

It was Easter Sunday and the family was on their way to church. Mom told her kids, “[Today, is the day, we celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead!](#)” Her 4 year old piped in, “[Does that mean He’ll be at church?](#)” *And that is the question, isn’t it?* More and more Christians today are asking... “[I love Jesus – but do I need a church to meet with Him and walk with Him?](#)”

To learn about Jesus – just grab Pastor Sandy’s podcast, and listen when it’s convenient... To worship Jesus - download Josh Blevins off I-Tunes... To fellowship with CC friends - log on to Facebook... We’re so wired electronically, *why bother attending a church?*

Beside Church-life gets messy... The leaders of the church will encourage you to use your gifts and serve the Lord - give an offering – return for special events – invite a friend - even sit next to people different from you – *conflicts are inevitable...*

Why put your self through all the angst – *Sleep late, stay home, brew a pot of coffee, save the gas...* You can sit on the couch in your underwear, grab the laptop, and log on to [sandyadams.org](http://sandyadams.org)! *Who needs church?*

A startling statistic recently appeared in US News. A survey revealed that **80%** of Americans now believe it’s possible to be a good Christian without attending a local church... In addition, I’ve read where **42%** of Christians who still attend church, now come only once a month.

A radical shift has occurred in our culture’s perception of Christianity. Christian commitment is no longer about membership and participation in a community of believers. Social involvement has been watered down. Modern Christianity is more about *curing personal ills*, and *enhancing individual growth*. As the article put it, “[It is spirituality turned inward.](#)”

Let me admit, all churches – *yes, even this church* – has its problems. Churches have flaws and failures. A church is made up of people, and since there are no perfect people, there will be no perfect churches. *And it’s all too easy for us to give up on, or minimize the church...*

But if you’re a Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christian that’s not an option. The Bible leaves no loopholes – no backdoors – no way-out; nothing to excuse a Christian from participating in a local church. Even though you may’ve been *hurt in the church* - or *disappointed by the church* - or become *disillusioned with the church* – you won’t find a single verse in your Bible that will justify you *bailing out on the church*.

The Scripture is clear. It teaches us that the strategic center of God’s plan for this world is the Christian Church. Jesus loves His Church.

In the New Testament, the Church goes by many names...

[The body of Christ... it’s strong and active](#)

[The bride of Christ... it’s loved](#)

[God’s flock... it’s many](#)

[The light of Christ... it’s shining for the world to see](#)

[God’s field... it’s growing](#)

[God’s vineyard... it’s fruitful](#)

[The building of God... it’s structured](#)

[The pillar and ground of the truth... it’s teaching has authority](#)

[God’s temple... it’s filled with His presence and glory](#)

[And God’s family... it’s a home for all God’s people.](#)

There’s no other entity on earth that compares to Jesus’ Church. It’s been said, “[The Church has many critics, but no rivals.](#)” If you want to be in on what God is up to - you need to be a part of His Church. I’m a believer... I believe in Jesus, *AND I believe in His Church.*

The NT closes with an invitation in Revelation 22:17, “And the Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’” The Church is the Bride of Christ. And until the end of the age - until Jesus returns – it is the job of *the Spirit of God* and *the Church of Jesus* to show the world the Gospel's life-changing power. Last week we looked at the “Spirit.” Today, we’ll study the “Church.”

We’re winding down a teaching series we’ve entitled “**Essentials: what Christians believe and why it matters.**” Each week we’ve examined a major doctrine - a set of beliefs - that are crucial to Christianity. In fact, each week I start out with a statement of faith. After I cover its content, we close the Bible Study by reciting the creed responsively.

Here’s today’s statement of faith... “We believe God reconciles people *in Christ and in His Church*. The Church is universal and local, visible and invisible, gathered and scattered. Jesus bought the Church, He builds the Church, and He does battle through the Church.”

The story of the Church begins before its beginning. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus talks about His Church *before it even exists*. Here’s the first mention in Scripture of the Greek term “*ekklesia*,” or in English, “church.” In the last half of Matthew 16:18 Jesus makes the triumphant prediction, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

The word “*ekklesia*” refers to “a called-out group of people.” The Church is an assembly of people who are called out of the world - called to a new life with Jesus - *and called to live that life together*.

