

The centrality of the church

1. Prayer
2. Introduction
 - a. Should we abandon church?
 - b. This is what some recent Christian books are telling us to do. Consider these titles-
 - i. “Life after church” Brian Sanders
 - ii. “Dear Church: Letters to a disillusioned Generation” Sarah Cunningham
 - iii. “Quitting Church” Julia Duin
 - iv. “Revolution: finding vibrant faith beyond the walls of the sanctuary” George Barna
 - c. This mad lib by Kevin Deyoung describes the thoughts of many....
 - i. “The institutional church is so (pejorative adjective). When I go to church I feel completely (negative emotion). The leadership is totally (adjective you would use to describe Richard Nixon) and the people are (Noun that starts with un-). The services are (adjective you might use to describe going to the dentist), the music is (adjective you would use to describe the singing on Barney), and the whole congregation is (Choose among: “passive,” “comatose,” “hypocritical,” or “Rush Limbaugh Republicans”). The whole thing makes me (Medical term).” (Deyoung, 14)
 - ii. Maybe you can relate... maybe you have been burned by a church!
 - d. Contrary to the perspective of many, the NT encourages us to make the church central to our lives.
 - e. This brings us to the sixth talk in our theological distinctives series...
 - i. We are committed to...
 1. The authority of Scripture
 2. The centrality of the Gospel
 3. Reformed theology
 4. Complementarity
 5. Continuationist pneumatology
 6. The centrality of the church
 - f. To convince you of the centrality of the church I’m going to ask two questions-
 - i. *What is the church?*
 - ii. *Why should we love the church?*

1. What is the church!

- a. The NT word for church is the word ecclesia, which means the gathering, or the assembling of a group of people. It is used 114 times in the NT.

- b. The church is a gathering of Christians who meet together in a specific place to celebrate the gospel.
 - i. This means that the church is not the physical building where Christians meet.
- c. But how do we know if a church is a true church?
 - i. Historically all Protestants have agreed that there are three essential marks of a church.
 - 1. The right preaching of the gospel
 - 2. The proper observance of the sacraments (baptism and communion)
 - 3. The practice of church discipline
 - ii. Without these things, you can't have a church. Which means that-
 - 1. The crisis pregnancy center is not the church
 - 2. UGM is not the church
 - 3. Campus Crusade for Christ is not the church
 - 4. Moody Bible Institute is not the church
 - 5. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is not the church
 - 6. Watching a preacher online with your family or roommates is not the church.
 - iii. The local church is a group of Christians who gather to hear God's word preached, celebrate the sacraments, and exercise church discipline.
 - iv. You may be thinking, "I understand what the church is, but why should I love the church?" This brings us to the next question.
- d. *First, what is the church!!!*

2. Why should we love the church?

- a. *There are many reasons... Let me humbly suggest five reasons!*

1. We should love the church because Christ loved the church.

- a. **Eph 5:25-28** ESV Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, (26) that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, (27) so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (28) In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.
- b. These verses are about marriage but in Paul's teaching on marriage we learn something very significant about Christ. We learn that he loves the church. In fact, these verses tell us that Christ loved the church so much that he died for her on the cross. This is extravagant, passionate, sacrificial love. This is love that demonstrates itself in commitment. This is how much Christ loves you if you are in his church. He loves you as much as the Godliest husband could ever love his wife.

- c. Proclaim gospel here....
- d. We often talk about wanting to have Christ's heart for the poor, the lost, the orphan, the widow, and racial reconciliation. We should share Christ's passion for these things, but when was the last time you hear someone say I want Christ's passion for the church?
- e. Do you share Christ's love for his church? Are you zealous for the church?
 - i. **John 2:17 (ESV) — 17** His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."
 - ii. **Acts 20:28 (ESV) — 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.
 - iii. **WWJD- He would not just go to church he would be very involved!**
 - 1. Yes, the church has issues.
 - 2. Yes, there are hypocrites in the church.
 - 3. Yes, some of us have been burned by church leaders and bad church experiences.
 - 4. But the church is still the bride of Christ.
- f. **Kevin Deyoung quote –**
 - i. *"And any husband worth the paper his marriage license is printed on will be jealous to guard the good name of his wife. She maybe a lying, no good, double-crossing poor excuse for a wife, but if she's your wife, you'll protect her honor, whatever may be left of it..."* (Deyoung, 12)
 - ii. *If you walked into my house and made fun of my wife, I would ask you to leave, if you refused to leave, I would shove you out the door.*
 - iii. Christ loves his bride, the church! So should we!!!
- g. Testimony of hearing about love for the church for the first time...
 - i. This seemed so strange to me.
 - ii. I had never heard of people talking about their love for the church.
 - iii. They talked specifically about not missing church.
 - iv. They talked about building their lives around the church.
 - v. They talked about serving in the church.
 - vi. Has anyone ever heard you talk about how much you love the church of Jesus Christ?
 - vii. Etc...
- h. *We should love the church because Christ loved the church (his bride). In addition...*

