

Hold Fast: The Forgotten Truths We Must Always Remember
Christians Love the Church
Selected Scriptures
August 7, 2016, AM
Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church

For most of church history, if you were a Christian your life revolved around the church. It was the center of your world. Everything else in life revolved around and found its place in relationship to the church. But that is clearly no longer true for many, perhaps even most, professing Christians in America. Here is another one of those foundational truths we've been examining this summer, truths that were so important in the past but that the church of today has largely forgotten. But it's a truth to which you and I must cling, we must hold fast: real Christians love the church. Real Christians love the church.

Now, let's be clear what we're talking about when we talk about the church. The New Testament uses the word *church* (of course the Greek word is *ekklesia*) 109 times. The word simply means “an assembly” or “a gathering.” But it's used in two primary senses. First of all, the word is used, *ekklesia* is used a few times to refer to the *universal church*; that is, the whole body of Christ's redeemed. It's used this way about 17 times in the New Testament. This refers to all believers everywhere and in all times. Now, theologians also divide the universal church into two categories. First of all, there's the *visible* universal church; that is, the universal church as you and I see it. And it includes both true believers and false believers. Look around you. This is a church. This is what you see. But there are true believers here and false believers. When you take the universal church, the people who've connected to the body of Christ around this world and in all times, there are true believers and false believers. That's what we see. But then there is the *invisible* universal church. That is the church as God sees it. It includes only true

believers. When God looks at the church, He sees and discerns those who are truly His, and that is the church as He sees it. But mostly in the New Testament the word *ekklesia* isn't used of the universal church. Instead, it refers to local churches: a local assembly or assemblies of those who profess faith in the Christ of Scripture. The word *ekklesia* is used in this way about 92 times in the New Testament.

Now think about that for a moment. The word *church* is used of the universal church, of all true Christians everywhere and in all times, only 17 times in the New Testament. But the same Greek word is used 92 times of local gatherings of believers like this one this morning. Now, that has a huge point for us to see. This means that your relationship not only to the universal church matters, your relationship to a local assembly of believers matters. And by the way, when we're talking about a local church—we're so used to using the word “Eng” in English of a building: “this is our church,” meaning this building. That's not at all the New Testament usage of *ekklesia*. There were no church buildings, and this building is not the church. *You* are the church. The people who've gathered here, this is the church. The point is that a local church should be the center of your life as a Christian. Real Christians love the church. Now, I want to begin by considering why, why real Christians love the church.

My dad was a music director. By the time I was born he was a—before that he'd been a bass fiddle player in a Big Band Era nightclub act. The Lord saved him out of that. And so by the time I came along, he was a church music director. So my earliest memories are of life in the church. Literally, my earliest memory that I can go back and frame is in a church classroom surrounded by other little kids and toys. The doors were open, my family was there. There's

never been a time in my life when I wasn't connected to a church. Even during my college years I consistently attended a local body of believers. However, I have to tell you that for many years after I became a Christian, the church was not the true priority of my life. I attended. I was there. But I can't say that the church was truly the priority. For many years I was married to school. Later, married to my wife. Then married to my work. But sadly, like many other Christians, in my twenties I was just dating the church. It was in my thirties that I began to see the biblical priority and the critical importance of the church. And I what I want to do over the next few minutes is just share with you what I began to see through a number of influences that God brought into my life. And I want to challenge you to consider just a few of the biblical reasons—and it is just a few—of the biblical reasons why real Christians love the church.

Number one. Real Christians love the church—and there is no more important one than this. The church along with Christ Himself is at the center of God's plan of the ages. Turn to Ephesians chapter 3. It's a remarkable text in the middle of Ephesians. Ephesians 3, verse 8. Paul's talking about his ministry. And he says that God has entrusted him, “the very least of all saints, {with a grace to} preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.” That's part of what he's been entrusted to in his ministry. But in verse 9 there's a second part of his ministry, and that is “to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery.” Now, in biblical terms a mystery is something that you can never discover on your own but that God has now revealed. He says part of my ministry is to bring to light the administration of this thing that used to be unknown but God has now revealed “which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things.” So this is something God has always known about, always been important to Him. What is the mystery? Verse 10:

So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and... authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now folks, verses 10 and 11 is one of the most far reaching statements in all of the Bible. And the key that unlocks our understanding of it is found in verse 11. Notice the words “the eternal purpose.” You'll notice in your Bible there's likely a marginal reference explaining that. Literally, the Greek text says “the plan of the ages.” The plan of the ages. In eternity past, among the counsels of the trinity, God conceived a plan for the ages. And at the heart of that plan is Jesus Christ. Look how verse 11 continues: “The eternal purpose {or, the plan of the ages} which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Now, we expect that. But what we don't expect is that Paul also makes it clear in this passage that the church has always been central in God's plan of the ages. It is the mystery which has now been revealed.

