

THE CHRISTIAN & THE CHURCH (04)

January 27, 2008.

Introduction

I have been receiving some very positive calls about the ongoing task I have given to you to call one person per day over six days. People have spoken of the many benefits they have received in doing this and the joy of reaching out and getting to know people they would not normally build relationships with. I believe I have the Biblical warrant to be an idealist and optimist. In the words of Paul, I want to be constantly reaching forward to the goals God has set before us. I want us to become the kind of church that God wants us to become.

Yet, at the same time, I am a realist. I expect a mixed response to this task and any other task that are given to you. I rejoice over those who are responding positively. Let me also say that it does not matter whether you are having short conversations or long conversations. Each call you make is a step in the right direction. And I am praying for the others to see the usefulness of this Biblically based exercise. My prayer is that over a period of time the infectiousness of what we have begun and what you are experiencing would spread and we would see greater involvement. What we have begun is a small but important step in the direction of creating in our midst true Biblical communion in Christ and fellowship in Christ. This week I have written out what you are being asked to do. May the Lord give you the strength, the boldness and the wisdom to continue to do what we have begun by His grace.

Now, in reviewing the sermons I have preached so far in this series, I felt the necessity to revisit some of the issues raised and tie up some loose ends before beginning our study of the primary Biblical imagery of the church : the church as the bride of Christ.

God's Eternal Purpose.

In *Eph.3:11* we saw that the church is God's eternal purpose in Christ. This eternal purpose was not revealed to the Old Testament saints. There are various prophecies concerning what was coming. While these prophecies are clear to us today, they were not as clear to those who received them. For example, Jeremiah spoke about the establishing of a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. (*Jer.31:31-34*). The Jews would have understood this from a nationalistic perspective. But the N.T. understanding of this is spiritual. This prophecy was quoted at length in *Heb.8:8-12*. The new covenant was established by Lord. In making reference to His death the Lord said to His disciples, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." (*Lk.22:20*). The context of this was the Passover celebration.

This new covenant that was established through the death of our Lord was for the church that would consist of both Jews and Gentiles. The Lord pointed very clearly in this direction during His ministry on earth. John the Baptist described our Lord as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (*Jn.1:29*). In His conversation with Nicodemus the Lord declared in *Jn.3:16*, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Our understanding of the word "**world**" must coincide with the Jewish understanding of the word "**world**". For a Jew, "**world**" referred to the Gentiles. Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of both Jews and Gentiles. The Lord's severely jolting message to Nicodemus, the teacher in Israel, is that God no longer loves the Jews exclusively. God loves both Jews and Gentiles and will save any Jew or Gentile who believes in Jesus.

In *Jn.10:16* Jesus said, "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd." The "**other sheep**" are the Gentiles who do not belong to the Jewish fold. In *Gal.6:16* Paul described the church as "the Israel of God." *Gal.3:29* says that all

who belong to Christ are Abraham's descendants. In *Jn.8:39-40* Jesus' clear implication is that the Jews were proving by their conduct that they were not Abraham's children.

In *Rom.2:28-29* Paul wrote, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit." In other words, Jewish identity is no longer physical. It is spiritual. The Jewish identity no longer belongs to those who have been physically circumcised. The Jewish identity belongs to those who have experienced circumcision of the heart by the Spirit. "Circumcision of the heart by the Spirit" refers to conversion to Christ.

There are also various prophecies that speak of the establishing of an everlasting covenant. The Lord said, within the context of this everlasting covenant, "I will put the fear of Me in their hearts." (*Jer.32:40; 50:5; Isa.55:3*). This everlasting is also called "a covenant of peace" in *Ezek.37:24-28*. In this passage the Lord said David will be their king and their prince forever. When this prophecy was made David was already dead. The prophecy was speaking of the one who would come from David's line to sit on David's throne forever. This one is the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter touched on this in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. (*Acts 2:29-32*).

The final reference I want to draw to your attention is *Dan.2:44*. Within the context of interpreting the King's dream regarding the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, Daniel said, "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

This kingdom that will endure forever is Christ's kingdom. Christ's kingdom is here and it is being built. The Lord Jesus Christ is not waiting to be enthroned. He is already enthroned. He is seated "at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the

heavens.” (*Heb.8:1; 1:3; 10:12*). But it must be understood that Christ’s kingdom is not a worldly kingdom. (cf. *Jn.18:36*). It is a spiritual kingdom and it is being built by spiritual means. Paul said, “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.” (*2Cor.10:4*).

