

Your church is a miracle. If you didn't know that, this book will help you understand why. Both new believers and old believers with conflicted feelings about the church will especially benefit. Read this excellent book to learn how to love Christ's people better and worship God more.

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director, 9Marks

This book about the church is a gift to the church. It's clear, winsome, and needed, reminding us of the great reality of the body of Christ called to live, worship, and minister together in his name until he comes. I'm grateful for this biblical call to remember who we are, and what by God's mercy we get to be and do as his gathered people.

**Kathleen Nielson, Director of Women's Initiatives
at The Gospel Coalition**

An excellent and hugely important book. Up-to-date, punchy, and humorous but penetrating. Sam makes the case that we need to re-discover the huge relevance of the church in our Christian lives.

Terry Virgo, founder of Newfrontiers

We couldn't be more excited about this book. Especially in our day when people look for reasons to reject the church, this book is a necessary encouragement. Sam expertly engages readers with what the Bible says, and brings the truth home through illustrations that stick with you. We're eager to see church members, ministers, and cross-cultural workers benefit from "Why Bother With Church?".

**Dave and Gloria Furman: Pastor, Redeemer Church of
Dubai; author of *The Pastor's Wife***

This is a thoroughly enjoyable book. It ably addresses many questions people are asking about the church. Without minimising its flaws, Sam helps us see that the church is a miracle of grace, destined for eternal glory as the bride of Christ. Sam has a God-given gift for presenting complex topics in ways that are biblically faithful, skilfully concise, pastorally wise, and culturally relevant.

Bob Kauflin, Director of Sovereign Grace Music

I'm so glad Sam wrote this book. Many in our day say that they like Jesus, but not the church. But is it possible to belong to the Head without being part of his visible body? This is a wise, winsome invitation to embrace the riches of communion with Christ's new society.

**Michael Horton, Professor of Theology,
Westminster Seminary, California**

Why bother with church?

And other questions about why you
need it and why it needs you



Sam Allberry

the goodbook
COMPANY



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To the church family at St Mary's

The park or the church?

 **B**eing honest, on some Sundays, the park looked like a better option.

I was working for a church in Oxford, and my walk to the morning service every Sunday took me through a park. It was lovely. There was something for everyone: a swimming pool, tennis courts, a boating pond, a lake full of ducks, a playground, plenty of space for ball games and plenty of benches for watching everyone doing their something. On a sunny Sunday morning the place was full: everyone doing their thing and having a great time.

And there I was, walking through it all, Bible tucked under my arm, on my way to church. And the question was: If I wasn't a pastor, would I stop? If my pay cheque didn't kind of depend on my being at church, would I stay in the park?



The park looked like a lot less effort than the church. It didn't look as if anyone in the park was going to put me on a rota. No one was going to ask me to pick up the tennis balls every other Sunday, or turn up early to get the ducks out.

The park looked like a lot of fun. You could choose what you wanted to do, how often you went, if you went, and how long you stayed. Feel like tennis? Come and play. Feel more like sitting on your own reading a book? Great. And if you're not here next week, that's fine. You can make friends, or not, as you wish.

The park also looked a lot more normal. No one would think I was strange for going there. Lots of my friends might like to come. Going to the park is a regular, normal part of 21st-century life.

Church, increasingly, isn't.

I am sure I am not the only Christian (and not the only pastor) to have had these feelings. Many if not most of us have our own equivalent to the park. We live in a time when there is a huge number of alternatives to church on a Sunday, readily available and seemingly very attractive. Sports. Bed. Shopping. Brunch with the gang. Hobbies. And as the number of options available to us grows and grows, church seems more and more irrelevant than ever.

In the UK, it was normal to go to church back in the 1950s—25% of British adults were in a service on a Sunday. Today, it's 5%. It's likely that more people will be in your local supermarket at 11 a.m. this Sunday than in your local church. In the US, that trend, though less far on, is nevertheless heading in the same direction.



There are so many reasons why we might not bother with church.

Church is an effort. It is sometimes hard. And it's far from normal. So why bother going at all? Why bother making it a priority in your week, every week? Why bother getting stuck in when it means putting yourself out? After all, the park is right there, ready and waiting.

That's what this book is about. Maybe you're someone who goes along dutifully to church week by week, but you've never been completely sure why. Maybe you're stuck in and serving hard, but wondering if it's all worth the effort. Maybe you're someone whose commitment to church has been waning for a while now. Or maybe you're new to church and you want to know what it is that you're getting into.

