

Osaka International Church
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Title: "Reflections on Church Life"

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Key verses:

Ephesians 2:19 (NKJV) – "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

Ephesians 5:19-20 (NKJV) – "Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Good morning. Happy Anniversary, OIC! Today we celebrate 48 years since our church held its first worship service. I wasn't here when that took place, but during my first year in Kansai, I attended OIC's 18th anniversary celebration. That was the year our founding pastor retired, though he left just before my first visit to OIC, so I didn't get to meet him until a few years later when he returned to Japan for a visit. In those days, our worship services were being held in the Miyako Hotel. I have here a collection of Sunday bulletins from the 1990's and 2000's, and you can see two of the bulletins on the screen over here. In the early 1990's, our bulletins featured a photo of the Miyako Hotel along with two Bible passages: Ephesians 2:19 and Ephesians 5:19-20. The first of these two Bible passages continued to be featured in our Sunday bulletin for many years. I would like to focus on that verse as a key text for today's sermon.

Ephesians 2:19 (NKJV) – "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

I have entitled my message "Reflections on Church Life." I would like to share with you a number of verses on a number of aspects of church life, plus I want to share with you a little bit about the history of Osaka International Church and a bit of my own personal history. That verse Ephesians 2:19 really touches me because when I first came to Osaka, I did feel like a stranger and foreigner here, and I did find a church home with the people of God at OIC.

I have here a booklet entitled "Directory of English Speaking Congregations Around the World." It was published in 1983. It was in this book that I first learned of Osaka International Church. I acquired this booklet in 1986 when I was in my late 20's and I was about to fulfill a lifelong dream to travel around the world. I wanted to be sure during my travels that I could be able to attend church services on Sundays. Although I couldn't be in church every Sunday during my trip around the world, I tried as best as I could to be in the House of God as often as possible. That is something that has always been important to me.

Let me share with you a verse that I memorized when I was a college student and which has been special to me ever since. Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) – "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Look at verse 25 again: do not forsake assembling together, as some people are in the habit of doing. I never want to get in the habit of skipping church. In fact, I want to be in church on Sunday, fellowshiping with my brothers and sisters. And what I found so remarkable during my trip around the world was that I could find like-minded people wherever I went because

in the churches I visited, I found brothers and sisters with the same faith and the same values as myself. Even across denominations. Among evangelicals who stand on the Word of God and on the fundamental Christian doctrines, such as those outlined in the Nicene Creed, there is far more we agree on than disagree on despite denominational differences.

Well, on my world trip in 1986-87, this directory of English speaking congregations helped me connect with churches in various countries. But I did not visit Japan on that trip. I came to Japan several years later, and not as a tourist. I have told you before the story of how I came to Japan the first time on a short-term missions program, and then after that I stayed for one year to help an independent missionary in Shikoku. After those experiences, I did not sense a call to be a full-time missionary, but I did love Japan, so I returned here and settled in Osaka in 1992 and found a job teaching English in a high school. At that time, there were three English-speaking churches in Osaka prefecture, and I visited all three of them during my first couple of years in Osaka. But it was at Osaka International Church where I felt most at home. What I found at OIC was similar to what I found when I visited various churches during my world travels: even though we may come from different denominations and cultures, we stand on the essential, fundamental Christian doctrines, such as: God the Creator of all things, Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God who is the sacrifice for our sins, and belief in the Bible as God's holy and inspired written revelation to us, which is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Well, I have said enough about my own story. Next, let me spend a few minutes to tell you the story of Osaka International Church. Back in the 1970's, there was no English speaking church in the Osaka area. A Japanese pastor named Peter Okayama wanted to change that. He and another man, Tsugio Saito, desired to give expatriate Christians in Osaka a place to worship and fellowship in English. They visited Pastor Okayama's friend in the United States named Jack Marshall to share this vision with him. Jack had been a missionary in Japan and had experience pastoring two English-speaking churches in Kanto for a short time. Pastor Jack was excited by this vision. After a visit to Osaka and after much prayer, he accepted the call to pastor this new international congregation. In 1974, Jack and his wife Geri moved here, and on October 13 of that year, the first worship service was held. That took place at the Royal Hotel, which provided a meeting room for them. Jack Marshall was the pastor, Peter Okayama was assistant pastor, and Mr. Saito played the organ at that first service. The first hymn sung was "To God be the Glory," which we sang today. During my early years at OIC, that hymn was sung again each year on our anniversary day, and we did that again at the beginning of today's service.

