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**Fruitful congregations ‘Remain’ (vv. 3 & 4)**

***Fruitful Congregations place encounter with the Living God***

***at the centre of their life***

**Off centre**

We know when something is off centre, whether on the mantelpiece or the flower arrangement in church. It looks the same as it always has, but we notice a subtle shift in its position from where it is meant to be. It knocks everything out. It disturbs the balance. Now nothing works the way it should.

In verse 3 Jesus reminds us of the need for our lives and congregations to be centred on a living relationship with God. That’s how our lives as Christians and the life of the Church began. Jesus says, ‘You are *already* clean because of the word that I have spoken to you’ (v.3) – His word of life that we have heard and received. But that centredness on Jesus is easily lost in a world of distraction and amid the whirr of busyness. This is why Jesus reminds us of the need to *‘remain’* in Him (v.4).

**Centrepiece**

The weekly centrepiece of our congregation’s life and witness needs to be time spent focusing on and meeting with the Living God in worship. When lingering in the presence of the Living God in praise, prayer and responding to the prompting of His Word is knocked off centre, we fail to ‘remain’ in the way Jesus describes. The activities of our life and witness lose their focus on Him and no longer draw their power from Him. Forgetting how and why we are meant to do what we do, life drains and barrenness results.

**Community centre**

The Sunday Worship Service is the primary place in which the community of God’s People in the congregation come together as one to *engage* with the Living God. Together we *encounter* God afresh, we *express* our gratitude for the gospel, we *explore* what He is saying to us, we e*xperience* His presence, we are reminded to *expect* Him to work in and through our life and witness. More than we realise, the way we approach our worship of God shapes who we are, what we do and how we do it as His People.

Although – maybe because - worshipping God is the part of congregational life and worship most members are involved and familiar with, both those leading and participating in worship need to work hard at concentrating hearts and minds on God. Those leading worship need to think about content and employ creativity. As participants, we need to *expect* that God will meet with us; focus with heart, soul, mind and strength so that we might *connect* with Him; and deeply *reflect* on what He has said to us.

Having our life as a community of God’s People centred on encounter with the Living God in Christ is crucial because, as Jesus reminds us, ‘No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me’ (v.4).

*How does what your congregation do in worship connect to what happens in other areas of its life and witness?*

*When have you felt like your activities in the congregation’s life or witness have lost their focus and power?*

*Describe a time when you knew you had encountered God in worship? How did it happen? What was involved? What difference did it make?*

*How can we better worship Sunday by Sunday expecting to meet with God, connecting with Him through the different sections of the service and reflecting on what He has said to us?*