tend to divide people? Circle any of the following traits that you personally have allowed to become divisive in your own life. Pray as a group for gospel unity to replace worldly divisiveness.

Skin color

Language differences

Political opinions

Cultural background

Level of education

Favorite sports team

Marital status

Hobbies or interests

Economic factors

LIVE IT OUT

How will you embrace your role as a member of Christ's church? Consider the following applications.

- ▶ **Confess wrong thinking.** In order to adopt a right mindset of your part in Christ's church, confess any wrong mindsets or attitudes you hold (or have previously held) about individuals in your local church.
- ▶ **Submit to Christ.** Re-read Ephesians 1:20-23 and reflect on the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Submit your life to His authority and control.
- ▶ **Commit or recommit to a church.** If you're not a member of a local church, pursue membership to begin experiencing the beauty of living "together" in the household of God. This might mean going through a membership class or talking to a pastor. If you're already a member, commit yourself anew to the covenant and mission of your church.

Our experiences with church in the past can affect our approach to church today. But God's grace can help us embrace a healthy view of our role in Christ's church. **Make a conscious decision to commit to God's view of His church.**