

I love the Church

Most of what I know about the Lord, about Christians and Baptists in particular I have learned in the local church. It was in the church that I learned the importance of the Bible. It was here that I learned to worship. I learned to share my faith and to be a witness for the Lord in the church. My first glimpse of world missions came through the Lottie Moon International missions emphasis at Christmas time. In the church I witnessed the ordination of deacons, heard missionaries speak of Christ working in far off countries, and saw souls won to the Lord. It was in the church that I learned to really pray, to give the the Lord's work and where I learned to preach God's Word.

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines Within The Church*, Donald Whitney asks the question, "Did you go to church last Sunday? If you did, you are in the minority of Americans. Although Americans has one of the highest percentages of churchgoers of any nation, more than half the people in this country did not go to church this past Lord's day."

Ask why people didn't attend church and you'll get a variety of responses, but most of them fall into about a dozen categories. Some say they don't go to church because they are turned off by what seems the endless asking for money.

Others stay away because church services are boring. A percentage of those who have no interest in church say the sermons are irrelevant to their lives. Some refuse to go because when they do attend they leave feeling guilty.

Some stay because they feel their lifestyles are too unacceptable, and still for others it is because Sunday is their only day off and they want to spend it recuperating from working all week to maintain a certain lifestyle.

It has been discovered that a crisis or some catastrophic event can drive people to church but not necessarily keep people in church. After September 11, church attendance surged all across America. By year's end, however, the mainstream and religious media alike reported that church attendance has dropped back to pre-September 11 levels.

That is in spite of all the Bible translations, all the study materials, all the Bible teachers, all the Christian radio and television broadcasts, all the Christian bookstores, scores of Christian colleges and universities, and hundreds of different Christian ministries, pastors and staff, church still seems to be mis-defined in our culture today.

Let me go on record today and say, "I love the church!" I am possibly the most blessed pastor in the entire world because God has called me to work with an awesome group of people like you. I stand here today to tell you that I am so glad that God has and is assembling a unified, diversified, glorified, baptized body of believers here at New Covenant and by His grace we will be a great church! I love the church!

There are several reasons why I love the Church and I want to share them with you today.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says, “I will build My church.” On the surface it appears that He has indeed built quite a church. According to the American Church List, we have over 330,000 Protestant churches just in our nation, with a total membership 112 million people. The Gallup organization reports that 50 million Americans claim to be “born again.”

I love the church. I know that it is far from perfect, and every church has its problems. Certainly our church is not immune from hypocrisy or lukewarmness or any other sin—after all, it is made up of saved sinners. Yet with all of its potential and real problems, I still love the church. It is one of the nearest things to heaven on earth.

Today we are going to look at that local church again—it is the place where many of us grew up. And we are going to see this morning: what the church is, how it got started, what it does, and who is in it.

1. What is a church?

The New Testament uses the word “church” 77 times in 76 verses. In all but two or three of these instances the word is used to describe a local body of baptized believers. The word “church” literally means “*the called out ones*.” And it came to mean an assembly of people called for a purpose. In the New Testament, the word “church” never refers to a group of church or a denomination. It always speaks of either a local church body or it includes all the redeemed through all the ages. The greater emphasis among Baptists, as in the New Testament, is on the local church. (Hobbs, BFM 1971).

In the Bible we see many pictures of the church:

- “The church of God” 1 Cor. 10:32
- “God’s own people” 1 Peter 2:9
- “The family of God” Mark 3:35
- “The household of God” Ephesians 2:19
- “The branches” on the Vine of Christ John 15
- “The Bride of Christ” Revelation 21:9
- “God’s building” 1 Cor.3:9

But the maybe the best picture of the church is the “Body of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27 (Also Romans 12:4-5).

The church is not an organization, it is a living organism.

2. How did it start?

The church was not started by people. It had its origin in the mind of God. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, “**I will build my church.**” The church has a divine origin and therefore a divine purpose.

Scholars have spent a lot of time trying to figure out what Jesus meant by saying to Peter, **“I tell you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

I will not spend this whole message dwelling on the matter of identifying the meaning of the **“rock”**. Suffice it to say that two very different words are used for Peter (petros, a masculine form meaning a small stone broken off a larger stone and partaking in its nature) and **“rock”** (petra, a feminine form which means a large ledge rock such as a foundation rock). In the Old Testament where **“rock”** is used symbolically it always refers to God himself. Certainly the New Testament teaches that the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ, not Peter or any other man (1 Corinthians 3:11).

To end this little doctrinal discussion let me just say that if you spend much time trying to figure out the meaning of rock here, you have missed the whole point of Jesus' words. The emphasis in the text is not on Peter or rock but on Jesus and his words, **“I will build my church.”**

The church was started by Jesus Christ and belongs to him. That is why it is so important for us to know Jesus and to have a Christ-centered church.

Let's back up a few verses and see how Jesus shows this to us.

