

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH DURING TROUBLING TIMES

INTRODUCTION

- During the covid lockdowns, in many places, churches were told they were not essential
 - Businesses and services deemed “essential” were kept open: supermarkets, hardware stores, gas stations, pet stores, laundromats, and so forth.
 - Many others, deemed “non-essential,” were ordered closed until further notice: gyms, movie theaters, casinos, retail stores, sports stadiums, concert venues, and churches
 - Sadly, churches were viewed as a “nice to have” luxury...but something we can presumably live without for a prolonged season
 - Such a response demonstrated how churchgoing has become a very low priority in contemporary Western culture
 - “Do we realize how revolutionary this is in the scheme of history? Mere decades ago, the role of churchgoing in society was so central in day-to-day life, so fundamental to the well-being of both individuals and communities, that it would be unthinkable to relegate church gatherings to ‘non-essential’ status. That we have come to see embodied church gatherings as ‘non-essential’ speaks to a few dynamics that the COVID-19 pandemic didn’t create but has exposed. These dynamics were not imposed by some external, anti-Christian bogeyman; in many cases they are dynamics perpetuated by Christians themselves.”¹
 - This was evident in that many believers attached themselves to livestream and virtual church, assuming it was the same as the church gathered but failing to realize that virtual church is a push to individualize Christianity
 - However, a Christian without a church in in trouble
 - Additionally, the response of government toward the church during covid demonstrated the antagonism of the world toward believers and the gathered church
 - It revealed the disdain of the world for God’s people and God’s church, something that should not surprise us
- John 15:18-20** ~ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.
- This response of the world to Christ’s church is only a small glimpse into what awaits believers in the future
 - As we continue to face troubling times and as the opposition against believers grows, we must understand the importance of the church
 - We must have a robust ecclesiology, thinking the same way about the church as Christ doe
 - We must demonstrate a commitment to and love for gathered worship
 - We must be unflinching in the face of opposition
 - We must know how to think about and react to persecution

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-essential/>

- In 2018-19, the Chinese government cracked down on Christians and churches
- One pastor, Wang Yi, along with 100 of his fellow members, was arrested and harassed
- He prepared written documents in advance of the persecution he saw coming, wanting to make sure his church would be properly instructed on how to respond if he was no longer available to them
- He wrote an article entitled “14 Decisions: In the Face of Persecution, What Will I Do?”
- The very first decision was: “**Do not stop gathering together:** Under no circumstances will we stop or give up on gathering publicly, especially the corporate worship of believers on Sunday. God’s sovereignty is higher than any secular authority and the church’s mission and the Bible’s teaching on not neglecting to gather together is higher than any secular law. Regardless of whether the Religious Affairs Bureau and the police take administrative and forceful measures toward Sunday worship, whether or not their enforcement follows due process, I will resist by peaceful means. I will not cooperate with the police banning, shutting down, dissolving, or sealing up the church and its gathering. I will not stop convening, hosting and participating in the church’s public worship, until the police seizes my personal freedom by force.”²
- A similar statement was made by the elders of Grace Community Church: “[It] has never been the prerogative of civil government to order, modify, forbid, or mandate worship. When, how, and how often the church worships is not subject to Caesar. Caesar himself is subject to God. Jesus affirmed that principle when He told Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). And because Christ is head of the church, ecclesiastical matters pertain to His Kingdom, not Caesar’s. Jesus drew a stark distinction between those two kingdoms when He said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Our Lord Himself always rendered to Caesar what was Caesar’s, but He never offered to Caesar what belongs solely to God. As pastors and elders, we cannot hand over to earthly authorities any privilege or power that belongs solely to Christ as head of His church. Pastors and elders are the ones to whom Christ has given the duty and the right to exercise His spiritual authority in the church (1 Peter 5:1–4; Hebrews 13:7, 17)—and Scripture alone defines how and whom they are to serve (1 Corinthians 4:1–4).”³
- Moving forward, we must understand the importance of the church to God’s kingdom program
- We must grasp the reality that regularly gathering together is necessary for a church to be a church
- Failure to do so will result in weak believers and anemic churches who will falter when difficult times come