Whoever you are, I hope you'll find this book realistic and useful. I hope that you'll grow not just to be bothered, but excited about your church. This book's last line will be:


*Why on earth would I **not** bother with church?*

You may feel a long way away from thinking that, and wondering how on earth you could ever get to that from where you are. Well, that's what the next 80 pages are about. But for now, let me sum it up in two words: what, and whose.

When we get *what* the church is, and *whose* the church is, we really won't want to go to the park (or anywhere else) on Sunday morning.



What is church?

 **F**or a number of years, I played tennis every Sunday morning with a good friend of mine. Giving up my lie-in, I'd walk to the end of my street where he'd pick me up at the same time each week, and we'd head to the local tennis club, whack a few balls around, catch up on each other's news and play a few sets until it started raining, someone else wanted the court, or my wildly inaccurate first serves had lost all our balls.

Then I became a Christian, and started going to my local church. Occasionally my tennis partner—now my ex-tennis partner, I suppose—would come with me. Ever since, Sunday mornings have meant church. A few years into my Christian life I started working for a church, so it also became part of my job to go. But even allowing for holidays and sickness, I can think of hardly any Sundays in the last twenty years when I didn't go to church.



Some might say my Sunday routine didn't change much. I just swapped one hobby for another. After all, I still give up my lie-in. I still head out at the same time each week, and still meet with a group of friends, where—among other things—we still catch up on each other's news.

It's easy to think of church as being a meeting place for those whose hobby happens to be God. On the surface, my church is a lot like my old tennis club: people meeting together because of a shared interest, running occasional events to raise the profile in the wider community, trying to drum up more members, having meetings with minutes and secretaries, and getting caught up in the minutiae of it all to a degree that would baffle most outsiders. There's also a lot of serving...

But scratch under the surface and there's a lot more going on.

The word "church" is so familiar to many today that we don't tend to stop and think about what we mean by it when we use it. A by-product of this is that we can easily and unwittingly end up actually misusing the word without realising it. Even before reading on, pause for a moment. Think of a sentence, or a few words, that sum up what you would say church is.

The church is a particular gathering

The word we commonly translate "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ecclesia*, which simply means "assembly" or "gathering". It was not a specifically religious word in New Testament times, and we see this reflected in the Bible itself. So in Acts 19, for



instance, “ecclesia” is used twice. Neither refers to the meeting at Holy Trinity, Genericville, at 10.30 on Sunday mornings. The writer, Luke, is recounting Paul’s mission trip to Ephesus; and as Paul preached, he sparked off a riot. Luke describes the chaos of the crowd:

The assembly was in confusion: some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

Acts 19 v 32

A local clerk eventually intervenes to calm the crowd down. Among other things, he says to them:

If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly.

Acts 19 v 38-39

In these two passages, Luke uses the word *ecclesia*. In one instance it refers to a riotous mob, in the other to a legal body. In both cases it simply describes the gathering of a group of people—a “church”—irrespective of their purpose and composition.

But as the early Christians maintained the habit of gathering regularly together, *ecclesia* came more and more to refer specifically to a Christian gathering—to the weekly meeting of believers to worship God and serve one another. In Acts 5 v 11, for example, Luke can



write that “great fear seized the whole church” using this very same word.

The word has now been taken over by this Christian context for it. Many of the words that relate to church life are derived from *ecclesia*—“ecclesiology” describes the doctrine of the church that we find in the Bible, “ecclesiastical” refers to matters concerning to denominational or local church affairs, and so on.

Ecclesia being the New Testament word for church is a significant indication of what a church actually is in essence. A church is a particular gathering of Christian believers—of people who have heard Jesus’ promise that in him, “the kingdom of God has come near” and obeyed Jesus’ command to “repent and believe the good news” by accepting him as King of their life, and as trusting him as their Saviour who gives them eternal life (Mark 1 v 15). It is a *particular* gathering because it is clear from the Bible that any meeting of two or more Christians, whatever the context, does not constitute what the New Testament regards as church. Bumping into a Christian friend in a grocery store does not mean that this piece of human interaction in the ice-cream aisle is a church.

We can go further back in the Bible to see what it is that makes church such a distinctive way of meeting. Following his rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt, God brought the people together at the foot of Mount Sinai. They camped in the wilderness there while Moses went up the mountain to meet with God (Exodus 19 v 1-6). It was during this time that God spoke to the Israelites as his chosen people, and identified them as uniquely



belonging to him, commissioned for his service. God also gave them his law, by which they would live as his rescued people. This law served to define them and to teach them how they were to live out their status as his people.

