

Why I Love the Church (And You Should Too)

Ephesians 5:25-32; Matthew 16:13-20

July 17 & 18, 2010
Chris Carr

Well, it is very good to have the opportunity to open God's Word with you tonight. If you will go ahead and turn with me to two passages -- Ephesians 5 and Matthew 16, we will get to them in just a moment. While you turn, let me introduce myself to those of you who may be new. My name is Chris Carr and it is my privilege to serve here at Bethel on the pastoral team.

I would also like to take a moment and thank the church for the 10th anniversary celebration that was given to me a few weeks ago. If you weren't here, it was a great night to roast me a little bit and at the same time celebrate God's goodness over the last 10 years.

As part of the celebration, I was given a trip to New York City with my wife Eva. The trip had two major highlights to it – one for me and one for Eva. For me, there were tickets to a Yankees game at the new Yankee Stadium. And it was fantastic. I know that some of you Sox and Cubs fans are asking how in the world I can be a Yankees fan. My only response is that I like being able to celebrate a World Series win more than once in my lifetime; or century if you are a Cubs fan.

For Eva, there were tickets to *Phantom of the Opera*. Many of you have asked me how that went. I can only tell you what I told the person who said that it was a once in a lifetime experience to see *Phantom* in New York. I told her "I hope so." All joking aside, it was a great trip and we are very grateful to all of you for your love and support. We love Bethel and we hope to have many more years of ministry with you here.

Now, to the task at hand. My assignment for today is to address the issue of church membership. And while the most direct way to do this would be to give you a list of biblical reasons for it, I have decided to take a different approach. In fact, I am going to talk very little about the concept of membership and rather focus upon developing a correct theology and understanding of the Church itself.

I really believe that many people don't understand the importance of church membership because they don't understand the importance of the Church itself. My hope for today is that the Holy Spirit will instill within all of us a love and passion for the Church so great that we all will want to be a part of what God is doing in His Church, and specifically here at Bethel. So, the title for my message today is this: *Why I Love the Church (And You Should Too)*.

Let me begin by clarifying what church I am talking about. The term "church" in the New Testament comes from the Greek word *Ekklesia*, which means "called out ones." It is normally translated "gathering" or "assembly." It has a unique redemptive meaning when it is used in two different ways: in general, it refers to all Christians of all times from all

locations; all of those whom God has called to be His. It is known as the invisible Church because it is impossible for anyone but God to see its full expression and number.

At the same time, there is also a visible church, or churches, which are local assemblies of believers that come together to form a specific visible, local church. And the New Testament clearly teaches that all true believers are, by default, members of the invisible Church, and all true believers belong to a visible church. In fact, the New Testament knows nothing of Christians who are not officially part of a visible church.

To clarify, when I say that I love the church I mean the Church as a whole -- the entire body of Christ, and specifically its local expression in Bethel Church. And I hope that the result of this message is that you will love the church, both visible and invisible, as well.

To keep it simple I have just two main points; two main reasons for my love for the Church.

Two Reasons to Love the Church

First, I love the Church because:

Jesus loves the Church (Ephesians 5:25-32)

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

This passage is, of course, the key passage on marriage in the Bible. Notice verse 32. What does Paul say he is actually referring to? *To Christ and the church*; so when we read and study this passage, we certainly want to learn what we can about marriage, but we have to be careful that we don't miss the important things that Paul is saying about the Church's relationship to Christ.

Look again at verse 25. Paul tells husbands that they are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. What is the model, the standard, that Christian husbands are called to? The standard is Christ's love for the Church. And how did He show His love to the Church? Paul says he *gave himself up for her*. This is somewhat vague, but in Acts 20:28 Paul is a little more to the point as he gives instructions to the Elders of this church. He says: *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.*** (Emphasis added)

Christ showed His love for the Church by laying down His life, and shedding His blood on the cross. The God of the universe stooped down to become a man, took on human flesh, lived the difficult life of a first-century Jewish carpenter, and ultimately suffered perhaps the cruelest form of execution ever. Why? He did it because of His love for the Church.

Now, there is something very important to the point I want to make today that you can easily miss. Please listen to this. Most of the time when we read passages like Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 5:25, we look at them through American individualistic eyes. We primarily think of Christ dying for us individually. When we read these passages we think, *Christ loves me. Christ died for me.* And He certainly did. But it is also just as true, and is quite clear here, that He also died for us collectively as a group, as His Church.

This might be a good time to take a moment and look at all of the different metaphors the Holy Spirit uses in the New Testament for the Church.

