

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 11, 2022

The Local Church

Acts 18:18-23

The date was May 19, 1957. A newly formed community of Christians called the Bryans Road Baptist Mission held its first Sunday service in the Pomonkey Grange Hall, located near the present day entrance to Matthew Henson Middle School. One of the congregation's founding members, Ralph Cary, wrote the following about those earliest services:

The Grange Hall was our first place of worship. Lacking modern conveniences, we endured rudimentary plumbing, a roof that leaked so bad when it rained we used buckets to catch the water, and floor cracks large enough to let the cold air in. Heat was furnished with potbelly stoves. Members of the mission, under the leadership of Don (Brown), would go on his property and cut firewood and haul it to the Grange Hall.¹

Cary's summary of the worship climate inside the Grange Hall makes our current HVAC problems seem mild. Our Buildings and Grounds Committee is still exploring heating options in light of our broken boiler, especially as we approach fall and winter. But a potbelly stove isn't on the list of proposals.

Today's recognition of our congregation's 64th anniversary (The Bryans Road Mission wasn't formally constituted as Grace Baptist Church until 1958) is an occasion to reflect on God's faithfulness, including the provision of heat. This morning, the AC is running fine, and we're able to worship in the comfort of a sanctuary first constructed in 1960. Over time, we've made some repairs, upgrades, and improvements. But the purpose of this space remains the same. This is where we gather to worship God.

Earlier in our service, you heard the reading from Hebrews in which the writer exhorts the members of the congregation to hold firmly to their hope and to spur one another on toward deeds of mercy. He concludes by reminding them that attendance at worship has been down lately. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (v. 25). So the preacher reminds them that God's victory over sin and death is drawing near, which means that when they gather for worship they're participating here and now in the eternal praises of God. All their singing and praying is a foretaste of what's to come in the Lord's everlasting kingdom.

In fact, in one sense, they're already gathered up into the presence of the Lord and the great company of his people. I like the way that one commentator puts it when he says, "... whenever Christians cluster together for worship we walk through the doorway of an ordinary building, "earthly tent," and find ourselves in the company of heaven singing praises with the heavenly hosts."² That building may be the Grange Hall of 65 years ago or the sanctuary here where we sit this morning. In either case, we're all part of an eternal gathering of God's people in Christ.

That's what some people mean when they speak of the universal church. The New Testament word translated into English as "church" means "assembly." The universal

church is a heavenly, end-of-time assembly of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. When you become a Christian you become a member of the universal church, the people of God's new creation in Christ.

But the universal church, a heavenly assembly, also shows up on earth in the form of the local church. The local church is a gathering of believers that takes shape in a particular place, like the Grange Hall or here now at 7345 Indian Head Highway. In and through the local church, the reign of God comes to visible and tangible expression, in real time and space with real people, people with names like Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila. When we see them in today's text from Acts, they're not just contemplating an abstraction called the universal church. They're participating in God's mission of creating and forming concrete communities of Christians in specific locations like Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, and Antioch.

At the conclusion of our text, Luke says, "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (v. 23). Place to place. That's the nature of the gospel. It can't be confined to one place. The gospel has countless addresses. Some of these addresses are small sanctuaries like ours. Some of them are great cathedrals. Some of them are megachurch campuses. Some of them are homes. Some of them are storefronts. Some of them are school gymnasiums. Some of them are parks. Some of them are basements. Some of them are online. The good news of Jesus Christ goes to work and comes to expression in a whole range of settings, each with its unique way of proclaiming and embodying the kingdom.

Praise God, the local church is here to stay. It's still the primary, indispensable way of living in Christian community and being formed into the likeness of our Lord, individually and together. Several years ago, Rasmussen Reports conducted a survey asking participants to describe how connected they felt to nine governmental and nongovernmental institutions. These included a "local church or religious organization," "local charity," "local government," "federal government," "political party," or "local advocacy group." The results revealed that "nothing else comes close [to church]. Government and politics are near the bottom of the list."³ This doesn't mean that churches don't have their faults, problems, and challenges. There are a multitude of those. But it does mean that a large portion of those who profess faith in Christ demonstrate that faith in part by their connection with and commitment to a local congregation.