The Church is not primarily a building, or organization, or an activity on Sundays. It consists of people alive to God, and alive to one another. AW Tozer once observed, “One-hundred religious persons knit into a unity by careful organization do not constitute a church any more than eleven dead men make a football team. The first requisite is life.” The church is a community of believers made alive by God’s Spirit – infused with new life, new loves, new power, and new passions.

When we discuss the subject of “Church” there are a few terms we use to define what we mean... First, the Church is **universal and local**. Believers in Jesus all over the globe are part of the universal Church. When we’re born again into God’s family – we become spiritual siblings to *Ricardo in Bolivia*, and *Lukas in Austria*, and *Chea in Cambodia*. Every believer in Jesus all over the world is a member of **the Church universal**.

But there’re also **local churches**... There’s CC in Lilburn, Calvary 316 in Winder, First Baptist in Snellville, 12 Stone Church in Lawrenceville... In the first century there was the church at Corinth, and Philippi, and Ephesus... *And according to the NT it’s not enough to be part of the universal church you need to be a participant in a local church*.

Second, there’s the **visible** and **invisible** Church. The visible Church is the Church **WE** see. It includes the buildings, organization, and activities. Whereas the invisible Church is the spiritual church only **GOD** sees.

What you find in most churches is a collection of true believers, seekers, hypocrites, and a few imposters. In Matthew 13 Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like “a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind...” Later angels separate the wicked and cast them to hell. In the same chapter, the wheat and tares grow side-by-side until the end of the age.

This means just because you’re a member of the visible Church – even a baptized member – even at CC – it doesn’t mean you’re heaven bound. The true Church is invisible. It’s made up of all real believers - out of all churches and from all generations... Only God knows a person’s heart.

Third, the Church is **gathered and scattered**. We’re an assembly of Christians who *gather* physically – not just virtually - to demonstrate our commitment to God, each other, and His Word.

We're not just wired or WI-FI-ed together. We can't hide behind screen names and log-ins. A *gathered church* rubs shoulders - speaks eyeball-to-eyeball. We listen and agree to God's Word in community; then act in unison to carry it out.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within us. Yet the *gathered church* is the outward demonstration of what Kingdom living will look like.

We're the Church when we *gather*, and we remain the Church when we *scatter*. It doesn't matter if we're in this building, or on the job, or at the ballpark - we're still the Church. We represent Jesus and one another. And this is why we're accountable to each other for how we do life.

Say you act nice on Sundays – then go home, and scream at your wife, or hit your kids. If the CC leadership learns of the situation, we're not going to look the other way. We're going to confront you, and get you help. As a church grows, church discipline becomes more difficult, *but at CC we try*. It's not a loving act for us to allow a person's sickness to go unchecked. *And it's unhealthy for the church*. We can't let a toxic attitude run rampant. Here's my point, whether you're in the sanctuary, or at home, we're still the Church – *gathered or scattered*. And we're responsible to each other.

Look again at Matthew 16. Remember, Jesus is pouring footings for His future Church – He's laying a foundation. Jesus promises His disciples, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” It helps me to summarize Jesus' words into three phrases... **Jesus bought the Church. Jesus builds the Church. Jesus battles through the Church.**

Let's take the rest of our time and explore these three statements...

Understand Jesus **bought** the church... I read recently where hundreds of church buildings in North Dakota are up for sale. A dwindling population has forced these prairie churches to close their doors and be auctioned.

Please note that's not the case with THE CHURCH. Over the last 2000 years the church has never changed hands, or needed new ownership. In verse 18 Jesus refers to the church as “**My church.**” There's no confusion or ambiguity over who owns our church. Jesus is the head of the church.

In Acts, Paul appointed **pastors and elders** to oversee the churches he started. **Deacons** stepped up in practical ways. Godly men were entrusted with leadership - but the church has, and always will, *belong* to Jesus.

In America, our government is **of the people, by the people, and for the people** - but not in the church... Church government is **of Jesus, by Jesus, and for Jesus**. Preeminence in the church is reserved for our Lord Jesus. On the cross Jesus *bought* us with His sacrifice. His body butchered – His blood spilled - now the Church belongs exclusively to Jesus.