7 REASONS THE CHURCH IS ESSENTIAL

It is God’s Idea and a Central Part of His Mission

Matthew 16:18 ~ I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it

- Here Jesus promised to build the church, an entity not known at this point in redemptive history
- He didn’t promise to build a program, a movement, or an organization...but rather a living organism
- He promised to build the church (*ekklesia*)...*ekklesia* comes from 2 words: *ek* - “out” and *kaleo* - “to call”
- The word “church” simply means “a called out group”...a group of believers whom God has called out of the world as a special group of His own who assemble together...the church is people
- This is a reference to the universal church or the invisible church which is made up of all true believers from Pentecost to the Rapture

² <https://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2018/12/in-the-face-of-persecution-what-will-i-do>

³ <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B200723/christ-not-caesar-is-head-of-the-church>

- But true believers manifest their inclusion in the universal church by their participation in the local church
- Christ Himself personally took it upon Himself to build His church...notice “my church”
- The church is Christ’s idea and His work
- It is not man’s idea...not a worldly invention...not some political entity...not a governmental program
- So certain was Christ of this promise that He guaranteed it: v. 18 ~ and the gates of Hades will not overpower it
- Hades is the place where the spirits of the dead go...it refers to death
- Jesus’ point is that even death, the ultimate weapon of Satan, has no power to stop the church
- This is why the church is essential...it is close to Christ’s heart, something He promised to build
- One of the ways we demonstrate our commitment to the church is to give ourselves wholeheartedly to a local church
- Our love must be committed to specific people, not just to an idea or concept
- The way we demonstrate our commitment to the universal church is by our involvement in the local expression of it
- To love Christ is to love His body...because it is the primary means by which the Lord is working in this age

It is an Organism That Christ Died to Purchase

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood

Ephesians 5:25-27 ~ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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.

- Christ loved the church so much that he gave Himself for it...He laid down his own life for the church
- He experienced the fires of hell itself in our place, condemned not because of His sin but ours
- He paid the ultimate price to redeem us and purchase the church
- Christ loved the church to the point of complete abandonment of His own protection and defense of His innocence
- Not only was His love a sacrificial one, it was a sanctifying one in that He died for the church to make her holy, to cleanse her, to purify her, and to present her as blameless (vv. 26-27)
- This is what makes the church essential
- How could we think so little of something that cost so much?
- How could we ever think that a superficial commitment to the church is consistent with Christ’s sacrificial death for it!
- We should care about the church because Christ cared so much for it that He gave His life for it!
- We should avoid a flippant or low view of the church in light of what it cost Christ
- Even if someone has been hurt by the church and are fearful of getting plugged in again, it doesn’t change the fact that Christ gave Himself for His bride

It is the Visible Manifestation of Christ in His Absence

Ephesians 1:22-23 ~ And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

- Christ is head of the church and, as head, He orders the body and directs His will in it
- In other words, as the Head of the body, Christ gives the Body its life, its energy, and its power since the body needs the Head for its coordination and unity
- Christ is the leader of the church and the church takes its cues from Christ
- In this sense, Christ is on display in the church...He is the one directing it...thus, the church is meant to be a place where the will and power and the glory of Christ is made known
- And Paul says that the church is the fullness of Christ, meaning that Christ fills the church with His presence, power, and blessing
- Christ is in a sense visibly manifest in the church
- In fact, to see and behold the church is, in a sense to see and behold Christ since the church shows us what Christ is like
- The church is the earthly representation of who Christ is
- This is important because it takes the fullness of the body to show us the fullness of Christ
- This means that it is not just what God is doing through us privately that is important, but also what God is doing through us corporately
- It takes the whole church to portray an accurate portrait of Christ, which involves every believer committing themselves to the church, using their gifts, and contributing their part
- Each believer fills in a piece of the puzzle in the body of Christ which, when complete, gives us the full picture of Christ
- The whole body is necessary to make this happen
- However, when some believers refuse to commit themselves to the local church, they prevent the church from properly displaying Christ in all His fullness
- Not only do they suffer personally, but the church suffers corporately

Ephesians 2:19-22 ~ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

- Paul says that the church is a building comprised of individual believers
- God "fits them together" (v. 21) and, in so doing, He fashions a whole building made of living stones
- And God's presence is made manifest in the church according to v. 22 ~ built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit
- The church is in a sense where God dwells in that God the Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence in His earthly sanctuary, the church
- Thus, we are the physical manifestation of Christ
- The best expression of Christ on the earth today is not just individual believers...but us corporately
- Christ is put on display when we come together to practice the one-anothers and function as a body
- This is why church is essential

