

# PERSPECTIVE

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## BEING & BELONGING:

Rethinking Church Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century







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## SERMON SCHEDULE

October 6  
**Are You Being Childish?**  
II Timothy 2:14–26

October 20  
**Do You Know What a  
Christian Looks Like?**  
II Timothy 3:1–9

October 13  
**No Matter What**  
Ezekiel 1–3  
Guest Preacher: Greg Gilbert

October 27  
**Are You Prepared to Suffer?**  
II Timothy 3:10–16

## FIGHTER VERSE

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather  
fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Matthew 10:28

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*Perspective* by email.

# Knowing

M V B C

These individuals were voted into membership at the Church in Conference on September 29, 2013. Make a point to get to know and love them.

## OUR NEWEST MEMBERS:



**Christina Barry**  
Smyrna, GA



**Blossom Harvey**  
Atlanta, GA



**Erik & Beverly Britt**  
Woodstock, GA



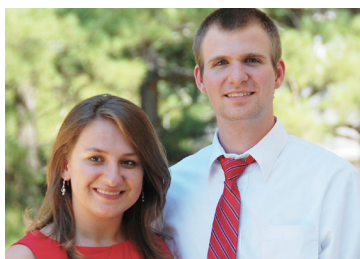
**Nathan Kitchens**  
Atlanta, GA



**Bill & Marion Clinton**  
Atlanta, GA



**David & Charity Roe**  
*Benjamin, John, Emma, Zachary*  
Atlanta, GA



**Michael & Victoria Guobaitis\***  
Norcross, GA



**Dane & Tina Ulett**  
*Ryenne, Tristen*  
Atlanta, GA



**Scott & Joy Hardy**  
*Kate, Amy, Brook, Taylor Paige*  
Atlanta, GA

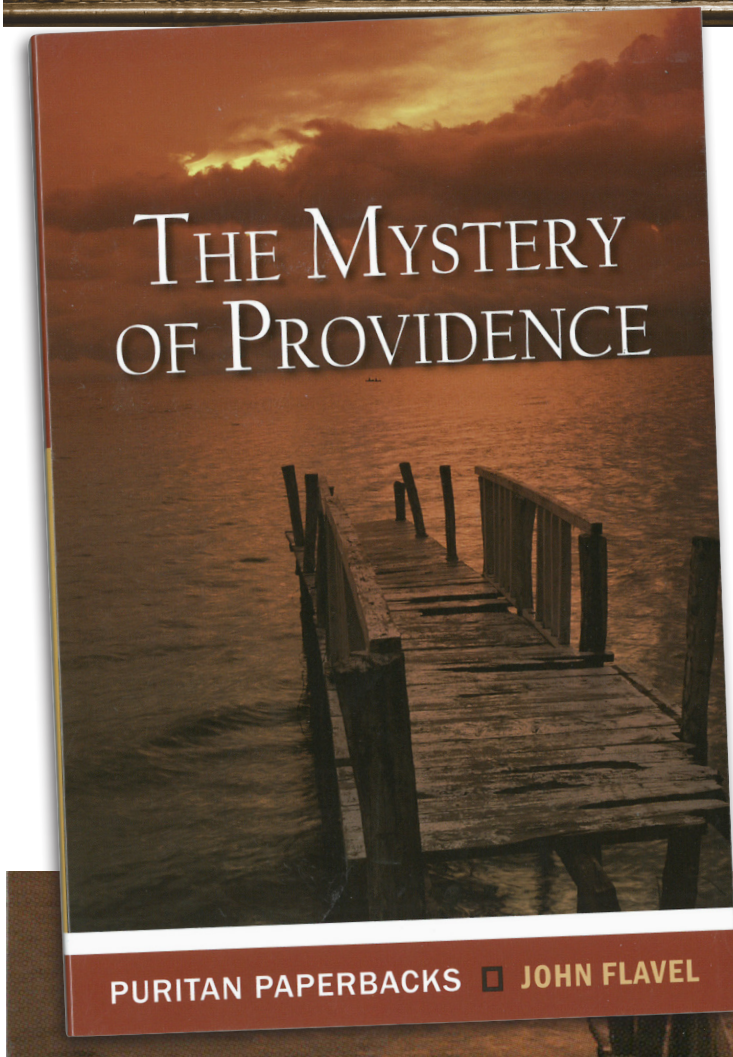
\* Associate Members

BY THIS ALL WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY  
DISCIPLES, THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

—JOHN 13:35



# The Bookshelf



## The Mystery of Providence

by John Flavel

Reviewed by Patrick Hearn

Our culture today is saturated with the message of self-promotion. It's not uncommon to hear phrases like, "Believe in yourself and anything is possible," "The answer is found within," or "Have faith in your abilities, and you will succeed." This message teaches that we can only rely on ourselves and that our circumstances are solely a result of our actions.

The idea that there might be a God, who is sovereign, is rarely mentioned and quickly dismissed. To contend that someone else is in control of our lives is laughable. Verses like Proverbs 3:5–6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths," are treated like foreign concepts.

Which do you think is true? Are all of the answers found within? Are you alone the solution to all your problems? Or is there something bigger than your self at work? Is God sovereign?

One of the joys of being a Christian is that God has joined us into a body of believers. This means that we do not have to search out the answers to questions like these on our own. In fact, we not only get to work through these questions with the saints who are living today, but we can also learn from those who have come before.

