

Living like Goldfish

One of my professors in seminary once told us that he used to feel sorry for goldfish. The reason is that goldfish spend countless hours and days going round and round in that little tank of water. And over and over again, day after day they see that same pirate ship and that same old treasure chest and the palm tree surrounded by blue stones. My professor said that he later discovered that a scientist had actually done some in-depth research on the minds of goldfish (I am totally serious) and what this scientist discovered was that goldfish have a memory span of only about three seconds. Now when you put this new information in perspective what you find is that the life of a goldfish—rather than dull and boring—is actually endlessly thrilling! Think of it. The goldfish swims around and thinks, “Wow, a pirate ship. And look, there’s a treasure chest and a palm tree.” And as they slowly make their next circle around the tank: “Look at that! A pirate ship and a treasure chest; wow a palm tree and blue stones!”

Unlike goldfish our lives, generally speaking, are not made better by having a short memory span. Sadly, many who claim to be Christians (and may be) seem to have forgotten the importance of membership in the local church and the structure and sound teaching that this provides for our spiritual growth and maturity. The Bible teaches that Christians are called to be members of a biblically healthy local church. We need to support and be supported by other Christians in the local church. In other words, it’s not just about me and what I want or don’t want, it’s about God’s plan for our Christian lives. All Christians have been given spiritual gifts that are for the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7). We are to be fed a regular diet of the Word preached from ordained ministers who ‘equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:11-12). We are to be in submission to the elders of the local church, “for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account” (Hebrews 13:17). It would be impossible to be shepherded by the elders of the church if we determine that we do not need or want to be members of the church.

It is in the context of the local church that we read many verses of scripture often called the “one another” verses. For example, the apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of

another....Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4: 25, 32). In the book of Hebrews 10:24-25 we read these words, also connected to church membership: “And let us consider how to stir up 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.”

I realize that it is entirely possible that there are Christians who are young in the faith who have not forgotten, but rather they have never been taught that a Christian must connect in membership to a biblically healthy local church for spiritual oversight by the elders in the church, healthy spiritual growth by feeding on the word preached and taught, participating in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as prayer and fellowship with other believers. And yet, if you are reading this article, you can never again say, “No one ever told me that.”

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