

A Messy Church

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[0 : 0 0] The church is an absolute mess. We believe in truth and advertising. So if you're here for the first time exploring Christianity, just know the church is an absolute mess.

! It was certainly true in the first century, the first century of the church's existence. The church in Corinth was a hot mess, full of division and heresy, full of people who were suing each other.

They were getting drunk at church. They were sleeping around. It was a mess. Why would it be any surprise that it is much the same today? Our denomination, the Anglican Communion, is a hot mess.

If you read the news, you have some inkling of that. Maybe you shouldn't read the news. Our church is certainly far from perfect. The church is a mess. Here's the thing. It's not just us. It's true of every church. It's true of every denomination that has ever existed in the last 2,000 years.

Some people encounter the messiness of the church and they leave and they never come back. Some people respond to the messiness of the church by embarking on a quest to find the perfect church.

[1 : 2 5] Chronic church hopping is actually an epidemic primarily among evangelical Protestants in the U.S. And it's not hard to see why. We live in a consumeristic culture. It's easy to get into a kind of optimization mentality.

We want to find the best pizza in town, the best church in town. The issue is this. If you do go to a new church, sooner or later that honeymoon period begins to wear off, the mess begins to emerge, and then you are faced with the same dilemma.

The dilemma is a result of this truth. There is no such thing as a perfect church. So that leaves us with a question. Those of us who feel called to and believe in participating in the life of a church, what do we do?

And the answer is found, I believe, in these first nine verses of Paul's letter to 1 Corinthians where Paul reminds us of three things about the church. He answers three questions. He tells us the way the church is formed.

He tells us about the way the church grows. And then finally, he gives us the reason that the church will last into eternity despite all appearances. And here's the point I want to make. If we understand what the Apostle Paul is saying in these first nine verses, we're going to come to see that the messiness of the church is actually good news. Another way of putting it, a church without problems is a problem. So pray with me, and we're going to open God's Word together. Let's pray.

[2 : 56] Lord, we thank you for your Word, and we thank you that these are not just thoughts that human beings have generated. It's not just the collective wisdom of people, that these are your words, and they're living and active. They're sharp like a sword. They're sharp like a surgical scalpel. And Lord, we need you through the power of your Spirit and the grace of your Son, Jesus, to do your work in us through your Word, that we might be conformed more to your image, that we might bring you glory, that we might encounter Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, the way the church is formed, the first thing Paul says in this letter to his church in Corinth is this. I'm here as an apostle because God called me.

I used to think Jesus was a fraud. I used to hate his followers. I used to persecute them whenever I got a chance. And then I encountered the risen Jesus, and he changed my life. And he sent me to tell the world that it's all true. He's the real deal. It all happened. He rose. The tomb is empty.

And then Paul says to the church, not only am I here because God called me, you, church, are here because God has called you. He says, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people. I don't know how it happened for you. Maybe you were at a summer camp at a praise and worship night in middle school. Maybe your Christian friend sat down with you and made some very persuasive arguments as to the truth and historicity of the resurrection and the claims of the gospels. Maybe you read a book that broke through. Maybe you hit rock bottom, and in your desperation, you cried out to God and heard him answer. Or maybe you have simply, as we pray every week, grown up, never knowing a day apart from the Lord. What I do know is this. However he did it, you're here because God called you to be here. And then at some point, if you're a Christian, it means that you responded to that call by calling out to Jesus. In verse 2, Paul says that Christians are those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. That means you began to say to Jesus,

I want to live my life in you and with you and for you. I want your life in me. I want to be like you.

And God called you, not only out of that old life, but he called you into something. He called you into the fellowship of the church. The word we translate church, ecclesia, means the called out ones.

[5 : 59] It's the community of people who have been called out and into this new community. So that means church isn't an option for Christians. Church is core to the definition of Christian.

