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THE CHURCH: WHY MARRY IT?

Ephesians 2:19-22

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November 18, 2007

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Ephesians Lesson 18

The Church: Why Marry It? Ephesians 2:19-22

I'm going to begin with a radical statement: *I believe that most Christians have inadequate or misguided views of the local church.* Now, let me try to defend it.

First, most Christians think in terms of *attending* church, not *being* the church. For them, church is a nice thing to attend on Sunday if you don't have anything else to do and if you weren't out too late the night before. So, you attend church much as you attend the theater. You hope that the program will be enjoyable and make you feel good. You greet a few of the other attenders and then get home quickly, because you don't want to miss the big game on TV.

But, meanwhile, you have no concept of being built together with other saints in the household of God, the temple where He dwells in human hearts. In support of my contention that *most* Christians think this way, pollster George Gallup found that while almost half the country attends church services, only 6 to 10 percent of all Americans are what he terms "highly spiritually committed" (cited by Charles Colson, *The Body* [Word, 1992], p. 31).

Here is a second reason that I think most Christians have inadequate or misguided views of the church: they choose their church as spiritual consumers, not in terms of being built up and ministering in the most holy faith. They shop around for a church that best meets their felt needs, much as they decide whether to shop at Wal-Mart or Target. If they like the services offered and they get a good feeling when they attend, they will give the church their business for a while. But, if they get bored or decide it isn't meeting their needs, they shop around for another one that suits them better. They don't evaluate a church on the basis of whether it teaches sound doctrine or whether it has an emphasis on the Great Commission or other biblical criteria. Rather, their evaluation is focused on whether or not the church meets their felt needs.

Charles Colson ("Breakpoint" [Prison Fellowship, 1995], p. 5) told about some friends of his that had started attending a Unity

church. Colson exclaimed, "What? You're a Christian—and Unity is a cult." "Really?" The man looked surprised.

"Of course it is," Colson explained. "They don't believe in the Resurrection or even in one true God."

Then the man's wife spoke up. "Oh, but we love it there. We always come away from the service feeling much better."

Colson comments, "*Feeling* better? Is that what church is all about? For many people, unfortunately, the answer is yes."

A third line of evidence that most Christians have inadequate views of the church is, as Joshua Harris puts it (*Stop Dating the Church* [Multnomah Publishers, 2004]), most Christians are dating the church, but they aren't married to it. His profile of a church-dater is (pp. 16-17), first, he is *me-centered*. He goes for what he can get. Second, he is *independent*. He doesn't want to commit himself or get too involved, especially with people. Often this is because the church-dater got burned in a previous church. Third, he tends to be *critical* of the church. This is where the consumer mindset kicks in. The church-dater is looking for the best product for the price. And so he is fickle, always hunting for a better deal.

Let's face it: if you've been involved in a local church for very long, you have been hurt or frustrated or disillusioned. But I would venture to say that if you've been married for very long, you have been hurt or frustrated or disillusioned. But I hope you're still married! Commitment is what keeps you going in your marriage, to work at making it better. In the same way, you need to commit yourself to the church and work at making it better. I want to persuade you to marry (and *stay married* to) the local church. After all, Christ loved the church as His bride and gave Himself for her. If I want to be like Christ, then I need to love the church and give myself for her, even if I get hurt or frustrated or disillusioned. Why?

You must commit yourself to the local church because
it is God's kingdom, His household,
and His temple where He dwells.

That is Paul's teaching in our text. He does not use the word "church," but that is obviously what he is talking about (see 1:22, 3:10). And, he does not specifically exhort us to be committed to the church, although that is the only conclusion that you can draw

if you understand his words. Rather, he elevates our understanding of what the church is, so that we will be motivated to marry it "till death do us part."

1. You must commit yourself to the local church because it is God's kingdom.

"So then" introduces the consequence of the preceding verses, that the Gentiles and Jews have been reconciled to one another and to God through the cross. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints...."

Paul is using the analogy of the church as God's nation or kingdom. From Abraham until the time of Christ, the Jews were God's chosen nation. He revealed Himself to them in a way that He did not do with any other people on earth. He made exclusive covenants and promises with them (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5). But now God has created a new man, the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles. The church is presently His kingdom people on this earth. The Gentiles are not second-class citizens in this new people of God, but rather, they are fellow-citizens with the saints (all of God's holy ones).

Note that Paul again reminds the Gentiles of what they once were: strangers and aliens (see 2:12). He does not want us to forget where we would be if God had not graciously brought us near. The two words are somewhat synonymous, but if there is a distinction, "strangers" refers to a foreigner, while "aliens" refers to the foreigner who lives in the land as a resident alien (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos, 1999], p. 211). Both words convey exclusion. You're an outsider. Even though you may be living in the country legally, you don't possess the same rights as legal citizens. You're treated differently. You don't really belong. As Gentiles, that was our status before the cross.