Christ Himself is building this kingdom. He is doing so through us, His people. He is doing so through the preaching of the gospel and the establishing of churches. This is made clear in the book of Acts. The gospel of Luke is Luke’s first account of all that Jesus began to do and teach. The book of Acts is also called the “**Acts of the Apostles**”. But more importantly, it is Luke’s account of the continuation of all that Jesus began to do and teach. (cf. *Acts 1:1-2*).

I recently acquired and began reading **John Stott’s** latest book, “**The Living Church – Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor.**” When this book was published last year, Stott was **87** years. **Stott** described an un-churched Christian as a grotesque anomaly. He wrote, *“The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God’s new community. For His purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build His church, that is, to call out of the world a people for His own glory.... The reason why we are committed to the church is that God is so committed.”*

Not Forsaking Our Assembling.

Please turn now to *Heb.10*. The second point I want to revisit is *Heb.10:25* which says, “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” I

do not desire to wrongly place upon any of you a bad conscience in this matter. Yet, at the same time, I want to maintain the Biblical standards and patterns.

From *Acts 20* we discover that the established pattern in the early church was that the church assembled on the evening of the Lord's Day, the first day of the week. Bear in mind that Paul's visit to Troas in *Acts 20* took place coming to the end of his third missionary journey and approximately **25** years after the events of *Acts 2*. The expression, "the Lord's Supper" (*1Cor.11:20*), also points to an evening gathering together of the church. Let me make it clear that the Lord's chosen day for us to gather is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. This day is not optional. The time of our gathering together may be optional. But the day is not optional.

The church gathered in the evening because most of its members were either poor or slaves and they had to work on Sundays. A slave refusing to work was a very dangerous thing. Those who owned slaves had the power of life and death over them. A slave's rebellion was usually dealt with via a severe beating and / or execution. A poor man refusing to work on Sunday would have most likely determined whether his family would eat that evening or the next day. I cannot say for certain when the church began to gather together for worship on the morning of the Lord's Day. It is quite likely that these changes began to take place when Constantine declared Sunday a public holiday and to be devoted to worship.

As a church, we have maintained the tradition we received of meeting for worship during the middle of the morning hours. For a long time we also maintained the tradition of having morning and evening services. After lengthy studies, we made the decision to have one service on the Lord's Day and developed the format we presently use based on the four means of grace given to the church. We still meet in the morning hours and that can create problems for people who work shift and who work for institutions that must have a seven-day work week. I do believe that the time will come when we will have to revisit the set times for our services on the Lord's Day as the work issue becomes more complicated.

In **Heb.10:25** the writer was addressing members of the church who were able to attend the Lord's Day services but were choosing to not attend. They had experienced severe persecution and were still experiencing persecution. This is made clear in **Heb.10:32-34**. (**read**). But they had not shed their blood as yet. **Heb.12:4** says, "You have not resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin."

Philip Hughes wrote, *"In the days following their reception of the gospel, as we have seen, they had 'endured a hard struggle with sufferings', involving public abuse, the plundering of their property, and imprisonment for some, but so far they have not been tested with the challenge of laying down their lives for the faith they profess."*

The best of us can become afraid within the context of persecution and take a step or two backwards. After the terrible beating Paul received in Philippi, Paul became afraid when the threat of violence against him surfaced in Corinth. The Lord had to intervene and reassure Paul. The Lord said to Paul, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." (**Acts 18:9-10**).

The members of the church addressed in the book of Hebrews were not taking a step or two backwards out of fear. They had begun to "**forsake**" and "**shrink back**". The verb "**forsake**" means to desert, to abandon, to leave in a lurch. Their forsaking of the assembling together of God's people had become habitual. **Vss.38b-39** makes it clear that deliberate shrinking back, regardless of the reason, is dangerous business. Not even **martyrdom** was a good enough reason for forsaking or shrinking back. The writer warned, "And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction." This "**destruction**" is not physical but spiritual and eternal. The forsaking taking place here was sin. The shrinking back was sin. And it is for this reason the writer warned in **vs.26**, "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

I want to share with you a lengthy quote from **Philip Hughes'** comments on these verses. He wrote, *"The implication [from vs.24] is that there are signs of a weakening of the bonds of Christian fellowship, resulting from a deficiency of that love which should unite them in Christ, and resulting in a falling off of those compassionate deeds by which Christian love expresses itself. Unconcern for the well-being of the body, of which they are members, is symptomatic of self-concern and egocentricity. Selfishness and divisiveness go hand in hand; for self-love breeds the spirit of isolationism.*

"He who does not love his fellow Christians fervently from the heart (1Pet.1:22) feels no compelling need to associate himself with them. Indeed, the genuineness of the Christian profession of a man in this state must be seriously suspect, for those who are one in Christ cannot help loving one another. The logic of the love of the brethren derives from God, who is love, and whose love has been freely manifested in the sending of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins : "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1Jn.4:7-12).

