

22nd February 2015

Better Together #1

Why we are Better Together #1: It is God's design

"I don't have to go to church to be a Christian."

Have you ever heard a statement like that? I'm sure you would have. There are all sorts of variations to it. "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I can worship him just as easily in the solitude of my garden. Or out in the bush." Or "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. Besides, the church is full of hypocrites."

What compounds the whole coming together to worship these days is just the busyness of life. We go a million miles an hour, trying to cram an impossible number of activities into the week. Then there's Sunday work and Sunday sport. For many, Sundays are the only day to sleep in and relax. And it's so tempting – in our busy, cluttered world – it's so tempting to cut church. Because that's one of the easiest things to cut. Coming together for regular worship – being together, experiencing community – might have been standard practice when times were simpler, but those times are gone.

Now I get that. I think that growing up in the church, coming to worship each week like I did in my teenage and young adult years was so much easier back then. For lots of reasons. And I understand that changes in society and society's attitudes are significant. And it's tough – for many people and families these days – it's tough to make time for regular worship and connecting with fellow Christians.

So today let's look at just one reason why coming together as community, why coming together to worship and fellowship is important. It's God's design. When God sat in his study in heaven, thinking about, pondering on, planning on how – when the earth was created and people were populating it - how his people could best grow in the faith and function effectively as Christians and experience the most fulfilling lives, the word "individual" wasn't a part of his thinking. You won't find it on any of his preliminary notes. Not part of his brainstorming process. Not included in any of his draft plans. The idea of people being Christians in isolation from each other never entered God's mind. His mind – and we do know some of his thoughts because he's revealed them to us in Scripture – his mind, his plan, his design has always been to place us together. In community. In gatherings of people we call churches.

When God gave the commandments to his people on Mt Sinai, he wanted to give them some key things to help them to get on with each other, and to grow deeper in their relationship with him. He could have given them hundreds of commandments, but he decided to give them just 10. The big ones. And in the top 3 was worship! And if you read the Old Testament, corporate worship - people coming together on the Sabbath to worship their God - was an essential part of their life. And when that weekly worship dropped off in the early New Testament church, St Paul notices it. And he responds to it. He says; *"and let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another"* Heb 10:25.

Then think of the letters that were written in the New Testament. Most were written to churches. To the church in Corinth. To the church in Ephesus, or Galatia, or Philippi, or Colossae. And there are a number of other churches that had letters written to them too. And when there are letters written to individuals - and there are only 4 of them; Paul's letters to Timothy – 2 of them – and to Titus and Philemon – they were written primarily so that they would be better, more effective leaders of the churches they were called to.

People coming together – to worship, to be church – it's actually part of God's design! It's God's idea! Think of the early Christian church that began at Pentecost. Peter's Pentecost sermon touched hearts and changed lives. 3,000 people became Christians that day. Listen . . . listen how the book of Acts describes what happened. *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in*

their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42, 45-47

“They devoted themselves to fellowship. They continued to meet together in the temple courts.” “They broke bread in their homes and ate together.” This coming together, this sharing life together – was no accident, but part of God’s design.

When the Bible uses images to describe the church, what kind of images are there?

Well the best-known image is of the church being a body. You can check it out in 1 Corinthians 12. St Paul says; *“Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part.”* Vs14. And he goes on to describe some of those parts: arms, legs, eyes, feet, hands. And none of those parts exist in isolation. None can say; “I’m going to go solo!” He says: *“The eye can never say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’ The head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’”* Vs21 And what we go through – as individuals – it affects everyone else in the body. We cry together, we laugh together. In summarising his picture of the body, Paul says; *“All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.”* Vs27

And you can go to other pictures the Bible gives of the church. It’s a flock of sheep – not one sheep - but a flock of sheep with the Good Shepherd - Jesus - leading them (Jn 10:1). There’s the picture of the church being a temple - and it’s made up of lots of living stones, bricks, individual people – with Jesus being the cornerstone (1 Pet 2:4-8). And you can keep going in Scripture. Over and over again the picture is given that Christians are to live life together. That’s God’s design. That’s the way it should be.

When the bible gives commands to us as to how we are to live our lives, those commands are almost exclusively given in the plural. Not “you” – singular, you love. It’s “you” - plural – you Christians in community – you group of people gathered together as church – you love. Because God never envisaged that Christians would be separate, islands, disconnected from each other. And so you get scripture giving all these *“one another”* commands. *“Love one another”* 1 Jn 3:11. *“Forgive one another”* Eph 4:32. *“Encourage one another”* Heb 10:25. *“Serve one another”* 1 Pet 4:10

It doesn’t matter which way you look at it, Christians coming together – for worship, for care, for prayer, for fellowship – it’s all part of God’s design. His plan. Scripture affirms that again and again and again. But why is it part of God’s plan? What’s the purpose of God’s design that we gather together as Christians instead of just going it alone through life? I don’t believe that he has come up with this design, I don’t think God has issued all these *“one another”* commands just for the fun of it. That they have no purpose. So, what is the purpose of the church, or Christians gathering together? Over the next 2 Sundays we’re going to explore this further, but this morning, let me just give you the simple, stark answer. God loves you! With the biggest love possible. And he has the highest of hopes for you. The greatest of plans. He wants you to experience the most rewarding, fulfilling, purposeful life possible. *“Life in all its fullness”*, he says (Jn 10:10). And that simply isn’t possible if Christians go through life without regular contact with their brothers and sisters in the family of God. Doesn’t mean that you can’t be a Christian. But it does mean that you’ll receive less of what God intends for you. Less purpose. Less joy. Less depth. Less fulfilment. That’s just the inevitable consequence if you reject or revise God’s design, God’s plan for you.

So we are “Better Together” because that’s the way God designed things to be so that we could experience best all his hopes and dreams for us. And really, that ought to be enough for us, shouldn’t it? I mean, if we have God as the Lord of our life, then what he says goes. Doesn’t it? If we believe that he has our best interests at heart, then that ought to be debate ended. If that’s his design, if that’s his purpose, then that’s good enough for me. I just need to respond to his design, to his plan, to his command and get together - be together – with my church community. So we can be “Better Together”.