The questions surrounding God's sovereignty are by no means new. In 1678 the Puritan, John Flavel, wrote *The Mystery of Providence* on this very

topic. In this work he seeks to show the evidences of God's sovereignty, how the Christian can reflect on and praise God for his providence, and the practical implications that God's sovereignty has on the life of the believer.

Flavel opens his work by providing evidence that God is indeed sovereign. He provided examples from Scripture, examples from history, and by asking the reader to examine his own life.

He begins by taking a look at God's oversight of the life of believers. That is evident by the fact that the church still exists today. That could only be by God's work to preserve it. He shows that, at times, God will bend the rules of nature to complete his will. The crossing of the Red Sea is a clear example. He also supports his case by discussing the idea that the weak things of the world are lifted up and that the fool shaming the wise can only be a result of God's providence.

Flavel also makes his case on a more personal level. He demonstrated how God watches over the believer in his day-to-day living. He pointed out how the believer is often kept from tragedy or dangerous circumstances. Also, the truth that God answers the believer's prayers clearly shows his sovereignty.

Flavel makes a very compelling argument just within the first chapter by providing example after example of God's sovereignty in providentially



guiding the affairs of the believer. At times, the amount of examples he gives can seem overwhelming. However, Flavel makes a clear case, leaving the reader with little argument to combat him. In fact, providing so many examples helps the reader consider exactly how far God's sovereignty reaches.

Through the remainder of the first section of the book, Flavel zooms in from a general believer's life to the reader's life. He begins by prompting the reader to ask the question of why he was born when he was born. Flavel contends that the providence of God is even responsible for the time period in which one lives. The place, the time, and the family that one is born into are not an accident. This means that what is available and accessible to each individual person is determined by God. In other words, what one has or what one lacks is due to what the Lord sees fit to give or take in his sovereignty according to his will.

Flavel spends entire chapters discussing specific aspects of this truth. For instance, God is sovereign over a person's employment. This means that the job a person has, the people he comes in contact with each day, and the way he is able to put food on the table is by God's providence. Flavel goes on to state that the person that one marries is a result of God's plan. Also, God often works in the believer's life to keep him away from temptation that might otherwise lead him or her to sin.

Flavel takes it a step further pointing to God's role in salvation. He demonstrates how a person's salvation is not by accident or by chance. All of the circumstances and people involved were carefully orchestrated by the hand of God. This prompts the reader to look at God's role in his own salvation. This is the element of God's sovereignty in which we should be most thankful.

Along with salvation, God's providence is evident in the working out of the believer's sanctification. This includes discipleship, but also includes being disciplined for sins. Flavel shows that God works through times of prosperity and times of suffering to make the believer more Christ-like.

Flavel's approach in this first section is a bit unique in that he did not spend a large amount of time on the theology of God's providence—although it is there—but he spends most of his time citing evidence. This evidence includes examples from Scripture such as the lives of David, Job, and Paul. It also includes evidence from history and personal examples from his life. By doing this, Flavel builds a solid case that God is sovereign and his providence is at work, even down to the fine details.

Flavel then moves his focus from presenting evidence of God's providence to explaining why and how the believer should spend time reflecting on it. We should practice meditating on God's providence because it is our Christian duty. In order to express thankfulness to God,

it requires reflection on His works. In a sense, if someone does not take time to think about God's role in their life then they might be denying that role. At the very least it prevents him or her from having the gratitude that he or she would otherwise have. Flavel then leads us into how to reflect on God's providence, which is essentially taking time to recount ways that God has worked in one's life. This is a detailed section that will have the reader searching every corner of his life, not just the large easy-to-spot things, to see where God has been working.

Flavel closes his book by showing the advantages of this reflection and how it can enhance the life of the believer. Meditating on God's sovereignty enhances one's walk with God. It increases one's trust in the Lord, knowing that he is control and works all things for the good of those who love him. It increases patience in the believer allowing him or her to realize that God works in his time and in his way even though it may not seem to make sense at the time. Reflecting on the Lord's providence lifts a burden off the believer because he or she realizes that God is working and not everything rests on his or her shoulders. It helps to secure the believer's faith during times of doubt even when the evidence of God's presence is minimal. And it helps the believer to live boldly through both prosperity and suffering.

Even though this book was written over 300 years ago, it still speaks to the believer today. Flavel's illustrations are thorough and timeless so that they will impact the reader of any era. The study of God's providence is of benefit to any believer. The reader of this book will leave with a greater awareness of God's working in his life. He will be confronted with his dependence on the Lord. He will be prompted to have a deeper appreciation for the blessings that he has been given. And he will be better equipped to face the trials that arise from daily living in a sinful world.

This book would also be valuable for use in a small group or in a discipleship setting. As the group spends time going through the book they could discuss how they see God working in their own lives. This gives the other members of the group not only the opportunity to reflect on God's work in their lives, but it also allows them to see the evidence of the Lord's sovereignty in the lives of others. This could result in them realizing that God works in ways that they had not thought of before. It would also be of great benefit to any in the group who were currently having doubts during a time of suffering as well as those who have grown complacent in a time of prosperity.

In a day when self-promotion and self-reliance are the themes of our society, it is helpful to return to a book that pulls the focus off of us and puts it where it should be: on the Creator God. He is our provider, our sustainer, and our salvation. ■



## *uestions* *from the Brink of Death*

Through the month of October, Pastor Aaron will continue a nine-part series through the book of II Timothy.

Each sermon will be available the Monday after is delivered through the Mount Vernon Podcast on iTunes and on the church's website.

Sermons are also available on CD for \$5 a copy.