Notice how verses 10 and 11 read. God has revealed this mystery, which is church, through Paul. Why? Verse 10. So that He could put His manifold (or His multi-colored, splended) wisdom on display. So do you see? Do you follow the line of thought? God has, through Paul, revealed something that is central at His plan of the ages, and that is the Church, so that He could put His wisdom on display—to whom? Notice, angels. “That the wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and... authorities in the heavenly places.” Those two terms speak of hierarchy of angelic beings. This is amazing. You know, we are so man-

centered that we think everything's about us. God says, I have put the Church center in the plan of the ages in order to put My wisdom on display to the angelic beings that surround this planet. As John Stott says, "The church becomes the graduate school for angels." The Church is the focal point of world history. Stott goes to say,

Secular history concentrates its attention on kings, queens, presidents, politicians, and generals, in fact on VIPs. The Bible concentrates rather on a group it calls "the saints," often little, insignificant, unimportant people, who are however at the same time God's people—and for that reason are both unknown to the world, and yet well known to God.

You see what Paul is saying here? He's saying that to God, and to all of the angelic beings that God created who hover over this world, the people of God, the church, is the center point. In the 1st century they watched not what happened in the capital cities of the world, but rather, they watched Paul and Peter. They watched Priscilla and Aquila. And they watched thousands of other unnamed, unimportant, insignificant Christians that we'll never know about until heaven. But now, you and I, and churches like ours scattered across this world, are the focus of their attention. And they are straining to watch what happens, because God, in the church, is putting His wisdom on display. And they are amazed. The church, along with Christ Himself, is at the very center of God's plan of the ages.

In fact, the church is God's primary stage in the world today for putting His glory on display. Look down at chapter 3, verse 21. Paul breaks out in doxology at the end of the first half of

Ephesians. And he says, “To {God} be the glory {watch this} in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations {it'll always be this way, and} forever and ever. Amen.” He says God is going to be glorified in this world, in human history, primarily in two places: in Jesus Christ and in the church. Stott concludes that section of his commentary by saying,

If the church is central to God's purpose as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center?

How dare we? Listen, real Christians love the church because they understand that the church is at the very center of God's plan of the ages.

Secondly, real Christians love the church, because the church is God's family. Look back at Ephesians chapter 2. Paul has introduced to us in chapter 2 the reality that (in verse 15) that God has taken Jews and Gentiles and made the two into one new man, one new entity, the church. And then in verses 19 to 22 he gives us three pictures of the church. First of all, in verse 19 it's like being citizens of God's kingdom: we're “fellow citizens with the saints.” But secondly, (notice verse 19) being in the church is like being in God's family: “you... are of God's household.” This is a common New Testament theme. Second Corinthians 6:18: “I will be a father to you, and you {will} be sons and daughters to Me,' says the Lord Almighty.” Paul, writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:15, says, I'm writing so you will know how to conduct yourself “in the household of God {the family of God}, which is the church.” By the way,

clearly there in 1 Timothy chapter 3 Paul is referring to the local church in Ephesus as a local expression of God's family. In other words, not only is the in the universal church God's family, but this church and every other true church is an expression locally of God's family. Church is an assembly of those who have been adopted by God and who are therefore part of His family. Is that how you think of the church? Do you think of these people as your family? That's how God thinks of it. That's the reality if you're in Christ. For some Christians, unfortunately, the church has become little more than a weekend music concert, or a weekend special conference that happens once a week: you show up, you enjoy, and you leave. Listen, the church is much more than that. The church is God's own family.