But now, Paul says, "you are fellow citizens with the saints." Your spiritual new birth in Christ has made you a natural citizen of His kingdom. You now live under His rule. You now have certain privileges and responsibilities as a member of this spiritual kingdom. You enjoy the benefits that He provides, such as protection from enemies. But also, you must obey His sovereign rule. If He calls you into battle, you must willingly go and fight. If He asks you

to represent Him, you gladly do so. As a member of His heavenly kingdom of light, you are distinct from those who are citizens of this earthly kingdom of darkness. The sovereign of this heavenly kingdom demands your total allegiance.

Paul continues to emphasize that the Jews and the Gentiles, who were formerly alienated from one another, are now *fellow-citizens* in Christ's kingdom. This means that there are no racial or cultural distinctions among the people of God. We all have equal standing before God in Christ Jesus. Because the church is His kingdom, you must commit yourself to it.

First Peter 2:9-10 puts it this way, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Then Peter applies it (2:11), "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul."

But because a single analogy is insufficient, Paul adds another:

2. You must commit yourself to the local church because it is God's household.

This is an advance on the idea of being members of God's kingdom or nation. To be a citizen of a kingdom is a great privilege, but it is rather impersonal and large-scale. I don't know any of our government leaders personally and they don't know me. There are millions of citizens of our nation. But, to be a member of a household is personal and more intimate. Family members know one another pretty well. In Paul's day, to be a member of a household meant refuge, protection, and identity (O'Brien, p. 212).

The sense of belonging is much stronger in a family than in a national sense. I read about a student who went to a university away from his hometown. In the evenings, he would often take a walk. He was lonely because he was away from his family. He would sometimes look into the well-lit windows of homes that he would walk by and see the families gathered around the dinner table. Occasionally, a family member would see him outside and get up and close the curtain. He felt excluded from that household!

But, Paul says, though you once were excluded, now you are *of God's household*. You're family. You're included. When the family gets together, you want to be there, because it is a great privilege to be a member of this family. When they talk about the things that matter most to the family, the things of God, you delight in the conversation. You want to hang out with the family when they get together just because you're family. If the family of God gathers for worship, you're there. If they gather for a meal, you join them. If they meet to talk about family matters, you're there. You're committed because you're part of the family. Do you see the difference between *attending church* and being a member of *God's family*?

So, you must marry the church because it is God's kingdom and His household, or family. But Paul goes even higher:

3. You must commit yourself to the local church because it is God's temple, where He dwells.

Paul uses a third analogy, of a building. But he is not talking about just any building, but rather, the temple, where God manifests His presence in a special way. God is omnipresent, but there is a special sense in which He dwells in His holy temple. The Jews experienced this as the Shekinah, the brilliant manifestation of the glory of God. But now, Paul says, the church is this temple.

Keep in mind that Paul is talking about the church as *people*, *not* as a literal *building*. In the Old Testament era, the temple was a sacred building. It may have been appropriate then for some old saint to tell the children, "Behave yourself! Don't you know that this is God's house?" But for New Testament believers, there is no such thing as a sacred building. God's temple now consists of His people. The New Testament sometimes refers to individual believers as God's temple, where His Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 6:19). But here Paul is referring to the saints corporately in a given locale. The people of God who gather in that locale are together the temple where God is worshiped and where He dwells.

Paul describes here the foundation, the formation, and the function of this new temple of God (Harold Hoehner, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck [Victor Books, 1983], 2:627):

- A. The foundation: God founded the church on New Testament truth, with Jesus Christ central to everything (2:20).

The church is built “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.” Paul means that the foundation consists of the apostles and prophets, with Christ being the cornerstone. *Apostles* refers to the Twelve and Paul, along with James and, perhaps, Barnabas (1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 2:7-9; 1 Cor. 9:6). They had seen the risen Lord Jesus and He commissioned them with special authority to found the church. *Prophets* refers to New Testament prophets in the early church (Eph. 3:5; 4:11). Before the canon of the New Testament was completed, the prophets received direct revelation from God to build up and encourage the church (Acts 15:32; 1 Cor. 14:3, 29-32). While there is debate over whether the gift or office of prophet is still functional in the church today, Paul’s point here is, the church was founded on the truth that we now possess in the New Testament, the testimony about Jesus Christ.

This means that one crucial criterion for you to consider before you marry a particular local church is, does it emphasize the preaching of God’s Word as His absolute truth? If the leaders of the church dodge certain doctrines in the Bible because they are not popular or they compromise key doctrines for the sake of “unity” with other churches that do not hold to these truths, you should not commit yourself to that church (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Not only is the church founded on New Testament truth, but also, that truth necessarily puts Jesus Christ in the center of everything. He is the cornerstone. Some argue that this refers to the capstone that finished off a building. But the context here clearly shows that Paul is talking about the foundation stone that was first laid at the corner. It had to be positioned perfectly, because all of the lines of the building came off that corner stone.