The Bible later looks back on this gathering as being the prototype of church. New Testament writers referring to this time used that very same word *ecclesia* to describe what was happening at Sinai (see, for example, Acts 7 v 38; Stephen describes the gathering of God's people at Sinai as "the assembly"—literally, "the ecclesia"). At the foot of Sinai, the people of God were "churching" together. And churching here means more than just hanging out over a latte and catching up on the weekend sports results. This gathering was marked by being in the presence of God, receiving his words of promise and direction, and being constituted as his people. The weekly gathering of Christians that the New Testament describes as church is something of a re-enactment of this moment. Christians gather as the people of God to receive his word afresh, to be reconstituted and recommissioned as his. (What this actually involves we'll look at further on.)

The church is an outpost

These local, weekly meetings of God's people are not just rehearsing a key moment from the Old Testament; they are a local and time-bound expression of something that is universal and timeless. All of the people of God, from across the ages, constitute his church—what is sometimes referred to as the universal church.



Spiritually, Christian people are seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 2 v 6). Wherever we happen to find ourselves on earth, we are part of a vast and timeless spiritual gathering, one that the gathering at Sinai was just the foretaste of:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them ...

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. *Hebrews 12 v 18-19, 22-24a*

Our mountain is not physical and earthly, but heavenly. This is the universal church. In one sense, in Christ, we're already there—but in another sense, we're not there yet. And so the local church is an outpost of this ultimate church. When Paul addresses his letter to the Christians in Corinth, he writes “to the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1 v 2). These believers happen to be in Corinth—that is their physical and earthly location. And so they constitute the “church of God” in that place.



Paul does not say that they are “part” of the church of God, as if the church of God is all the local churches collected up and put together. No, the local church is the church of God, in that particular locale. They are the embodiment in Corinth of the universal church. The church functions like an embassy of this new society that God is creating through Christ. Just as the US embassy in London is considered a part of US sovereign territory overseas in a foreign land, so the local church is a small part of heavenly territory in this world.

So the church is the gathering in a particular location of God’s people, as his people, in his presence, to hear and respond to his word. Two things follow from this.

First, the church is not the building God’s people happen to meet in. We commonly use the word that way (“That’s a beautiful/imposing/crumbling church”), but it is not really being accurate to the Bible to do so. The church is not the building itself, but the people meeting there. People don’t enter a church; the church enters a building. In fact, a specially designated building is not even essential. In parts of Africa, Christians meet week by week under a spreading tree. Others will meet in the open air or in someone’s home.

Second, the church is not the denomination. I pastor a church that belongs to the Church of England. It is the denomination to which I happen to belong. There is much I like about the Church of England (though it is changing in ways that mean I like it much less than I used to), but its name is not one of them. It is a misnomer. It is an association of churches. Biblically speaking, it is not, as an organisation, a church in and of itself.



When denominational representatives speak on behalf of the organisation, they are not technically speaking for all the Christians in England, still less for all the local churches in England. A better name would be something like “The Anglican Denomination in England”.

The church is a family and an embassy

In his letter to the pastor Timothy, Paul says that a church leader needs to be able to...

... manage his own family well ... If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?

1 Timothy 3 v 4-5

Paul’s point is simple: as a household is a biological family, so a church is a spiritual family. Later in the same passage Paul describes the church as “God’s household” (1 Timothy 3 v 15).

The church is God’s family. It is not those who have signed up to a human institution, or who find themselves in natural sympathy with Christian ethics and church life. It is those who have been brought into God’s family through the reconciling work of his Son. When we were adopted by God as his children, we were adopted into his family—we became part of a familial community. When God draws people to himself, he draws them into family.

All families have likenesses, whether of physical features or particular mannerisms. One characteristic of the church is “truth”. Later in his letter to Timothy,



Paul describes church in these terms: “The church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3 v 15).

The way in which the church depends on the truth is obvious: it is the truth of God’s word that brings the church into existence and shapes all that she is to be. But there is also a way in which God’s truth depends on the church: not that the church approves or decides on what the truth is, but that the church is the means by which God’s truth reaches into his world. The church is the earthly outlet for God’s truth, the embassy that represents him. Christians are this individually too, of course. But it is through the church being church, rather than primarily through individual believers each separately doing their bit, that the truth is upheld and commended to a watching world.