A Christian is someone who has been called into the church. So how is the church formed? This first question, God calls it into existence. God has called it forth out of the world. He's the one in charge, in other words, of the invite list. He's the one who decides who gets in to the church. And one of the many reasons that the church is messy is because God loves to call messy people.

Those are exactly the kind of people he wants to invite to be part of this thing he's doing in the world. Jesus said very clearly, those who are well have no need of a physician. It's those who are sick.

I came to call not the righteous, but sinners. Very clear. You would never go to an emergency room, walk in, and expect to see a bunch of healthy, thriving people who are happy, having the best time of their life. That's not what an ER is. You go into the ER, and you expect to see broken bones, and blood, and addiction, and mental illness, and suffering. Because people are there because they need healing. So why would we go to a church expecting to see a bunch of shiny, happy, perfect people? The church, friends, is a spiritual emergency room. People are here because they're facing brokenness and struggle. There's blood on the ground. There's sin. There's addiction. There's mental illness. People are here because they need healing. Now, maybe we're better at hiding it than people are in the ER. Doesn't make it any less true. The point is the church isn't meant to be impressive. The church is meant to be redemptive, and there's a big difference. So here's the real question for us to ponder. With all due respect, if God loves to call messy people and you're here, what does that mean about you? Right? I love to, I'll paraphrase Charles Spurgeon. He says, you know, if you ever do find a perfect church, don't go because you'll spoil it. So a messy church is good news if you're a messy person.

It's very good news if you're a messy person because unlike other communities in D.C., the church is a place where you can be open and honest about your failures and struggles, and instead of people responding by saying, I don't think this is the right place for you.

[8 : 42] Right? I don't think this is the right work environment for you. I don't think this is the right club for you. Right? People respond and say, you're in the right place. That's why this church exists. It's for people exactly like you. Welcome home. But this also raises another question. If the church is messy because it's filled with messy people, then how are we ever to grow and heal in such a place? Isn't it just the blind leading the blind, the broken leading the broken? How do we get better?

The way the church grows. Verses four through seven in this passage are quite amazing to me if you keep in mind the reality of the church that Paul is writing to. A lot of problems, as I said, hot mess. And yet Paul doesn't say, I've been dying to tell you all the things that have been bothering me about your church, blah, blah, blah. Here's what he says. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him, you have been enriched in every way.

You've been made rich in every way. That's an amazing statement to this particular church. So what reason could Paul possibly have to give thanks for this church that has so many problems?

Well, he's thanking God because God has given this messy, imperfect church everything necessary for spiritual growth. If you're going to a church like that, it would be so easy to think there is something wrong with this place. They're missing something. They've missed out on something, right? How could things be this bad in this church? And Paul's saying, no, it's quite the opposite. God has enriched you in every way. You lack in nothing. You're not lacking any spiritual gift. You have everything you need to grow. The point is, Paul is not simply looking at the surface level of the church, which looks fairly messy. Paul is looking under the surface. He's looking deeper. Paul is looking at the spiritual power that is at work in the church, and he has the eyes to see it. This reminds me of that wonderful place in C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, which if you're familiar, it's about an older experienced demon named Screwtape who's teaching a young tempter, a young demon, how to prevent his patient, human being, from ever knowing God, from ever having a relationship with God, because they ultimately want to bring the patient down with them to hell. And at first, the task, the strategy is to prevent the patient from becoming a Christian. But then that happens. And so, the demons have to change their strategy. No longer is it about preventing conversion, because that's happened. Their new strategy is this. Now that he's a Christian, how can we prevent him from growing? How can we prevent this from ever leading anywhere? And here's the advice from Screwtape. How do we prevent him from growing? One of our greatest allies at present is the church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the church as we see her, spread through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately, it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient needs to see is the half-finished sham gothic erection on the new building estate. Once inside, keep him focused on, and I'll update it for our time, keep him focused on things like this. Once he walks in the door, keep him focused on the fact that it was hard to find a place to park, and he had to walk in the rain. Keep him focused on the fact that there are typos in the bulletin and the print is too small. Keep him focused on the fact that the woman in the pew behind him is singing out of key. Keep him focused on the baby who's fussing and causing distraction. Keep him focused on the fact that there are sound issues, that the video projector keeps turning on and off in the middle of the singing. Keep him focused on the fact that the worship music isn't the style he would prefer, or it's a little too loud, or it's not quite loud enough, or the sermon was too much of this, or not quite enough of that. And Screwtape says this, make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like the body of Christ and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the enemy's side, no matter. Your patient, thanks to our Father below, is a fool.