# BEING & BELONGING:

Rethinking Church Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



It was 1997, the year Princess Diana died in a car crash, Microsoft emerged as the world's most valuable company, and Tiger Woods became the youngest man to win the Masters. I was on staff at a small church in Washington, DC, trying to explain to a young woman that if she wanted to sing in the choir she needed to join the church. She was confused, sad, and angry. She simply wanted to serve God's people, and she perceived that I was putting up a bureaucratic, unloving, and even unbiblical roadblock. My friend loved God, and she loved God's people, but being told to join the church offended her.

## THE MEMBERSHIP MALAISE

I've been in ministry for seventeen years, and sadly, I've had more than one encounter like this. There are many Christians today who don't see the value of being a member of a church. Why is this the case? In other words, why is church membership seen to some as unnecessary at best or unhelpful at worst?

I think there are several reasons. First, some churches have sought to woo Christians into joining a church the way an advertiser woos consumers into buying a product. This has left many faithful Christians feeling used by church leaders. They've come to view churches as organizations more concerned about the bottom line (noses & nickels) than the glory of God.

Second, some Christians have become so individualistic that they can't accept that the Christian calling includes submitting to the will of others. These believers pay lip service to the idea of accountability until they are asked to formally commit to a body of people. Let's face it; joining a church can be intimidating! You are granting a whole group of people—people you might not even know—the permission to speak into your life spiritually. This isn't easy for the average American. Paul Simon sang, "I am a rock, I am an island," and many Christians seem to think this is true for them.

Third, some church leaders who understand the biblical basis for membership have nonetheless failed to teach on the topic with the love and sensitivity it demands. And not only this, but they've fallen short of shepherding the flock of God. They preach and pray publicly, but how often are they sitting down with their members, probing their spiritual health, and demonstrating the kind of love that ought to mark a shepherd for his sheep? If pastors don't care for the flock but talk a lot about church membership, they may leave people scratching their heads. These folks may wonder if their pastor cares more about the membership list than the saints themselves. Scottish pastor William Still put much of the blame for our present membership malaise at the feet of unfaithful shepherds:

Many who are called pastors, having lost the end in view, or never having seen it, become peddlers of various sorts of wares, gulling the people and leading them into their own power. And when they fail to gather a clientele for their own brand or merchandise they uptail and away, for they are not really interested in the flock of God; they were using them only as a means of their own aggrandizement, to boost their ego and indulge their desire for power.<sup>1</sup>

For all these reasons, biblical church membership has fallen on rough times. According to a 2012 Pew Research study, the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans is rising rapidly, from fifteen percent of all U.S. adults in 2007 to twenty percent in 2012. Part of the problem is skepticism toward the church. As the study showed, "Overwhelmingly [the unaffiliated] think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics."

It doesn't have to be this way. We have an opportunity to present a

clear, bold vision about what it looks like to be in Christ and to belong to His body, the church. Membership really isn't about having one's name on a roll—though it includes that—it's about *being* and *belonging*. It's about being—being a new creation, with a new identity in Christ. And it's about belonging—belonging to God and to His people.

In this article I want us to think about the importance of being a faithful member of a local church through this lens of being and belonging. If you are already a faithful church member, praise God! I pray that this essay encourages you to thank God for His amazing work in your life. He, after all, is the one who has led you to rightly understand the value of the local church. If you are a church member but have drifted away for whatever reason, I pray that these words would encourage you to re-engage. No church is perfect, but God has given you a church for your sanctification. Finally, maybe you are not a church member at all, but you are a Christian, and a concerned friend asked you to read this article. If that's you, I hope you'll come with an open mind. Please know that I'm not trying to get you to be involved in my church, and I'm not even necessarily trying to get you to go to a traditional "brick and mortar" facility. I'm simply hoping that you'll see the value of formally committing to a local church, even if that means submitting your preferences and desires to the will of others.

## BEING A NEW CREATION

Let's think for a moment about what happens when God saves a sinner. The Bible says that he or she is a new creation: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). This is really a remarkable statement. Paul is encouraging Christians tempted to despair in the midst of suffering. He reassures them that they can persevere because "the surpassing power belongs to God," and not to them (2 Cor. 4:7). Even though their physical bodies suffer, their "inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). Though they may die as martyrs, they have an eternal home "in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1). They can take heart because they "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). But the climax of this avalanche of encouragement is found in verse 17. Believers cannot finally be destroyed because they are now a new creation.

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**No church is perfect, but  
God has given you a church  
for your sanctification.**

This is the same point Jesus made to the curious Nicodemus who wondered how one finds eternal life. Jesus told him he needed more than a new start, he needed new life: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Stop and think about this for a moment. Becoming a Christian is more than gaining a new set of preferences or replacing some bad habits. To be a Christian is to be fundamentally transformed by God Himself. God grants us a new birth. We are quite literally changed from the inside out. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

To understand just what Paul means here, and what it means for our involvement in the church, we need to do some heavy, theological lifting. So grab a cup of coffee and let's take a brief tour of the Bible.

Let's go to the very beginning, when God first created the heavens and the earth. He made birds, and fish, and the beasts of the land. And then God made man, and He placed him in a beautiful garden, and He

<sup>1</sup> William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Christian Focus, 2010), 18.

charged him to keep it and care for it. And then God said something very important: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). God gave Eve to Adam, and He gave Adam to Eve. And for a short while the two lived in God’s presence, in the garden, without sin and suffering in the world.

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## The church isn’t a building; it’s a group of people brought together by the Holy Spirit to be living representatives of our holy God.