"The failure of love shows itself, then, in selfish individualism, and specifically here in 'the habit of some neglecting to meet together'. Such unconcern for one's fellow believers argues unconcern for Christ Himself and portends the danger of apostasy, concerning which our author is about to issue another earnest warning [from vs.26 onwards]."

Now Brethren, I am not saying that there are absolutely no justifiable reasons for absence from the church's gathering together on the Lord's Day. We have seen already the complication of work related problems. I am saying there is a difference between your animal falling into a well on the Lord's Day and you having to rescue it and you deliberately pushing your animal into the well on the Lord's Day. (***Matt.12:11-12; Lk.14:5***). The final approval of the justification of your reason(s) for absence is not you, or a pastor, or a deacon, but the Lord.

Heb.10:25 is not saying that you cannot go on a vacation. On the other hand, vacations do not cancel or suspend the reality of the Lord's Day and your Biblical obligations regarding the Lord's Day. How you fulfill these obligations while on vacation is something you have to work out. Whether on vacation or not, at the end of the day you will have to say with judgment day honesty that you have done all in your power to fulfill your Biblical obligations regarding the Lord's Day.

At the same time you need to be told that when you are absent you are missed. Time and again people come to me at the end of the service and say, "*Pastor, have you seen so and so?*" I am being asked because you were missed and your absence was also distracting to the person or persons who particularly missed you. As we shall see, the church is a building made up of living stones. When you are absent, there is a hole in the wall. The church is a body. When you are absent, an organ is missing from the body. The church is a family. When you are absent, a beloved brother or sister is missing from the family gathering. In other words, when you are missing there is a sense in which things are not normal for the gathered church. And those who are present sense that. Let me go a step further.

When a woman prepares a very special meal for her husband and children, she does so with the expectation that they will be home and ready to partake in the meal. This meal is not a surprise but planned and everyone knows about it. She puts extra thought, care, planning, detailed preparation and great love into this meal. The time comes when the table is set and the meal is laid out. But then the phone begins to ring. Her husband will be late because his friends insisted they go for a drink and he couldn't refuse them. Her sons will be late because one is eating at his friend's home and the other would prefer to eat KFC today. Her daughters, well that's another story. One had a fight with her boyfriend and certainly can't eat. She would much prefer to die. The other, well, she spoiled her diet during the day and must now skip the meal to restore her weight.

Where does that leave mother? Well, you see, she is our mother and very understanding. And Dad will be there with her and they can spend a romantic evening together. Where

does that leave wife? Husband sits with his friends and boasts about the great wife he has. I mean, she cooked a very special meal for the family tonight but didn't mind that I stayed and limered with you guys. Now, that is woman to have! I know also that she and the children will be together and have a good time. The leftovers will be put in the fridge and I will eat it the next day.

Time and again a church's taping ministry is treated as the fridge for getting the leftovers from the Lord's Day. In other words, it really doesn't matter if you miss the Lord's Day service. You can always get the sermon. But one day the discovery will be made that it did matter that you were absent by choice.

There is really very little comparison between a pastor preparing a sermon for the church and a woman preparing a special meal for her family. Every sermon is special. Some people think, well, that's a pastor's job. I assure you that preparing a sermon is infinitely far more than a job. It's a labor that is constantly on your mind every waking hour all seven days of the week and regardless of what you are doing. It is a labor that never seems to end. It's a labor in which every point brings you before our mind's eyes like a marching parade. It's a labor that constantly keeps before us the reality that there will be eternal consequences for those who will hear us and for those who are absent and miss out.

The daily challenge of preparing is complicated by the fact that you know that any number of the membership will be absent. Some will be absent for justifiable reasons and some will be absent because they have settled themselves to feed on the leftovers via the tape or CD. Some days we can take the absence in stride and some days the absence is like a horse's kick in the stomach, and a pain we cannot reveal when we stand behind the pulpit. The daily challenge of preparing is also complicated by the fact that you know that a few hours after preaching, without fail, you will be sinking into despair and depression.

