

a

LEARNING TO LOVE

place

THE LOCAL CHURCH

to

MEGAN HILL

belong

“A thousand messengers point us to the good news of a personal relationship with Christ, but this book contains something precious: the good news of a corporate one. Megan Hill has written a love song for the church, a celebration of the communion of saints in all its present practicality and all its future glory. Her message stirred me to greater love for the fellowship of believers and greater longing for the day when Christ and his bride are at last fully and finally united.”

Jen Wilkin, Director of Classes and Curriculum, The Village Church; author, *Women of the Word*; *None Like Him*; and *In His Image*

“This book is positively, intelligently, and helpfully countercultural. It pushes back on our individualism, cynicism, and consumerism and winsomely calls us to invest our lives—indeed find our lives—in something we may be tempted to think is simply not worth the trouble—the local church.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, *Even Better than Eden: Nine Ways the Bible’s Story Changes Everything about Your Story*

“Megan Hill’s love for the church and her Savior shines on every page. She possesses an uncommon gift for engaging illustrations and applications. Her theology of the church is biblical, and her instruction winsome as she clarifies what it means for the church’s members to share in each other’s gifts and graces. Readers will find themselves thanking God for his gift of ‘a place to belong.’”

Charles M. Wingard, Dean of Students and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Help for the New Pastor: Practical Advice for Your First Year of Ministry*

“Megan Hill encourages us to think biblically about the church rather than just experientially or emotionally. This book celebrates our ‘blessed belonging’ that is our privilege as God’s covenant people. It is also an accessible tool to prepare us as his bride as we await our bridegroom’s return.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America; author, *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver and Life-giving Leadership*

A Place to Belong

*A Place
to Belong*

LEARNING TO LOVE
THE LOCAL CHURCH

MEGAN HILL

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church

Copyright © 2020 by Megan Hill

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Lindy Martin, Faceout Studios

Cover image: Shutterstock 197188535, Shutterstock 547924612

First printing 2020

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hill, Megan, 1978– author.

Title: A place to belong : learning to love the local church / Megan Hill.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019030351 (print) | LCCN 2019030352 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433563737 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433563744 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433563751 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433563768 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Church—Biblical teaching. | Bible. Epistles—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Public worship. | Church attendance.

Classification: LCC BS2545.C5 H55 2020 (print) | LCC BS2545.C5 (ebook) | DDC 250—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019030351>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019030352>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Brad, Caleb, Nathan, and Evelyn
—children of the covenant—

As you grow, I'm sure you will see that
the church often seems unremarkable.

I pray you will also see that it
is the glory of Christ.

Contents

Introduction	11
1 Beloved: Loving the People God Loves	17
2 Called: Our One Testimony	29
3 Church: We Gather to Worship	43
4 Flock: Receiving Care from a Shepherd	57
5 Body: No Unimportant Parts	71
6 Saints: Holiness Is a Community Project	85
7 Brothers and Sisters: Members of the Family	99
8 Gospel Partners: We Have Work to Do	113
9 Multitude: Part of Something Bigger	127
Acknowledgments	141
Study Questions	143
Notes	157
Bibliography	165
General Index	171
Scripture Index	177

Introduction

Around the corner from where I live, a house is for sale. In bold green letters the lawn sign reads: “I’m Gorgeous Inside!” The message is surprising. From the street, the house is thoroughly ordinary, even run-down. It’s a seventies-era raised ranch with dingy white vinyl siding and a location on a busy road. The roof looks like it lacks the necessary resolve to bear the weight of another winter’s snowfall. The circular driveway loops around a weedy patch of grass obviously intended for a fountain but more likely currently concealing ticks. The bushes are too big, the windows are too small, and the backyard is nonexistent.

But the sign encourages me to believe there is something more beautiful—and more valuable—about this seemingly ho-hum house than I can appreciate from the curb.

The local church is a little like that house. At first glance, “the house of God” (Heb. 10:21) is unremarkable: a regular gathering of ordinary people committed to a largely invisible mission. We are young and old, male and female, single and married, unemployed and overworked. None of us is much to look at. We sing slightly off-key, and we can’t always clearly articulate the faith we profess. Anyone can see that our diverse personalities, political views, and parenting styles don’t easily harmonize, and even our most spiritually mature members sometimes stumble into quarrels, petty jealousies, grumbling,

and lethargy. Following worship, bad coffee and awkward moments are served at plastic tables in a damp basement.