This is obviously the introduction of marriage. God knew what He was doing. He designed the marital relationship between a man and a woman as so central, so vital, and so intimate that it could profoundly and yet mysteriously point forward to an even more important relationship, that between Christ and the church (see Eph. 5).

But there is more to it than even that. By saying that it was not good for Adam to be alone, God indicated that He chooses not to reign over an individual, but over a community. God would be the Lord of a people. At the very headwaters of the Bible, we find that God introduces the idea of society. God’s purpose in creation is not merely for one person to worship him, but for an entire people to sing his praise.

Of course, sin soon entered the world and all of humanity fell out of God’s favor and under His wrath. Now, for the rest of human history, there would be two kinds of people: those who place their faith in God and those who do not. The faithful rely upon God and serve Him. The faithless reject God and serve themselves. But the story of the Bible is of a God, at work, calling sinners to Himself, giving them saving faith, and restoring what Adam broke — a community existing for the praise of His glorious name.

Just look for yourself. In the days of Enosh, Adam’s grandson, “people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen. 4:26). In the days of Noah, after the tragic flood killed most of humanity, God once again worked with a people, “And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gen. 9:1). God raised up Abraham, not merely so that Abraham could worship God (though he did), but so that Abraham could be the start of a great nation (Gen. 12:1). We see this promise unfold in the life of Abraham’s descendant, Joseph. He and his brothers became what we know as the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 46). And these twelve tribes became the nation that God promised Abraham so many years before.

God cared about His people, Israel. He charged them to represent Him on earth, to reflect His glory. He told them to be holy, because He is holy (Lev. 20:22–26). But Abraham’s descendants failed to live up to this command. Most of them rejected God. They adopted the habits of the nations around them instead of the holiness that God had commanded them. In fact, as the centuries wore on, some not only forgot God’s ways, they forgot God himself (Judges 8:34; Psa. 106:21; Hos. 8:14). Note the irony: the very people made by God for His glory forgot their Maker and lived for their own glory.

But God never forgot His people. Even after they rebelled against Him, God promised to restore them. He promised, in fact, to *re-create* them. God had made them to be a holy society. They failed. But God would have the last word. He would re-create them by giving them a new heart — a

heart that truly loves Him (Eze. 36:26). And just as God dwelt with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, so God would dwell once again with His people: “My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Eze. 37:27). It was not good for Adam to be alone; God wanted a community to worship Him. And it is still not good for believers to be alone; we are to be a part of a community of saints who worship Him anew. God promised this would happen.

Jesus came to make this promise a reality. He preached about the kingdom of God, and called disciples to enter into this kingdom through repentance and faith (Mark 1:15). Jesus described the qualities that would mark citizens of this kingdom (Matt. 5:2–11). And Jesus preached that all those who would come into this kingdom must enter through Him (John 10:9; 14:6). Finally, Jesus did the work necessary to make our entrance into this kingdom possible. He died in the place of all who would repent and believe. On the cross He bore the punishment we deserved. And by the power of His resurrection, Jesus brought everlasting life (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24).

And when the mystery of the gospel was unveiled by the Holy Spirit, and the apostles were released to preach, God’s promises were fully, if not finally fulfilled. The Lord was about, creating a people for Himself. He was at work, gathering a community of believers together: men, women, and children drawn not merely from ethnic Israel, but from all the nations of the earth (just as God promised Abraham centuries prior). In Acts 2 we find the Spirit blowing and the apostles preaching. Peter proclaimed the gospel, and a church was born:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousands souls (Acts 2:37–41).

Do you see what God’s plan is throughout all of Scripture? It’s a people who call upon the name of the Lord, a people who live for the praise of His glory, a people saved by the blood of the Lamb. And where do these people come from? They come from God! As Jesus told Nicodemus: they are a people born again. And as Paul told the believers in Corinth: they are a new creation. And what do we call these new creation people? We call them the church.

The past few decades, something awful has happened in the evangelical world. We have casually used the word, “church,” to refer to a *building* where people gather instead of the *people* gathered. What a mistake! The church isn’t a building; it’s a group of people brought together by the Holy Spirit to be living representatives of our holy God. It’s what you see when you pick up your New Testament. Most of the letters are written to local churches, just like ours.

Therefore, to *be* a new creation is to be part of a local church. This is simply God’s design. It was not good for Adam to be alone in the garden, and it is not good for a believer to be alone on his spiritual journey today. God made us to run the Christian race together. It just doesn’t make any biblical sense to describe yourself as *being* a new creation without also speaking about the community God has called us to, the church. Our identity as a new creation in Christ demands our identification with a local church.



I love how Jonathan Leeman put it in his little book on church membership. He made it clear that for the Christian, membership isn't really an option. It's a sacred responsibility, even an obligation: "From the non-Christian's standpoint, a local church is a voluntary association. No one has to join. From the standpoint of the Christian life, however, it's not. Once you choose Christ, you must choose his people, too. It's a package deal. Choose the Father and the Son and you have to choose the whole family—which you do through a local church."<sup>2</sup>

So before I list practical, biblical reasons why one should be a member of a local church, I simply want to establish that a plain reading of the Bible as a whole should lead you to the conclusion that you can't, in any biblical sense, call yourself a new creation without identifying yourself with the very people God purposed to create, the church. Being in Christ means belonging to a local church.

## **BELONGING TO A LOCAL CHURCH**

When I was a freshman in college, I attended a large evangelical church in Eugene, Oregon. I spent a fair amount of time with the college pastor. I appreciated his teaching, and I could tell that he wanted to help me grow spiritually. We had been meeting for a few weeks when he asked me if I wanted to join the church. I quickly declined. You see I knew that I'd only be in Eugene for four years, so I didn't see any reason to join the church. Somehow I came to the notion that joining a church is a lot like buying a burial plot—you want to be really sure you are in the right place before you commit.