Here's the point. Don't allow yourself to be fooled when you look at the church. Below the surface of every church, no matter how small or unimpressive it might be in the eyes of the world, below the surface, the power of the living God is at work. The power of God is at work. Spiritual growth does not happen because of good music or good preaching or good programs. Spiritual growth is only possible because God is at work in His church, because God has supplied everything we need to grow. If the gospel is being proclaimed, if the church is grounded in Scripture, if there are opportunities for prayer, opportunities for fellowship with other Christians, then theoretically, you should be able to grow in almost any church you're a part of. So, messiness, friends, is not an obstacle to spiritual growth. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I would say that messiness is miracle growth for spiritual growth. It is miracle growth.

[14 : 38] When you pray and you ask God to help you grow in your faith, how do you think God does that? Because I know that when I pray for things like that, what I really want is almost like in the matrix when Neo plugs in and he learns a martial art. They hit a button and then boom, it like beams into his brain and he all of a sudden knows it or he like knows a language. I'm like, God, I want to become stronger in my faith and I want God to just download it into my brain. And I get done praying and I just feel stronger in my faith. But that's not at all how God does it. How does God help us grow in our faith when we ask him to do that? How do you think God helps you become more patient and loving?

He puts you in a church where you have to learn how to love people who are difficult to love. He puts you in a church where you have to learn how to love people who have very different political views than you. You pray and you ask God, help me become more humble and forgiving.

How does God answer that prayer? He puts you in a church where you have to work through conflict with other people. In real time, real flesh and blood people, not a book about conflict resolution. A person who said something that really offended and hurt your feelings. A person who you think harmful thoughts about because they have so angered you. And God says, here's the scripture, here's the community, here's the Holy Spirit. It's time for you to grow. Sometimes I see people get into conflict in the church and instead of working it through, they leave. And just to be totally honest, it kills me every time that happens.

I see the conflict happen. I see the anger. I see the offense. I hear about it. Next week, those people aren't there. Next week, those people aren't there. Next week, those people aren't there. And they're gone without another word. And that kills me. You know what that kills me? It kills me because I think, man, you missed out. I think, man, God was about to do something in your life. God was about to bring growth to your heart. God was about to deepen your understanding of the gospel. God was about to strengthen your reliance on the Holy Spirit. He was about to humble you. He was about to take all of the preaching and the books and the teaching, the things that you've talked about in theory, and He was about to drive it home in real time and make it flesh and blood on the ground reality in your life. And I just think, man, you missed out. Think how your faith could have grown if you had been willing to stick it out. Messiness is not an obstacle to growth. Messiness is actually the place where I think we are most likely to grow if we hang in there. Because God has given us everything we need to grow. And His power is what makes it possible. It's our participation that is the variable.

But this, of course, leads to our third question. With everything going on in the church and all of this messiness, what ultimate assurance do we have that all of this isn't just going to crumble?

[17 : 48] Can the church survive all of this messiness? Are we just going to limp along? Where's it all going? You know, over the centuries at various points, people have predicted that the church would one day fade away. You know, it's happened multiple times throughout history, but going all the way back to the first century, they were like, this tiny little movement will never last, right? It's a little subset of Judaism, right? 0.014% of the Roman population. It's never going to last, right?