- Household (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17)
- Family (Ephesians 3:15; Hebrews 2:11)
- Flock (John 10:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2)
- Building (1 Corinthians 3:9; Ephesians 2:21)
- Bride (Ephesians 5:22-32; Revelation 19:7, 21:9, 22:17)
- Body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:23, 5:23)

Now, think about this for a minute. Why do you think that the Holy Spirit went to pains to repeatedly describe the Church in different ways? It's like He is trying to use every means possible to get across the point to us that the Church is really, really important.

You see, on my own I don't make up God's household, family, building, or body. I am a part of it, but not the whole; not by a long shot. This fact means that, whether I like it or not, for better or worse, I am intimately connected to everyone else who is a part of the Church. Look around today. Do you see these people here? They are your brothers and sisters. We are family. Long story short, we are in this together.

Let's press this a little further. Look at verses 22-24: *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

Once again we will ignore the marriage ramifications and simply look at what Paul says about the Church. The key verse is 23. Christ is the head, and the Church is the body. Here is what is happening to a significant degree, in the Church at large and even to some degree here at Bethel. There are some who are in love with the head but are really not so crazy about the body. Do you know what I mean? There are some who claim to be committed to Jesus, but they have little affection and commitment to His body. There are even some who have given up on the Body altogether.

Isn't that a little strange, and quite problematic? How can you love the head and want nothing to do with the body? Would any of us say to our spouse, "You know your head is really beautiful, but I am not so crazy about the rest of you. Can we just remove your head and get rid of your body all together?" Now, if you think that is not proper for a message then you might be getting the point. We can't say that we want Jesus, but we don't want what comes along with Jesus. And for better or for worse, what comes along with Jesus is the Church.

Three categories of affection for and involvement with the Church

I'd like to take a few moments to do a short analysis of how this plays out practically at Bethel. As I think about the church here, it seems to me that those who call Bethel their church fall into three broad categories regarding their affection for and involvement with the church.

The Connected

These are people who love the church and give themselves to it. They are faithful in attendance, they regularly fellowship with one another, and they use their spiritual gifts to serve and help build God's Kingdom. You can see on the wall here that we have our 3E banners up for the month of July. The three E's – exalt, experience, engage – are what we encourage all Bethel people to regularly give their lives to. We believe that these 3E's accurately describe what basic New Testament Christianity looks like.

The first E is **Exalt** – regularly worshipping Christ through a commitment to corporate gatherings, prayer, and giving.

The second E is **Experience** – regularly participating in fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ. We call this horizontal Christianity.

The third E is **Engage** – regularly using your spiritual gifts to help build God's Kingdom. This is what we have been studying in detail in 1 Corinthians.

If this describes you, and it does for much of our congregation, I say, "Wonderful job." You are making a tremendous difference and the church is wonderfully blessed by your love and commitment. This isn't one of my points, but one of the reasons I love this church is the many people who make ministry such a joy through their faithful love and service. And I thank you for that.

The Unconnected

These are people who may or may not be sporadic in attendance, but either way, simple attendance is what defines their church life. They do not participate in fellowship with others in the body and they aren't normally using their gifts to help build Christ's Church. You may not realize this, but there are hundreds of people who call Bethel their church who fall into this category. Hundreds of people come every week, or every other week and slip out without fellowshiping or serving the Body in any significant way.

If this is you, I want to lovingly encourage you that God wants so much more for you and from you. Your Savior wants you to have the joy of regularly worshipping Him with other believers. He wants you to have the relationships and accountability you need to help you grow in your walk with Him. He wants you to experience the satisfaction and excitement of using your gifts for something much bigger than yourself – His Church and its mission.

Not only does God want so much more for you, he also wants so much more from you. Christ gave His life so that you could be a part of His body, His Church. Yes, He died so that you can have eternal life and spend eternity with Him. But He also died to make you a

member of His family, His Church. Being a member of His Church means something for your life **now**. It means living in community with other believers. It means faithfulness to hearing the Word preached. It means good stewardship of God's resources. It means loving your brothers and sisters in Christ. It means having a heart for the poor, both the physically and the spiritually poor. Ultimately, it means not being about you, but being about Christ and His Church.

One of the most well known preachers of all time was Charles Spurgeon, who pastored a large church in London during the latter half of the 19th century. Apparently, his church struggled with this same issue. Note what he had to say to the unconnected in his church:

I know there are some who say, "Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to the church." Now why not? "Because I can be a Christian without it." Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? What is a brick made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just a good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do.

