

“With a pastor’s heart, Tony Merida delivers a practical manual that not only instructs, but also inspires. Merida reminds us that our local church—with all its quirks—is a family. This simple truth will stir your heart to love and will encourage believers in pews everywhere.”

WALTER R. STRICKLAND II, Assistant Professor of Systematic and Contextual Theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“It’s fair to say that the contemporary church is doing a serious re-think about church membership. We are recognizing that we have bred a consumerism that prioritizes self-satisfaction over selfless commitment to the purposes of Christ. Merida courageously enters the re-think with a sweet spirit, reminding us that the one who invited us to take up our cross for him also called us to be responsible for his corporate body as well as our personal souls.”

BRYAN CHAPELL, Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church in America

“I pray that every Christian would love their church, and I believe this book can help us get there! Tony writes with a pastoral heart and offers extremely practical help for every one of us to grow in love. I believe the world will be changed when we all learn to heed this call.”

JENNI PRICE, Women’s Ministries Director,
The Grove Community Church, Riverside, California

“An excellent resource for all Christians seeking to understand the importance of being a part of a local church and the extraordinary blessings that come from being fully engaged and committed as a church member. If you’re struggling to commit to a local church because of past church hurt or any other reason, I implore you to give this book a read.”

DR. DOUG LOGAN, JR., President of Grimké Seminary;
Dean of Grimké Urban; Associate Director of Acts 29

“This book does what it sets out to do—to help ordinary Christians to love Jesus and his church and to know how to do it. Not only is it a tremendously enjoyable book to read but it achieves the rare blend of taking deep Bible truth and presenting it in an engaging and winsome way.”

SIMON AUSTEN, Rector, St Leonard’s Church, Exeter, UK

“Jesus loves his church—his bride—enough to die for her. Often we can take our church for granted, be lukewarm or lazy (going through the revolving door of church life on someone else’s push). Yet to belong to the people of God is a great privilege and responsibility. Tony Merida shows us from the Bible the why and how of loving our church. His message is clear and urgent, because loving our church will have value into eternity.”

AL STEWART, National Director, FIEC Australia

“The best thing I could say about this book is that I love the church more after reading it. And I’m confident you will, too. Whether you’re new to a church, or you’ve spent your whole life in church, *Love Your Church* will help you experience the wonder of what God has designed you and me to experience as brothers and sisters in Christ.”

DAVID PLATT, Lead Pastor, McLean Bible Church, Washington, D.C.;
Author, *Radical*

“Jesus is perfect—he will never let us down. The church, however, is full of people who are not perfect and will let us down. Why bother with them? It’s because God is building a community of people who love him and who also love each other. Tony Merida’s eight great things about being a church member reach beyond his own church and culture. So, whether your church sounds just like his or a bit different, you’ll discover what church is for, why you should be part of a church, and why you will love being part of a church—God’s family.”

LIZ COX, Minister for Women and Community,
St Giles’ Church, Derby, UK

“A great book—thoroughly biblical, honest, practical, and readable. It is very timely in its proper and elevated view of the glory of the local church. The eight main sections are worthy of thorough study and personal reflection. Read it, and get others to read it!”

TREVOR RAMSEY, President, Association of
Baptist Churches in Ireland

“The time has come for us to face the music: the church is in crisis throughout most of the Western world. I think this reveals that many people have a misunderstanding of the true nature of the church. It is time for us to recapture the New Testament’s vision of Christ’s church. I am happy to commend Tony Merida’s timely book, which is a clarion call for us to fall back in love with Christ and his church.”

DR. WINFIELD BEVINS, Director of Church Planting,
Asbury Seminary

“Not often do you find a book that is written for church members and which is both intensely practical and deeply theological. In *Love Your Church*, Merida helps you love not an idyllic church but your church.”

AMBER BOWEN, Assistant Professor of Philosophy,
Redeemer University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

“The kind of book that I want to put into the hands of every person in our church. It reads like a conversation with a wise friend over a coffee, patiently walking us into a compelling vision of what Jesus wants our church to look like. Each chapter comes loaded with practical and easily implementable next steps.”

ADAM RAMSEY, Lead Pastor, Liberty Church, Gold Coast, Australia;
Network Director, Acts 29 Australia & New Zealand;
Author, *Truth on Fire*

“Through careful biblical instruction, good humour, and rich personal experience, Tony Merida encourages the reader to want to serve the church over which Jesus is Lord—responsibly, joyfully and wholeheartedly. This is a ‘must read’ for every church member.”