But the church has more beauty—and more value—than we can see with physical eyes. Like the Old Testament tabernacle that was covered on the outside with rams' skins and goat hair but ornamented inside with gold and silver, the ordinary-looking church is actually much more than it seems.¹ The Bible proclaims that the church is a radiant bride, a spiritual house made with living stones, a pillar and buttress of the truth, the very body of Christ himself (Eph. 5:27; 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Cor. 12:27).

We may not immediately realize it from the curb, but this house is gorgeous.

I have had my share of ordinary church experiences. I'm a pastor's wife and a pastor's daughter, but I've been a member of churches where I was neither. I've been a church kid, a youth-group member, a college student, a single woman, a newlywed, a mom. I've attended Sunday school. I've taught Sunday school. I've taken my kids to Sunday school. I've been part of a small church surrounded by cornfields and part of a thousands-of-members church in the city. I've gone to churches where everyone remembers my birthday and churches where I felt like I was always and forever the new girl. I have been loved by people in the church—given casseroles and prayed for and encouraged to use my gifts—and I have sometimes been hurt by people in the church—ignored and misunderstood and intentionally deceived. I know I have hurt a few people myself. I've been impatient with the weak, and I've looked past people who were struggling because I didn't feel like mustering the energy to get involved. The local church doesn't always seem gorgeous.

Perhaps no group is known to meet claims of the church's beauty with more skepticism than the generation just a few

years behind me: millennials. Among Christians in their twenties and thirties, narratives of questioning, criticizing, and rejecting the church are common. Seemingly, wandering away from the church is the new road to spiritual maturity and religious credibility. But it's not just young Christians who have grown cold toward the church. People of all generations can struggle to look beyond the church's lackluster appearance. If we are honest, life in the local church sometimes seems ordinary and repetitive. Week after week, we interact with the same people and do the same things together. Over the years, we've been frustrated and disappointed, and we have never seen as much fruit from our worship and work as we would like. In fact, many weeks there seems to be no fruit at all. Maybe we aren't about to leave, but belonging to the local church doesn't always seem like much of a glorious privilege.

So what do we do? When the local church appears utterly unremarkable—insignificant in the eyes of the world and pretty ordinary even in our own—how do we delight in belonging there? And how can we encourage those around us—our children and teenagers, our fellow church members, our newly converted brothers and sisters in Christ, our curious neighbors—that the church is more than it may seem at first glance?

I have taken the thesis of this book from Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “Our greatest need is to recapture the New Testament teaching concerning the Church. If only we could see ourselves in terms of it, we would realize that we are the most privileged people on earth, that there is nothing to be compared with being a Christian and a member of the mystical body of Christ.”² We may be young or old, newcomer or founding member, leader in the church or teen in the back row, but this is our task: to see the church as God sees the church and then to embrace the privilege of being part of it.

In these pages we'll focus on the New Testament Epistles and the beautiful words those letters use to describe the church (though we'll also see these same truths revealed in the gathered people of God from Genesis to Revelation). Focusing on these terms will help us to clarify what is essential to the value of the local church. Whether your church gathers in America or Azerbaijan, whether it has ten or ten thousand members, whether it hosts dozens of activities or simply meets on Sundays to worship, the same biblical truths should define it, and the same biblical truths will foster your delight in the fundamental loveliness of Christ's gathered people.

When we take seriously what God says about his church, it will shape our experience of belonging there.