It's pretty clear that Spurgeon spoke it plain. But he did so because he loved the church and wanted the best for the flock he was called to shepherd.

So, if you find yourself unconnected, can I plead with you to join us? Commit yourself to the Body and enjoy the blessings of what God has for you and what He wants to do through you.

The Hurting

This category isn't exclusive of the other two. In fact, I am sure there are both connected and unconnected people who have come to Bethel as wounded soldiers. Perhaps you have come to us from another church where you were used and abused and so you are wary of getting involved again. Perhaps you come from a faith background where legalism or liberalism reared their ugly heads, making it difficult for you to trust a church again. Perhaps you have watched the church from the outside and become disenfranchised by hypocrisy and a lack of love displayed by those who call themselves Christians. It's even possible that you have been hurt while at Bethel. Maybe even by me. For all of these hurts, I am sorry. The leadership sympathizes, and in many cases empathizes with you. Many of us have been hurt by the Church as well.

Regardless of why you are hurting, please know that we want to be a place of healing and safety for you. We do believe that one of the functions of the church is to be a hospital for the spiritually wounded. And we want you to know that our leaders are more than willing to minister to you in any way that we can.

At the same time, we would encourage you to only view the church as a hospital for so long. We can honestly tell you that until you commit yourself to us, and therefore us to you, you will only be able to heal so much. If you don't enter into a formal, committed relationship

with the church, it is impossible for us to shepherd you completely and for you to give yourself to Christ's mission in a way that will wash away your hurt and pain. One of the best ways to heal is to immerse yourself in the life-giving ministry of the church.

A final word on this point. I believe a big part of the answer to our struggles with the Church is that we fail to see its beauty – its beauty now and its beauty in the future. Look back at Ephesians 5:25-27. There is beautiful language here regarding how Christ has died to make His bride, the Church – us – beautiful. Now, in a real sense this is a work in progress. We aren't there yet. But friends, it is happening. There are beautiful things about the Church. They are on display all the time, every week. But you know what? Most of the time you have to get close to see them. It's easy to see shortcomings from far away, but until you get close you may have a very hard time seeing how beautiful the Church really is. But when you get close and connected, the beauty begins to shine through, and with the beauty come the blessings.

Even better, one day all of the warts will be gone, and we will spend eternity in the presence of our Groom together. In Revelation 19, the Apostle John tells us about our future at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Revelation 19:6-9)

Friends, there is a day coming when all the hurt and pain will be gone, and we will be with the Savior we love – together as a beautiful, perfect Bride. Until then, let's do our best to make ourselves ready for that glorious day.

So, why should we love the Church? Christ loves the Church and is making her beautiful.

The second reason why I love the Church is that:

The Church is what God is doing (Matthew 16:13-20)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

This is at the same time one of the most powerful and controversial passages in the entire Bible. There is a lot of debate as to who the "rock" is that Jesus refers to verse 18 and what the keys are in verse 19. And although it would be fun to digest these things, I simply want to address the promise made by Jesus in verse 18: *I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* Rightly understood, I believe this is one of the most powerful statements in Scripture regarding our understanding of the Church and its mission.

Note with me a few things:

Jesus says, "I will build."

His statement here is in the future tense. He still had to die, resurrect, and authorize the Apostles to begin the Church once the Holy Spirit arrived. But today we say "He is building His Church." The point is that it is a given. It's a fact. And nothing can stop it. Further, he says,

"I will build My Church."

This means that the Church is Christ's Church. It's not my church, and it's not your church. It's Christ's Church. It is His Church, because as we saw in Acts 20:28, it was by His blood that it was bought.

So, if someone asks you, "Is that your church?" Say, "No, it's Christ's church, and I am a part of it." He, not me, is the one who paid the price to make it His.

Finally, "I will build my church and,"

"The gates of hell will not prevail against it."

What I really want to get across to you is this last part of this verse. I think many of us, myself included, have totally missed what Jesus is saying here. This is often taken to mean that we are being attacked by hell and Satan and that Christ will assure that the Church will be able to ward off the attack. This understanding has often led Christians and churches to go into defensive mode; to circle the wagons. We huddle up and try to do everything we can to protect ourselves from the world. We create our own Christian bubble and do everything we can to keep the devil out. I would give examples of what this looks like, but I am afraid I would offend some of you.

But guess what? Jesus isn't telling us to be on the defensive, but rather to go on the offensive. The key to understanding this is in two words: *gates* and *hell*. The word *hell* here can also be translated as Hades, the place of the dead. What Jesus is referring to isn't the lake of fire that we normally associate with hell, but simply the realm of the dead; the place where dead people are.

