



Spiritual Disciplines: Our Local Church

In this article I want to focus on the more formal side of fellowship, that is, our involvement in our local church.

What is the church? The Westminster Confession of Faith describes it as *“the whole number of the elect, who have been, are or will be, gathered into one, under Christ, its Head. The church is the bride, the body, the fullness of him who fills all ... It is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”* Often our experience of the church does not seem to fit with these wonderful descriptions. However, as Eugene Peterson notes in his *Practice Resurrection*, *“Church is the textured context in which we grow up in Christ to maturity.”* Every local congregation is a community of justified sinners attempting, by God’s grace, to live out the life of faith in their own particular neighbourhood. It is in our life together that we grow in the faith.

How then does church aid us in our spiritual growth? Church affords us the opportunity to hear the word of God preached and taught, to receive the sacraments, to benefit from formal accountability to the Elders, to worship with and share in the fellowship of the congregation. These are benefits but what of the responsibilities? What *discipline* is required on our part?

In his *Disciplines of a Godly Man* Kent Hughes identifies the following:

- The discipline of regular attendance, and not just attendance but also of membership, of belonging and identifying with the church.
- The discipline of giving; the church requires a financial commitment to pay for the wages of the minister, the running of its ministries of the church and the relief of the poor.
- The discipline of participation – our time, talents and creativity should be used for the glory of God.
- The discipline of love and prayer: As the letter of James exhorts us, our faith is shown by our acts. Christ tells us that the world will know we are his followers by our love.

For some church will be the centre of their lives and they will be major contributors to the life of the congregation, for example, Elders, Deacons, and Sunday School Teachers. For others long hours at work or family commitments, perhaps due to young children or elderly parents, will mean that they have little time to give and they will be very much on the receiving end of the church’s ministries. Indeed our level of involvement will change at different stages of our lives. However we must be careful not to let busy lives be an excuse to withdraw from the church community: We drift from the church at our peril. If the church is the God-ordained environment for our growth, then we cannot hope to thrive spiritually in isolation. Even if (and perhaps especially if) our legitimate vocation means our lives are busy and our time is limited, we must ensure that we maintain our commitment to attend, to hear the Word preached and to share in the fellowship. As we are admonished in Hebrews *“Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do”* (NLT).

Michael Trimble