FRANK SELLAR, Minister, Bloomfield Presbyterian Church,
Northern Ireland

“This book reminds me why it was that, long before I became a pastor, I was thrilled to be a part of a local church. I commend it enthusiastically and hope that each member of my church will read, mark, inwardly digest, and live out the lessons learned.”

ALISTAIR BEGG, Senior Minister, Parkside Church,
Chagrin Falls, Ohio; Author, *Brave by Faith*

“Church feels complicated these days. People wonder if it’s even relevant anymore and we tend toward cynicism and individualism. In *Love Your Church* Tony Merida is like a big brother who explains what in the world the church is for. His eight reasons to love my church lifted my eyes off of myself and off the current cultural landscape and onto the beauty and wonder of God and how he designed his people to gather together with purpose, care, mission, and joy. This is a life-giving read.”

JEN OSHMAN, Author, *Enough About Me*

“It’s easy to say grand things about the church as an abstract concept. It’s possible to propound a high view of ‘the church’, all the while having a relatively low view of the actual churches we go to. This book is a pastor’s call to love ‘the church’ by loving our churches. Through eight short, punchy chapters, Tony encourages us to embrace all that God has for us in the motley crew that makes up the local church.”

RORY SHINER, Senior Pastor, Providence City Church, Perth, Australia

“*Love Your Church* is biblical and engaging, but above all it is timely. Many of our normal church practices have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging from this period many recognise the need to recalibrate our church life according to the teaching of the New Testament. This accessible book provides a wonderfully helpful tool in that process of re-thinking and evaluating our priorities. I warmly commend it.”

ANGUS MACLEAY, Rector, St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, Kent, UK

“Tony Merida provides a word-centred, Christ-exalting, accessible and practical GPS for every Christian to help them avoid the holes in the road and accelerate forward in ministry and mission together in the local church. I will enthusiastically hand this book out to the leaders and members of our church.”

JONATHAN E. McCLAUGHLIN, Senior Pastor, Hamilton Road Baptist Church, Bangor, Northern Ireland

LOVE
YOUR
CHURCH

TONY
MERIDA

Love Your Church:
8 Great Things About Being a Church Member
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For Imago Dei Church

*And for faithful church members around the world—
the unsung heroes who continue to bless the church
and advance Jesus' mission*

CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Ray Ortlund</i>	11
Introduction: What Your Church Is	15
1 Belonging	23
2 Welcoming	37
3 Gathering	55
4 Caring	75
5 Serving	93
6 Honoring	109
7 Witnessing	123
8 Sending	141
Conclusion: A Vision of Your Church	159
Discussion Guide	163
Bibliography	171
Acknowledgments	175

FOREWORD

Jesus did not come into this world merely to start a new community. He came to start a new kind of community. In a world of grandiosity and brutality, Jesus gave his very lifeblood to start a community set apart by beauty—his own beauty.

For example, his famous Beatitudes—the “ground rules” for his new community—begin this way: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). His word “blessed” means “Congratulations!” It’s a high-five. So Jesus is congratulating, high-fiving, celebrating and welcoming the poor in spirit. He looks past the big-shots, the heavy-hitters, the insiders, the cool kids. He looks to the poor, who have nothing to offer him, nothing to boast about, nothing but need—these are very ones he rejoices over and welcomes in and enriches as the heirs of his kingdom.

Who would start a think-tank with dropouts? Who would start a business with bankrupts? Who would start a bold new venture with failures? Jesus. He builds his new kind of community with sinners so bad they can’t give God a single reason why he should even notice them.

He gathers into his arms those very sinners and says to them, *Congratulations! You stand to inherit everything worth having forever!*

In his new kind of community, we don't bring our strengths. We bring our needs. And he provides everything—and on terms of his grace, too. There is no room left for our swagger. All we have now, all we need, is Jesus in his all-sufficient mercy. And that surprising strategy is how his beauty enters into this world of ugliness.

Pastor Tony Merida and I deeply believe this. We are giving our lives to advancing this new kind of community that only Jesus can create. And I am glad to commend Tony's wonderful new book, *Love Your Church*. This book you are holding in your hands can powerfully enrich your experience of Jesus and his community.