Regarding the exhortation to encourage one another to be present, let me go a step further. After all is said and done by way of encouraging, what can you justifiably do on a practical level to help that person or persons be present on the Lord's Day with the gathered church? It is indeed sad, but as Christians when we build or renovate houses, we do not think hospitality. When we buy vehicles, as far as is justifiably possible, we do not think transport. Your vehicle that brings someone to church may be the vehicle that is also taking that someone to heaven. It is the Lord who gives us wisdom and strength to make money. Yet we build and buy thinking only of ourselves and not the Lord's glory in the gospel. In closing this point let me encourage you to encourage one another to be present at the mid-week prayer meeting. Despite the challenges, and I know there are many challenges, start your Wednesday with the prayer and determination, *"Lord, help me to be present at the prayer meeting."*

Emphasizing Plurality.

This brings us to our third point. We live in a world that emphasizes individualism. We live in societies isolated from one another. Neighborhoods are no longer communities but the place where people sleep and from where they go to work the next day. This individualism and isolationism have impacted the church. Christians who practice this individualism and isolationism will tell you this is what I am by nature. By nature I am a loner. By nature I like to keep to myself. That way I keep out of trouble. The reality is : by your fallen sinful nature you are what you are but God calls that the sin of selfishness.

As a Christian you are a new creation in Christ. You have a new transformed nature that is being transformed in Christ day by day. It is to this new you that God speaks and gives His commands. He calls you to a new quality of life that, by your old fallen sinful nature, you cannot live. Your new nature is energized by the Holy Spirit who provides for you the strength, the power and the wisdom to live this new quality of life. The new you are a part of God's new community – the church. You are called to live in union and

communion with God's new community. You are called to a community identity and quality of life that emphasize plurality

In our last study we saw that the word **“church”** refers to *“a called out group of people.”* In the N.T. the word **“church”** is used to describe the gathered community of God's people assembled for worship. I want you to note that there is no emphasis on singularity in the word **“church”**. The emphasis is on plurality. This emphasis on plurality is also seen in the various imageries used to describe the church.

The church is likened to a body made up of its several functioning parts. (*1Cor.12*). The church is likened to a household made up of the members who comprise that household. The church is likened to a country of which we are fellow citizens. (*Eph.2:19*). The church is likened to a building made up of living stones. We are those living stones. (*1Pet.2:5*). The church is likened to a vine with many branches. (*Jn.15:5*). The church is likened to a flock of sheep. (*Jn.10:16*).

There are other illustrations to be found in the Bible that point to this plurality. Let us consider a few of them. In *Matt.18:20* we read, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” What is the context of this verse? The context is not a family gathered for worship at home or while on a vacation. The context is not a Christian camp or a retreat. The context is not the church's youth group, men's group or ladies group. The context is the church, the gathering together of the church in Christ's name, that is, identified with Him and under His rule and authority.

Jesus' statement is idiomatic. Jesus' point is that the size of the gathered church is not the issue. The point is that when the church gathers in His name, He is there in their midst. But I want you to note the numbers Jesus used to make His point. He used plural numbers. He did not use the number **“one”** to make the point that the size of the church is not the issue. The church is a plural gathering together of its members in Christ's name. Now let me deal with the question in your mind. Can this promise have a

secondary application to unusual gatherings of believers who are gathered together in Jesus' name? The answer is a guarded **“yes”**.

Secondly, the process of your salvation in Christ is clearly singular. You must repent of your sins. You must believe in the Lord Jesus. (*Acts 16:31*). Peter said in *Acts 2:38*. “let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” As we saw in our studies in *Eph.chap.1*, “in Christ” is the briefest description of our saving union in Christ. Union in Christ is the fundamental reality of the Christian life. Union in Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. Union in Christ is what it means to be a Christian.

But Brethren, this singularity of your salvation in Christ quickly merges with the already existing plurality in Christ. Salvation in Christ establishes union and communion with Christ and union and communion with all others who are in Christ. Someone rightly noted that **“communion”** cannot be spelt without **“union”** and that there can be no communion without union. In other words, we cannot speak of having communion or fellowship with one another in Christ until we recognize our union in Christ.

Picture Christ as this building. When you are saved, you are put in Christ. But what do you discover when you are put in Christ? You discover a multitude of others who are already in Christ. Your union in Christ is their union in Christ. Your communion with Christ is their communion with Christ. You discover also that this union that bonds you with Christ also bonds you with those who are in Christ. In other words, you cannot be united to Christ without also being united to every Christian. As a matter of fact, union with Christ is not so much a union between Christ and the Christian as it is a union between Christ and the church. The greater emphasis is not on the brief singular journey into Christ but on the already existing plurality in Christ. The professed Christian who practices a persistent and / or unrepentant individualism and isolationism is suspect.