We will see from Scripture that the church is the *beloved* (chapter 1) and the *called* (chapter 2). We love the local church because God loves the local church, and we share a common testimony with everyone in the church. Next, we will see that the *church* (chapter 3) exists to worship. When we gather together, week by week, to hear God speak to us and then to speak to him, we are at our highest expression of what it means to be God's assembled people. Then we will consider the way the church is organized by God. The church is a *flock* (chapter 4), receiving care from shepherd elders, and the church is a *body* (chapter 5), requiring the gifts and graces of every member. From there, we will look at how we engage with one another—what the Apostles' Creed calls “the communion of saints.” We will learn to see ourselves and one another as the *saints* (chapter 6), *brothers and sisters* (chapter 7), and *gospel partners* (chapter 8). Finally, we'll consider what it means to be the heavenly *multitude* (chapter 9) and take encouragement from the fact that each local church is part of something bigger than itself. In every chapter, we'll discover that the local church is much more than it first appears. We'll consider how

this knowledge equips us to pray for one another, to speak to one another, and to live alongside one another. And we'll find that there is nothing to be compared with being a member of the body of Christ.

As I think back over years of Sundays in the pew, I have seen the significance of these truths in my own experience. If I have any maturity in the faith, any authentic spiritual life, any resolve to follow Christ, any experience of his fullness, it is because of the ordinary local church. It is because men of God have been given to me as priceless gifts to preach the word of God for the good of my soul. It is because the members of the church have prayed for me and because its children have noisily added their praises to mine. It is because men and women whom I might not otherwise have met are committing their lives to helping me become like Christ. For four decades now, I have worshiped and worked alongside those for whom Christ died, and I am absolutely convinced that I am more of a Christian in the church than I could ever be alone.³

It's worth noting that most of the terms we will consider are given to us (through divine inspiration) by someone who had a very complicated church story. The apostle Paul was a religious kid, but rather than growing up into love for the church, he kicked against it (Phil. 3:5–6). He hated the church, celebrated the death of her first martyr, and used all his energies to strike down Christ's beloved people wherever he could find them (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1–2). Then on his way to persecute the Way, he was waylaid. Christ appeared to him, and the direction of his life forever changed. Overnight, the church's enemy became the church's friend (Acts 9:1–22).

We might expect Paul's church story to be all sunshine and hymn sings from that moment on. But, instead, new church member Paul went on to experience many of the challenges of life in the local church. He was viewed with skepticism by

church leaders (Acts 9:26). He suffered personal attacks from false teachers and their disciples (2 Cor. 10:10). He was intentionally misunderstood by other Christians (2 Pet. 3:16). He had disagreements with other Christians (Acts 15:36–40). He was disappointed by other Christians (see 2 Cor. 11:22–29). He sat alone in prison, longing for committed fellow workers but realizing “they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 2:21). And—in what may be the saddest verse in all of the Epistles—he recounts, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me” (2 Tim. 4:16). If anyone knew how disappointing the local church can be, it was the apostle Paul.

And yet. This same Paul is the one who calls the church *beloved* at least a dozen times in his letters. He regularly refers to other Christians as *brothers and sisters*. He doesn’t hesitate to address them as *saints*. His writings overflow with tender mentions of particular Christians, with longing to be face-to-face with the churches, with both anxiety and affection for them, and with unflagging optimism for their future glorification. Paul knew that the church is more than it often seems: it is the people of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit, and the fullness of Christ. The truth about the church shaped Paul’s experience of the church.

The truth should shape us, too, so that belonging to this ordinary gathering of unremarkable people becomes one of the highest joys and greatest privileges of our lives. In the unassuming assembly of our local churches, Christ manifests his glory. Brothers and sisters, come delight in the church. I know it doesn’t look like much from the curb. And I freely admit that it is still being perfected. But the Lord himself tells us: it’s beautiful inside.

Please, come in.

Beloved

LOVING THE PEOPLE GOD LOVES

Beloved, if God so loved us,
we also ought to love one another.

1 JOHN 4:11

Jim came to our church from prison. Over the decades, his life had taken many turns, but none of them had passed through the door of a gospel-preaching church. Raised by non-Christian parents, snared by sin, and incarcerated as an adult, Jim had never heard a biblical sermon, sung a psalm, or joined his heart to the prayers of God's people. In prison, though, Christ drew Jim to himself through the ministry of a chaplain. As a new believer, Jim spent hours praying and studying the Bible both by himself and in groups of other inmates. Under the chaplain's mentorship, Jim grew in his knowledge of Christ until one day—sentence served—he walked out of prison a truly free man.

