

The Church: Why does it Matter?

Selected Scriptures

July 2, 2006 PM

*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church*

We come tonight to begin our study of the church. We finished the doctrine of salvation. We started now, some almost three years ago, right after I came to Countryside. I believe it was November 1, three years ago; we began our study of the great doctrines of the Bible. We have two more to go: the doctrine of the church, which we'll begin tonight, and then the doctrine of last things. I thought it was important for us to begin here with the importance of the church. The church: why does it matter?

For most of church history, if you were a Christian, your life revolved around the church. Even when churches began to have their own buildings, often in communities that were permeated by the gospel, the entire community would be located around, built around, the church, because the church was the hub of community life. You can still see that in most of the old towns and villages if you visit them here in America as well as in Europe. The church was not only the center of your spiritual life; it was also the center of your social life. For true Christians, the church was literally the center of their world.

One of the reasons I enjoy going to Russia is because, in spite of the problems that they've had in the Russian church, when you visit the church there, some of you have had the opportunity to do that, it's almost as if you get a glimpse back in time at how the church was, and this is a reality there. The entire life of the Christian is built around the church. But the sad reality is, that there has been a mega-shift among professing evangelical Christians. For many Christians, the church is no longer the center of their world, and for some who profess Christ, it is no longer even a regular part of their world.

I want to begin tonight by looking at a book, briefly. George Barna, the Christian researcher and survey expert, recently wrote a book called, "Revolution." It's one of the worst books I have read in a long time. Now, let me say to you that George Barna is, I believe, a brother in Christ, and there are many things he's done that are helpful. But he's not a theologian, and he's not an expositor of Scripture, and unfortunately that becomes patently obvious in this book that he has written. Barna pronounces the local church dead, a relic from the past that no longer has any usefulness. The first chapter begins with two men named David and Michael, golfing. Or as Barna puts it, tongue in cheek, they were attending "Church on the Green." It's Sunday morning and they're at Church on the Green, hole 1.

Both he says, were born-again Christians who had eliminated church life from their busy schedules. Now, so far, you don't know which direction he's going to go, but here's the punchline. He mentions one of them, David, and he says, "David is a revolutionary Christian. His life reflects the very ideals and principles that characterize the life and purpose of Jesus Christ and that advance the kingdom of God, despite the fact that David rarely attends church services." Then he comes to chapter 4, a chapter entitled, "How is the local church doing?" Here Barna presents his survey findings about what he calls, "77 million born-again American Christians." As he looks at those survey results, he ends with this admission, "One of the greatest frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about church-going Christians, and what the Bible in fact calls us to be." He says, "If the local church is the hope of the world, then the world has no hope."

So, what exactly is his solution? Well, Barna, in his book, calls for a revolution. He says, "Millions of people who are growing as Christians and passionate about their faith, have come to recognize that the local church is not, and need not be, the epicenter of their spiritual adventure." So, in place of the local church, what does Barna propose? Well, he says there are these macro-models, that is, all-inclusive faith communities something like the church is today. And he lists four of those; of the four he lists, he says the two that he thinks have the greatest potential are house churches and cyber-churches, whatever in the world a cyber-church is. But he says, really he prefers the micro-models, which are, he calls "narrowly focused assemblies."

What exactly does he mean? He says, well, for example, he prefers independent worship events, one-time events that feature a, "worship gypsy, playing extended sets of worship music." Just what I always wanted, my own worship gypsy. Seth, could you tend to that? Or marketplace fellowships, people on the job getting together and having fellowship together as believers, coaching communities, or narrow cast, internet-based faith groups, or various para-church ministries. It is a revolution when an evangelical, as part of the Christian community, one who, (although we wouldn't be agreed on everything) has stood in the historic tradition of faith, begins to espouse the death of the local church.

What are the causes that lie behind this huge shift in Christian thinking? I don't think Barna's the only one. I do think, as he writes, there are many who are beginning to embrace the very ideas that he writes regarding. What has caused this? Well, I'm not going to spend much time here, but let me just briefly ask you to think about this. What are the primary causes of the drift that has occurred among Christians from a church-centered life to something else?

Well, let's first think of the causes that have come from outside the church, that have come from the culture. First of all, just the general pursuit of materialism. This is the reason behind many two income homes, both spouses work and both spouses commute, so when the weekend comes, they may or may not be up for setting aside time for church. If they feel up for it, if they haven't had too difficult a week, then that will enable them to come. If not, they choose to stay home and take it easy.