Examine the cross of Jesus, and you'll notice it has two posts...

**The vertical bar** extends from heaven to earth. On the cross Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. He made amends, and repaired the ugly damage caused by sin. Jesus forgives, so we can live lives connected to God.

But the cross also has **a horizontal beam**. This speaks of another kind of reconciliation. The cross not only connects us to God, but it also links believers to each other. We all become part of God's forever family. **This is why we say we're reconciled in Christ and in the Church.**

Recall what happened at the Tower of Babel. Mankind revolted against God and embraced a false-Christ – Nimrod was *a-hunter-of-men's-souls*. The rebels gathered in the plains of Shinar to build a tower to heaven. And God broke up the party. He confused their languages. Everyone spoke a different dialect - and it caused humanity to divide into nations, tribes, tongues, and families. The population dispersed and scattered.

And humanity remained fragmented for thousands of years. In fact, rather than deal with mankind as a whole, God chose a different tact. He chose one man and His family – and for the next 2500 years He worked through Abraham and the Jews to witness to the world.

*Until the Day of Pentecost...* In the upper room, the power of the Holy Spirit fell suddenly on the followers of Jesus. The Church was born and many of the believers spoke in tongues – so that, people from all over the Earth heard the wonderful works of God in their native language.

It was a *miracle* - and a *model* for Jesus' Church. The Church is a reversal of Nimrod's Babel. Sin drove a wedge between the nations. The shock of unfamiliar dialects caused us to fear one another. Rather than work through our differences, it was easier to go our separate ways.

But at Pentecost God reversed that tendency - Jesus filled His followers with overcoming love... The unity of the Spirit caused the first Christians to set aside what made them different, and emphasize what made them one. The commonality they had in Jesus transcended all their differences. The Holy Spirit was their impetus to work at unity and love each other.

And I have to tell you, this is your pastor's prayer. CC is a tough church to attend - because you look around and not everybody here is like you.

*If you're black...* not everybody else is black.

*If you're Latino...* not everybody else is Latino.

*If you're white...* not everybody else is white.

*If you're old...* not everyone here enjoys hymns. Some of us young guys like to rock.

*If you're young...* we respect older folks and lower the volume.

*If you're rich...* Sorry, we're not all rich. The pastor's ride is a 97 Marquis that lost its hubcaps. Hanging with me won't enhance your social status.

*If you're poor...* stop being jealous! Rejoice that we've got a few folks in this church who can give a good offering. They're covering for you.

*If you're Republican...* there're some people here who voted for Obama. *Get over it!* They voted their Christian conscience just like you did – it just expressed itself differently. What's more important than how we voted is our *freedom as Americans* and our *liberty as Christians* - to do so! This past election tested some of us... *are we Christians first?*

According to 1Peter 2:9 - before you are a Republican or a Democrat... before you're a baby boomer or Generation Xer... before you're poverty or middle class... before you're Nigerian or American... **"You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people..."**

It's a shallow love that reaches out to only those people for which I have an affinity. That's not love at all. *Love realizes* God's family – the Church - is not a group of people who look, talk, dress, and even vote like me. I want to be part of a serious church, and Galatians 3:28 describes what one looks like - **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."**

It hit me this week. What we really need is an outpouring of God's Spirit. It will always be easier for us to go our separate ways – for blacks to go to all-black churches, and whites to go to whitey churches, and Latinos to go to all-Hispanic churches - *until* we're filled with God's overcoming love. Jesus said the world will know we're His followers if we have love for one another. God's love *overcomes* fear and *overlooks* differences.

Author Philip Yancey quotes a pastor from India. The pastor told him, **"Most of what happens in our Christian churches - even the miracles - can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups."** The pastor added, **"That's the real miracle."** I'm praying for God to do a miracle at Calvary...

Jesus *bought* the Church, but He also **builds** the Church. He promises in Matthew 16, **"I will**

**build My church.**" He's the architect and contractor. Jesus was a carpenter by trade - skillful with wood. *Jesus knows how to build stuff.* He's good at popping chalk lines, and keeping walls in plumb, and sanding down rough edges, and gluing together tricky angles.