Author Elyse Fitzpatrick tells about a vacation that she and her husband took to Europe. She writes:

In about three and a half weeks we visited thirteen different nations. When we'd enter a country, we'd get our passports stamped, exchange currencies, learn a few key phrases, and then off we'd go to visit the natives. We'd wander through outdoor markets, peruse museums, and sample the cuisine. We'd exchange a few niceties with the locals, sit on the steps of cathedrals, watch the life of the town go by, take a picture or two, and purchase a little something to remind us of our time there, and then we were off. We had a wonderful vacation. Our hearts weren't changed in any significant ways by our little visits, but then they weren't meant to be. We were tourists.

It seems to me that what I've just described is very close to many people's understanding of the congregational life of the local church. On any given [weekend], many tourists can be found in church. They pop in for forty-five minutes or an hour, sing a chorus or two, and exchange niceties with the locals They sample some of the local cuisine, they might purchase a book or CD to remind them of their visit, and then they race to their cars to get to

their favorite restaurant before the rush or home before the game. For many people, church is simply ... about being a tourist, and our land is filled with tourist-friendly churches.⁴

What we see Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila doing in today's text isn't a case of spiritual tourism. They're not going from region to region, city to city, town to town, just sampling the faith of local congregations, collecting memories that will go into their mental scrapbook. No, they and other early Christian missionary leaders are heavily invested in these local communities of disciples. Our text opens by noting that Paul "stayed on in Corinth for some time" (v. 18). He didn't just pop in and pop out. The church in Corinth, like others he had started, required ongoing instruction and guidance. The church in Ephesus asked him to spend more time with them, and though he declined, he promised to come back, God willing. Then he spent time in Antioch, another strategic location in the spread of the gospel. Take all this into account, and it's clear that Luke isn't narrating the journeys of church tourists, but rather devoted followers of Jesus who are committed to the life and ministry of local congregations.

Here in the life of Grace Baptist Church, we try to stay attentive to and engaged with the larger body of Christ in the world. We sometimes connect with other local congregations for worship and for projects of service to our community. We have denominational partnerships that bind us to other disciples in our region and nation. As we've already highlighted during today's service, the week ahead is when we focus on giving to and praying for the work of our Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. Every Sunday, we watch a Missions Moment video that highlights our ties to and involvement in Christian missions around the world. We're always part of the global church, participating in God's global mission of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration.

But we never cease to be a local church, an assembly in a particular time, a particular space, a particular community. We live in a time when all sorts of avenues and resources are now available to us to help us be modern day followers of Jesus. Live streamed worship, online Bible study groups, notable television preachers, prayer request chat rooms, Christian radio, telecounseling, podcasts, books, and so on. In some ways, Christian discipleship has become a media-based buffet from which people can choose in order to assemble their own unique spiritual diet. But as beneficial and fruitful as many of these resources can be, they're never a complete substitute for the embodied kingdom, the local, flesh and blood congregation of believers who gather for worship, work, and witness as God's people.

Editor Richard Clark writes, "The local church is not an option for believers to entertain; it's a home for which we long and to which we unavoidably belong." He adds, "In every local church community there is comedy and tragedy, companionship and loneliness, conflict and love. On this side of Christ's return, it will always be so. But God still uses congregations to reach the world, sanctify one another, and work out his divine plan of redemption."⁵

On this day in God's ongoing plan of redemption, we still take our cues from the faithful ones who persevered through some damp and chilly gatherings in the Grange Hall. As they assembled, so we assemble. They gathered to lay foundations that we continue to build on, more than sixty-four years later. So our church anniversary is an occasion for us to give thanks for them and for all those who have been part of the mission of Grace Baptist Church across the years. It's also an opportunity for me as your pastor to say thanks to you for your continued devotion to the life and ministry of our congregation. Your love for, your commitment to, and your investment in this local assembly of disciples is a gift of God, a blessing to me, and a sign of the Lord's faithfulness.

¹ "A Brief History of the Grace Baptist Church of Bryans Road" (Published on the occasion of the church's 40th anniversary in 1998) 3.

² Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

³ Melissa Steffan, "Americans Far More Connected to Local Church than Any Other Institution." Christianity Today. March 5, 2013. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/march/americans-far-more-connected-to-local-church-than-any.html> (September 7, 2022).

⁴ Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Because He Loves Me* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) 173-174.

⁵ Richard Clark, "The Local Church Isn't Going Anywhere." Christianity Today. April 18, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april-web-only/local-church-isnt-going-anywhere.html> (September 8, 2022).