In Matthew 16 Jesus is with his disciples in a place called Caesarea Philippi. Jesus knows that the end of His ministry on earth is near. So he gets alone with his disciples to have a heart-to-heart talk with them about His identity. He wanted to know what His disciple's thought of what other people said about Him and what they personally understood about Him.

Anybody remember how the disciples responded? They in essence said, **“On the streets some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”**

Then Jesus asks, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Peter, always the first to speak, jumped right in and answered for the group: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

Jesus answered Peter and said, **“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”**

Now the question is, “What is the significance of Peter's revelation?” Here's the significance: once God reveals to us who Jesus is and we recognize and agree and confess that as Peter did, we have started to have church.

When we agree who is and choose to follow Him, we begin to live and function as His people --- the church. The thought of church doesn't begin with us, it begins with Jesus.

Praise and worship is good, fellowshiping is good, learning and studying the Bible is good, getting spiritual guidance and healing is good, ministering to each other's needs is good, reaching out to a lost world is good, but Jesus is better. Why?

Because without Christ there can be no true Praise and worship. Without Christ there can be no true fellowship. Without Christ there can be no true knowledge of God. Without Christ there can be no solid spiritual guidance and healing. Without Christ all the ministry and missions that we do are worthless. Jesus said, **“apart from me, you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5).

If we are a part of His church it is because Jesus saved us. If we are saved, it is because Jesus found us in our sin and paid the price on the cross to forgive us and purchase us for Himself. He singled us out --- through no merit of our own --- paid the price, revealed Himself to us, and called us to follow Him.

So being the church must start with knowing Jesus. He is the Rock on which the church stands.

The biblical church is a church centered on Jesus Christ and Him alone. The Christ-centered church seeks to do God’s work, God’s way for God’s glory. The Christ-centered church is a body not a business. The Christ-centered church is a flock not a factory. The Christ-centered church is a living organism not an organization. The Christ-centered church wants to follow the unchanging Word of God, not the ever-changing whims of culture. The Christ-centered church is led by the presence of the Spirit of God not the manipulation of human personality. The Christ-centered church exists for the glory of God not the ego of men.

That’s the kind of church I want to be a part of. That is who Jesus Christ made us to be when He called us and saved us. And that is the only kind of church that will have any true lasting impact.

Listen to what Jesus said next. Jesus’ statement did not end with the words **“I will build My Church.”** He also said, **“And the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”**

Jesus is implying that the church is something that the Devil wants to put a halt to. The Bible teaches that Hades is the place of punishment for the spirits of dead unbelievers. The point of entry for such is death. This, then, is a Jewish phrase referring to death. Even death, the ultimate weapon of Satan (cf. Heb. 2:14, 15), has no power to stop the church.

Satan and even death will have no victory against us as believers. Death will not overcome, overpower, or overtake what Jesus is building. In fact we are to be storming the gates of Hades. We are to be rescuing the captives, snatching others from the fire. That is what the keys to the kingdom are all about. Jesus said,

“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

He said I will give the keys of the kingdom. The keys represent authority. Nobody else has the key to your house but the one you give it to. Nobody else has the key to your car but the one you give it to.

No other people group has the keys to the kingdom but the one whom Jesus gave it to --- the church.

He didn't give the keys to the politicians and political vehicles of the times; he didn't give the keys to the social institutions of his time or our time; he didn't give the keys to the ungodly men and women for self-gratification and self-absorption.

He gave the keys to the folks...

who were sinners but now saints;

who were lost but now found;

who were consumed by lust but now covered by love;

who were dead in sins, but now alive in the Spirit;

who were a living a mess, but now a living miracle;

who were in the dark, but now in the light

who were facing the judgment of God, but now having the grace of God.

Jesus has given the authority and the responsibility to us. What can we do? You say, we are just a small group of people, and the task is so big, what can we do?

Statistically, 50 percent of Southern Baptist churches have less than 100 members. There are a lot of small churches like ours. What can we do? Win the lost. What can we do? Preach the word. What can we do? Feed the hungry. What can we do? Clothe the poor. Heal the sick. What can we do? Love the unlovely. Just because we cannot do everything is no excuse for doing nothing. And as we cooperate together with other churches we can be involved in many great works of God in places all over the world. The genius of cooperative giving like we do is that the smallest church can be involved in the biggest mission work the world has ever known. We have the keys to the kingdom. We are His church.

I love the church because it belongs to Jesus.

I love the church because it has Jesus's mission.

I love the church because it has Jesus' power.

The Perfect Church

I think that I shall never see

A Church that's all it ought to be

A Church whose members never stray

Beyond the straight and narrow way

Church that has no empty pews

Whose pastor never has the blues

A Church whose Deacons always deak

And none is proud, and all are meek

Where gossips never peddle lies

Or make complaints or criticize

Where all are always sweet and kind

And all to other's faults are blind
Such perfect churches there may be
But none of them is known to me
But still we'll work and pray and plan
To make our own the best we can.