2. We should love the church because it is the dwelling place of God

- a. **Eph 2:19-22** “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, (20) built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, *Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*, (21) in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (22) In him you also are being *built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*”
- b. The original audience knew that this was a reference to the temple of the OT which was also a spiritual house composed of massive stones. This is very significant because the temple in the Bible has always been the place where God’s presence dwells.
- c. In one sense the Bible is the history of God dwelling among his people.
- a. The Garden of Eden...
 - b. Pillar of fire and the cloud
 - c. Moses builds the tabernacle (in the center of God’s people).
 - d. Solomon builds the temple.
 - e. God’s presence leaves temple in time of Ezekiel
- d. God promised to fill the temple again, but his promise was not to fill a literal stone temple but to fill his church. (See also 1 Peter 2)
- e. After Pentecost the dwelling place of God is the church or the people of God because Christ is the cornerstone of this temple.
- f. **Illustration-**
- i. Maybe you are really into music... what if I told you that Beethoven was going to be here, at GCF next week? Or John Mayer, or Taylor Swift, etc..
 - ii. Maybe you are really into politics... Ronald Regan...
 - iii. Maybe you are really into the royal family... Queen Elizabeth...
 - iv. Maybe you are really into the seahawks... Russell Wilson...
 - v. Maybe you are really into tennis... Roger Federer...
 - vi. Someone far more important is here every Sunday...
- i. **Application**
- i. God’s presence is not always as intense as we want it to be...
 - 1. Pray...
 - 2. Revival is the result of God manifesting his presence.
 - 3. Spurgeon’s prayer team, praying during the service for God to manifest his presence...

- ii. Have you ever considered preparing to be in God's presence?
 1. Go to bed on time Saturday night.
 2. Pray Saturday night
 3. Maybe avoid watching tons of television... Sometimes we walk into church distracted by what we saw the night before.
 4. Confess your sins to God
 5. Get up on time on Sunday morning
- iii. Consider inviting your non-Christian friends to experience God's presence with you on the Lord's Day?

- j. We should love the church because Christ loves the church*
- k. We should love the church because it is the dwelling place of God.*

3. We should love the church because we need its ministries to help us grow.

- a. We need the ministry of the Word (i.e., preaching) to help us grow.
- b. We need the ministry of elders and deacons to help us grow.
- c. We need the ministry of congregational singing to help us grow.
- d. We need the ministry of the sacraments...
- e. We need the ministry of church discipline.
- f. We need the ministry of discipleship to help us grow.
- g. We need the ministry of fellowship to help us grow.
- h. We need every one of these ministries to help us grow and they are only found in one place—the church of Jesus Christ.
- i. If we are not intimately involved in the church, we don't have access to these ministries.
- j. Each ministry is specifically designed by God to help the members of the church grow!

k. Illustration

- i. Grass fiasco...
- ii. I need to think about several things to help my grass grow healthy and strong
- iii. I need to think about fertilizer
- iv. I need to think about weed killer
- v. I need to mow at the right height
- vi. I need to water it the right amount...
- vii. If I only do one of these things, I will not have much success...

l. Application

- i. In a similar sense, we need to be exposed to several ministries to help us grow.
 1. We need more than preaching...
 2. We need more than the sacraments...
 3. We need more than fellowship...
 4. We need all the ministries the church provides.

- ii. The church of Jesus Christ is like a spiritual super store...
 - 1. I love Wal Mart!!! Where else can you go to buy a car battery, some bullets, some diapers, mountain dew, and some t-shirts.
 - 2. It has everything we need in one place, but it is all free of charge.
- iii. Are you taking advantage of all the churches ministries?
- iv. BTW... if you only come on Sunday mornings and you are not involved in a small group or a discipleship group you are missing out on God's best for you.

m. We should love the church because...

- i. Christ loved the church*
- ii. It is the dwelling place of God.*
- iii. Its ministries help us grow.*
- iv. There is more...*

4. We should love the church because the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

a. Matthew 16:16–18 (ESV) — 16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **17** And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. **18** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

- i. The last few years have been rather discouraging. I think we all understand the absolute futility of putting any hope in human institutions.
- ii. We can't put our hope -
 - 1. Political parties
 - 2. Cable news stations
 - 3. Local government
 - 4. State government
 - 5. School districts
 - 6. The CDC
 - 7. Health Experts
 - 8. Etc...
- iii. God does not promise that any of these institutions will survive.
 - 1. Yet, God does promise that one and only one institution will not only survive, it will thrive, despite what Satan plans.
 - 2. Jesus promises that the “gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”
- iv. Objections
 - 1. But Dave, it seems like the church is losing. (From Ember to Flame p. 7-8)