It Occupies a Central Place in Bringing God Glory

Ephesians 3:10 ~ so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

- God made the church for the purpose of demonstrating the manifold wisdom of God to the angels
- The purpose for proclaiming the marvelous truths about Gentiles being included in the body of Christ is that angels (“rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”) are watching
- It is in the church that God makes known His “manifold wisdom” to these angels
- “manifold” means “multi-colored, marked with a great variety of colors, many sided, of many kinds”
- In classical Greek, this word referred to the beauty of an embroidered pattern or the variety of colors in flowers
- Paul says that God’s wisdom is multifaceted in the sense that it is a multiracial, multi-cultural community united as fellow members in the body of Christ
- That God would take diverse people including male, female, bond, free, Jew, and Greek and He would melt down all the walls and blend them together in an indivisible oneness all one with Himself is incredible
- That God could do that kind of miracle of salvation is a wonder beyond wonders of wisdom and causes the angelic host to give him glory
- And the church is where the manifold wisdom of God is put on display, the stage where it is best seen
- The vastness of God’s wisdom shines forth in blazing splendor in the church
- And the audience of this divine drama are angels...they are watching, taking it all in
- They are looking at the church to understand God’s wisdom in salvation, watching the church to see God’s mystery unveiled
- Someone has well said: “The history of the Christian church is the graduate school for angels”
- So, Paul is saying that the reason the church exists is not simply to save people
- It is so that the angels will see this incredible miracle of the church and they will glorify the wisdom of God
- In other words, the church is not an end in itself...it is a means to an end
- The end is that God will be glorified in the unlimited praise of the angelic hosts
- Thus, the church does not exist for itself; rather, it exists for God

Ephesians 3:20-21 ~ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

- The church is an expression of the glory of Christ in the world which is why it is essential

It is Where Believers are Shepherded

- The metaphor of shepherd and flock is frequently used in the OT and it pictures God as the shepherd who loves and tenderly cares for His sheep

Psalms 23:1 ~ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Psalms 11:3 ~ We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture

- In similar fashion, the NT describes Christ’s relationship with His people as one of shepherd and sheep

John 10:1-18

- Jesus calls the sheep and leads them (vv. 3-4)
- Jesus is the door through which the sheep enter (v. 9)
- Jesus is the shepherd who lays His life down for the sheep (v. 11, 15)
- Jesus has a close relationship with His sheep (v. 14)...He knows those who are His and provides every need for them...as shepherd He guards the sheep from danger, tends the sick, searches for the lost, and leads them to good pasture
- The relationship of shepherd to sheep was one of considerable intimacy
- All of this serves to show the value which God has placed upon the flock and the fact that He lovingly cares for His people
- And in the church, Christ has committed the work of shepherding to undershepherds as His ministers in the church

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1 Peter 5:2 ~ shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness

Ephesians 4:11 ~ And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers

- There is no better description of the work of the leaders of the church than undershepherds of the chief Shepherd whose ministry is to care for each member as a shepherd cares for His sheep
- This involves feeding them the Word (2 Tim 4:2), leading the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2), protecting them (Acts 20:29-30), and keeping watch over their souls (Heb 13:17)
- This is why church is essential

It is Where Believers are Equipped

Ephesians 4:11-16 ~ And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love

- The primary role of the gifted men in Ephesians 4:11 is that they are to be equippers, those who use God's Word to prepare God's people
- The word "equipping" means literally "to put in order, restore, make complete, to prepare"
- This term was used in the Greek OT in Ezra in connection with the rebuilding of the wall and the temple after the Babylonian exile (Ezra 4:12, 16; 5:3, 9; 6:14)
- This term is found in the secular sense of repairing fishing nets

Matthew 4:21 ~ And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the {son} of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them.

