

## The Church: Anchored in a Transformed Identity

*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 20:28

**Introduction:** The arts tend to shed light on the practical thinking and theology of a culture, whether they recognize it or not. Movies and music of any era often explain the pervasive worldview at a particular time and space. Shows in the 1960's and even to the 80's often portrayed home life intact with strong father figures, and shows that did, I was not allowed to watch! Lyrics of songs as well as the type of music can reveal what people think about authority, future, and what people are striving for. Knowing this, as we listen to popular music, we can gain some understanding as to the drift and course a society is on. This can be true of popular Christian music as well.

This summer as we drove on trips as a family, we would listen to music, often an eclectic mix (if I had my druthers) of styles and eras, which included selections of popular Christian music. One of the songs that stuck out to me, in a bad way, was *Toby McKeehan's song* (aka. TobyMac) "*a lil church*". This is no knock on brother Toby, who had all of us Christians in the 90's doing a *Nu Thang* and willing to be *Jesus Freaks*, but this song stuck out to me for its take on modern day church. I will come back at the end and say where I AGREED with the song, but for now let's take a look at some of the lyrics:

*I could use a **little church right now**  
Love to have a little family around  
I've been feelin' so overwhelmed  
I could use a little church right now  
I can almost hear the choir singin'  
Back to when I was a child believin'  
**That nobody's too lost to get found**  
I could use a little church right now*

The gist of the song, some of which is good, is that no one is too lost to be found, and not too far off to return to the faith of one's youth, including the church that was clearly left for a large chunk of life. The oft repeated tag line in catchy chorus is "*I could use a little church right now, love to have a little family around.*" Without spending too much time exegeting the theology of this song, what made me twitch a little every time I heard it was the **minimizing** of what the church is, making the church sound like some marginal good thing that one can come back to in desperation. It also makes the church all about the person, rather than a place that God ordained.

Even when the song goes on to rightly say what the church **IS NOT**, it does not explain with any clarity what the church actually **IS**, instead choosing to give it a nebulous definition of hands and feet of a loving God:

*It's not about the **four walls**  
Or that steeple up on top (no)  
Ain't talkin' about them **hard pews** (ain't about the hard pews)  
Or that **torn-up parkin' lot** (say it)  
It could happen on a dirt road (it could happen on a dirt road)*

*Or a crowded coffee shop (crowded coffee shop)  
Yeah, **the church I need is the hands and feet**  
**Of a God who came to love***

Now, my purpose in bringing this up is NOT to comb through every song on your Spotify list or to hunt down every piece of bad theology in our songs (though that may be a worthy exercise), but to show how this song encapsulates what many think about **God's church**. Not only do we struggle with a wrong view, but we actually may have no idea what the right view is. This comes out in what many think church is (some of which is good, and some not):

- **Designed for me, the consumer** – From website, to children's ministry, to programs to music, in trying to communicate who we are as a church it can feel like we are competing with other consumers to try to differentiate ourselves from other churches. Many make ultimate value judgment on a church based on what's they feel fits their family best. NOT ALL of this is wrong, but does illustrate something about a view of the church
- **A place of connection** – The church is a place for friendship, networking, or community
- **A place to find INSPIRATION** – I've talked with many folks who want to feel good walking OUT of a service, and love to have their emotions stirred and minds inspired for the week ahead
- **A place of good, clean, safe activity for my kids** – "If our kids don't like it, we aren't coming"
- **A good but marginal part of our life** – The church is not deemed as something 'bad', but it also does not rank high on the priority list, and most anything else in terms of work, family, fun, or activities will trump it.

***"The church as a new creation of God rests upon the person and work of Jesus Christ"**<sup>1</sup>*

Overall, we fall short in our view of the church when we try to define it **by ourselves as the ultimate measure**. Instead of looking to Scripture as the driver and ultimate guide, we list out qualifications we want in a church that have little or nothing to do with what the Bible says about it. Far too often people view the church the way they do their **local gym**: it's a good thing, we believe most people need it, but our commitment to it waxes and wanes based on schedules and priorities. Yes, we surge back for a few weeks a year, but overall we see it has marginal goodness in our life, but not ultimate or vital importance. We are also *stunned* that going to the gym once in a while does not offer the results we are hoping for!

One of the reasons there is a misunderstanding or lack of clarity regarding the church is our desire for **reductionism**, or to *oversimplify* something that has many parts. This can happen in medicine by treating a symptom in one part of the body without taking into consideration how all the organs work together, or even in the presenting of the gospel itself. For good reasons, the western church has adopted the language of **"ask Jesus into your heart"** as a means of getting saved. This phrase is not found in the Bible nor does it deal with the essential nature of the **holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the need for a Savior, the work of Jesus, forgiveness, repentance, or following Christ**. Though Colossians 2:6 says, *"Therefore, as you have **received** Christ Jesus as Lord..."*, the sinner's prayer often boils down to us "accepting Christ" or asking Him to come into our heart. This is more than just simplification, though again the goal is to explain to children or new hearers what to do with the information of the gospel. This is reductionism to the point where we lose the message all together. It may be better to adopt **George Whitefield's hymn titled 'A Sinner's Prayer'**:

*"God of my salvation, hear, and help me to believe: Simply would I now draw near, thy blessings to receive. Full of guilt, alas I am, but to thy wounds for refuge flea; Friend of sinners, spotless lam, thy blood was shed for me..."<sup>1</sup>*

So, if we are going to fight against oversimplifying the church, the question is begged: **what is the church?** What is God's expectation for her? Why did He create it? What does He demand? In each of these questions, we are assuming an important point: **the church is God's creation, not ours. It was purchased by Jesus' blood, not invented by mankind to control humanity** (Acts 20:28)

### **What does the word 'church' mean?**

The common Greek word used for 'church' in the New Testament is *ekklessia*, which literally translates to 'called out of' or 'called out ones'. But the basic meaning and usage of the word in both the Septuagint and New Testament is the idea of an **assembly**<sup>2</sup>. Part of an essential understanding of the church, then, is a group of people who **gather --- assemble together --- regularly**. The church is obviously MORE than this but not less. But does that mean a church is any random group of Christian's hanging out together? No, it entails a **definite group**:

**Acts 5:12-13** *"Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem."*

The early church knew who the disciples of the church were (Acts 6:2). They assembled to **devote themselves** to the apostles **teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer** (Acts 2:42). They participated in the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:23-34), and did this as they came together. There was also a commitment to uphold purity, since one would be removed if there was unrepentant, ongoing sin:

**1 Corinthians 5:4-5** *"4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord"*

This would all take place under the shepherding care of elders/pastors who met the high character qualifications and to work hard at teaching, preaching, and modeling Christ among the people (1 Pet. 5:1-5; 1 Tim. 3:1-8; Heb. 13:17; Titus 1:5-9).

So, **how would we synthesize this together?** It's interesting that throughout church history, creeds and confessions have been created to answer this exact question. **John Calvin** said it this way:

<sup>1</sup> For a history of "the Sinner's Prayer" and the origination of "asking Jesus into your heart", see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/ask-jesus-into-your-heart-a-history-of-the-sinners-prayer/> and an article by Thomas Kidd

<sup>2</sup> The word *ekklessia* is used 65 times in the Greek OT, and most of the time refers to the assembly of Israel. An example in the NT NOT referring to the church but an actual assembly is Acts 19:32, which cites an assembly of the citizens of Ephesus.

**“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists”<sup>3</sup>**

Or the Swedish Baptist Confession of Faith in 1861:

**We believe that a true Christian church is a union of believing and baptized Christians, who have covenanted to strive to keep all that Christ has commanded, to sustain public worship, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose among themselves shepherds or overseers, and deacons, to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper, to practice Christian church-discipline, to promote godliness and brotherly love, and to contribute to the general spread of the gospel; also that every such church is an independent body, free in its relation to other Christian churches and acknowledging Christ only as its head.”<sup>4</sup>**

Or in an article by Pastor Chris Hutchison:

**A church is a group of Christians who meet together regularly and who have some measure of a commitment to each other to be the body of Christ together, which includes biblical leadership and biblical teaching and preaching and a proper celebration of the Lord’s Supper and a right application of Christian discipline.<sup>5</sup>**

### **What is the nature of the church?**

Or to say it another way, “*what is the church like?*” This is where the Bible is helpful since it gives us several *metaphors* to understand the makeup and nature of the church. Over the next three weeks we want to look at **several key** metaphors that Scripture gives us to understand the nature, makeup, mission, and place the church has in the life of a believer. It is significant that God shows us the church in vivid and practical pictures, but it also leaves us without a doubt how **HE VIEWS the church**, and calls us to do the same. This morning we will look at the church as a **Bride and Groom**, followed by the Shepherd with His Sheep, the Body and Temple in the next two weeks.

### **BRIDE & GROOM**

**Ephesians 5:31-32** “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*” 32 *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”*

When God instituted the beautiful covenant union called marriage back in Genesis 2, which happened before the **fall of mankind into sin**, he not only created a perpetuating relationship, but He did so in a perfect environment for thriving to the glory of God. We know that sin corrupted the original design, but it is significant that as God commanded a man to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, it was given **before** sin and **before** Adam and Eve had kids and grandkids. In other words, it was built into the DNA of this world, but also was an ultimate **pointer to Christ’s love for His bride, the church**.

The bridegroom/bride metaphor is all through Scripture. In the OT, God referred to Israel as His bride -

<sup>3</sup> · John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1023.