And that Sunday he came to church. In the next weeks and months, Jim participated in corporate worship for the first time in his life. He sang heartily and wept freely. He confessed his faith alongside the saints and added his prayers to those of the congregation. His comments during Sunday school revealed a deep biblical knowledge that edified all of us. Over time, he shared meals in people's homes, asked questions, and learned the names of the church's children. He began to greet church members with enthusiastic hugs. On the day that Jim joined our church, he gave his testimony of coming to faith. As he concluded, he looked out over the congregation and reflected with obvious delight, "I've never had a people before."

After he said that, I glanced around the room. Frankly, we weren't much to get excited about. We had just finished a post-worship, bring-a-dish-to-share fellowship lunch, and we sat together at tables littered with crumpled napkins. Listening to Jim's story of coming to Christ, the adults half-heartedly picked at dry remnants of baked ziti on paper plates. The kids, antsy with so much sitting, ran circles around the room or sneaked a third chocolate chip cookie from the dessert table. On the whole, we weren't powerful, rich, intelligent, beautiful, or even especially godly. We were an unassuming collection of graduate students and grandmothers, musicians and mechanics, infants and immigrants. We were just ordinary people who would have to get up on Monday morning and do the next thing. Jim's delight over belonging with us almost seemed naïve.

But Jim wasn't naïve. He was loving what God loves.

God Loves His People

More than thirty times the New Testament writers address the church as "beloved."¹ And as we seek to embrace the privilege of belonging to the local church, we too must begin with this fundamental truth: God loves his people. Toward those

who are his own, God has a real heart affection and delight, a settled commitment to sacrificially seek their good, and a desire to see them grow in holiness. We will also see that the local church—a *body of believers and their children in a particular location under the leadership of elders*—is God’s beloved, visible people in this world and that we ought to love them as he does.² Finally, we will delight in the fact that belonging to the beloved brings us into fellowship with Christ himself.

It’s worth noting here that Scripture also attaches the word *beloved* to many of the other terms and truths we’ll consider later in this book: Jude encourages the church that they are “called, beloved . . . and kept” (Jude 1), and Paul reminds them that they are both “holy and beloved” (Col. 3:12). The apostolic writers address their readers as “beloved brothers” (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58; James 1:16); Paul mentions his “beloved fellow worker” (Philem. 1); and John calls the church in eternity “the beloved city” (Rev. 20:9). In future chapters, we’ll see that the local church has several glorious identities. We are (among other things) those called in Christ, made saints, joined as brothers and sisters, appointed as partners in gospel work, and included in the heavenly multitude. In this chapter, we’ll see that these are only true of us because we are beloved. Before we are anything else as the local church, we are the people God loves.

Of course, God’s love for his people didn’t begin with your local church, or even with the establishment of the New Testament church in the book of Acts. God’s love for his people is eternal. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” the Lord declares (Jer. 31:3; cf. Ps. 103:17). In the councils of eternity—before anything was made and before any human was present to witness it—God set his love on his people. The triune God who is himself love (1 John 4:8) determined to love others. And the rest of the story is the story of God making his love visible.

We get our first look at God's love for his people in the opening chapters of the Bible. During the early days of creation, God prepared an arena to display his love. He illuminated it with light, beautified and sustained it with water and plants, diversified it with animal life. Then at the end of the sixth day, with every star and starling ready to welcome them, God created a man and a woman. In love he created them.³ In love he called them to worship and work in the place where he set them. In love he gave them the ability and the duty to fill the earth with other worshipers (Gen. 1:28). In love he brought them into his near presence. He was with them, and they were his people. When God lovingly gathered Adam and Eve in the garden, he established the first congregation. And it was very good.

Sadly, the people of God fell into sin. They responded to his love with hatred and rebelled against the one who was their gracious king. They spurned his fellowship and clung to their sin instead. But their rejection of God did not cause God to reject them; instead, it served as an even greater arena to display divine love. Though his people despised him, God did not despise his people. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God calls his people—even his sinful and straying people—"the beloved of my soul" (Jer. 12:7). And, throughout the Old Testament we see God demonstrating his steadfast love for them. God made covenants with his people, entering into a relationship with them.⁴ God dwelt among his people, meeting with them in the tabernacle and temple. God spoke to his people, sending Moses and the prophets to proclaim his word to the assembly. God chastised his people, exercising fatherly discipline by handing them over to foreign nations. God redeemed his people from the waters of the flood, from slavery in Egypt, from exile in pagan lands. And God added to his people, giving godly families to Adam and Noah and Abraham and even

calling in outsiders like Ruth and Rahab. From Genesis to Malachi, God's gathered people are his beloved.