Well, in 1992, Pastor Jack retired from OIC. He and his wife Geri returned to America, and about three or four years later Geri passed away. In the late 1990's, Jack married a former OIC member and church secretary named Keiko Yamamoto. Many of you have seen Jack and Keiko – they have visited us here several times. In the early 2000's, Jack and Keiko were invited to Brisbane, Australia, to help start a new bilingual Japanese/English church – they spent six years there. Then they returned to Keiko's hometown of Amagasaki and they started another bilingual church, called Rejoice. I know that many of you have visited there.

Well, I have told you the story of Osaka International Church. During my early years here, I remember this story being told on every anniversary day. It always warmed my heart to hear the story because I felt that OIC was a church started for people just like myself: English speaking Christians seeking a place of worship and fellowship with Christian brothers and

sisters. And from the beginning, many English-speaking Japanese Christians have made OIC their church home as well. All are welcome.

For many years, our Sunday bulletin contained the following “Vision Statement” of Osaka International Church:

“To exhibit the life & love of Jesus Christ, in unity within cultural diversity, so that expatriates & Japanese in the Kansai area may be drawn to a saving and growing faith in Christ.”

That is the end of my historical overview of OIC. I would now like to move to the theme of my sermon today, sharing with you various aspects of church life. And I would like to start with a verse I shared with you a few minutes ago.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) – “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

There are a few ideas I want to draw out of these verses. I mentioned one idea already. Verse 25 tells us not to forsake assembling together, which some people are in the habit of doing. I told you how much I desired to be with the people of God on Sundays even while traveling abroad. How much more important it is to be part of a local fellowship here where you are living. That is the first aspect of church life that I want to highlight in today’s message: do not forsake assembling together... do not forsake church attendance. Because we each need to be an active part of the Christian community. Your church needs you ... and you need the fellowship of your brothers and sisters.

Look again at verse 25. Here is the second aspect of church life that I wish to highlight: we are to be encouraging one another. That’s why we need to be active in the Christian community. The church is a family, and we need to support one another spiritually and emotionally. We are no longer strangers and foreigners, as Ephesians 2 tells us, but we are members of God’s household, members of God’s family, and we ought to be encouraging one another in our walk with the Lord.

Let me read for you something from our OIC church constitution. These are the opening words of the constitution: “Preamble: Whereas a group of English-speaking Protestant Christians resident in the Osaka area, believing it to be the will of God that the followers of Jesus Christ associate themselves in fellowship for mutual encouragement, for public worship and for active service, did band themselves together and organize the Osaka International Church, ...”

The founders of our church believed it to be God’s will that followers of Jesus Christ should associate together for three main purposes: mutual encouragement, public worship, and active service. I will touch on these three themes in today’s message. Right now, let me continue on with the theme of encouraging one another.

On that first OIC bulletin that I showed you at the beginning of today’s message, it quotes Ephesians 5:19-20 (NKJV) – “Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There is a related verse in Colossians 3:16 (NASB) – “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

In Ephesians it says we speak to one another in psalms and hymns. In Colossians, it says we are teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns. Here is the third aspect of church life I wish to highlight: let us be teaching and admonishing one another. Teaching and admonishing and encouraging one another are important features of church life, of congregational life. And we are using the Word of God when we do so. Colossians says, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you...” – we should be reading and listening to the Scripture and letting the words fill us and instruct us and transform us. We need to always be learning and growing in our Christian lives. And sometimes we need our fellow Christians to admonish us to keep on walking on the right path, because none of us is perfect in our obedience or perfect in our actions. We are disciples of Christ, and when I look at that word “disciple” I note that it is related to the word “discipline.” We need to be disciplined in how we live as followers of Christ. And here in my quotations from Ephesians and Colossians, the “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” are likely a reference to the different kinds of songs we find in the Book of Psalms ... but Paul’s words here might also refer to songs of praise composed by the Christians of the New Testament period. Both the Word of God and the songs of the church are a source of instruction and admonition to the people of God.