I am struck by two things about Tony's book, for starters. First, the categories are magnificent. Look at the table of contents. It lists the priorities we really do want in our churches: belonging, welcoming, gathering, caring, serving, honoring, witnessing and sending. Who today is suffering from too much of these glorious realities? Too much belonging, for example? Have we nailed that one down so well that we can "move on"? And I'm struck that not one of these sacred privileges Tony commends to us is specific to one denomination or another. These aren't Baptist only or Anglican only or Presbyterian only. These heavenly powers are simply Christian. They show us where Jesus is present. We can reach for these gospel

proofs without any concern that we might lose our way or go too far.

The second thing about Tony's book that jumps out at me is how he concludes each chapter. He offers us "Action Steps," to help us get traction at a practical level. We have enough theoretical Christianity already, don't we? What we need more of is real Christianity that makes a real difference. Tony's bullet points take us to that next level. As you come to the end of each chapter, why not dare to take the challenge, by God's grace and for his glory? Let's embody, in every practical way, real Jesus-created community in our churches.

But for me, the best thing about Tony's book is the overall tone of it and the impact it will surely make. This book will help us all see our churches with new eyes of expectancy and love our churches with new gladness of heart. Instead of finding fault, we will marvel at the privilege of belonging to a church where Jesus is present. If your church isn't beneath him, isn't it good enough for you? The whole outlook Tony imparts to us throughout this book is a new sense of wonder that we get to be involved in the greatest reality on the face of the earth today: the community where Jesus himself lives.

Walking into church Sunday by Sunday with this awareness living in our hearts, we can start breathing life into everyone around. And who isn't looking to die less and live more? I love how one of my heroes, Francis Schaeffer, said it decades ago:

“If the church is what it should be, young people will be there. But they will not just ‘be there.’ They will be there with the blowing of horns and the clashing of high-sounding cymbals, and they will come dancing with flowers in their hair.”

(The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century, p 107)

And old people will come too. And our cities will begin to sense that Jesus himself has come to town!

Thank you, Tony, for helping us reach for that prophetic reality in every one of our churches.

Ray Ortlund, February 2021

INTRODUCTION

WHAT YOUR CHURCH IS

If you're reading this book, then I want you to know that I have an agenda: I want people to love Jesus and his church—and to know how to love their church.

That's it.

There is a plethora of books on the church, and I'm grateful for so many excellent resources. What is distinct about this little book is my attempt to speak to the “ordinary” Christian, with the aim that he or she—you—will realize the significance of the church and what role they can play in it. This is not a book for church leaders, though I hope they benefit from it; it is for anyone who wants to faithfully follow Jesus in the context of a local Christ-centered fellowship, and to enjoy making a difference as they do.

And if you are to love your church, the best place to start is by seeing what your church *is*.

ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE OUR FAMILY?

My wife and I have five adopted children: four from Ukraine and a son from Ethiopia. Joshua, our Ethiopian son, had been home with us for about four months when he experienced his first Christmas. I will never forget one particular moment that December—not only because it’s a precious family memory but because it so wonderfully illustrates the nature of the church.

After being amazed by the snow in Northern Virginia, we entered the home of Joshua’s new grandparents. The house was filled with family members—and it’s a lively family! Joshua, who was five years old at the time, was holding my hand as he carefully observed all of these cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. With the Christmas music playing, lights shining, and presents laid out under the tree (for him too!), he looked up and asked, “Papa, are all of these people our family?”

“Yes, son,” I said. “All of these people are our family.”

Likewise, every time we walk into our church’s large or small gatherings, we can say of fellow believers, “All of these people are our family.”

Some of you may be tempted to say in your (extended) family gatherings, “*Unfortunately*, all of these people are our family...” That too illustrates the church! Every church has people who are difficult to love. You may be one of them from time to time! Every church has some crazy uncles and wild brothers and sisters; for evidence

that this has always been the case, just read Paul's letters to the Corinthians. But that's the church.

What Joshua was learning during his first Christmas was this lesson: *when you get adopted, you get a new family*. And the church is a family of adopted brothers and sisters (see Galatians 4 v 4-7; Romans 8 v 12-17). When we come to faith in Christ, we get not only a new relationship with our Father but new family members too (1 Timothy 3 v 15; 5 v 1-2; Galatians 6 v 10).

We are an "already-but-not-yet" community of brothers and sisters transformed by our elder Brother and King, Jesus; that is, we experience true salvation now (the "already"), but we await final and full salvation in the future (the "not yet") with all God's people throughout all of time. As an already-but-not-yet community, we show the world what our King is like, and what the kingdom to come will be like, through our shared life and our mission of word and deed in the world. Seen this way, the local church is like a little embassy of the greater kingdom of God, living under the gracious rule of Christ. We are situated outside of our homeland (as sojourners and exiles, 1 Peter 2 v 11), so our life and actions are different from others. We are here so that the outside world would look at us and see something different and ask, "You guys aren't from around here, are you?" No, we aren't. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we're waiting for our Savior to come from there to here and make all things new (Philippians 3 v 20).