And yet that hasn't happened. Why not? The reason the church will last into eternity, right? As I said, in the first century, looking at a church like Corinth, it seemed like a fragile movement that would not even last a generation. To be totally honest, I sometimes feel that way about our denomination, the ACNA. No one could have predicted that the church would spread across the entire known world, transform billions of lives, and become the foundation of Western civilization itself. No one could have predicted when they looked at Corinth where this would lead. How did it happen? Verses 8 and 9. God will also keep you firm to the end, Paul says, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then he says this, God is faithful.

God is faithful. Who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Friends, how can we be sure that the church will survive, that the church will last into eternity? That's the answer.

Because God is faithful. Christian hope is not based on our faithfulness to God. It's based on God's faithfulness to us, on God's promise that he will never leave us, that he will never forsake us. And God has promised, which Paul reiterates here, to keep his people firm to the end of time. You say, well, how is that possible? How is God going to keep us and sustain us so that when that final day comes and when God, when Jesus comes to make all things new, how does God ensure that we will be there and that we will stand before the Lord and that we will be welcomed into that new reality as the Jerusalem descends and all things are made new and every tear is wiped away? How do we know that? How does God give us that assurance? By calling us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Because if you know the core of our faith, the gospel, you know this truth, that on the cross, Jesus took all of the mess. He took all of the brokenness. He took all of the ugliness and all of the blood and all of the addiction and all of the suffering. He took all of that on himself.

And then through his death, he defeated sin. He defeated death. He guaranteed that one day suffering would come to an end. So if we are, as Paul says, in fellowship with him, meaning we follow him in faith, meaning we are baptized in his name, what this means is that even if our lives are messy through the cross, Jesus has called us holy. Right? Even though we look messy on the outside, even though we feel messy on the inside, God looks at us and says, you are holy. I mean, how does Paul describe the church in verse 2? Those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people. These are people who are, they're divided, they're angry, they're suing each other, they're getting drunk at church. He says, you are holy. The church may be a mess, but friends, the church is a holy mess.

[21 : 52] And God loves the holy mess of the church. God pours his life into the holy mess of the church. And for God, the church is his plan A for the world. There is no plan B.

And this is another reason why a church without problems would be a problem. Later in this chapter, Paul says that God has purposely chosen to use the weak and foolish things to shame the strong and the wise. With all due respect, no offense, he's talking about us.

Right? God wants it to be abundantly clear that everything that is good and true and beautiful in the church comes from him alone so that he gets the glory, not us. I would go so far as to put it this way. A perfect church cannot glorify God because a perfect church doesn't need God.

A perfect church doesn't need a savior. A perfect church doesn't need grace, doesn't need mercy. A perfect church doesn't need reassurance that we're going to be held firm to the end because we know that already because we're perfect.

But when the world sees a messy church, when the world sees people who, despite all of the mess, the church looks at that mess and despite all of it, people are coming to faith in Jesus and people are giving generously to love and serve the poor and vulnerable and people are reconciling with one another and people have hope and joy even in the midst of tragedy.

[23 : 27] There's only one explanation for that and it means that God gets the glory, not human beings because there's no other way to explain it. So here is the good news, God's good news, for messy people in messy churches. God called the church into being. God has given us everything we need and God will sustain us into eternity. And as I have been reading and meditating on these verses, I have felt my own discouragement dissipate and I have felt hope rising in my heart. And I hope and pray that as you hear these words, the same thing is happening in you. That discouragement and weariness is beginning to dissipate and you feel hope rising in your heart. Because at Advent, friends, we're going through a lot of change right now. In many ways, we are going back to our original vision when we started the church many years ago to be a city center church with a city-wide vision.

But it means a lot of change is taking place and change is unavoidably messy. It's hard. It causes all kinds of insecurity and potential for miscommunication. And there might be some people here who are simply weary because of the messiness of it all. And you might be saying, man, I'm just tired of the mess.

