

**WE  
LOVE  
THE  
CHURCH**

**An Invitation  
from the Elders of Trinity Fellowship  
to love the family of God  
– *universal & local***

# WE LOVE THE CHURCH

*An Invitation from the Elders of Trinity Fellowship Evangelical Free Church, Big Rapids, Michigan*

We, the elders of Trinity Fellowship, love the church. We love the universal, worldwide church of Jesus, that includes all believers from all time, everywhere. AND we love the local church, where the love and unity Jesus prescribed can become more than just an ideal.

In recent years, many have emphasized the value of the universal church, and much of what has been said has brought important corrections away from a spirit of elitism and the unfortunate dividing of the body of Christ. As with many corrections throughout history, it is easy for the pendulum to swing too far. It seems it has become necessary to present again the importance of a high view of the local church. It is our prayer that such teaching will bring the pendulum of thought more in line with Biblical truth and that it will help us live out what our Lord has in store for us as a local church.

## The Church: Idealism AND Realism

Bringing such alignment to our understanding and practices is very difficult. Even if we assume that a person who holds Jesus in high regard would also have an elevated view of His Bride, the Church, there is still the matter of the battle between our idealism and our realism. Ideally, the church should be filled with love, unified, pure, and holy. When we consider passages from the Bible that look at the universal Church, we find that our idealism rests secure, because the Church will be, through Christ's work, a beautiful bride.

*. . . as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.<sup>1</sup>*

Yet we also know that our view of the church must be realistic. The problems of the local assembly have always been with us and will be until Jesus returns.

*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.<sup>2</sup>*

So we live torn between the idealism of the spotless Bride of Christ and the reality of fellowshiping with flawed individuals, like ourselves. Some will relieve the stress by talking only of the universal church in her idealistic beauty. But often the local church, with her messy relationships, imperfect people, and gnawing inconsistencies is overlooked or even condemned as a waste of time.

But God has not made a mistake by creating local churches to be the tangible expression of the Body of Christ. The gathering together, and committing to one another as brothers and sisters, allows these "family units" to be the canvas for the art of showing forth to the world the beauty of the character of God. The outworking of the ideal splendor of the universal church in the flawed reality of the local church is almost a miracle. When this work of God takes place, the broader community that surrounds the local church takes notice.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 5:25-27 (All texts are from the English Standard Version)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:18-19

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*<sup>3</sup>

### The Church: Universal AND Local

We have spoken of the different senses of the term “church” in the Bible. Let’s see that this term’s spectrum ranges from the breadth of the universal family of God to the specifics of the local fellowship.

*. . . so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*<sup>4</sup>

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*<sup>5</sup>

These two passages from Ephesians 3 are just too “big” to be limited to a specific local church, that is, one with specific elders and deacons and perhaps a list of supported widows. But there are other places where we see a different picture, one where the context is too “small” or specific to be thinking of anywhere other than a local church.

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*<sup>6</sup>

*I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*<sup>7</sup>

The Ephesians elders had a specific flock to care for. And in the second passage cited, Timothy, ministering in Ephesus, was given instructions for how to behave in the “household of God.” Even with the lofty, idealistic terms used for “the church of the living God,” we know the directions applied to the local fellowship. The context of the text, the lists of the qualifications for elders, deacons, and widows in need, points definitively in that more narrow direction.

It is the local church for whom the overseers care.<sup>8</sup> Many texts point out that there were many local churches in an area, not just a vague “regional church.”<sup>9</sup> It is in the context of these local churches that we are to “come together.”<sup>10</sup> We are challenged to even lay our disputes before those leaders with standing inside these churches, rather than going to the courts outside.<sup>11</sup> It is in these local assemblies that we can “despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing.”<sup>12</sup> Such care, community, submission, and honor mean little if they are not with real people who share interwoven lives.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:7-12

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3:10

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21

<sup>6</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 3:14-15

<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>9</sup> For example: 1 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 1:1 & 8:1; Galatians 1:22; Colossians 4:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:4

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:18

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:4 and 5:12

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:22

## The Local Church: Where the “One Anothers” become Reality

This local body of believers provides the canvas for painting the realities of community to which the Bible calls us. These include the “one anothers” of the New Testament. It is simple to say that one believes in these biblical directives when the practical brushwork is only with imaginary people. It is the wonder of God when these interpersonal imperatives are actually carried out.