- a. “About 95% of all churches in North America average one hundred people or less at worship.”
 - b. “Over 80% of established American churches are either on a plateau or in decline.”
 - c. “Every year 3500-4000 churches die in this country.”
 - d. “An average of fifty to sixty congregations in American Protestantism dissolve every week.”
 - e. The PCA is one of the healthiest denominations in the country. In a recent year 28 churches were planted but 24 closed their doors.
2. The church may be losing now in America, but it is thriving in other parts of the world.
 3. Jesus promises us that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.
 4. We know how the story ends. God is on his throne, He rules and reigns over all things, which means he is able to ensure that the church will win in the end.
 5. The church of Jesus Christ is the only eternally enduring community!!!
Therefore, it is wise to give yourself to it.

b. *We should love the church because*

- i. *Christ loves the church*
- ii. *It is the dwelling place of God.*
- iii. *Its ministries help us grow.*
- iv. *The gates of hell will not prevail against it.*
- v. *But there is one more reason....*

5. We should love the church because it is the only hope for a lost and dying world.

a. Describing the church, Paul writes...

b. Ephesians 2:11–16 (ESV) — 11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— **12** remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

c. Exposition

- i. The gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to reconcile Jew and gentile.

- ii. Where does this happen? Only in the church of Jesus Christ!!! The community of the redeemed!

- d. Application
 - i. The church is the one place on earth where the glory of God shines brightest.
 - ii. The church is meant to be a city on a hill.

- e. Most importantly... the church is the place where the gospel of Jesus Christ is made visible.
 - i. The gospel is heard in the preaching.
 - ii. The gospel is celebrated in the singing.
 - iii. The gospel is seen in the sacraments.
 - iv. The power of the gospel is displayed in change lives.

- f. It is one thing to hear the message of the gospel...
 - i. But what is the proof that the gospel actually works?
 - ii. The community of the church!
 - iii. How else can we explain such different people coming together to worship.
 - iv. In most institutions' diversity is forced...

 - v. In the church of Jesus Christ diversity happens naturally....
 - 1. We see rich and poor
 - 2. Black and white
 - 3. Educated and uneducated
 - 4. North siders and south siders
 - 5. The young and the old

 - 6. All rejoicing together in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

 - 7. Furthermore, they actually get along...

- g. The people in your life who don't know Christ are lost and helpless.
 - i. Hooked on porn
 - ii. Hooked on material things.
 - iii. Broken relationships
 - iv. Broken marriages
 - v. They are lonely and broken.
 - vi. They feel isolated.
 - vii. Addictions
 - viii. Never finding joy and satisfaction.
 - ix. Heading towards hell.

- x. They need to see that the gospel works. They need to see the gospel on display in the lives of the members of a local church.
- h. *I asked two questions*
 - i. *What is the church?*
 - ii. *Why should we love the church?*

6. Application

- a. What does it look like to love the church?

b. Join a church

- i. When you become a formal member of the church you are saying, I want to serve in this church, I want to give to this church, I want to be accountable to this church. And I want the world to know that I'm associating with these people...
 - 1. We have no problem becoming members of Costco
 - 2. We become members of the YMCA
 - 3. We become members of Alaskan airlines
 - 4. Yet some of us are reluctant to become a member of a local church???
- ii. Our next membership class is this fall.
- iii. No church is perfect... find a decent one and jump in with both feet!
 - 1. "If I had never joined a Church until I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I joined it, if I had found one, I would have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us... All who have first given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord's people." (Charles Spurgeon)
- iv. *Not only should you join a church....*

c. Get involved in a church

- i. How???
- ii. Make attendance a priority
 - 1. Is it ok to miss church a few times a year? Yes...
 - 2. But it is not ok to come to church twice a month.
 - 3. What is more important than church?
- iii. Make serving a priority
 - 1. Serve in the nursery
 - 2. Help with the youth ministry
 - 3. Serving on a ministry team
 - 4. Show up when you are supposed to (be a person of your word)

- iv. Make hospitality a priority
 - 1. Take a new person out to coffee
 - 2. Invite a new person to small group
- v. Make giving a priority
- vi. Make fellowship in the context of a small group/discipleship group a priority
- vii. Don't be like an SEC football game...
- viii. The church is the big game. Don't sit on the sidelines!

7. Conclusion:

a. Paul David Tripp writes to Christians-

- i. "Your life is much bigger than a good job, an understanding spouse, and non-delinquent kids. It is bigger than beautiful gardens, nice vacations, and fashionable clothes, in reality you are part of something immense, something that began before you were born and will continue after you die. God is rescuing fallen humanity, transporting them into his kingdom, and progressively shaping them into his likeness- and he wants you to be a part of it."
- b. Your life is much bigger than you, your life is about bringing God glory to God in and through a local church. We will die, marriage will cease, politics will cease, your career will end, but the church of Jesus Christ will endure forever. Let's pray...