Carpentry is time consuming - hands on - tedious work - but Jesus is a pro. If we give Him ourselves - and a little time - He'll make us fit, then fit us together in a way that we'll be better together than we could be apart.

No church, or era of church history, grew as quickly or as qualitatively as the church in Acts 2. In a single day the church grew from 120 to 3000 souls. A couple of days later the church swelled to 5000. In the first few months the Jerusalem church expanded from 120 to 25,000 converts.

And out of this church came a Who's Who of men and women who changed the world. Even its deacons, Stephen and Phillip became famous evangelists. This was a strong and healthy church.

The book of Acts explains how the First Church grew so effectively and so explosively. Acts 2:42 is **"The Jesus Method"** for building churches... Verse 42 tells us, **"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."**

Here's how Jesus built the First Church. A healthy, overflowing church grew on a steady diet of four activities... **The Apostles Doctrine (or the Bible)... Fellowship... Breaking Bread (or worship)... and Prayer...**

Some church calendars are filled with aerobic workouts, and dance classes, and golf outings. The church functions more like a country club than a godly community. But when the First Church of Acts 2 gathered together the agenda was always spiritual. God Himself was the goal.

Pastor Jon Courson makes a comment about youth groups that applies to all Christian Ministry. He writes, **"The world can out-fun us, out-entertain us, out-slick us every time because when Christians copy what the world does, they never do it as well. But I'll tell you what we can do with kids: we can love them and give them the truth like the world never can."**

Christians should do fun things when they get together, but the ultimate purpose behind our gatherings should be to strengthen our faith.

And notice the four ways this happened in Acts 2:42...

First, **"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine."** The Church was habitual about **Bible study**. When believers met their conversations always revolved around some *Bible promise* or some *Bible passage*. *They couldn't get enough of the Bread from heaven!* The Apostles who had been with Jesus taught them His Words and the church got healthy.

Someone commented on the ministry of a particular church, **"It's a mile wide, and a foot deep."** Large numbers of people get brought in with fluff, and entertainment, and *a few Bible bits* - but there's no substance. Tragically some churches today are turning out biblically illiterate Christians.

For people to grow spiritually they need a steady diet - of not just milk - but the meat of God's Word... Psalm 119:9 asks, **"How can a young man cleanse his way?"** The answer, **"By taking heed according to Your word."** There's no short-cut to spiritual growth. The Word of God builds faith.

Another activity on the agenda of the First Church was **fellowship**. The Greek word, **"koinonia,"** means **"to hold in common."** Here's a great definition for fellowship. **"Fellowship is two fellows in the same ship."**

Too many of you are *Ninja Christians*. You slip in - slip out - and never leave a trace you were here. **"Did you see him?"** You're camouflaged. But this is tragic. The Bible knows nothing of solitary living. There's no such thing as a Lone Ranger for Jesus. Church is a place to share

life.

Once, at a pastors' conference I heard this statement, "People don't want a friendly church. They want a friend at church." And that's true... It's fairly easy to be friendly – but it takes time and effort to be a friend. Fellowship is more than a handshake, or a polite gesture, or a friendly greeting – it's genuine, heartfelt, out-of-my-way care for other Christians.

Notice also the **breaking of bread**, or the *practice of communion*. Author Steve Brown says of communion, "The world drinks to forget, while the Christian drinks to remember." What we call the Lord's Supper points to Jesus and the cross. The focus is body and blood of Jesus. This is what matters most. *The main thing stays the main thing!*

Baptism is the other ordinance given by Jesus. And it serves the same purpose – it reminds us of our life in Christ. Jesus stays front-and-center.

This is what worship in general does for a church. Worship through music not only blesses the heart of God, and cultivates in us a sense of God's presence – but it also keeps our eyes on Jesus!

Greg Laurie recounts the first time he heard true worship. He wasn't a Christian, but because of the church's love and sincerity, he concluded, "I could tell these people believed what they were singing. But, more than that, I sensed someone was on the receiving end of their praise."

Worship and communion is a staple in the diet of a healthy church.