How amazing that love originates with God, and that it was manifested when He sent His Son to earth as the Redeemer. Yet, even more surprising is that the Bible teaches, in the passage from 1 John 4 that we looked at already, that the love of God is “perfected among us.” How we function as a church, on the local level, has been inextricably woven to God’s love. He has staked His reputation as the God who is love to the local expressions of the Body of Jesus. It is HIS love that is perfectly demonstrated AMONG US.

The commands of what we are to do to and for “one another” include: love one another, encourage one another, outdo one another in showing honor, live in harmony with one another, welcome one another, instruct one another, wait for one another, greet one another, comfort one another, serve one another, bear one another’s burdens, bear up with one another in love, be kind to one another, forgiving one another, not grumbling against one another, showing hospitality to one another. Such a list is the stuff of ivory tower sermons if the commands do not need to be lived out with real people in a real local assembly. We all will vote for bearing up with one another . . . until someone does something that really hurts us.

*Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.<sup>13</sup>*

This text means nothing if not taken as a series of directives to people who were living in local community with one another. It has been said that the churches in some parts of the world are stronger than those in the USA because it is a 200-mile walk to the next Bible-believing fellowship. There really is no option but to “work it out.” It is our prayer that being convinced of the importance of both the universal and local perspectives of the “church” will help us commit to sticking around and working it out, even when there are other churches to attend.

Working toward the ideal of a unified, loving church that is actively engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission is not for the faint of heart. And since we have options of churches to attend, it will only be under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and for the glory of Jesus that we actually stick it out with a local body of believers. It has always been easier to leave and get away from those that have hurt or disappointed us. And EVERY person who has ever attempted to truly share their heart with other people in a local church, or any relationship, will be hurt or disappointed. Maybe not right away, but over time we will all be let down by people.

Yet, in these moments of hurt, the opportunity for the beauty of God’s love to shine through is the brightest. Unfortunately, some will miss this chance for the power of God to be demonstrated by becoming superficial in the local church relationships or even just hopping from one fellowship to another. But, for those who reaffirm a commitment to the local church, this is the moment when we grow deeper in understanding the love of God and in showing it. When the Holy Spirit helps us to seek and experience restoration, it results in a peace that can only be labeled as the peace of God. It is this supernatural unity in the family of God that reflects the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is this peace and love that testifies to the world that Jesus is indeed the Savior sent from God.

*I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:11

<sup>14</sup> John 17:23

## The Local Church: A Body of which to be a Member

The local church is to reflect the manifold wisdom of God as seen in the Church universal.<sup>15</sup> To do this there is a need for some sort of structure within the local fellowship. When any organism becomes larger it takes on the shape of organization. The same is true for the church. Throughout history there have been three basic options of how to organize when a body grows larger. One form focuses the authority on a bishop or other leader outside the local church. Another places the responsibility with a group of leaders that appoints their own replacements. And a third option has been to have the entire assembly be the final authority, under the Lordship of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

Our local church has decided to organize using a mixture of the second and third options. Ultimately, we are congregational since the entire membership decides the leaders of the church. And yet we have tried to take seriously the passages of Scripture that speak of leaders leading. Therefore we have some marks of an elder-led form of church government. This mixture seeks to avoid the two most common weaknesses of each system. The congregational system gives one vote to each person, whether those people are babies in Christ or mature followers who have proven themselves faithful. Immaturity can win the day in this system, with some votes becoming popularity contests. The elder-rule system has the danger of having poor elders selecting new elders who are not godly individuals who meet the Biblical qualifications. It is also a temptation for the elders to become out of touch with the body as a whole. It is much easier to lead a small group astray than an entire church family. Seeking to avoid these danger zones, while taking the best of both systems, our congregation of members affirms (and re-affirms every three years) the elders who are to lead our church family.

In a congregational system of organization, membership is essential in determining who can vote on the issues before the Body. The Evangelical Free Church has set the standard of “believers only, but all believers.” If someone is a member of the universal Church, then one is eligible for membership in the local church. Thus, if a person says that they are not able to serve in the local assembly because they are not a member, it is based on two things they themselves control. First, are they a believer in Christ? And secondly, have they asked to be a member of the local covenant community?