Isaiah 28:16 prophesied of Christ, “Therefore thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed.’” Psalm 118:22 predicted of Jesus, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone” (see Matt. 21:42).

This means that “the temple is built out and up from the revelation given in Christ, with the apostles and prophets elaborating and explaining the mystery, which had been made known to them by the Holy Spirit (3:4-11, esp. v. 5). ‘But all is built on Christ, supported by Christ, and the lie or shape of the continuing building is determined by Christ, the cornerstone’” (O’Brien, pp. 217-218, citing M. Turner, *New Bible Commentary* in the last sentence). Thus any church that diminishes the person or work of Jesus Christ is not a true church. Any church that undermines the inspiration and authority of the Bible must be rejected. Such churches are buildings without a solid foundation.

- B. The formation: God is fitting and growing the members of the church together into a holy temple in the Lord (2:21).

“In whom” (2:21 & 22) refers to Christ. Everything depends on being in union with Him. In Him, “the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” Paul mixes metaphors here, in that he first refers to the church as stones in the temple, which were carefully fit together. But since “dead stones” is an inadequate picture, he shifts to a living analogy, stating that they are *growing* into a holy temple. So, like Peter, he views the church as *living stones*, an intriguing oxymoron!

In the construction of Solomon’s Temple, the stones were quarried and shaped away from the construction site and then brought to the site and fitted carefully together (1 Kings 6:7). It is a picture of the Lord fitting us together with one another, so that each stone contributes a vital part to the entire wall. Individual stones are not of much value apart from the whole, but when they are fit together, the entire structure becomes a beautiful, functional place where God is worshiped. The implication is that it is only in close relationships with one another that God uses us for His purpose and glory. To do that, He often has to chip off our rough edges, which is a painful process! It is often through relational conflicts in the church that we learn where we need to grow and change. If we submit to the process, the end result is worth it!

- C. The function: God is building the church together to be His own dwelling place in the Spirit (2:22).

What an amazing truth: God is building us together into His dwelling place in the Spirit! In the Old Testament, the temple was the special place where God met with His people and revealed Himself. But now, not in a physical building, but in the hearts of His people gathered in one locale, knit together in love (Col. 2:2), God dwells.

As stated explicitly in verse 21 and implicitly in verse 22, the church as God's dwelling place must be holy. *Temple* refers to the inner sanctuary, the most holy place. God does not dwell where sin is tolerated or excused away. How much of your behavior would you change if you sensed that you were gathering each week in a place where God in all of His holiness dwells? If you had an awareness of God's presence in your life personally, would you live differently? In one of his books, Watchman Nee says that if you have a small amount of change in your pocket, you can walk along rather carefree. But if you have a large amount of money in your pocket, you'll walk more carefully, guarding the treasure. When we realize that both individually and corporately, the living God dwells in our midst, we will be careful to walk in holiness.

This also means that when we gather as the church, we should come to *meet with God*. We want to sense His presence in our midst. As Moses prayed (Exod. 33:15), if the Lord's presence does not go with us, we don't want to go at all! So pray and prepare your heart before you gather with the saints, "Lord, I want to meet with You! I want You to show your glory in Your temple!"

Conclusion

What does getting married to a church look like? Josh Harris describes it in seven ways (pp. 67-77). I can only hit the highlights:

(1) You join.

You officially join the church so that the pastors and others there know that you're part of the team. Here at FCF, this means going through the New Member Class, filling out an application, and being interviewed by an elder. Joining expresses your commitment to be here and serve together.

(2) You make the local church a priority.

You build your life around your priorities, so that other things take a back seat. Harris advises you to think carefully before you move for a better job or go away to college, if it means leaving a solid church to do it. You may or may not find such a church in the new location.

(3) You make your pastor's job a joy.

Harris quotes Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." He advises you to embrace, obey, and love God's Word. Also, pray for your pastor and refuse to engage in slander against him. I like that advice!

(4) You find ways to serve.

Harris says (p. 72), "Serving is the fastest way to feel a sense of ownership in your church. It's also the best way to build relationships." Don't wait to be asked to serve. *Look for ways to serve.*

(5) You give.

"Because the local church is where you are nourished spiritually, it should be the first place you invest financially" (p. 74).

(6) You connect with people.

Being married is a relationship. Being married to the church means getting to know some of the members on a level that you cannot do just in passing on Sunday mornings.

(7) You share your passion.

When you're in love with the church, you can't keep it to yourself. You want others to experience the same joy. Harris (pp. 64-65) cites John Stott, "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?"

When you see that the church is God's kingdom, His household, and His temple where He dwells, it should motivate you to fall in love and get married. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. So should you!

Application Questions

1. I mentioned three ways in which most Christians have an inadequate view of the church. Can you think of more?
2. At what point should a person leave a church that has problems? What criteria should he use to evaluate this?
3. I mentioned two criteria to evaluate whether you should join a church (the Word and the Great Commission). What are some other important criteria? (Josh Harris lists ten.)
4. The early church did not have official "membership." Why should we?

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