The other item Jesus uses to build His Church is **prayer**. A healthy church meets to pray. God unleashes His power through prayer. Author Sidlow Baxter writes, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons – but they are helpless against our prayers." Prayer makes the Church invincible.

Once I saw a street sign that read, "Electric Avenue" – it was next to a yellow, diamond-shaped traffic sign that read, "No Outlet". How ironic is that, *no outlet on Electric Avenue?*

Every church is located on Electric Avenue – and there is an outlet. The Spirit desires to energize us, but we plug into His power through prayer.

Jesus *bought* the Church. Jesus *builds* His Church through Bible Study, fellowship, worship, and prayer. And Jesus **battles** through the Church. He declares, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against (His Church)."

In ancient cities gates were a defensive fortification. No one was attacked by a gate. You used a gate to keep unwanted forces out. The implication is the church should be on the offensive.

There's a bloody war being waged. The devil's tools are sin, and fear, and doubt, and darkness... The weapons of Jesus are truth, grace, and mercy... The spoils of battle are the souls of men and women... And the Church is God's outpost on the frontline.

From the Church, believers should go out and storm the gates of hell with the good news of God's grace. God wants to use us to break down barriers to belief, and rescue prisoners being held in bondage.

And here's how this looks... It's almost funny. In Luke 10:2 Jesus says to us what He said to His disciples, "Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves..."

There's a war going on around us. Vicious wolves are out to get us. We're fighting the devil, demons, and hell. *Where are the grenades, and missile launchers, and AK-47s?* Instead, Jesus tells us to fight like lambs. *Instead of Rambos we're all Lambos?*

Here's how Christian's fight - *we attack evil with good – we speak truth, not propaganda – we make inroads with integrity, not espionage – rather than provoke, and arm folks with hate, we disarm them with grace – we march fearlessly into battle, while we trust the Spirit to fight for us.*

Here's how the Church storms the gates of hell... *we show love and we speak truth*. It's called *evangelism*. You target a friend, or a family member, or a neighbor, or a co-worker, or a stranger – or another community – or a country. You go in - show love - and give an explanation of the Gospel. This is the Great Commission. This is the job of the Church. *Do you evangelize?* How else are folks saved from hell and end up in heaven?

Everybody in heaven is there because someone took this seriously.

*When was the last time you showed a person love they didn't deserve, and set down with them to explain the Gospel?* If you appreciate someone talking to you about your soul, don't you think it's time to return the favor?

*But people will laugh, and make fun of me – or I'll risk losing my status or promotion – or my friends hate it when I bring up the subject... SO?* Next week we're going to talk about heaven and hell. The stakes are enormously high. Concerns that matter today will be trivial in eternity.

Every generation of Christians is responsible to take the Gospel to that generation of lost people. Each church has the task of winning the world.

The Church is precious to Jesus. It's prosperous. It's powerful. Jesus *bought* it - *builds* it – does *battle* through it.

*The church is the watering hole in the desert...*

*It's the sign at the fork in the road...*

*It's the streetlight on a pitch black night...*

*It's the only voice of truth in a world full of noise and confusion...*

*The church stands by the only exit on the freeway to hell...*

It's true, *"The world at its worse needs the church at its best."*

Let's close by reciting today's statement of faith concerning the Church. I'll read a line; then you repeat it... *"We believe God reconciles people in Christ and in His Church. The Church is universal and local, visible and invisible, gathered and scattered. Jesus bought the Church, He builds the Church, and He does battle through the Church."*

## BONUS MATERIAL:

There is a principle in Bible interpretation known as “the law of first mention.” The idea is to pay special attention to the first place a subject appears in Scripture. Its initial reference conveys key insights. Such is the case in Matthew 16 and 18...

Understand, at this point the church is in its embryonic stage. It’s growing, but only in the hearts of the disciples. It’s yet to be born - and revealed to the world. The Old Testament saints knew nothing of the church. Paul spoke of the Church as “a mystery” - a truth that was hidden from view – that was known only to God...

Here in Matthew, Jesus speaks prophetically of His Church. In these two strategic passages Jesus describes His heart for His Church.

God is doing His work in the world today by *His Spirit* through *His Church*. In God’s plan the Church is where the action is...

William Temple once said, “The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.”