This doesn't change when we get to the New Testament. There, in the climax of the biblical narrative, God demonstrates his tender care for his beloved people by sending the beloved Son. In the atoning work of Christ, God revealed "the breadth and length and height and depth" of his love for his people (see Eph. 3:17–19). He loved his people from all eternity, and he loved them all the way to the cross. We read of Christ: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). By his work on their behalf, Christ cleansed his people from sin, united his people to himself, and secured their relationship with God (see Eph. 1:3–10). And because of this perfect, redeeming work, God gave his beloved people to Christ as Christ's heritage (e.g., Ps. 33:12). Christ came into the world to redeem all of his people and to gather them to himself as the holy object of his divine love.

Though Christ is not physically present with us today, God's love for his people is still on display—in the local church. No sooner had Christ gone up into heaven than his people gathered as local churches. Consider this description from the book of Acts:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (2:42, 46–47)

Hopefully your own local church isn't much different from that. No matter the century or the location, the followers of

Christ and their families commit themselves to gathering where God has placed them for the purpose of worship and mutual encouragement in submission to God-appointed leadership.⁵ Our life together may be simple—“the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship . . . the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42)—but it testifies to a glorious reality. In the ordinary local church, God makes his love for his people visible. It should be no surprise, then, that the apostolic writers all call the New Testament churches “beloved.” In the church God calls us out of the pagan world to gather together before him. In the church he dwells among us by his Spirit, promising to be present with us as we worship (Matt. 18:20; 28:20; cf. Ezek. 37:27). In the church he adds to our number those who are being saved, continuing his faithfulness to all generations. In the church he speaks to us by his word as it is read and preached. And in the church he gives us the sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—as a visible sign and seal that we belong to him.

Ultimately, “beloved” describes the local church because “beloved” describes Christ. Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father “loved . . . before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). From all eternity, the one who was coequal with the Father and the Spirit was also the object of their mutual love. And we who are “in Christ” are therefore those who have been “blessed . . . in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:1, 6). As the people who were created in Christ, redeemed by Christ, united with Christ, and given to Christ, our identity in the church is inseparably connected to his. If Christ is the beloved, in him we are beloved too.

Last Sunday I sat near Jim as our church received the Lord’s Supper. Along with the rest of the congregation, we heard the testimony of God’s love for his people: “This is my body, which is for you. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:24–25). With our eyes we saw the bread broken;

with our hands we held the crumbs and the cup; with our mouths we tasted the sign of God's unfailing covenant. In our outwardly unremarkable act of eating and drinking, God reminded us that we are the beloved people who have been redeemed by the blood of the beloved Son.

Loving the People God Loves

And what God loves, we must love. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1–2). If we are beloved children, we must walk in Christlike love for his people. Repeatedly in the New Testament, God calls the members of his beloved church to love one another.⁶ Love for the church ought to be a fundamental characteristic of our lives. You have a people. They are your local church. And our love ought to mirror God's love in three important ways.

1. Loving the Unlovely

Since the fall of Adam, sin has made everyone unlovely. Listen to some of the words that the Bible uses to describe fallen people: enemies (Rom. 5:10), strangers (Eph. 2:12), rebels (Ezek. 20:38), and haters (Rom. 1:30); impure (Eph. 5:5), disobedient (Eph. 2:2), hopeless (Eph. 2:12), and ignorant (Rom. 10:3). Our sin not only makes us repulsive; it rightly places us under God's wrath and displeasure (Eph. 2:3). There is nothing attractive about any of this. But, thankfully, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). When we were unlovely, God loved us. We did nothing to deserve his love, but he loved us anyway. In what might seem like circular reasoning, God explains his love for his people this way: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on

Beloved

you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you” (Deut. 7:7–8). God loves his people because of his own eternal, sovereign, good pleasure and nothing else. His love is “uncaused, un-purchased and unconditional.”⁷ His love is “uninfluenced.”⁸ He loves us because he loves us.