Looking back, I regret that decision. Refusing to join the church allowed me to play the role of Christian butterfly—fluttering in and out of church services whenever it suited my schedule. And because I never really belonged, I never developed any deep friendships in that local church—friendships that could have been used in my life to keep me from sin and to prod me to grow in all sorts of ways. I now know how much I needed that church. So I know what it's like to regret not joining a church.

Over the years I've met very solid believers who occupy themselves with great Bible studies, spectacular missions trips, and deep friendships with Christian friends throughout the world. They love the fact that they can give to ministry without having to fund air conditioning and salaries—the kinds of expenses associated with congregations meeting in brick and mortar facilities. But for every "solid" believer living life without being affiliated to a local church, I think there are fifty Christians like I was—fluttering about without the accountability they need to grow in their faith. They need to make the decision to belong to a local church. And here's why:

### **First, join a church because you need accountability**

The moment you think you aren't capable of falling into serious sin you have come to a dangerous, dangerous place. Sin can be subtle. Satan is prowling around like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). In other words, he doesn't lightly nibble at our toes until we scream and run away. No, his tactics are much more effective. He looks and he waits for the perfect opportunity to slyly pounce, and when he does his bite is deadly. Believers need to be on guard, and one means of standing guard is by belonging to a local church.

By joining a church you are saying, "I know that I'm weak, and that I need brothers and sisters in my life to challenge me. Please tell me if you notice me doing something I shouldn't be doing, saying something I shouldn't be saying, thinking something I shouldn't be thinking. I don't want to be caught flat-footed if Satan is snooping around trying to knock me down."

The author of Hebrews drove home our need for one another when he wrote, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12–13).

Let me tell you what this looks like. The other night I was spending some time with a brother from church. I started complaining about my week. I had to deal with a number of inconveniences that cost a fair bit of time and money. He listened to me patiently, and then gently but firmly said something like, "Brother, you should be thankful. At least you have the means to take care of these problems." He wasn't angry, condescending, or even stern. He was just open and honest. He knew that I was feeding my sinful desire to be dissatisfied. He wanted me to remember God's goodness in my life so that I could give thanks in all circumstances. Now, did this man have to be a member of my church to give me that kind of correction? Of course not. But the fact that we are both members of the same church has brought our lives together. Not only that, he understands what membership means. He knows that he is obligated before the Lord to hold me accountable, and he did.

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**The moment you think you  
aren't capable of falling  
into serious sin you have  
come to a dangerous,  
dangerous place.**

### **Second, join a local church to magnify the gospel**

Not too long ago, some members at Mount Vernon invited some out-of-town family to a service. They knew that the day would be difficult because their family members were not Christians. They were mainly attending church out of respect for their hosts. But they came, and they were confronted by gospel. Truth be told, they were offended by what they heard. They didn't like the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

After the service they went home for lunch. But the mvbc members decided to invite some Christian friends from church to lunch, too. They wanted their out-of-town family to see older and younger members of the body of Christ. Their hope was simple: perhaps if they could meet other believers, they'd realize just how amazing Jesus is, and how it's worth it to give up everything and follow Him.

A few days later, I received an update about the lunch. Though the family did not leave Atlanta born-again, an impression had been made. Not only did they *hear* the gospel, they *saw* the church at work, and it was beautiful. One of the out-of-town guests gushed about what he experienced: "You have the best, most loving community. I wish we had a community of people where we live." During the sermon that Sunday morning, this young man heard the gospel. But over lunch that Sunday afternoon he got to see the gospel lived out as men and women, young and old, gathered to break bread with only the gospel in common. He was affected, if not converted, by what he heard and saw.

The world is full of lonely people. They are made in the image of God and that means they are hard-wired to want community. And the church is the community they need.

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<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership* (Crossway, 2012), 31.

Jesus taught us this. One day, before He went to the cross, He told His disciples: “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” (John 13:34–35). Jesus said that non-Christians would better understand His mission when they saw His disciples deliberately and carefully loving one another. The best evangelistic strategy is not a program; it’s a group of people caring and serving one another each and every week; it’s the church. Join a church so that you can be a part of magnifying the gospel before a watching world.

### Third, join a church for the sake of leaders

Most Christians acknowledge that the Bible calls for churches to be led by pastors or elders. We see it all over the place. In Acts 20, Paul says goodbye to the elders of the church in Ephesus. In 1 Timothy 3, he describes the qualifications of the elders who are to lead the church. Peter exhorts elders to humbly shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet. 5). In short, the writers of the New Testament assume that local churches will be led by men with real responsibility to care for the souls of a particular group of saints.

But whom, exactly, are these men called to shepherd? Take me, for example. I pastor in Sandy Springs, GA. Who is my flock? Is it the people on the block where I live? The residents of Sandy Springs? The citizens of greater Atlanta? I hope you see the problem. Elders need to know whom they are shepherding. Deacons need to know whom they are serving. In that sense, church membership is a very practical and biblical way for church leaders to identify the particular Christians they are called to serve.

Come to an elders meeting at MVBC and you’ll see this idea at work. After a brief devotional, we turn to the membership directory and we start talking about and praying over the Christians God has entrusted to our care. Of course, all of the elders here have Christian friends who are not members of Mount Vernon, and we care for them deeply. And in our own personal devotions we pray for them, too. But when we gather as the elders of MVBC, we focus our time on praying for this particular local church. But how do we know who the members are? Because they have identified themselves by joining the church. They’ve said, in effect, “I want to be shepherded by you.”

