

The Church is...

1. We are a building.

- 1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 2:20-22

- Christ is the Builder
- Christ is the Cornerstone
- Christ is the Occupant

2. We are a body.

- Colossians 2:19

- Christ is the Head

3. We are sheep.

- Christ is the Shepherd

4. We are branches.

- John 15:5

- Christ is the Vine

5. We are a treasure.

- Malachi 3:17

- Christ is the Buyer

6. We are his Bride.

- 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 2:7

- Christ is the Groom

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The Church is...

Here's something about me that maybe most of you don't know: I'm a fan of the Andy Griffith Show. Anybody know what that television show is? For those who don't, it's a comedy show that aired from 1960-1968.

I didn't know about that show until I was in college and later. I wasn't even born when the show started. I'm not *that* old.

The show is set in a mythical town in North Carolina called Mayberry. The center of the show is a character named Sheriff Andy Taylor. He's a widower and a single parent, leaving him with his very young son, Opie. Andy's Aunt Bee lives with them, taking care of them. There's a great cast of local townspeople who each have amusing idiosyncrasies. It's a sleepy little town, so there's not a lot of crime to solve, so most of Andy's time is spent philosophizing and calming down his cousin, Deputy Barney Fife, who's very high strung.

That's more than you probably want to know about the show, even though you really should check it out. But the reason I'm telling you all this is because there is one episode called "Man in a Hurry," where a businessman named Malcom from the "big city" is passing through Mayberry on his way to meetings in the big city of Mount Pilot. But his car breaks down, and he has to wait for it to be fixed. While he waits, the slow pace of the folks in Mayberry drives him crazy. Andy invites Malcom to stay the night at their house and tells him he can sleep in his son Opie's bed. Malcom says he wouldn't want Opie to give up his bed, but six-year-old Opie insists. Opie says, "If you stay in my bed, I get to sleep on an ironing board between two chairs." Malcom says, "That sounds horrible!" Opie says, "No it ain't – that's adventure sleepin'!"

I tell you that story because it is an example of what our attitude can be when we're dealing with change: we either see it as an adventure or we see it as something horrible. For us who are Christians, every day, every event, every change is an adventure because we trust God who leads us!

And I say that because our church is about to go "adventure sleeping"! In three weeks we are going to begin worshipping in the gym for about a month and half. These are exciting times, and I'll tell you why.

A couple years ago we raised money to pay off our church's one-million-dollar debt and to begin much needed renovations around here. Just as we started raising those funds, the pandemic hit and shut things down, and we didn't meet in person all together for nearly a year. But we raised *the entire million dollars in that first year!* We paid off the debt that the church had been carrying for almost twenty-five years. Then we continued raising money for renovations. Your church Leadership Team, pastors, and a group of people from our church have been working with an architect and designers to lay out a plan. So far, we've remodeled the bathrooms and some of the children's area, and The Quad and kitchenette

on the other side of that wall. You've probably seen areas we've been painting and some areas that we're still working on painting. That's all part of a larger, multiphase plan to update our amazing church facility. We need to do this because the newest parts of our building are 25 years old, and this area that we're sitting in is around 50 years old! So the next phase is the beginning of working in here – in our Worship Center. In this phase we'll be painting the walls, replacing some of the carpet, and getting some really nice, new seating. So in February we are going to move our Sunday morning worship time into the gym while work is being done in here. The plan is for the first phase of renovations to be done in March – plenty of time before Easter.

While that is being done, we'll take lots of time to remember and celebrate all that has happened in the past to get us to this exciting place!

We're going to do some "adventure worshipping"!

As we've planned and prepared for this time, we've been praying about what God would want us to focus on to make sure we get the most out of this adventure, and that's why we are starting this series on what it means to be the Church and what the Bible tells us about being the church.

Listen: we don't go to church – we *are* the church. We are a group of people who are passionately committed to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in this world. We are filled with the very same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. We have overcoming power from heaven living inside of us, and together we are changing the destiny of West Valley and even the world! What better time to get aligned with what God is doing in and through our church!

The church is *not a building*; the church is the *people*. So even though we use phrases like, "I'm going to church," or, "I was at church," those really are misleading because it sounds as if church is a place to go to. We even have a beautiful sign out on the corner of 72nd and Nob Hill that identifies "West Valley Church." But that's not the name of the *building*; that is the name of the *people*. Church is not a place, church is not a weekly event; church is *people* filled with the Spirit of Christ himself.

So what exactly does it mean to be the church? It might help to understand that when the word "church" is used in the Bible it's used two different ways: one way that the Bible uses the word is to refer to every Christian who's ever lived throughout history. Maybe you've heard it called the "Universal Church." That's a way to describe every believer all around the world and throughout history, no matter what denomination, whether they meet in a church building, in a tent or under a tree – they are a part of the Universal Church. That's one way the Bible describes the Church.