If a person will not submit to Christ as Lord and Savior, that is their choice. They are welcome to attend our fellowship as a “seeker” but should not have a say in the decisions of the church family. If a person is a follower of Jesus but chooses not to submit to the by-laws (structure and organization) the local church has adopted, then they have themselves chosen not to be as active and publicly committed a part of the family as they should be. Submitting to becoming a member of a local church is one of the ways to practically live out Scriptures like the following:

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*<sup>17</sup>

*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*<sup>18</sup>

*Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints — be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.*<sup>19</sup>

Therefore the decision to become a member of a local assembly should be carefully weighed. This is true of any covenant we make, whether of the lifetime commitment of marriage or the contractual relationships at work – but this should not keep us from taking the step. We should decide, before the Lord, whether we can submit to the whole body

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<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 3:10

<sup>16</sup> These three options are often labeled Episcopalian (tied to the Greek word usually translated “bishop”), Presbyterian (tied to the Greek word usually translated “elder(s)”), and Congregational.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 13:17

<sup>18</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:15-16

and specifically to the chosen leaders of a particular local fellowship. Such submission does not mean that we set aside our responsibility to make moral choices ourselves. Even as a soldier cannot claim innocence because he was “under orders,” if those commands were unlawful, so as part of the body we have responsibility to helping her remain and grow ever more faithful to Jesus.

Becoming a member means that we see this local fellowship as the family of God. We are asking that the other members of the family take seriously their responsibility of walking with us – all the way through to the finish line of the race of faith God has put before us, and that we promise to do the same for them! It is in the context of the local church that we can make promises of loyalty to one another. This loyalty is expressed in mutual accountability and encouragement.

### The Local Church: A Safer Place for Members

Membership in a local church is also for protection – the protection of the reputation of Christ in the community and the protection of the individual believer from the snares of the devil. In most churches, anyone can attend. The majority of folks in the unbelieving community around the church will form their opinions of the church and of her Lord by observing those who attend. When these folks are habitually and flagrantly sinning, then dishonor comes to the church and to Christ. A local church has more influence over her members and thereby the name of Christ is afforded some protection. Even the recognition that some people are only “attenders” while some are members helps explain the differences in observable behavior.

But the protection is more for the members themselves. Consider the issue commonly called “church discipline.” Without membership in place, the local congregationally-organized church would be foolish to discipline a person, especially in a more public way. But discipline is a responsibility of the body and a command of Jesus.

*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”<sup>20</sup>*

Often people who will not become members will say that they really still would want the church to discipline them if they err away from Christ. What they forget is when discipline is really needed, one is not in submission to Christ and therefore not as open to being corrected. Since Jesus tells us that the first steps of discipline are private, reaching the public stage means that things are seriously in trouble. This means that the person has been ensnared by the devil. The leaders of the fellowship are supposed to graciously and gently, yet firmly, deal with the sin, as directed to Timothy in Paul’s second letter to him.

*And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.<sup>21</sup>*

The early reformers taught that the marks of a true church included discipline.<sup>22</sup> If membership marks admission to the local church family (much like baptism marks the admission to the universal church family), then it is church discipline that signifies that one can break covenant and be faithless. The redemptive ramping up of the threat level in the process

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 18:15-20

<sup>21</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24-26

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the ministry of the Word and of the Ordinances of Communion and Baptism. *We Love the Church – Page 6*  
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of church discipline is an attempt to give people the opportunity to either redeem the situation or to provide confirmation that indeed they are willfully sinning and breaking covenant with God and God's community, the church. If the problem is not just one of perception and miscommunication, true members of the covenant community will repent of improper methods and faulty motives. The resulting restoration is what we always pray for.<sup>23</sup>

But it is equally loving to discipline someone to the point where they are forced to face the reality that they are sinning with the high hand, willfully choosing to disobey the Bible's clear teachings. For a church to declare someone to be an unbeliever<sup>24</sup> is a loving act since it helps the person know that, as far as Christ's representatives here on earth can tell, they are not yet real believers. This helps them to know that the first thing they must do is come to Christ in true faith and repentance, that will always show itself alive through practical works.<sup>25</sup>