I want to go to a place where there's no mess, where it'll just be easy. And it might just be easier to just avoid the mess altogether. But I want you to hear me on this. I believe with all of my heart that now is the time to lean in, not to pull out. It's the time to lean in. What do I mean by that?

Instead of looking at all of the options and asking, what kind of church does God want for me? Let's be the kind of people who ask, what kind of me does God want for his church?

What kind of me does God want for his church? Where is God opening and extending an invitation to you right now? Right? Maybe it's to reprioritize. Maybe it's to get more involved in some way. Maybe it's just to deepen your trust in the things that we're talking about, in the truths of Scripture and the heart of God. Maybe it's to double down and invest in new or existing relationships.

[26 : 06] Right? As we've had many new people come, we've had some people, because of the change and because of the geographic shift, leave and find other churches. So there's a lot of transition. And it's been hard. It's been brutal. It's been painful. Every, you know, one of the things that, just to be totally honest, probably one of the hardest things about being a pastor is when people leave. And I know it's true for you too. And you're so excited about all the new people. And yet when you say goodbye to somebody, you think, you know, where I've poured my heart and my soul and my life into this community. And then to see somebody leave, it just feels like an amputation.

And yet God is bringing in people who are excited, who are thrilled about the direction and the future that we are taking. They're excited about what God is doing. And so maybe the invitation is simply to double down on the relationships that you have and invest in the opportunities for new relationships that are presenting themselves in your life. And I say this, and even as I say this, I recognize that many of us are already leaning in. You know, just this morning, we wrapped up a wonderful foundations class with a room full of people who are new to the church, who are super excited to become members, who are excited to be confirmed. We talked about the opportunities that are opening up to us as we moved to Shaw. And there was a lot of excitement in the room. People are wanting to know how to get more involved. That's leaning in. You know, we've had two work days last, this past Saturday, yesterday, and then a week ago, Sunday, work days at the new building, right, as we're in the final weeks before we're actually able to move in and inhabit the space. And if you don't mind, could you, for those of you who were at one of those work days, could you just raise your hand? Right? Look how many hands are in the air. We, I mean, we had dozens and dozens and dozens of people come out for both times and just rolling up our sleeves and working together. It was an incredibly exhilarating experience. Those are, that's a, that's leaning in, right? Leaning in may mean you're demolishing old pews and putting them in a dumpster. Don't worry, we saved most of them. Leaning in may mean you're just kind of, you're, you're taking out trash or you're, you're going to Home Depot and getting supplies or, or hanging whiteboards in the classrooms, right? Leaning in, right? I talked to a woman just a few days ago over coffee and, you know, she said, hey, you know, I want to talk. I said, hey, yeah, what's up? We got together. And she said, here's my problem. And I'm like, all right, I'm ready.

What is it? You know, I want to figure out how to carve out more margin in my job because the thing I'm most excited about in my life is what, what God is doing at Church of the Advent. And I really want to help start a ministry and, but I need margin to do that. There's few things I can imagine being more delighted to hear, right? A few problems I would be more excited to help do something about.

So I said, let's just commit to praying and let's just see what God does. Lean in, right? So what is God doing in you through the mess? What kind of me does God want for His church? Wherever you see the invitations and opportunities the Lord is giving you, I encourage you, my friends, lean in. Let's pray. Lord, as weird as it may be to say this, we thank you for the mess. Lord, because every time we see the messiness of the church, it disabuses us of the notion that we can somehow do this without you.

And Lord, the thing that we need most as your people is to be on our knees in utter dependence. Lord, again and again and again through our history as a church, we have seen you provide it in moments of time where we did not see a way forward and you have provided for us.

[29 : 50] And you have taught us over the years that we can trust you. And Lord, we pray that we would be people marked by that prayerful dependence on you, that that mess would drive us to our knees and drive us further up and further in to your presence. And Lord, that is the way we believe that you're calling us to glorify you, not by being perfect and not needing you, but by in every way making it clear that you're the one who gets the glory for everything that happens here. And it's in that spirit and in the name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.