The other way the word "church" is used in the Bible is to refer to a *local group* in a specific location: like the church at Ephesus or the church that met in Lydia's home in the book of Acts. Or like our sister church in Victoria, Guyana, when they met at Sister Hilda's house under her carport until they started meeting in that beautiful building you helped them build. The word church is used in a local sense.

Here's the thing: of the nearly 80 times the New Testament uses the word "church," it's only used *four times* to refer to the universal church. Almost *every* time you see the word

“church” in the Bible it’s used to refer to a specific group of believers who meet in a local place together, like we are today. Over 75 times it’s used to describe that – it describes us.

So in this series we are talking about *our* local church – West Valley Church. We want to see what it means to be the “church” – whether we meet in the Worship Center or in the gym.

You may already know some of what we’ll be looking at, but in the words of the Apostle Paul to the church that met at Philippi:

“I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.”
(Philippians 3:1, nlt)

So, first of all, let me remind us that...

1. We are a ***building***.

Wait a minute!! Didn’t I just finish going through all that introductory stuff saying the church is NOT a building?! How can I turn right around and contradict myself? I know it sounds like I am, but I’m not, because the church is *not* a brick and mortar and wood building, it is a flesh and blood and Spirit building.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church that met in Corinth and said, “...you are God’s building.” (nlt)

Picture the bricks that make up a building; that’s what you and I are. The Apostle Peter wrote this about us:

“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”
(1 Peter 2:5, niv)

In a building, every brick, every board, every part is important. As individual believers, being placed together, every one is important. We depend on each other for support and protection and stability. We can’t do without *you*; we can’t do without anyone. That’s why we have the 103 Class – to help us identify what part of the building each of us is. All of us have an important place in this church, and without you we are left with a hole in the “building.” We work together, serve together, pray together, worship together, and accomplish impossible things together.

If we are a building, then...

– Christ is the ***builder***.

In Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 16, there was a time for Peter when the lights went on and he realized who Jesus is and he declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus said that it was on *that* faith realization – the same faith you have if you have become a true follower of Christ – it is on that faith that Jesus said:

“*I will build my church.*” (Matthew 16:18)

So Christ is the builder.

Also...

- **Christ is the cornerstone** of the building.

In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, he says that...

"Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself." (Ephesians 2:20, nlt)

He is the chief cornerstone – the first, the one that the entire building is anchored on and squared true to. That must be true of your life and of our church.

- **Christ is (also) the occupant.**

Not only is Jesus the builder and the cornerstone, he is the one who lives in the building. He lives in you and me, and he lives in the church through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the next verse of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, he says:

"We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you ...are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:21-22, nlt)

Christ lives in each of us individually and collectively by the Holy Spirit when we are submitted to him.

We are a building, and also...

2. We are a body.

The Bible says that you and I, we are the body of Christ and each one of us is an important part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27). We are a body, and...

- **Christ is the head.**

(Colossians 1:18) He's the one that makes the decisions, he tells us as a church what to do and where to go, he disciplines us to stay in shape, he feeds us healthy food from his Word, he keeps us from getting fat and lazy; he decides, and we obey. We stay connected and obedient to the head.

Folks who suffer from cerebral palsy or Parkinson's understand how important this connection is. Because of their condition, their mind says one thing but their extremities or their voice or their mouth does something different; it must be so frustrating. Well I've seen churches with cerebral palsy or Parkinson's, too. Christ the head will tell the body to do something, but the body goes off and does something completely different – or does nothing at all.

The Bible tells us not to lose connection to the head:

“For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.” (Colossians 2:19, nlt)

Your Leadership Team – that’s your elected church board – and your pastors work hard and pray hard to make sure we are following the long-range direction that Jesus is leading our church. That’s why we are working on renovating important parts of the building – because as a church we have been called to make the most of the spaces we have, making them as functional and welcoming and useful as possible to accomplish what Jesus the head is leading us, his body, to do, because the church is a building, a body, and...

3. We are sheep.

This was Jesus favorite term for the church. He called us “my little flock.”

Now, I’ll admit that it may not seem flattering because sheep are not known for their intelligence but are known for their stubbornness. That’s pretty accurate, because we’re not always that smart either; we often wander into foolish or sinful situations and away from the Lord. But the point of the metaphor is not to put the attention on us as sheep – the point is to focus on the tender and loving care of the shepherd, because...

- Christ is the shepherd.

Jesus is the *good* shepherd (John 10:11-18) who went so far as to lay down his life for his sheep. That’s us. So as a church we must carefully follow the loving, good shepherd’s leading.

We are a building, the body, a flock, and fourth...

4. We are branches.

You and I are branches and we are connected to, nourished by, and can only truly live if we remain connected to...