Over the years I’ve heard objections to this view of membership. I’ve been told by some that the members are simply the people who come: “You don’t need formal church membership,” they argue, “you just need to look around and see who’s committed.” They argue that formal membership should be replaced by a casual, organic recognition of those who are present. They insist that it will simply be obvious who the members are—the folks attending regularly, serving in the nursery, singing in the choir, and so forth.

I would argue, however, that though well-intentioned, this plan just doesn’t work. It’s a little like a common-law marriage: “Just look at the woman you’ve been living with for five years—she’s your wife!” But church membership isn’t something that’s merely recognized; it’s something to be entered. My marriage works because almost eighteen years ago, my wife and I stood before a crowd and swore, “I do.” We committed ourselves to one another so that our family and friends and the whole world would know that we are husband and wife. Likewise in a church it is appropriate for an individual to state his or her intentions: “Yes, I want to belong to this body, to adhere to this doctrine, to live by these principles. Yes, I want to be a member.” It is those believers who express their willingness to belong to the local church that the elders are called to pastor.

One way you can honor these elders and deacons is by joining the church you attend. Let them know that you are there and that you need

to be shepherd. Be willing to be the kind of person that they can call upon to serve the body. Let your faithfulness to Christ be evident by belonging to the body of Christ, where a handful of church leaders have been recognized to serve.

### Fourth, join a church to encourage other believers

This may sound crazy, but some people need the church more than others. I’ve met some believers who have an amazing, godly drive. You could put them on an island in the South Pacific or a city in East Asia, and they would thrive spiritually. With the Spirit in their heart and the Bible in their hand, they would find a way to work for the Lord wherever they are.

Over the years the men and women whom I have heard criticize church membership are those I would describe in many ways as strong believers. They are driven to pray, to attend a Bible study, to stay connected with a small group of Christian friends. Honestly, I respect their commitment. They have found a way to “do church” without joining a body that actually requires any formal commitment.

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## The best evangelistic strategy is not a program; it’s a group of people caring and serving one another each and every week.

However, the vast majority of believers I’ve met are not like this. Most of us need the daily prodding of other believers who encourage us to do simple things like pray, read the Bible, and be holy. We aren’t to join a church simply because we realize we need help and accountability. We are to join a church because we recognize that others may need our help and encouragement. We want to model a commitment to the local church because we are convinced that others, especially newer believers, desperately need to see our example.

To the best of my knowledge, we find one, explicit command to gather together each week. It’s in Hebrews 10:23–25, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*, Don Whitney argues just how important it is for truly mature believers to model a commitment to a local church commanded by these verses: “Bear in mind the message you give to other believers, especially new believers, if you do not join a church. What are you modeling to new believers when you remain uncommitted to the local church? Do they see your example and learn that the church isn’t important enough to join?”<sup>3</sup>

### Fifth, join a church because membership makes sense of the Bible

One of the most compelling reasons I’ve encountered to officially, formally join a church is found in the many images of the church we find in Scripture. These pictures combine to form a powerful argument for church membership.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Moody, 1996), 53.



Peter describes Christians as “living stones...being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5). The point is obvious. As a Christian, I’m to see myself as an integral part of house—not a brick structure, but a spiritual house, the church of the living God. If I’m a stone in this house, then I’m resting on other stones, and other stones are resting on me. A stone in this house can’t come and go as it pleases. The house depends on it! We shouldn’t press the metaphor too far. None of us is indispensable in the local church. But each one of us is important, and each one of us has a place. It’s no wonder that we see the metaphor of a building used throughout the New Testament. Paul described the church in Corinth as “the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:6). And he encouraged the church in Ephesus by reminding them they were “being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21).

Perhaps the most common picture for the church in the Bible is that of the human body. Paul wanted the church in Rome to understand the importance of their fellowship. Everyone is valued; everyone has a place: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:4–5). It’s a different metaphor than that of the house, but the point is the same. The hand is connected to the arm, and the ear is connected to the face. To be a Christian is to be connected to one another. Being in Christ demands belonging to the body of Christ.

The church is also described as a family. As Christians we have been adopted by God. He is now our Father (Eph. 1:5). And if God is our Father, then we now have brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus we shouldn’t be surprised to discover that local churches are called households:

- “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the *household of faith*” (Gal. 6:10).
- “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 truth” (1 Tim. 3:14–15).
- “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the *household of God*” (Eph. 2:19).

Mount Vernon Baptist Church is my household, my family. One day there will be no more local churches; every “household” will be forever and perfectly united in heaven. I look forward to that day. But until then, we are to focus our love and our compassion and our sympathies on a smaller group of believers, those brothers and sisters who make up a local church that gathers in a particular geographic location.

Admittedly, technology is moving us away from the simple act of gathering together as a local church. Your Facebook family is probably spread throughout several continents. Your church may actually meet in many different locations. I know of some believers who prefer to watch their pastor preach over the internet, instead of sitting in an auditorium among the church family. But when I meditate on the pictures of the church in the Bible, I can’t shake the notion that God intends us to meet together, each week, in the same place. And He calls us not merely to meet, but to be connected to another. At times this

will be messy because people are difficult. But let’s face it, a congregation of redeemed sinners is the canvas on which our sanctification is painted. God designed us to grow spiritually in the context of a local church.

