

EXCERPT

IVP Academic

Why Church? *A Basic Introduction*

July 9, 2019 | \$22, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5238-3

Is a church just something we create to serve our purposes or to maintain old traditions? Or is the church something more vital, more meaningful, and more powerful? In this introduction to the nature of the local church, historian and missionary Scott Sunquist brings us a portrait of the church in motion, clarifying the two primary purposes of the church: worship and witness.

Understanding the Church Through Time and Throughout the World

Many years have passed since I had my crisis of “church faith.” My conversion to Jesus at the age of sixteen was in some ways a conversion away from the church I had come to experience and only partially love. I had tried to leave the church and just focus on Christian friends and relatives, but I kept getting drawn back. I have, frankly, attended churches that have been frustrating and even embarrassing when I have brought my friends. I have been to churches that support abortion (which I do not) and churches that really don’t want to be multicultural (which I do want). I have attended churches that talk about the Bible, but really do not study it, and I have attended churches that talk about love and diversity, but seem only welcoming to older white liberals. I have also been to churches where you have to know how and when to turn pages in a “liturgy” book and when to stand up, speak, be silent, or sit down—things I didn’t know and so found frustrating.

With all of these frustrations and imperfections in churches, I have come to realize that I am really the main problem. At the same time I have discovered that the Church is really one of God’s best ideas (second only to Jesus). Two issues regarding the church have helped me come to these conclusions. First is history. As I was traveling through life, trying to be faithful to Jesus as a university student, then as a junior high teacher/soccer coach, then as an InterVarsity staff worker, then as a missionary, and now as a seminary professor, I found out that I had become a historian. I have now written a lot about history, mostly about the history of the church. I have discovered that the Church and local churches are amazing, diverse, complex, and very, very meaningful. I have found that many governments find the church their greatest enemy! They try to crush the church because it threatens their rule.

My frustration and even anger at the church decades ago was in part because of my ignorance of what the church is. Was I to blame? Partly, but my fairly liberal mainline “Christendom” church was also to blame. I was involved in a local community that was much more beautiful and much more profound than I was led to believe. If I had known about the early church, living in the shadow of Jesus, the former dead person, I think I would have been much more committed to the idea of church. If I had known about how early Christians developed patterns of living and dying in imitation of Jesus, it would have helped me a great deal. Since that time I have come to have great respect for the great martyrs of the church—those who died for their faith, refusing to recant or deny Jesus as Lord—missionaries, and even some pastors and priests (people I had no desire to emulate until I met some great ones). For me, history has revealed the richness, diversity, and even the joy of “church.” I plan to talk a lot about history in the following pages, mostly about people in history, which is far more interesting than facts and dates. But I will also talk about the church around the world. Thus, we will try to understand the church through time and throughout the world.

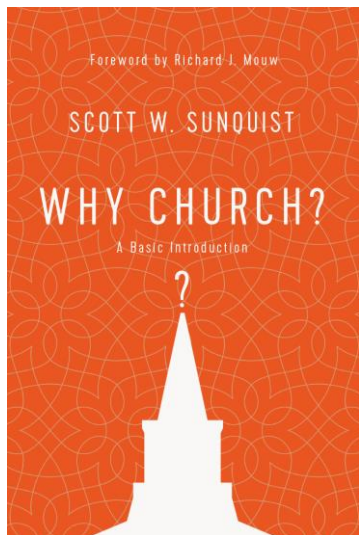


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Related to history is culture. I have discovered that the church, or at least any local church, is embedded in local communities and larger societies. Churches are so different from one another! Some churches have incense and bells, large statues and paintings and stained glass; others have dirt floors and split cane walls. Some churches have no music, and others thrive on worship that is mostly singing and chanting. I have been to churches with joy and dancing (even dancing when the people come up to give their offerings), and I have been to very solemn churches where I have struggled to follow the little book in the pew with bold type and normal type and seasonal prayers that make it very difficult for the outsider to follow. At times I wish all these different churches were more similar, and then I catch myself: how wonderful it is that churches reflect different cultures and even different issues and themes from the Bible.

The best of churches, I believe, are both connected to the past and culturally relevant: connected and contextual. They are mysteriously ancient, and they make sense to the local visitor. I hope that after a few hours of reading this book you will come to a similar conclusion for yourself.

—From the chapter 1, “Church: Only Two Purposes”



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Scott W. Sunquist (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Previously, he was a professor and dean at the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, he taught missiology and Christian history at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and he also lectured as a Presbyterian missionary at Trinity Theological College in Singapore.

Writing frequently about Asian Christianity, global Christianity, and missiology, Sunquist is the author of *Explorations in Asian Christianity*, *Understanding Christian Mission*, and *The Unexpected Christian Century*. He is also the editor of *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, coauthor of *A History of the World Christian Movement, Volume I* and *Volume II*, and coeditor of a volume of *A History of Presbyterian Missions, 1944-2006*, with his daughter.

"In this deceptively profound book, Scott Sunquist writes, 'the church was Jesus' idea.' Local congregations have two grand purposes: to worship and do mission. Utilizing two millennia of church life and contemporary stories from around the world, he weaves a wonderful tapestry of biblical teaching and personal illustration. Only a personally pious and missional historian could write such a book."

—Alec Hill, president emeritus, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

"Rising generations who wonder about the church's significance today will find Why Church? a compelling and timely book. Scott Sunquist masterfully weaves together clear theological claims with his own experiences along with beautiful illustrations of the global church. Taking on the real challenges we face to live like one body, this book will heighten your imagination by breaking down predominant conceptions of the church as a sterile religious institution. Sunquist increased my curiosity to once again examine the movement from worship to witness as well as the critical nature of our shared Christian identity. As you read, you will experience being invited to come and kneel with communities who are on the go."

—Sharon Galgay Ketcham, author of *Reciprocal Church*, professor of theology and ministry at Gordon College, MA

"In a post-Christendom era, a primer on what the church is all about is sorely needed. Sunquist offers us a book that is fluent and fresh, combining profundity and down-to-earth simplicity, with healthy doses of humor and no-nonsense realism. After reading it, you are very likely to agree with him when he writes: 'the church is really one of God's best ideas.'"

—Jeremy Begbie, Duke University



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