So we love God’s people simply because God loves them. Hear the words of the apostle John: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). God’s people are not always lovely. Every one of us can be thoughtless, immature, unkind, foolish, and repeatedly snared by sin. And those are just our obvious failings. We probably don’t even know the worst about the people in our church. But God does, and he loves us anyway. When Christ hung on the cross, he died for each particular sin of each particular person the Father had given him. There is no sin of his people yet to be discovered by the Lord and nothing that can disqualify his true children from his love. As we walk in love for the local church, our love models the love of God himself. There was nothing lovely in us that caused God to love us, so we don’t wait for God’s people to seem attractive in order to love them. If God in his sovereign good pleasure has set his love on these people from eternity past, uniting them to his Son and gathering them into his church, then it is our privilege to love them too.

2. Loving Sacrificially

God loves us because he loves us, and he loves us at great cost to himself. As we have already seen, our sin and rebellion set us against God and put us under his wrath. But because of the great love with which he loved his people, he sacrificed his beloved Son. On that starlit night in Bethlehem, God himself came into the world as a human baby. The Son made his home with us, experiencing all the struggles of life in a fallen

world. He obeyed the Father's will, joyfully and perfectly. He took our sins upon him, dying the death we deserved on the cross. Because he loves us, God propitiated his own wrath. He appeased his own judgment. He paid his own penalty. He set himself against his own Son so that he might align himself with us.⁹ With great cost and out of a great love, God reconciled his people to himself so that we might enter into a relationship with him.¹⁰

Our love for the local church, then, must assume this same self-sacrificing character. "By this we know love," writes John, "that [Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). Loving God's people requires us to lay down our lives. In the local church, we will regularly give up time, emotional resources, money, respect from the world, physical comfort, and personal preferences. But as John Stott explains, "No-one who has been to the cross and seen God's immeasurable and unmerited love displayed there can go back to a life of selfishness."¹¹ We will learn more in future chapters about the practical implications of our sacrificial love for the members of Christ's church, but for now we can commit to loving the people God loves, even at great cost to ourselves.

3. Love That Makes Us Lovely

The ultimate result of God's uncaused, sacrificial love is to make the objects of his love lovely. Garry Williams writes, "God does not find people who are beautiful and then decide to love them. Rather, he makes the objects of his love beautiful."¹² The glorious purpose of Christ's incarnation, obedience, death, and resurrection was so that he might "present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). God sets his love on sinful, rebellious, hateful,

and ignorant people. And his love changes everything about us. Listen to some of the beautiful words that the Bible uses to describe the people God loves: clean (Heb. 10:22), holy (Eph. 5:27), blameless (Eph. 1:4), faithful (Col. 1:2), chosen (1 Thess. 1:4), and lacking nothing (1 Cor. 1:4–8). Like the prophet Hosea who took a prostitute for a wife, lavished on her gold and silver, nourished her with grain and wine, and dressed her with flax and wool, the Lord tenderly gathers his people to himself and by his love he makes his beloved lovely (Hos. 2:7–8, 14–23; Rom. 9:25–26).

We cannot make anyone lovely—not in the way that God does by removing our sin and imputing Christ’s perfect righteousness to us. But our love for one another in the church does produce a sort of radiant loveliness that shines before a watching world. The church father Tertullian famously imagined the Romans marveling at the first-century church, saying, “See, how those Christians love one another!” And Jesus himself makes this point: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Though we may be awkward and unremarkable on our own, gathered in the mutual love of the church, we grow in loveliness. Our loveliness blossoms out of the love of God for us and in us, and it is affirmed and magnified and publicly displayed in the love we have for one another. It stands before the watching world as an invitation: come and see God’s love displayed.

God’s Love in Us

Thankfully, our love for the local church is not a self-produced love. We do not have to manufacture in our own hearts the love necessary to love a profoundly ordinary—and sometimes difficult—group of people whom we did not choose for ourselves. Instead, the God who loved each one of his people puts his love for them in us. John tells us that when we love one

another “God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12). We look to God for the incentive for our love, we look to God for the example of how to love, and we look to God for the love itself. When the God who is love (1 John 4:8) dwells in us by his Spirit, we have everything we need to love his people.