- The term was used to refer to that which is fit, restored to its original condition or made complete
- It was often used as a medical term for the setting of bones

- God's desire is that His people be prepared, trained, and equipped for "for the work of service"
- It is not the gifted men who have the most responsibility to do the work of service
- No pastor or even a group of pastors can do everything a church needs to do
- God's purpose is that the pastors equip the people that God has given to their care
- Obviously, the leaders share in serving but God's basic design is that the saints be equipped so they can serve each other effectively
- When the gifted men are faithful in prayer and in teaching the Word, the people will be properly equipped and rightly motivated to do the work of service
- Spiritual service is the work of every Christian

- This should result in "the building up of the body of Christ"
- The emphasis here is on the church being built up internally as all believers are nurtured to fruitful service through the Word
- God's goal is that individual believers grow in spiritual depth...and for spiritual maturity to take place individually and corporately

- This results in spiritual stability...v. 14 ~ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming
- There will be growth in spiritual discernment and an unwillingness to be captivated by spiritual fads

- This has the effect of further spiritual growth...v. 15 ~ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ
- The result is believers becoming more and more like Christ

- This equipping ministry brings about a healthy body, with each member contributing to it...v. 16 ~ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love
- Every believer using their spiritual gift in the community of believers has a corporate sanctifying effect

- This is why the church is essential...it leads to spiritual growth

- And this is why isolation from church is dangerous and results in spiritual suicide
- Isolation is a serious threat to our spiritual growth because it is one of those sins that can go undetected for a while, and before long, there is a sudden coldness and unhealthy wall built up between an individual and their church family
- Isolation is the devil's oldest trick in his black book of sinful temptations
- It is dangerous for many reasons:
 - It creates distance from the church body and kills community
 - It makes you vulnerable to Satan's attacks
 - It opens you up for influence from the world, the flesh, and the devil
 - It creates a rogue attitude of independence that's misguided and deceptively false
 - It prevents accountability
 - It creates loneliness and intensifies the burdens of life

It is the Pillar and Support of the Truth

1 Timothy 3:15 ~ but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

- The church's task is to uphold the truth
- "buttress" (*hedraioma*) means "support"
- Paul may have had in mind the Temple of Diana in Ephesus which was supported by 127 gold-plated marble pillars

- On April 15, 2019, the roof of the Notre Dame Cathedral burned and its roof collapsed into the nave
- The roof had been crafted by hand in the Middle Ages by skilled artisans who used 5,000 oak trees in its construction
- During the blaze, there was much speculation as to whether Notre Dame's 28 flying buttresses, built in 1180, would collapse inward and bring down the building
- They didn't...and it was a reminder that they were the reason the structure has stood so long
- Without them, the whole structure would have crumbled to the ground like matchsticks

- The church is a bulwark of God's truth in that the truth is her mission and her message
- The truth is her reason for existence in the world
- This does not mean that the church is the source of God's truth; rather, Paul was simply affirming the crucial role of the universal church as the support of God's truth
- "The truth given to us through Scripture is the pillar and support of the church, having the same authority, relevance, and sufficiency as God himself, for the Bible is his divine breath...The pillar and buttress of Scripture is the church's only hope when earthly ideological fires threaten to destroy all she holds dear."⁴
- This is why the church is essential...because we can only live the way God intends for us to live when we are brought face to face with His truth
- So, for these reasons, the church is critical at all times, but especially when believers face troubling times
- A believer disconnected from the body of Christ will be left without resources at the time when they need them most
- All the resources they need are found in Christ and His church, but not outside of them
- Thus, as we move forward facing a future that will almost certainly include increasing opposition and persecution, we must remain steadfastly connected to the church as one of God's primary means of grace
- "What's a gathered church? It's an embassy of heaven. Step inside your church or ours, and what should you find? A whole different nation — sojourners, exiles, citizens of Christ's kingdom. Inside such churches, you'll hear the King of heaven's words declared. You'll hear heaven's language of faith, hope, and love. You'll get a taste of the end-time heavenly banquet through the Lord's Supper. And you'll be charged with its diplomatic business as you're called to bring the gospel to your nation and every other nation. Jesus didn't ask the United Nations, the U.S. Supreme Court, or the Oxford University philosophy department to represent him and declare his judgments. He asked the humble, the lowly, the 'things that are not' (1 Corinthians 1:28). He asked your church and ours."⁵

⁴ Dustin Bengé, *The Loveliest Place*, 84-85.

⁵ Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church*, 54-55.