Thirdly, real Christians love the church, because the church is God's dwelling place. You know, Paul does say in 1 Corinthians that our bodies (your body, believer) is the temple of the Holy Spirit. That's true. But far more often Paul describes the church as the temple. Not the building again. Not this structure. But rather, we the people of the church, we are a temple. Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 9. He writes to the believers in the local assembly there in Corinth, and he says, "You {plural, you together, collectively} ...are God's building." Verse 16: "You are the temple of God." Look here in Ephesians chapter 3, I'm sorry, chapter 2, verse 21, eh ah if you're still there. Those three illustrations I mentioned? The third illustration comes in verse 20. We're a building. The church is like a building

Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ
Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together,
is growing {watch this} into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are

being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

You understand that the invisible church and the local church are like a temple built by God as a place where He dwells? The image of a temple emphasizes the priority of worship. The metaphor of the church as a temple teaches us that now, when we gather together, we are experiencing God's presence in the same way the Old Testament believer did when he went to the Old Testament temple. Not because God dwells in the *place* where we meet. We sometimes talk about this as as “the church” or as “the house of God.” This isn't the house of God. *We* are the house of God. God dwells in the midst of His people. 2 Corinthians 6:16: “We are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I will dwell in them and will walk among them.’” Real Christians love the church, because it is the place on earth where God has especially chosen to manifest His presence just like He did with the Old Testament temple.

Now in the interest of time, let me just really briefly give you a few other reasons Christians love the church. Number four. Real Christians love the church, because the church is the only entity on earth under Christ's immediate, loving leadership. He is so devoted to the church that He is its intimate leader. Look at Ephesians chapter 5. Ephesians chapter 5, verse 23: “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.” In the same way that a husband is the head of his wife, Christ is the head of His church. He loves her. He cares for her. He leads her.

Number five. Real Christians love the church, because the church is the supreme object of Christ's love. What does Christ love most on this planet? His church. Look at verse 25:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church.” Now, this is something interesting to think about. What is the goal for our own moral characters as a Christian? To be like—Christ. To be like Christ. And to become like Christ is to hate what Christ hates and to love what Christ loves. So to be like Christ is to love the church like Christ loves the church. Occasionally I'll run into someone who tells me they love Jesus, but then they go on to tell me that they're not really involved in the life of the church, never have been. Listen, let this bore into your soul. You cannot love Jesus without loving His church. In fact, the more spiritually mature you become, the more you will love His church. You want a barometer of your spiritual maturity? How much do you love the church?

Number six. True believers, real believers love the church, because the church was the purpose behind Jesus' death. Look at verse 25 again. Christ loved the church, and He “gave Himself up for her” It's like that hymn that we sing: “From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride.” It's the purpose behind His death.

Number seven. The church is being cleansed and purified by Christ Himself. Look at verse 26: “That He might sanctify her.” Listen, right now Christ is working on His church. He's sanctifying her. He's making her pure.

Number eight. Real Christians love the church, because the church is the primary reason Christ will return. Look at verse 27: “That He might present to Himself the church in all her glory having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless.” This is looking to the future. This is looking to the Rapture when Christ comes for His church. He's

coming for His bride.

Number nine. Real Christians love the church, because most of the New Testament was written to local churches and their leaders. Isn't it interesting that when the apostles wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit to believers, they either wrote to pastors of churches or to churches? Very little to individual Christians. Now what is implied in the fact that most of the New Testament is written to churches? Well, since all Christians need the Word of God, the apostles were assuming what? They were assuming that all Christians would be intimately connected to local churches. In fact, the last communication that we have from Jesus Christ our Lord is the Book of Revelation—addressed to seven local churches.

And number ten. Real Christians love the church, because the church is the only entity Christ promised to build. Matthew 16:18: “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades,” the entrance to the grave. What's that? Death. Even death can't overpower My church. There is nothing that will stop Me from building My church, Jesus says. That's what He's doing today. That's why you shouldn't live all concerned about politics. Listen, Christ is building His church, and whatever happens in the capital of our country will not change that reality. When real believers through a study of God's Word begin to understand how important the church is to the Father and to the Son and to the Spirit, because believers love God, they love what He loves. And they come to love the church.

