

*Ezekiel 34:11-16 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

<sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup>I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

*Acts 2:41-47 (NRSV)*

<sup>41</sup>So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

*A simple faith. A simple life. Simple practices.*

Back to the day of Pentecost and Peter's powerful speech. In response to Peter's call for repentance, thousands were baptized. How exciting it must have been. Surely, some were swept up in the moment and soon went back to their old lives and old ways. But for those who stayed, a new way of life had to be lived. They sought to live in the kingdom, to live as Jesus had taught them and as the apostles would. Looking in from the outside, it must all seemed so plain, so simple. They learned, they prayed, they ate together and prayed together. They looked after each other's needs and praised God as they did. Nothing flashy, nothing notable, at least in the world's eyes. They were simply learning to be the body of Christ, his hands and feet, the Church.

But what is a church? Why go -- or tune in -- during this Time of Virus.? Those are pretty basic questions and you'd surely get a wide variety of answers if you went out on the street and asked a bunch of people those two simple questions. Many people have had wonderful experiences with churches, but many have had just the opposite. Philip Yancey, the well-known Christian writer, talks straightforwardly about his own church upbringing and that he became a Christian despite it. On the jacket of his book, *Soul Survivor*, he writes, "I have spent most of my life in recovery from the Church." That's quite a statement from one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation. Given that Yancey speaks for far too many, including some who lost their faith entirely, let's take a look at those two basic questions.

### *What is a church?*

First, a church is not a building, we've learned well in these past weeks.. We may use the word that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on on-line to worship, to pray, to care for one another, to learn, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called "the Church."

There are many images of "the Church" in the Bible. It is we who are God's sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a "chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

### *Why Go?*

I sometimes get a question something like this: "I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can't I love Jesus just as well on my own?" I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I'm not much of a joiner myself. And I'm pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that N. T. Wright has written, "it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself," for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God's creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." To put it another way, we can't expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to have a Good Shepherd.

So, why go to church? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek. Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God's new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no church will meet all our expectations, nor will any church meet all of God's expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life, amid the simple practices that comprise the life of a disciple.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew more than twenty years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we've been here ever since, in good times and bad. One son was baptized here, another married, and we've gotten to share the baptism of our two grandchildren (yes, we are counting on more) with this wonderful congregation of Christians.

But even more important, it has been here that Patti and I have each found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used

all these wonderful people, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters.

I will leave you with this from Bishop Wright. It is an informed and heartfelt description of the body of Christ, the Church, our family. This is excerpted from his book, *Simply Christian*.

“If God is our father, the church is our mother.” The words are those of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin. Several biblical passages speak in this way (notably, Galatians 4:26-27, echoing Isaiah 54:1).

They underline the fact that it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself. The church is first and foremost a *community*, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God, the God we know in and through Jesus. Though we often use the word “church” to denote a building, the point is that it’s the building *where this community meets*. True, buildings can and do carry memories, and when people have been praying and worshipping and mourning and celebrating in a particular building for many years, the building itself may come to speak powerfully of God’s welcoming presence. But it is the *people* who matter.

The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. You can and must worship, and work for God’s kingdom, in private and in ways unique to yourself, but if God’s kingdom is to go forward, rather than around and around in circles, we must work together as well as apart.

The church also exists for a third purpose, which serves the other two: to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as *fellowship*. This doesn’t just mean serving one another cups of tea and coffee. It’s all about living within that sense of a joint enterprise, a family business, in which everyone has a proper share and a proper place.

It is within this context that the different “ministries” within the church have grown up. From the very earliest evidence we have, in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, the church has recognized different callings within its common life. God has given different gifts to different people so that the whole community may flourish and take forward the work with which it has been entrusted.

Worship, fellowship, and the work of reflecting God’s kingdom into the world flow into and out of one another. You can’t reflect God’s image without returning to worship to keep the reflection fresh and authentic. In the same way, worship sustains and nourishes fellowship; without it, fellowship quickly deteriorates into groups of the like-minded, which in turn quickly become exclusive cliques—the very opposite of what Jesus’s people should be aiming at.

It is within the church, even when the church isn’t getting everything quite right, that the Christian faith of which we have spoken is nourished and grows to maturity. As with any family, the members discover who they are in relationship with one another. Churches vary enormously in size, from scattered handfuls of people in isolated villages to enormous congregations of many thousands in some parts of the world. But ideally every Christian should belong to a group that is small enough for individuals to get to know and care for each other, and particularly to pray in meaningful depth for one another, and also to a fellowship large enough to contain a wide variety in its membership, styles of worship, and kingdom-activity. The smaller the local community, the more important it is to be

powerfully linked to a larger unit. The larger the regular gathering (I think of those churches where several hundred, or even several thousand, meet together every week), the more important it is for each member to belong also to a smaller group. Ideally, groups of a dozen or so will meet to pray, study scripture, and build one another up in the faith.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### **Monday Evening Class**

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 11:45am Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at noon on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

**Videos are all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.