Any society or gathering of folks without discipline falls into a state of anarchy. The core premise behind such a state of confusion is the arrogance that "I, and only I, know what's best for me." In children we label such an attitude as "rebellious." God is not a God of confusion but of order. Therefore, the covenant community gathered in His name must as well have order, not anarchy. This order is not to be roughly administered, shoving it down people's throats by leaders that "lord it over" others.<sup>26</sup> And yet it must also not be so "soft" that the leaders allow others to merely disregard them.<sup>27</sup> This servant-leadership, that is strong and yet gentle, is an onerous task of frustration when the members of the covenant community do not live out the value of biblical submission.<sup>28</sup> This graciously administered order helps believers, who commit to a local church family through public membership, help protect the reputation of Christ and His church, as they help protect themselves from the deceptions of sin.

### The Local Church: A Place of Forgiveness

To build a long lasting covenant-faithful family of members is a challenging task. An essential ingredient is forgiveness. Without true forgiveness there will be an inevitable breakdown of the "unity of the Spirit" that we are eager to maintain. Unfortunately, even the wonderful compassion of forgiveness can be twisted into a self-centered indulgence. It is true that there are "two hands" of forgiveness and we only control one of them. We can offer forgiveness to someone, or we can ask for forgiveness through confession and repentance. But the ideal is always to be prayerfully seeking the connecting of those two hands into completed forgiveness, also called reconciliation.

Many Christians have broken fellowship with other believers over some hurt, disappointment, or even blatant sin. When asked if they have offered forgiveness to the erring party, they say they have. They have opened their hand emotionally and inwardly. They have sought to turn over the desire for vengeance to God. And yet, these folks have chosen not to verbally or actively extend the hand of forgiveness to the other party (all the work has been internal). They have not sought or even allowed for the possibility of reconciliation. The ideal in their minds has gone down from the restoring of a relationship to a getting rid of the bad feelings they have inside of themselves. God did not offer forgiveness to the world in order to make Himself feel better. He extended His hand of grace with the desire that all would repent, accepting His forgiveness extended through Christ, thereby becoming reconciled with the Holy Trinity. Likewise, our forgiveness toward one another must be active, seeking reconciliation, rather than an internal forgiveness only.

Believers who have committed themselves to one another in a local church through membership must seek to live out all the "one another's" of the Bible. It is in moments of disappointment and pain that the grace and power of God can become most evident and beautiful. While it is tempting just to leave and lick our wounds, the biblical response is to stay and work it out. As Christians we revel in the forgiveness of God, and we should. But we must also allow that forgiveness to change us into forgiving people.

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<sup>23</sup> See Galatians 6:1-2

<sup>24</sup> This is the implication of calling someone "a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" in Matthew 18:17.

<sup>25</sup> See James 2:14-26

<sup>26</sup> See Matthew 20:25-28.

<sup>27</sup> See Titus 2:15

<sup>28</sup> See Hebrews 13:17

*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.<sup>29</sup>*

### The Local Church: The Household of God We Love

*Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.<sup>30</sup>*

*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.<sup>31</sup>*

*If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.<sup>32</sup>*

These texts from the beloved disciple, John, challenge and stir us. It is too easy to say we love Jesus or that we love the Church. The real test of our love is how we treat the brothers and sisters whom we know, and specifically those in our local fellowship. "Hatred" and "closing our hearts" are such stern words that we easily dismiss them. But it is in the context of the local church that we find the canvas for the artwork of God's grace to display itself. And when we bypass the commitment of membership, the posture of submission, and the grace of forgiveness, we have hidden the work of the Master that declares to the world that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior.

We invite you to join us in loving the local church, the household of God. Share with us by publicly declaring to be one of us and one with us through membership. Share with us by guarding each other through mutual accountability. Share with us by working through the pain of disappointments. Share with us by not giving up on the local family of God, but by extending and receiving grace humbly through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Let us together seek to "be family." Let us live out the daily practicalities of the Bible's "one another's" as we "do family." And as we live together in meaningful life-on-life relationships, the world around us will take notice and know that we are the disciples of Jesus.

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>29</sup> Ephesians 4:29-32

<sup>30</sup> 1 John 2:9-11

<sup>31</sup> 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>32</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

<sup>33</sup> John 13:34-35