This is one of the reasons why church matters so much. I once heard it said that there is no such thing as a God-forsaken place (given that God is present everywhere), but there is such a thing as a church-forsaken place. For a region to be without a church means that it does not have the access it needs to the truth of God’s goodness and love. Lacking a church is not equivalent to lacking a decent supermarket or movie theatre; it is like lacking a hospital or a source of water. It is an utter necessity.

We see this priority reflected throughout the New Testament. The world needs a church, in every place. Think about Paul’s instruction to his younger colleague, Titus:



The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. *Titus 1 v 5*

Notice Paul does not say “elders in every church”. Churches need leadership (as we’ll see in due course). But Paul’s point is broader. It is not just the case that every church needs a leader, but that every town needs a church. Paul’s concern is with mission. For the gospel to penetrate the urban centres of Crete, there needs to be at least one church in every town. Churches are God’s way to reach whole regions.

We see this in Paul’s own mission activity. When he spends time in a given city, he does not just seek to make a few disciples here and there, and then considers his job to be done. He forms an assembly—a church—and appoints elders to oversee and lead them. He is not just wanting converts, but churches.

The world did not need my old tennis club. And it did not need me to be committed to that tennis club (they seem to have managed quite well without me). But the world does need the church. My local area needs the local church I’m part of. Your local area needs your church too. Church is foundational and central to what God is doing in his world.

The church is the bride of Jesus

In one of the final passages in the Bible, the elderly apostle John is given a glimpse of the future, of the day when God recreates the cosmos for his people to enjoy in perfection, for ever. It’s an amazing vision; and one



of the most amazing aspects is how the church—what Revelation calls “the new Jerusalem”—is described, and dressed:

I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. *Revelation 21 v 1-2*

The church is a bride—a beautiful one. Whose bride? John already knows:

The wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)

19 v 7-8

The church is the beautiful bride of the Lamb—of Jesus himself. And so the day of Jesus’ return will be a wedding feast—and Christians are invited to it not as guests, but as the bride. None of us will have to sneak into heaven through the back door—we’ll be walking up the aisle.

All this seems strange to us, because the marriage we’re used to is not between the Son of God and his church, but between two people. But actually, the human marriages that happen all the time are pictures of this greater one (Ephesians 5 v 22-33)—this is the



ultimate relationship, the only marriage that endures for eternity.

If you want to understand how committed Jesus is to the church, here's your answer. He doesn't just create it and let it be. He marries it. He is not just our almighty King; he is also our perfect Husband. That's how much concern he has for every member of his church. That's how much he cares about local church. That's how committed he is to us, for ever.

This is even more amazing when we appreciate who the church is. At the end of time, at the wedding feast of the Lamb, the church will look beautiful, but only because clean, righteous "linen" will be "given her to wear" (Revelation 19 v 8). This promise of what the church will be in the future is a wonderful assurance that one day she will be perfect. But it is also a reminder that she is sadly still very imperfect in this present age. She is not yet the beauty she will one day be. Alongside the wonderful status we have as God's people there is still considerable ugliness and failure. We are not yet the bride we should be.

In the Old Testament, God had used a human marriage to show what his people were like. He told one of his prophets, Hosea, to...

Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land [that is, God's people, living in Israel] is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD. *Hosea 1 v 2*



Hosea's wife was adulterous—she cheated on her husband. And God is saying that his people were, and are, spiritually adulterous. That's what sin is—it is loving something more than God; it is cheating on God. Spiritually speaking, the church is unfaithful.

Yet Jesus is the Husband of the church. And as Hosea was sent to “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress” (3 v 1), Jesus still loves us, despite what we're like. And as Hosea had to pay “fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley” (v 2) to free his wife to live with him again—a high price—so Jesus paid his own life to free us to live with him for ever—the highest price. That's how much he loves his church. All we bring to this relationship is our need and our guilt. But he brings freedom, a “dress” worth wearing, and a perfect future with him for ever.

So the church is the beloved bride of Jesus. Church is not his hobby; it is his marriage—and it's ours too. Think about what it means to be church in this way and it becomes exciting, and all the more so when we recognise what we're like as his people. We will gather on a Sunday, look round and look at ourselves, and be absolutely amazed at who we are before him. We will hear about who he is in his word, and sing about who he is in our hymns, and be completely awestruck that we get to be part of his bride. And we will live each day safe and secure in the knowledge that Jesus could not care more about his church: he died for it.