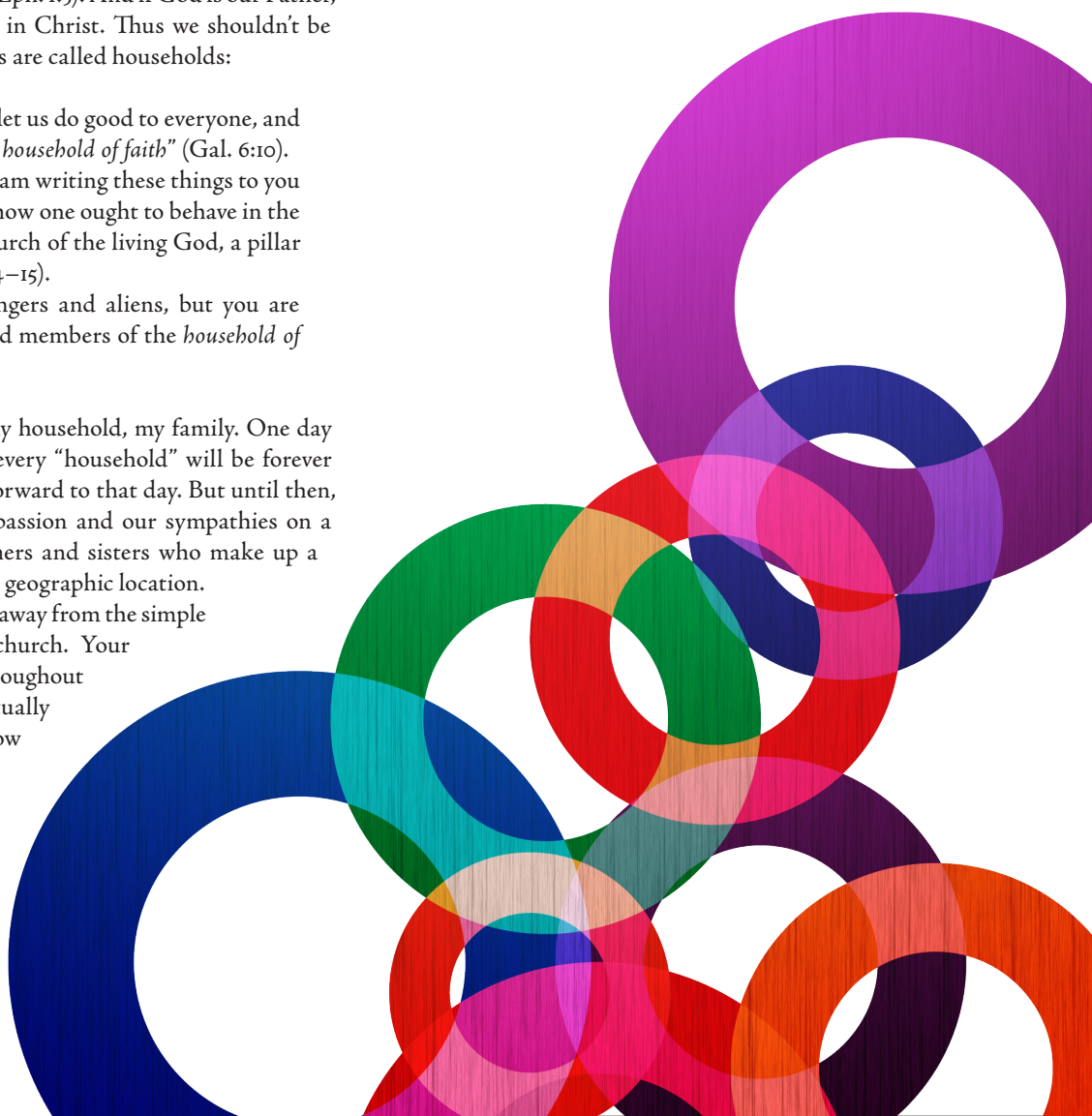
## ONE LAST WORD

In this article, I’ve tried to convince you that being in Christ means belonging to the body of Christ. This idea may sound old-fashioned to you and out of step with the way the church needs to keep pace with a changing society. But I would insist that what we need, more than ever before, is simple churches with committed members who preach the gospel in words and display the gospel in love.

And if you are a member of Mount Vernon, would you join me in making this vision of church membership a reality? If you are less engaged than you should be, would you think about what it would look like to find the accountability and the encouragement God designed the church to provide? Would you look out for other Christians who might not be connected to the local church and present this vision for church membership to them.

And if you aren’t a member of a local church but somehow you made it through this entire article, would you consider whether you should find a local church to commit to? It doesn’t have to be done exactly the way we do it here, at Mount Vernon, but how can you truly be in Christ without *belonging* to the body of Christ, the church? ■

~ Aaron Menikoff





# Seasons of Grace

October 17  
7:30 pm



*The Women's Ministry invites you to a casual dessert and coffee fellowship where to from different women about trusting God in all the various seasons and stages of life.*

A promotional poster for youth basketball. It features a close-up of a Wilson basketball in the foreground, with the brand name 'Wilson' and 'EVOLUTION' visible. The background is a blurred image of a basketball court with blue and yellow lines. The text 'January - February 2014 Season' is at the top left, and 'YOUTH BASKETBALL' is written in large, bold, orange letters across the middle. At the bottom right, there is information about the program, including age range, cost, start date, and a registration link.

January - February 2014 Season

## YOUTH BASKETBALL

Boys & Girls Ages 7-14 | \$90 per child  
Practices begin Monday, November 4  
Register online at [mvbchurch.org/youth-basketball](http://mvbchurch.org/youth-basketball)



The *Knowing MVBC* member-ship class is a four-session course that introduces you to life at Mount Vernon.