As for gates, let me ask you this – when have ever heard of gates being used as an offensive weapon? In any movie you have seen or book you have ever read, have you ever heard the King say to his army, "Go attack them with the gates!?" "Take those gates off their hinges and go attack the enemy with them!?" No, what are gates for? They are for defense, to keep attackers away. Who has the gates here? Is it the Church? No! It's hell!

So what does that mean? It means that the Church is to be on the offense. You have heard it said that the best defense is a good offense. That's true for the Church. We are to be on the attack and the gates of hell cannot prevent us from accomplishing our mission.

Let's take a moment to clarify what our mission is about. In the context of Matthew's gospel, I think it is fair to say that our mission is to make disciples out of dead people. The New Testament is clear that those without Christ are dead in their trespasses and sins, but when the Spirit comes in and makes them alive He transfers them from Satan's kingdom into God's kingdom. Friends, we are God's army, and we are called to storm the gates of hell with the gospel of God's grace. As we do, Jesus promises that we will be successful and His Church will be built. This is why I love the Church. Because I love the mission that Christ has given us, and I love the fact that it cannot fail.

I have to believe that one of the reasons that there is a lack of passion and love for the Church is that there is a lack of understanding and appreciation for the mission that God has called us to. We don't get too excited about church because there doesn't seem to be anything to be really excited about. It might be a good place to visit every once in a while or even every week, but there isn't anything really earthshattering about it.

Friends, nothing could be further from the truth. The mission that Christ has given us isn't just earthshattering, its hell shattering. Please don't ignore the fact that Christ has invited and commanded us to be involved in the greatest thing in the world – the one thing that cannot fail – the one thing that matters in the end: the Church of Jesus Christ.

I'd like to take a moment now and address all of the men here today. I know I did this the last time that I preached but I am sure you have forgotten about that by now. Guys, I am convinced that one of the reasons that many men struggle with giving themselves to the church is that we as leaders haven't set the bar high enough. Any man worth his salt wants to give himself to something that really matters. Well, here in Matthew 16 Jesus is laying it out for you. If you want to give yourself to something that really matters, here it is. Commit yourself to using your abilities to help to build God's kingdom and watch what He will do. He promises you success. The only thing we as men like more than our hobbies is a sure thing. Something we can bank on. Well here it is: get on the mission to build God's Church by making disciples out of dead people.

Paul David Tripp tells us this:

Your life is much bigger than a good job, an understanding spouse, and non-delinquent kids. It is bigger than beautiful gardens, nice vacations, and fashionable clothes. In reality, you are part of something immense, something that began before you were born and will continue after you die. God is rescuing fallen humanity, transporting them into his kingdom, and progressively shaping them into his likeness – and he wants you to be a part of it.

Jesus says, *I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.* Will you join him in the mission?

Practical Implications

Now, I want to finish with a couple of words regarding church membership. This was my task, and although I said I wasn't going to talk about it much, it is an important application of what we have just addressed.

Here is what we need at Bethel:

We need our members to function as members

As I said earlier, many of you do. Keep up the good work. As Paul said, *Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.* (1 Corinthians 15:58)

But here's a problem. Some of you are members in name only. You don't serve, you don't fellowship, and you don't give. That isn't membership. That's consumerism. And it's not what Christ had in mind when He said He would build His church. If you are a member, function as one. Worship. Fellowship. Serve. Follow through with what you have committed to do.

We need our non-members to become (and function) as members

Many of you who haven't joined, already function as members and you simply have not made a formal commitment to the church. We are thankful for your participation, but would urge you that until you formally join the church you cannot function or be shepherded as God would have you to. In 1 Peter 5, Elders are commanded to shepherd the flock that is under their care. This presents a problem for the Elders, however, when they don't know who their flock is. So, can I encourage you today to officially join the church and fully participate in all that God has for you here?

I'd also like to say that when it comes to church membership many people have questions and issues. Sometimes it is baptism, sometimes church discipline, sometimes it is some other point of doctrine or concern. Please talk to us. Allow us to work through the issues with you. Our desire is for a united, loving, pure church that can have a massive impact for Christ's kingdom here in Northwest Indiana.

A final word. I have shared some difficult things here. Please know that it is said out of love. We want what is best for you. We want to shepherd you. We want to see your gifts fully expressed and for you to experience the joy that comes from giving yourself fully to Christ and His church.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.