Belonging to the Beloved

Loving God’s beloved people doesn’t merely bring us into fellowship with one another; loving God’s beloved people also brings us into fellowship with the beloved Son. And it does this in two important ways.

First, in loving the local church, we become like Christ. As Pastor Jeremy Walker explains, “It is like God to love those whom God loves—it is godliness.”¹³ Do you want to grow in Christlikeness? Come to church and love the people you find there. In fact, our love for the local church is one way that God assures us that we truly belong to Christ. “Whoever loves,” writes John, “has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). If on a Sunday morning you find yourself reaching across the pew to take the hand of someone who is utterly different from you—someone whose manners or politics or gender or age or life’s work seems to have nothing to do with your own, be encouraged. If you pray for someone in the hospital or visit someone at her home or rake leaves on an elderly member’s lawn, take heart. If a smile rises to your lips when you greet a church member on the sidewalk, rejoice. Seek to grow in your love for God’s people, and give thanks to God when you do. These ordinary acts of love for Christ’s church are evidence that he is making you like Christ.

But second—and even more precious!—in loving the local church, we experience the presence of Christ. Before going to the cross to redeem his people, Christ prayed for the church.

Beloved

He asked the Father “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). In the church, because of the Father’s love, Christ is in us. He is among us—leading our worship and attending to our prayers—and he is within us—dwelling in his people by his Spirit.¹⁴ When we are there, week after week, worshiping and working alongside the gathered people of God, we will fellowship with Christ himself. The book of Proverbs tells us that “in a multitude of people is the glory of a king” (14:28), and so it is with Christ. He is love, and his love shines most brightly when it shines in the midst of his redeemed, gathered, beloved people. For all eternity, “My beloved is mine, and I am his” will be the song of the church and her Christ (Song 2:16).

Come, belong to God’s beloved.

Equipping Another Generation to Practice and Delight in Prayer



Exploring the Bible's teaching on corporate prayer and the rich blessings that result, *Praying Together* will help you delight in the privilege of prayer and give you the practical tools to make praying with others a regular practice in your home, your church, and your community.

"This book will remind you of how good and pleasant it is when God's people dwell—and pray—together in unity."

KATELYN BEATY, Managing Editor, *Christianity Today*

"Megan Hill has given us a primer on prayer that is both useful and eloquent."

JEN WILKIN, Director of Classes and Curriculum, The Village Church; author, *Women of the Word*; *None Like Him*; and *In His Image*

For more information, visit crossway.org.

The church has more beauty—and more value—than we can see with physical eyes. Though our congregations are made up of ordinary people engaged in predictable practices, we are an outpost of heaven itself. The church is the people of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit, and the fullness of Christ. With rich theology and practical direction, *A Place to Belong* invites us to experience the local church in light of the Bible's testimony. Considering nine biblical terms for the church—such as *beloved*, *brothers and sisters*, *saints*, and *gospel partners*—this book equips us to love and serve one another. Whether we are new Christians or mature believers, learning to love the local church can become one of our greatest privileges and highest joys. The church is where we belong.

“A thousand messengers point us to the good news of a personal relationship with Christ, but this book contains something precious: the good news of a corporate one.”

JEN WILKIN, Director of Classes and Curriculum, The Village Church; author, *Women of the Word*; *None Like Him*; and *In His Image*

“This book is positively, intelligently, and helpfully countercultural!”

NANCY GUTHRIE, author, *Even Better than Eden*; *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus*; and the *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* series

“Megan Hill’s love for the church and her Savior shines on every page. Readers will find themselves thanking God for his gift of ‘a place to belong.’”

CHARLES M. WINGARD, Dean of Students and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Help for the New Pastor: Practical Advice for Your First Year of Ministry*

MEGAN HILL (BA, Grove City College) is the author of *Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities, and Churches* and *Contentment: Seeing God’s Goodness*. She also serves as an editor for the Gospel Coalition. A pastor’s wife and pastor’s daughter, she lives in Massachusetts with her husband and four children, where they belong to West Springfield Covenant Community Church (PCA).

CHRISTIAN LIVING

 **CROSSWAY**
crossway.org

