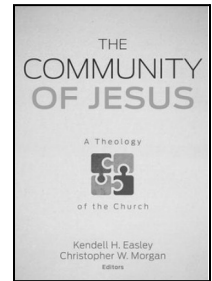


# THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

Edited by KENDELL H. EASLEY and CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN



**Jeff Purswell**

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HARDLY A DAY PASSES when the internet does not serve up yet another testimony bemoaning the failures of the church. While the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, Christian media often gives the impression that toxic cultures, bully pastors, and politically-divided congregations just might. As pastors called to “spend and be spent” (2 Cor. 12:15) on behalf of God’s people, we must fight to maintain a biblical vision of just what the church is—its divine nature, its cosmic significance, and its principal role in the redemptive purposes of God. *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, edited by Kendell Easley and Christopher Morgan, provides just the kind of clarifying encouragement pastors and church members need, not only to refresh and deepen their understanding of the church, but to cherish it as Jesus does.

Pastors will need to look elsewhere for detailed instructions on how to *do church*; *The Community of Jesus* instead seeks to provide a theological vision of the church grounded upon biblical-theological foundations. The editors have assembled a solid team of scholars from various disciplines with the goal of providing “a biblical, historic, systematic, missional theology of the church” (xiii). This approach lifts the reader’s eyes above so many of the issues that tend to dominate ecclesiological discussions (the sacraments, church leadership, polity), placing them in a broader, salvation-historical context that helps re-frame how we should view the church and its mission.

To accomplish this goal, the book contains one chapter on the Old Testament people of God and four chapters on the New Testament’s presentation of the church. There is one (rather ambitious) chapter on church history, two theologically oriented chapters, and a final one on the church in God’s mission. I would especially note Steve Wellum’s chapter on the church as “God’s New Covenant Community,” which helpfully traces continuities between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church (over against dispensationalism) and important discontinuities (over against traditional covenant theology).

Given that pastors spend much of their waking lives engaged in the life and nurture of Christ’s bride, I regularly recommend that they read at least one book a year on the church. Yet not all such books are created equal. In the wake of the cultural turbulence of the past few years, it is precisely the biblical-theological grounding laid in *The Community of Jesus* that can serve as a vital safeguard against ecclesiological winds and waves that are currently lashing the church. It is remarkable how many of the current (and, for that matter, ancient) distortions of the church’s identity and mission—be it a fearful separatism, or a culturally-captive

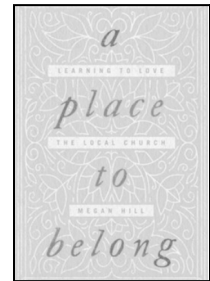
hyper-transformationalism, or a politically-charged theonomy—stem from a failure to appreciate the salvation-historical location of the new covenant church. In driving us back to the text of Scripture, books like *The Community of Jesus* hold great potential: to remind us of our true identity; to focus us on our true mission; to deepen our affections for the local church; and to cause us to treasure more fully the one who brought the church into being through his death and resurrection.

# A PLACE TO BELONG

By MEGAN HILL

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IN AN AGE WHEN church attendance is considered quaint at best and hateful at worst, faithful Christians continue to gather with the people of God. But sometimes offkey singing, sparsely attended prayer meetings, and odd assortments of people can cause us to wonder, “Is this really worth it?”

In *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church*, author Megan Hill answers with a resounding “yes.” She challenges readers “to see the church as God sees the church and then to embrace the privilege of being part of it” (13). Rather than leaving us with this general goal, she takes us on a tour of the epistles, highlighting the details of our calling as the beloved people of God, the eternal fruitfulness of our simple gatherings, and the importance of being good sheep and good shepherds.

As a longstanding member of a Sovereign Grace church, I assumed this book would be a quick review of what I already knew. However, it accomplished what its subtitle promised and convinced me not simply to like, or to attend, or to serve my local church, but to love it. Why? Because my dear savior loves it with a passion so great he gave his life for it, “And what God loves, we must love” (23). “Do you want to grow in Christlikeness?” Hill asks. “Come to church and love the people you find there” (27).

## ***Celebrate Ordinary***

When we focus too much on numerical growth or cultural influence, we miss what God is doing all around us.

When people in the church encourage one another, teach one another, serve one another, and pray for one another in dozens of small and large ways, we ought to rejoice. This is a sign of God-given life and a mark of his blessing (77).

Hill reminds us to move our focus from what the world loves to what God loves: namely, his people united to praise his name. As unimpressive as our gatherings may seem, God delights in them. By aligning our perspective with his, we can embrace what might otherwise discourage us and celebrate the “ordinary” works of God in our “ordinary” churches.

## ***Anticipate Glory***

The church is not merely a pastor's job or a member's duty, it's the purpose of God lived out on Earth. As his people unite under his rule and reign, the triune God makes himself known. The smallest earthly gathering resounds in eternity, and each local body, thriving or struggling "can rightly be called a colony of heaven" (53). The faithful mundane is blindingly glorious.