Thirdly, we noted that your baptism is singular. Peter said, “let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” But once again, the singular quickly merges

with the already existing plurality. Turn to **Rom.6:3-5**. (**read**). Paul's emphasis is clearly plural. Baptism is more than a sign of personal faith in Christ. Baptism is a sign of **our** union with Christ. "[**We**] have been baptized into Christ." Baptism publicly signifies and confirms that **we** belong to Christ and to His community. In the words of Calvin, it is the sign of the initiation by which **we** are received into the society of the church. It is the sign of **our** union and communion with the saints.

The word "saints" brings us to our **fourth** example. Christians are saints. They are God's holy people, set apart by God for Himself. And they pursue holiness. The word "saints" appears **60** times in your N.T. In those **60** times, "saint" is used only once in the singular. Paul wrote in **Phil.4:21**, "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus." The rest of the time it is used in the plural. But even though "saint" is singular, its context is the plurality of the church. The emphasis on what we are is clearly plural.

We are not individual saints in Christ, disconnected and isolated from each other. We are saints in Christ Jesus, (**Phil.1:1; Col.1:2**), connected to each other. The communion of the saints is not something we create. The communion of the saints is God's will and design. The communion of the saints is something we receive as a gift of our salvation. The communion of the saints is not something we may choose to enter into and get involved with. The communion of the saints is something Christ brings us into by virtue of our union with Him and requires that we get involved in this communion.

If you are not in Christ, united to Christ, that is death, spiritual death that is hurtling towards the second or eternal death in the lake of fire. If you are in Christ, united to Christ, that is life, eternal life. Now Brethren, you cannot say to Christ that you want to be united to Him but not united to the saints who are united to Him. That's impossible. You cannot claim to love Christ, be united to Christ and want to sustain a relationship with Christ but at the same time despise and reject the others who love Christ, who are united with Christ and who are sustaining a relationship with Christ.

John said in *1Jn.3:14*, “We know that we have passed out of the death into the life, because we love the brethren.” He did not say we know we are saved because we love Christ. The Christian says, *“I know I am saved because I love the Lord.”* That is not what John is saying to you in this verse. John specifically said we know that we are saved because we love the brethren. It is assumed that the Christian loves Christ. But love for Christ must manifest itself in love for the brethren. And herein lies the practical visible evidence that you are saved. John said, “If someone says, ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (*1Jn.4:20*). In *1Jn.2:9* John said, “The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.” Note the expression **“the darkness.”** **“The darkness”** is the place of **“the death”**, that is, spiritual death. **“The darkness”** is the domain of Satan. (*Col.1:13*). Now, in case you missed John’s clear warning, he quickly repeated himself for you in *vs.11*, “the one who hates his brother is in the darkness, and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

Your union with the communion of the saints is not a matter of personal choice. It is automatic. Your union with the communion of the saints, your relationship to the other saints, your involvement with the other saints, your functioning together with the other saints, these things are not under your control and dictates. These things are spelled out by Christ and under His control and dictates as the Lord of the church and the Lord of your life. We saw what Christ’s Lordship over you means.

You cannot call Christ Lord and then say to Him, *“Lord, step aside here and let me be first. Let me take the lead here. I cannot accept Your commands. You know that I am not a people person and I am not about to change that. I have other plans and another path I want to follow.”* Christ as your Lord means you will obey Him; you will submit to and follow His plans and precepts. Christ as your Lord means you will humble yourself and submit to and do His will.

I want to return to something I said earlier. Some people say, *“I keep to myself because when I get involved with others I get into trouble.”* If you are a Christian and submitting yourself to Christ’s Lordship, you do not have a choice here. It is the Lord’s will that you get involved. It is the Lord’s will that you get into trouble. It is the Lord’s will that your relational sins be exposed and dealt with. It is the Lord’s will that your bad attitudes be exposed and be dealt with in repentance and forgiveness. It is the Lord’s will that your selfishness be exposed and be dealt with. It is the Lord’s will that your poor relational skills be exposed and dealt with and corrected. That is what your sanctification in Christ is all about.

No Christian must live with *“this is what I am.”* You must set your eyes upon what God wants you to become in Christ and live with *“this is what I need to become in Christ.”* You are a saint in Christ living in that fleshly body of sin. You need to let the saint grow and develop and take over. You are a most beautiful Christian butterfly living in that ugly form of the caterpillar. You need to set free that beautiful butterfly. Glorification is waiting for us. You need to let that glory begin to manifest itself now in this dark, crooked and perverse world.