So that's why real Christians love the church. But I want us to consider briefly, secondly, how real Christians love the church. If we share our Lord's love for and commitment to the church,

what should that mean in our daily lives? Well, here are several commitments that real Christians have always made, real Christians who love the church make.

First of all, belong to a local church. Although New Testament churches didn't handle their membership exactly like we do, the concept of officially committing to and belonging to a church is very much a New Testament idea. Let me give you several examples of that. In the New Testament when individuals repented and believed in Jesus Christ, guess what happened? They were added to the church. Go to Acts chapter 2. Acts chapter 2, verse 41. On the Day of Pentecost, those who had received Peter's message, who had believed, "were baptized; and that day there were added {added to what? added to the church in Jerusalem} about three thousand souls." Verse 47: "Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to the number day by day those who were being saved." To what number? Well, to the three thousand plus, the 120 who were in the upper room, to the church in Jerusalem. Chapter 5, verse 14: "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number." Again, the church there in Jerusalem. You see, when people repented and believed in Christ, they didn't choose to live out a private commitment to and communion with Christ. They joined formally with other believers in a local assembly.

In addition to that, there's evidence that each church apparently kept an official list of its members as people were saved. That's why you have a number given in Acts chapter 2. They were added. When a believer moved from one city to another, his church often wrote a letter of commendation to the new church. Paul talks about those letters in 2 Corinthians chapter 3. And elders (the leaders of the church) are commanded to shepherd God's flock among them, Acts

20:28; to have charge over them, 1 Thessalonians 5:12; and to keep watch over their souls, Hebrews 13:17. In fact, Hebrews 13:17 says that the elders and I will have to give an account for every individual who's a part of this church. Those responsibilities given to elders demand an identifiable membership. We can only shepherd the flock if we know who belongs and who doesn't.

Spurgeon writes:

There are some who say, "Well, I've 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." {Spurgeon says} 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 as good a brick while it's 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. (end quote)

You and I are to commit ourselves to belonging to a local church.

Secondly, because real Christians love the church, they make this commitment: they make the church their priority. There are a number of ways to look at this. You remember when Jesus was in Capernaum teaching in the house there in Matthew chapter 12. He's teaching His disciples,

and a large crowd of them are gathered in the house. And His mother, Mary, and His brothers show up outside. And the word gets passed through the crowd: Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You; You need to stop what You're doing and go and interact with them. To which Jesus replies, these, the disciples these are My mother and My brother and My sisters. And then He says in Matthew 12:50, “Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” Your personal family is not an eternal reality. But God's family is. That doesn't mean you neglect your family. We're commanded to love them and care for them as well.

The early believers were devoted to the church. Look back at Acts 2, verse 41. Those who received the message that day at Pentecost were baptized; they were added to the church. “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship {with God's family, and} to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Look at verse 46: “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple {they would go at the prayer time at the temple and meet there and corporately worship}, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” They made God's people, God's family, their family.

You must make the church a priority in your life as well—whatever your circumstances. If you're a student, listen, study hard, but don't consistently put your studies and your extracurricular activities ahead of involvement in the church. And don't choose a college if you can't find a good church there that you can truly get involved in. If you're in your career years, let the priority of the church shape your career choices. Don't pursue a job that consistently

makes involvement in the church impossible. And don't take the promotion if there isn't a good church for your family there. Whatever your age or circumstances, don't let your weekly decisions crowd out the priority of the church. Don't consistently place other priorities ahead of the church. Parents, let me speak to you. If you consistently tell your kids, “God is the most important thing in our world,” and then you structure your weekly activity so that you neglect involvement in the church for their sports, for their academics, for you family's fun—they're going to get the message loud and clear. Make the church a priority, because it's Christ's priority.

Number three. Serve faithfully in the church. Serve faithfully in the church. Real Christians express their love for the church by serving in the church. As someone once said, the church is made up of pillars and caterpillars: the pillars support the church; the caterpillars just crawl in and out every week. Listen, when you really come to understand how much the church matters to our Lord, you can no longer in good conscience just be a caterpillar. Over and over again, the New Testament stresses the importance of using your giftedness in a local body of Christ. Look at Romans chapter 12. Romans 12, verse 4. Paul deals with this very issue. He says,

For just as we have many members in {our physical} body and all the members {don't} have the same function {but all of them have a function}, so {verse 5} we, who are many, are one body in Christ {spiritually}, and individually members of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise {those gifts} accordingly.