When you gather in a local church to sing praise to God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and to sit under the word of God, partake in the Lord’s Supper, observe a baptism, fellowship with fellow family members, and pray together, you are doing much, much more than “going to a religious meeting.” You are part of something different—something glorious and something eternal. And all of it is made possible through the saving work of Christ Jesus.

The statements about the church in Scripture are stunning. For instance, in one single, awesome sentence the apostle Paul declares the vitality of the church, the familial nature of the church, and the truth proclaimed by the church: we are “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 4 v 15). Or consider when Paul spoke to the Ephesian pastors/elders and said, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for *the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood*” (Acts 20 v 28, my emphasis). What a privilege to belong to God’s church, which has been purchased by the atoning work of God’s own beloved Son! Or consider how Jesus so identifies with his church that when Paul was persecuting the church, Jesus asked, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9 v 4; 22 v 7, my emphasis). In this moment, the terrorist who would become the apostle realized not only that Jesus is the living Lord, but that to persecute the church was to

persecute him. That is how bound up Jesus' heart is with his church.

RESPONSIBILITIES THAT ARE PRIVILEGES

In this book, I want to draw your attention to eight key responsibilities of church members. Each responsibility is also a privilege.

In chapter one, we'll see why it is important to belong to a local church. In the next chapter, we'll see why and how to practice hospitality, welcoming all types of people into our fellowship. The importance of our worship services occupies the next chapter. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the calling for church members to care for one another and to serve the body with the use of our spiritual gifts. Chapter 6 will outline some of the key responsibilities of pastors and describe how members should relate to pastors. Chapters 7 and 8 both deal with mission—both our individual witness and how we can impact our communities and the world as a local church.

This book is not meant merely to impart information. I hope that it changes you. So at the end of each chapter there is a brief list of “action steps,” which is intended to show you what it may look like to become a church member who loves your church well in the area that we've explored in that chapter.

I want you to be thrilled about being a part of a local community of believers. And I know that many of us (whether we would say it out loud or not) are not too

thrilled when it comes to being part of a church. There are a number of reasons why people aren't deeply invested in a church family. First, some have been hurt by members of a church, and some have been hurt by pastors. I grieve over these realities and desire for these individuals to receive care, healing, and restored fellowship in a faithful church family. If this book helps you with that, I'll rejoice.

Others are "pro church in theory but not in reality" Christians. They see church as something that's good if you have nothing going on during the weekend, or something that they want their kids to experience, but after they've grown up, it's sort of optional.

Many love the *idea* of the church but don't actually have fellowship with real believers in a local church. Some keep up with church news on social media, and even offer "advice" for pastors, but are "missing in action."

Some are open to learning about the importance of the church but simply haven't been taught that much about it. If that's you, then I'm glad you're reading!

Still others have been serving and loving their church for some time but are tired, due to their context, or internal problems in the church, or for some other reason. Exhausted Christians need to be reminded of the inexhaustible riches of Christ, and they need to be reminded of how significant their labors in his church are. I hope I can stir you up by way of reminder.

Then there are “church ninjas”: those individuals that I see from the platform during our church services and about whom I think, “I don’t know that person,” “I haven’t seen that person in a while,” or “I need to get him/her/them connected to some other members.” But by the time I get out to the lobby to meet them, they’re gone! I marvel at their speed but would love to hear their stories. I assume some are interested seekers exploring the claims of Christianity. Others may be reluctant to get involved in the church because of a negative church experience in the past. Some may feel that our church could never be as great as their former church back home, so they stay distant. I guess some may not like my sermon and can’t wait to leave. Maybe there are other reasons. I long for them to experience the joy of biblical community made possible through Christ Jesus.

Finally, some people really do love their church but are not quite sure *how* to love it. Some wonder, “If I’m not in ministry leadership, or in the band, or on some leadership team, what is my role?” If that’s you, then I hope this book will help you catch a glimpse of what you can do through simple but meaningful acts of discipleship in and for your church.

Regardless of where you’re at, we all will benefit by recapturing the New Testament’s vision of Christ’s church. We can all learn to love our church as Christ calls us to.