Here is another verse. Proverbs 27:17 (NASB) – “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” A different English translation (NKJV) renders this verse slightly differently – “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.” *Sharpens the countenance of his friend*. As we follow the instruction to encourage and admonish one another, we are sharpening each other, sharpening each other’s countenance. I hope that our words to our fellow Christians will be words that build up and brighten up their lives and their walk with the Lord. I told you in a message a few months ago that as I get older, more and more I hope that my life overall will have been more of a positive influence on the lives of the people around me rather than a negative influence, because I know from past experience how easy it is to be grumpy and complain and say negative comments to people. Let us be positive in our words to each other.

Romans 14:19 (NASB) – “So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”

1st Thessalonians 5:11 (NASB) – “Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you also are doing.”

Let us return to Ephesians 2:19 (NKJV) – “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” If you read the context of this verse, you learn that this passage is teaching that the Gentiles are now being included in God’s plan, that the promised Messiah is for Gentiles as well as Jews. Verse 18 says, “For through Him [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.” Through Christ both Jews and Gentiles now have access to God the Father by the Holy Spirit.

Let’s look at 1st Corinthians 12:13 (NASB) – “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” All who have put their faith in Christ are one body, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, all have access to the one Holy Spirit, who makes us into one body.

Galatians 3:28-29 (NASB) – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.”

This is the fourth aspect of church life that I wish to highlight. It doesn’t matter if you are Jew or Gentile ... it doesn’t matter what your social status is ... it doesn’t matter if you’re male or female, all who have put their faith in Christ are equally valued members of His family – we too have been made heirs of the promise given to Abraham’s descendants.

Colossians 3:11 (ESV) – “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” Again: Here, among the New Covenant people of God, the old distinctions are gone ... race and social status don’t matter.

And now I want to read verses 12 to 14 in this same chapter. We will see the next aspect of church life that I want to highlight: some character qualities that should characterize the people of God.

Colossians 3:12-14 (NASB) – “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also. ¹⁴ In addition to all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

We – the Jews and Gentiles who have embraced the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ – are the chosen people of God. He loves us. And we are called “holy” – this word “holy” means “set apart” ... we have been set apart from the rest of the world and dedicated now to God.

And we read here certain character traits that should mark us. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Forgiveness. And Love.
Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Forgiveness. Love.

Verse 13 again: “Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also.” Bearing with one another – all of us are imperfect, and sometimes we irritate each other, but we must bear with one another. And forgive one another. This is the essence of the Christian message.

The next few comments I have for you were added to this sermon by my wife while she was translating the message into Japanese. She says: if someone hurts you, you pray to God to heal that wound. But even if you pray to God for that healing, you sometimes feel that you aren’t healed. God’s teaching is that we must first forgive the burdens of others, as it says in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive our trespasses, as we have forgiven those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). We do this even if the other person has done wrong. If you don’t experience healing, it’s because you don’t really want to forgive the other person – right? If you really decide to forgive, the Holy Spirit will back you up. When that happens, the wounds of the heart will be healed and the heart will be free and burdens relieved. There is no pain in the heart when you recall that bad event. I suppose this is the real “forgiveness”. As we told you in the sermon on forgiveness last month, forgiveness brings blessings to both parties. It opens up new avenues. Forgiveness brings to healing for anything, not only in relationships.

Lets return to Colossians chapter 3. Love. We Christians are marked by love. Verse 14: we should “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” Love and unity.