<sup>4</sup> · W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia, American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 367.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-a-church/> Chris Hutchison, “What is a Church”, May 25, 2023

**Isaiah 54:5-6 (cf. Isaiah 62:5)** *“For your **Maker is your husband**, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.*

<sup>6</sup> *For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, **like a wife of youth when she is cast off**, says your God.”*

It is not difficult to discern the dominant theme of using this metaphor, since marriage is intended to be an ultimate place of **commitment, intimacy, and love**. *What does that mean for our understanding of the church? How does Jesus present Himself as our Bridegroom and what does it matter for the church?*

A marriage in the Ancient Near East had its own cultural nuances, just like we do today with our rhythm of dating, engagement, and ceremony. In the NT, a wedding would have **three parts to it: betrothal, formal marriage ceremony, and celebration**. A betrothal was a formal, legally binding covenant between two families, but was short of actually cohabiting and living together. To get out of a betrothal would have required a formal **divorce** (which is what Joseph considered with a pregnant Mary before the visit of the angel – Matt. 1:19). A betrothal also required a **bridal price**, a gift to the family to “acquire” the bride. After this arrangement, there would be a waiting period where the bride would prepare herself for the wedding ceremony and **confirm her purity**. As the marriage ceremony would come closer, the groom would come and ‘take his bride’ to a ceremony followed by a time of consummation (which would prove virginity), and then an often week long feast would follow.<sup>6</sup>

The church today is in a time of **betrothal**, a time where we are united with Christ but still awaiting His appearing. Paul described it like this is **2 Corinthians 11:2**:

*“For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I **betrothed you to one husband**, to present you as a **pure virgin to Christ**.”*

Notice that the church at Corinth was both betrothed AND expected to be pure when Christ came. *But if the church is betrothed to Christ, what was the price paid?*

**Acts 20:28** *“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**”*

**Romans 5:8-10** *“...but **God shows his love for us** in that while **we were still sinners**, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been **justified by his blood**, much more shall we be saved by him **from the wrath of God**. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”*

Every person stands condemned in our sin and are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3), not only because we sin but because we are born sinners. Being ‘under the wrath of God’ means that we not only **deserve it**, but the only way to pay for it is for God to pour it out for an eternity. Now, we see the beautiful picture of Christ being the bridegroom of the church. **Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for HER!!! (Eph. 5:25)** The bridal price was not paid out of the riches found in creation, but in the person of Jesus Himself. The price was clear: it was His blood, shed on the cross, as an innocent Lamb, that was the cost. And notice that He did not do it because we were lovely or loveable! He did it simply because He chose to love us, even while we were still sinners, ugly, selfish, prideful, full of

<sup>6</sup> Saucy, “The church in God’s program”, pp. 45-47.

ourselves. And this love continues to stretch to the church after He buys us out of wrath, in that He continues to *sanctify, nourish, and cherish us* (Eph. 5:25-30).

*What is expected of the Bride? First is the purity that comes out of exclusivity*, the type of purity that says we will go after no other lover, that Christ will be our ultimate joy and satisfaction, and He will be our measure of beauty. Our time left on this earth is a time of preparation for eternity, and that comes with a commitment to growing in purity and holiness (1 John 3:2-3).

**Second**, is the fact that we will **submit our lives to Him, willingly arranging ourselves under His loving leadership** (Eph. 5:24 – *“now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands”*). Is this enslavement or some sort of sadistic ploy? No, but it is a radical new disposition and identity that now sees our life not as our own but as slaves of Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20; Rom. 6:16-23; Gal. 1:10). This is a fundamental misunderstanding of some modern church goers: *we think that we can have Christ and keep autonomy over our lives!* True freedom from the bondage of sin comes when we no longer live as a “single” person and unite our lives to Christ, following His loving leadership as a husband, but also as a master/lord. The gospel is for anyone who believe by faith that Jesus died for us, but that same exact faith is one that yields itself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all things, and joins Him intimately and exclusively in His church.

**Third**, because we have been the object of the love of Christ, we are called to **love one another**.

**1 John 4:19-21** *“We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother”*

What does this mean? Your life in Christ and the church is NOT about you, but it is about **loving others**, which is **sincere, earnest, pure** (1 Pet. 1:22), **humble, gentle, patient, and bearing with** (Eph. 4:2) one another. This DEMANDS and EXPECTS deepening relationships, NOT arm’s length acquaintances. There is absolutely NO WAY TO FULFILL THIS KIND OF LOVE WITHOUT FAITHFUL, SACRIFICIAL, and PRIORITIZED COMMITMENT to a local church!!!

**Lastly**, the church is in a time of waiting, waiting for our groom to come and take us away. When the church at Thessalonica came to Christ by turning from idols to serve the living and true God, they immediately began to **“wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”** (1 Thess. 1:10). We are encouraged by the truth that there will come a time when those who are still alive will be caught up together with the LORD and will then ALWAYS BE WITH HIM (1 Thess. 4:17-18). We look forward to a day when we will **feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb** (Rev. 19:6-10), where we as the Bride will be clothed in fine linen and purity (v. 7-8) and will worship our Lord, seeing Him for who He is. That is the longing and encouragement of the church that we engage in together, each Sunday gathering that we not only celebrate His resurrection but the fact that we will be raised with Him one day.

The church is a group of redeemed believers, who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from the wrath of God, to unite with Him in devoted submission, growing purity, and committed love for Him and others as we wait for His return to be with Him forever. **Do we need a little of that?** We need a whole lot of it. But the area of agreement with TobyMac: *this is open to any and all who believe!* Do you believe that Jesus died for you, offers forgiveness through His blood, and gives Himself as our Savior and Lord? This is the gateway of being a part of a church, both now and forever.