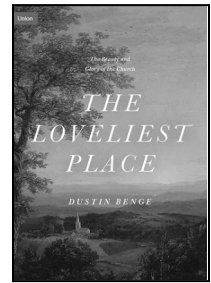
*A Place to Belong* cleans our lenses so we can see the church rightly: beloved, precious, glorious, God's very own. There truly is no better place on earth. Reader, don't assume with a sigh that you already "get" the local church. Allow this book to refresh your vision so you can throw yourself into building God's church with a new and appropriate joy.

# THE LOVELIEST PLACE

By DUSTIN BENGE

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CHARLES SPURGEON AFFECTIONATELY REFERRED to the church as “The Dearest Place on Earth.” Though that statement is true, our culture can make that truth hard to believe. The turmoil, anger, distrust, and despair that has permeated the air in recent years has greatly impacted Christians, particularly in their view of the church. The distrust of institutions, normalization of a critical spirit, and rampant individualism in the culture has led Christians to drift into a “less-than-spectacular” view of the glorious, blood-bought bride of Christ.

Our ecclesiology is being affected, and whether we realize it or not, the air we breathe in this world results in a waning love for the church. A deeper love and appreciation for the church must be cultivated and sought after.

This is why I’m incredibly grateful for Dustin Bengé’s wonderful book *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church*. This book helps us appropriately recalibrate our affection for the bride of Christ. Through fourteen Scripture-saturated and theologically rich chapters, Bengé reinvigorates love for the church by helping the reader see the church in the way Christ sees the church. In other words, in these pages we see that the church truly is the loveliest place on earth—that she is beautiful.

The tone of this book is filled with celebration and wonder. Bengé demonstrates familiar truth in fresh ways, cultivating a deeper love for the church. He helps us to see the depths of love that Christ has for the church: “To grasp Christ’s love for his church is to plumb depths that have no bottom, find a treasure with no bounds, and climb heights that have no peak” (49). The beauty of the church comes from the fact that it belongs to Christ. His beauty beautifies her, and our love for Christ necessitates a love for his bride.

Subsequent chapters highlight the specific ways that the church is beautified. The members, the pastors, the good news of the gospel, and the sacraments all contribute to the beautification of Christ’s bride. Bengé highlights the need to walk in unity in a manner worthy of the calling of Christ, and to expect persecution. He celebrates the valuable role each Person of the Godhead plays in building and sustaining the church. Bengé helps us see that every aspect of the church is used by God to beautify the church.

*The Loveliest Place* is not a dry, dense read. In this book, affections will be stirred. The beauty of Christ and the glory of the gospel make everything in the church extraordinary and spectacular.

Benge's purpose in writing this book is to help us all have a "refreshing drink from the well of a thoroughly biblical ecclesiology to revitalize the reader for a new ministry, bold exposition, passionate worship, and wholehearted service" (183). He wants to renew and reinvigorate Christians' joy in their local church. He wants to assist God's children to worship him in Spirit and truth— to think upon Christ's church with a warm smile. He does not pretend that the church is problem-free or sinless. The church is flawed because of those it consists of. Nevertheless, it is beautiful, and it deserves our all.

Christ regards his church through the lens of the cross, and when we share that lens, we will see the church with the same eyes as her beloved Husband.

# WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE GOING TO CHURCH?

By GUNNER GUNDERSEN

*Jimmy Cannon*

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WHAT IF I DON'T feel like going to church? The superficial answer is, "Go anyway!" This likely misses the opportunity for greater insight into why one may feel unmotivated. What is going on at the heart-level that leads to feeling disinterested in being a part of the gathered church? In his book, *What if I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?*, Gunner Gundersen explores practical ways to discern reasons behind feeling unmotivated and offers biblical help on how to increase our understanding of the immense blessing it is to be together as a church family.

Gundersen's audience and goals are clear from the outset. He writes, "My goal is simple: I want to motivate Christians to meet together with consistency, joy, and purpose. I'm writing to Christians who love Jesus and want to follow him, but struggle to understand, appreciate, or make time for the church" (10). We must have a category in our mind that allows for us to see that any believer can be tempted to give in to this kind of indolence. Therefore we must watch over our own heart, but also be more alert to the struggle others might be facing. Gundersen begins by giving practical help in discerning the deeper motive underneath the feelings. There are many reasons for not wanting to go to church. Gundersen encourages the reader to take time to discern the heart through God's Word, discerning friends, and God-given leaders. Knowing this is key to finding the way forward. "Up to this point" Gundersen writes, "we've explored our hearts and reminded ourselves to seek help. Now it's time to talk about the church" (23).

Gundersen skillfully utilizes Scripture to help elevate our understanding of how glorious the church truly is. He does this by explaining the different images used in the New Testament that highlight the "togetherness" of the church. He helpfully unpacks what it means to be part of this "covenant community." The beauty and mystery of believers coming together and being given real purpose by God is something that fills one with a sense of awe.

This place of wonder leads us to explore what it actually means to be "present" in church. We know that attendance in itself is not the goal. We can be present physically and yet absent emotionally. Gundersen spends much of this short book setting out a compelling vision for what it can and should look like for us to be "present" among God's people.

*What if I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?* is concise, yet packed with biblically sound and practical help when caring for someone who is feeling unmotivated to gather with God's people. Whether you are a pastor who is seeking to care for those on the church's periphery or you have a friend who seems to be adrift, this book will help.