In John 13:34-35 (ESV), Jesus says – “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. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” This is the mark that tells the world that we are Christ’s followers: that we love one another.

So much more could be said on each of these character qualities, but I want to move on to the next part of my message. I told you earlier that in the opening lines of our church constitution, the founders of OIC stated their belief that followers of Jesus Christ should associate together for three main purposes: mutual encouragement, public worship, and active service. I have said a lot about the first one ... let me now move on to the other two, which I’ll cover rather briefly.

Another aspect of church life that I want to highlight is public worship. I’m going to introduce this topic by quoting a few sentences from one of my theology textbooks, the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Here is what it says in an article on “Worship”:

The paradigmatic picture of early Christian worship has long been Acts 2:42. ... Other accounts indicate that early Christian worship included offerings, songs, and the felt presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 16:1–2; Eph 5:19; Gal 3:1–5). Worship encompassed the entirety of one’s life lived in obedience to God (Rom 12:1–2). ... This worship will find its consummation when people from every tribe, tongue, and nation join with the rest of creation in adoration before the throne of the Lamb (Rev 5:11–14).

(Esau McCaulley, “Worship,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook, Lexham Bible Reference Series* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).)

That last reference to Revelation chapter 5 is one of my favorite passages of Scripture, the description of praise and worship of God the Father and of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who redeemed people from every tribe, language, and nation, people like you and me. I love that passage, but won’t read it today. Let’s look at the life of the church in our current time and place. The first sentence of my quotation says this: “The paradigmatic picture of early Christian worship has long been Acts 2:42.” So, let’s look at that passage.

Acts 2:42 (NASB) – “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.” When the early Christians gathered together, their meetings were composed of these four parts: 1) devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, 2) fellowship, 3) the breaking of bread, and 4) the prayers. The “breaking of bread” refers to the Communion service and the shared meal that often accompanied it (you can look at 1st Corinthians 11 for more on that). Prayers had been an important feature of worship in the Jewish temple and they have been an important feature in Christian worship up to the present day. And fellowship – so crucial. Most of what I said previously in today’s message has been about how we are to encourage and admonish each other. And you know that OIC always has a “fellowship time” on the third floor after the service – even though in this current climate of the coronavirus we are unable to include snacks and drinks like we used to, we nevertheless still desire to have that time of conversation together. And verse 42 mentions first of all that the early Christians “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” A teaching aspect to the church gathering has always been a crucial feature of the worship service – reading the scripture and listening to some instruction on it in the form of a sermon or a short homily.

Well, let me move to the last section of my sermon. The last aspect of church life which I want to highlight is, in the words of our church constitution: “active service.” We all have a part to play in the Body of Christ, the church, whether a big part or a small part. We each have been given gifts from God to serve in one place or another in the church. Each part is important, and don’t worry if you think your part seems small or insignificant – each task is valued by God and necessary for church life. You have heard me speak on this topic before, and I recommend you look at my previous sermon entitled “A Place of Service.”

Let’s take a look at 1st Corinthians 12:4-7 (ESV) – “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Verse 11 – “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

There are varieties of gifts, but it is the same God, same Lord Jesus, same Holy Spirit who bestows these gifts to the people in His church, apportioned to each person according to God’s will. And the purpose is “for the common good” – you get a gift, but you exercise it for the benefit of the whole church of Christ.

Let’s read verse 13 – “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

And verse 27 – “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We all come from different backgrounds, but we are part of one Body of Christ, energized by one Holy Spirit. To make this body function properly, each member needs to play his or her part. Everyone is valued and everyone is important. My last admonition for you today is to find your place of service in your church to help the Body of Christ operate at full capacity, relying on the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to do so.

Let me close today’s message by quoting the OIC “Vision Statement” on the Sunday bulletin:

“To exhibit the life & love of Jesus Christ, in unity within cultural diversity, so that expatriates & Japanese in the Kansai area may be drawn to a saving and growing faith in Christ.”

God bless you all.

Happy Anniversary, OIC!