You hear what Paul is saying? He's saying listen, just like your body has different members and

each member has a role, the body of Christ has different members and each member has a role. You have a responsibility. First Corinthians 12:7: “To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”—talking about spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:7: “To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.” Again, talking about spiritual gifts. Look at 1 Peter chapter 4. First Peter chapter 4, verse 10: “As each one {every one of us} has received a special gift {a spiritual gifting}, employ it {use it} in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” And then he says some of you have speaking gifts; some of you have serving gifts. Listen, you either have a speaking gift, you have serving gift, or you have a combination of the two. But if you're a Christian, you have been spiritually gifted. Use it, he says, employ it in the church. This is what real Christians who love the church do. They use their giftedness in the body of Christ.

Number four. Build relationships in the church. Remember, the church is God's family. We saw that in Ephesians 2, other places. You must not only engage in the corporate worship of the church, you must also engage in mutual relationships with other believers in the church. Within the context of the New Testament churches, we are commanded to carry out a long list of responsibilities to one another. Let me just give you a little list. We are commanded within the church to love one another, be devoted to one another, honor one another, rejoice with one another, serve one another, carry one another's burdens, forgive one another, encourage one another, offer hospitality to one another, confess our sins to one another, pray for one another. You get the idea of mutual relationship? It's not enough to show up at a service once a week. Real Christians love and look out for the other members of their family. Let me put it very bluntly. And I don't mean this in a harsh way. This is just the reality. You don't truly love God if

you don't love God's family. You don't. 1 John 4:20: "The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom {he's} not seen." You have a responsibility for God's family in the church where you have committed yourself. It's a shared life as a family. Pursue relationships. Pursue friendships in the church. And by the way, let me just say that loving other people in the church means you don't wait for them to reach out to you. You reach out to them.

Number five. Real Christians show their love for the church by sharing a passion for evangelism. You see, we saw in Ephesians 2 that the church is a temple in which God is to be worshiped. But the church is still under construction. Not all of the stones have been added yet. There're more stones to be added before this structure is complete. And that's where evangelism comes in. This is why Paul was told by the Lord in Acts 18, "Do not be afraid... but go on speaking... do not be silent... for I have many people in this city." You know what Jesus was saying to Paul? Listen, I'm still building My temple. I've got other stones from this city I'm planning to add. Keep on sharing the gospel. If we love the church, we'll do the same.

So, how would you describe your relationship to the church? Ask yourself that question. How would you describe your relationship to the church? Let me give you five simple tests to help you evaluate your commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. Number one: have you officially connected yourself to a local church? Number two: is the church that you've connected yourself to the center of yours and your family's life? Or do you just fit the church around everything else? Number three: do you faithfully attend the corporate worship of the church? Listen, this is a biblical command. Hebrews says, do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is. Do you build your family's life around Sunday, or is it kind of an add-on?

You get to it if you can, and you come dead tired because you spent your time doing what is the real priorities (sic) of your life. Number four: are you faithfully involved in a smaller group where you can practice the one another's of the New Testament? Again, the Bible doesn't dictate what that smaller group is, but it does dictate that we carry out the one another's in the context of the church. That means you've got to get to know some people. By the way, that's the reason for the Ministry Fair. Go down there. There're fellowship ministries there as well where you can connect with a smaller group. Number five: do you faithfully exercise your spiritual giftedness in the church? Again, that's part of the reason the Ministry Fair is down in the gym. After this service is over, you want to apply this message? Go look. Go see what the opportunities are, and find a way to connect with the giftedness God has given you with the needs that are here in this church family.

Brothers and sisters, hold fast to this forgotten truth: real Christians love the church. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for Your Word. And thank You for the church. Thank You that You have placed it at the very center of Your plan of the ages, right alongside Your Son, because the Church is His bride. Father, thank You for this local manifestation of the church. Thank You for the people You've brought here. Lord, help us to love Your church as You love it, and help us to express our love in these ways. O God, make us faithful in a day when so many have neglected their responsibility to the church, when Christian's lives center in so many other places. Lord, help us to love what You love, to be committed to what You're committed to, and in so doing to reflect Christ likeness. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.