- Christ (who) is the vine.

Jesus said:

“I am the vine, you are the branches, apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5, niv)

The picture is of a vineyard, and the vine is the trunk, the branches are what run along the trellis and grow fruit. And that’s our job as a church – to remain connected to Jesus so we can grow in him and produce fruit – which means doing good to others, introducing them to Jesus.

So again, all of us are branches, and that means all of us are to bear fruit. It’s not just *my* job, or the pastoral staff’s job; it’s the job of the entire church – every branch that makes up the

church – that’s you. As *you* stay closely connected to Jesus, all of us together are the church of branches, staying close to Jesus. The point is that it takes the entire vineyard – each and all of us – to produce the harvest of more people that God expects; to do the ministry.

We are a building, a body, a bunch of sheep, branches, and...

5. We are a ***treasure***.

Each one of us are a precious gem in a cherished treasure. You’ll see that the last book of the Old Testament Scripture is Malachi. That was the end of the Old Testament – nothing else for four hundred years until Jesus arrived. The last words that closed the Old Testament and echoed down the centuries until Christ appeared on this earth is exactly this statement about you and me:

"On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my *treasured possession*. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him." (Malachi 3:17, niv)

We are a treasure and...

- Christ is the ***buyer***.

The Bible says that even though Jesus was rich, he sold everything he had to buy you. He became poor in order to purchase us (2 Corinthians 8:9). He would have done that even if you were the only person in all of history – that’s how valuable you are and all of us are to him.

Let me tell you, the world and the devil will tell you that you aren’t worth anything. Maybe that’s what your parents told you. Maybe that’s what you tell yourself. If there was a price tag on you, you’d be sold on the clearance rack at the dollar store. But Jesus saw you and me, he saw us, and he didn’t agree with that price on the tag. He determined that we are so valuable that he would pay the very highest price he could pay to purchase us; that price was his own life.

You’ve heard me say this before: the price of something is determined by the price you are willing to pay for it. Jesus determined that we are worth his life. There is no higher price that God could pay than the life of his one and only son because there is nothing more valuable to him than us. (John 3:16). The Bible says that we are not our own; we were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Jesus became poor in order to buy us.

We are a building, a body, sheep, branches, a treasure, and...

6. We are his ***bride***.

That means that...

- Christ is the ***groom***.

This is a prominent theme throughout Scripture. Over a hundred times the Bible talks about God as the groom and us as the bride. In the book of Revelation we are described as a bride all dressed up for the groom (Revelation 19:7-9). In John 3 (3:29), Jesus says that he couldn't be happier than to be married to us.

That is as close as God could come to describe how deep our relationship with him can be, and how deeply he loves us, the church. He has made a forever commitment to us – to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death gives us life. And it's amazing that he would love US. It's like he's Prince Charming, but instead of picking Cinderella, he picks the ugliest and wickedest stepsister! And when he picks her, she suddenly becomes more dazzlingly beautiful than Cinderella could ever be. He is LOVE, and we are unlovely and unlove-able with sin. But he was without sin, so he took on the ugliness of our sin so that we might become beautiful. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21, niv)

He found us in our sin and loved us right where we were.

Physician Richard Selzer wrote a book called *Mortal Lessons*¹, and in the book he describes a scene in a hospital room after he had performed surgery on a young woman's face. I want to read to you what he wrote:

“I stand by the bed where the young woman lies...her face, postoperative...her mouth twisted in palsy...clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, one of the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be that way from now on. I had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut this little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to be in a world all their own in the evening lamplight...isolated from me...private.

Who are they? I ask myself...he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously. The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It's kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with the divine. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers...to show her that their kiss still works.” Isn't that a beautiful story?

In Scripture we are told of Jesus – the perfect, unblemished, beautiful Son of God...

“Making himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:7).

By doing that, God bent down, 'twisted his lips' and kissed the crooked lips of a world, bent out of shape by sin and anxiety, with His love and grace. Jesus became twisted in death on the cross to show us that the kiss still works. God still loves us.

¹ Touchstone Books, 1987

Oh, my dear friends...West Valley Church, please know that you are the beloved of God. You are a building, a body, a bunch of sheep, branches, a brilliant treasure, a bride. You are his beloved. We are loved.

I don't expect you to remember all these different metaphors for the church; I didn't share all this with you to memorize these things and there won't be a quiz. I want you to remember this: we don't go to church we *are* the church. The church is not about location it is about relation: relation to God and to each other. All these metaphors describe that relationship with God, and that's what we are going to discover and define and describe and do.

Prayer

Now glory be to God, who by his mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of—infininitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes. May he be given glory forever and ever through endless ages because of his master plan of salvation for the Church through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 3:21, tlb)