The next class is being offered **Sunday, November 3.**

The first session takes place in room 217 during the Sunday School hour (9:15–10:15 am). The remaining sessions take place in room 232 from 12:00–2:30 pm. Lunch is provided.

Sign up is available on the edge of the bulletin or by contacting the church office at 404-255-3133 or [info@mvbchurch.org](mailto:info@mvbchurch.org).

### Session 1

Knowing Our Commitments: Church Covenant

### Session 2

Knowing Our Beliefs: Statement of Faith

### Session 3

Knowing Our Structure: Leadership

### Session 4

Knowing How to Be Involved: Evangelizing, Discipling & Serving



## Calvary Children's Home

Family Mission Trip

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

—James 1:27

Join us for a Family Mission Trip to Calvary Children's Home! This will be our second year to help the Home in various ways as they put us to work.

Most of the children at Calvary are coming from broken homes and tragic circumstances. In many cases, they have a parent or parents who are unable or simply unwilling to care for them.

Our practical help will support the work of the Home.

Ideally, parents of our children will accompany their children, but if that is not possible, don't let that keep your children from participating!

Participants should dress for work. Water will be provided. There will be a cookout lunch with the Calvary staff and children. Some older students may be painting.

**What:** A workday in Powder Springs at Calvary Children's Home

**When:** Saturday, October 19, 2013

*Meet at MVBC at 8:15 am to leave with the caravan from the church, or be at Calvary by 10:00 am. We will leave the Home around 2:00 pm.*

**Where:** Calvary Children's Home  
1430 Lost Mountain Rd.  
Powder Springs, GA 30127

**RSVP:** October 13 to Doug Young ([dougyoung@mvbchurch.org](mailto:dougyoung@mvbchurch.org))

# October 2013

	1	2	3	4	5
6 4:30 pm Covenant Group Leaders' Meeting 6:00 pm Lord's Supper 7:00 pm Lord's Supper Fellowship Meal	7	8	9	10	11
12 7:00 pm 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Challenges to the Gospel					
13 10:30 am Guest Preacher: Greg Gilbert 4:30 pm Youth Parents & Volunteer Meeting	14	15	16	17 7:30 pm Women's "Seasons of Grace" Event	18
19 8:15 am Calvary Children's Home Trip					
20 4:30 pm Scripture Readers' Workshop	21 12:00 pm RW&A Luncheon	22	23	24	25
26					
27	28	29	30	31	



# EVENTS

## CHURCHWIDE

- October 6

6:00 pm

Lord's Supper

We encourage members to examine their hearts and relationship with one another in preparation for this celebration of Christ's death and resurrection.
- October 6

7:00 pm

Lord's Supper Fellowship Meal

Following the Lord's Supper during the evening service, we welcome everyone to come and fellowship together around a meal.
- October 12

7:00 pm

21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges to the Gospel

Members interested in participating in the ministry of public scripture reading are invited to attend the next workshop in which we will pursue ways of more effectively communicating the power and message of God's Word.
- October 20

4:30 pm

Scripture Readers Workshop

Members interested in participating in the ministry of public scripture reading are invited to attend the next workshop in which we will pursue ways of more effectively communicating the power and message of God's Word.

## ADULT

- October 6

4:30 pm

Covenant Group Leaders' Meeting
- October 21

12:00 pm

RW&A Luncheon

Everyone 50 and older is invited to lunch and fellowship as the RW&A's kick off the fall season. Please bring a covered dish.

## WOMEN

- October 17

7:30 pm

Women's "Seasons of Grace" Event

Women, please plan to join the Women's Ministry for a casual dessert and coffee fellowship where women will share on the topic of trusting God in all the various seasons and stages of life.

## YOUTH

- October 13

4:30 pm

Youth Parent & Volunteer Meeting

All parents of youth, soon to be youth, or anyone interested in volunteering with youth are invited to an informational meeting in which Doug Young will be sharing more about the vision of youth ministry and how to be involved.

## CHILDREN

- October 19

8:15 am

Calvary Children's Home Trip

The Family Ministry will be hosting a trip to Calvary Children's Home in Powder Springs. Parents are encouraged to attend with their children as we serve the children in need at the home.

# BIRTHDAYS

- 1

Renee Drexler

Patty Stanfield
- 2

Mary Anne Knowles
- 3

Barbara Bear

Parks Houser

Martha Morgan

Jerry Sexton
- 4

Aaron Menikoff
- 5

Charity Roe
- 7

Carey Louthan
- 9

David Scott
- 10

Dane Ulett

Megan Weltscheff
- 11

Ed Goodgame
- 12

Margaret Boomhower
- 13

Betty Lowndes
- 15

Pete Vanderzee
- 17

Juraj Bedi

Tommy McNeese

Carolyn Roberts
- 18

Scott Houser

Mark Mosby
- 19

Pat Orchard
- 20

Paige Clayton

Stephanie Morris

Michael Varzi
- 21

Marilyn Early

Lark Ivester

Richard Sweet

Jeanette Wallace
- 22

Megan Gryder
- 23

Jamie Butts
- 24

Shirley Chandler

Joy Harty
- 25

Rhonda Hatley

Jerrie Woodward
- 26

Nick Birmingham
- 27

Tina Ulett
- 29

Suzanne Lewis
- 31

Wynette Fleming



850 Mount Vernon Highway NW  
Sandy Springs, GA 30327