Another is the busyness of modern life; we have many more conveniences today. Don Whitney has written a book talking about simplifying our lives, and he makes the point (I think accurately) that the things we think of as conveniences have in many ways complicated our lives. Have you tried to set your DVR time, or your VCR time (if you still have a VCR) or your microwave, or set your thermostats to leave on vacation? Those are conveniences that now take much more of our time than they used to. Used to, there was an on and off switch; it was fairly simple. But those things add to the busyness of modern life. All the technological advances, while they're helpful, also add to the busyness of modern life.

Third reason I think from outside the church, is the over commitment of the family. Families today, by admission, many of the families of our church freely admit this as well, are overbooked with various activities. All of which seem important, all of which seem to cry out to be done, and yet it results in an over-commitment that makes church and a church-centered life not that important.

The quest for self-fulfillment. Our culture says, "Do what fulfills you." This leads to a sort of shopper's mindset for many looking for a church. It's like going to Walmart and looking at the toothbrushes. I'm looking for just the perfect one that fits me, and then I'll go when it fits me, and when it suits me, and when it benefits me. But I'm really looking to fulfill myself.

The cry for egalitarianism, that is equality and individualism, especially. I've promised our girls back a few months ago that we would get a dog. We had a dog a few years ago, the dog died. I don't know what possessed me to promise to get another dog, but I have, and I plan to live up to my commitment. We're looking for a Shih Tzu, a name that I don't allow my wife to pronounce in public for obvious reasons. and so I started looking on the internet for this dog, and I came across what they now call designer dogs. Now, supposedly designer dogs are blends of two purebreds. The theory is that if you combine these two purebreds, you end up with the best qualities of the two breeds. But my thought was: what keeps you from ending up with the worst qualities of the two breeds? But I was curious, so I looked at a couple of sites and to my great

shock, designer dogs were being sold, this cute little dog, a combination of two breeds that I had some interest in, for \$1500! It's \$500 more than I spent for my first car. And I didn't have to clean up behind my car. You know, when I thought about that, I thought what a marketing coup – change the name of what used to be called a mixed breed, or a mutt, to a designer puppy, and sell it for more than you could sell for a purebred.

Now why do I tell that? Why do I share that with you? Because it occurred to me that the influence of rugged individualism has created a similar trend for people in the church. They don't want traditional church. They want designer church. Let me design a church that fits my likes and my preferences, let's mix this breed and this breed and come up with one that suits me. George Barna, in his book "Revolution," puts it this way,

The congregational model of the church ([that's what we are] a definable group of people who regularly meet at the same place to engage in religious routines and programs [notice how he puts that very negatively] under the guidance of a paid pastor [yes, I am] who provides doctrinal teaching and organizational direction, has been the dominant force in people's spiritual lives for hundreds of years. [glad to hear him admit that. Then he says] So why is it so rapidly losing ground at this moment in history? Perhaps [he says] the major reasons are people's insistence on choices and their desire to have customized experiences. One outcome of the multifaceted push for new spiritual models has been the rise of unique, highly personalized, church experiences.

What he's saying is, people want "designer church" that fits them perfectly. So, these people never really commit, instead they spend their lives on a search for the church that fits them perfectly, a designer church.

What about the causes from inside the professing church? Just a couple of thoughts. I think one thing that has led to this de-centered life away from the church is the anonymity that comes to people who attend megachurches. You can miss for weeks, and no one seems to notice or really care. So, it breeds a kind of nonchalant attitude toward the church. "I can come, and I can go, and it doesn't really matter at all."

The rise of the seeker sensitive church, because now with the seeker sensitive churches weekends are built not around the saints, but around unbelievers, so church seems less and less necessary for believers. Why do I need to go? They're trying to reach the lost.

The rise and influence of para-church ministries. Now, don't understand me, there are good para-church ministries. Good para-church ministries are those ministries that direct people back to their local churches, that equip them to serve in their local churches, that encourage that. And there are some that do that very effectively. But there are a lot of bad para-church ministries as well, that siphon off Christians' time, money, prayers, and participation away from the church.

You won't be surprised that I also included as one of those causes from within the church, the decline of expository preaching. Why do I say that? Well, I think there's several reasons that the lack of expository preaching pulls people away from the church. First of all, believers aren't fed, so they wander off looking for something else. I think also, when there's no expository teaching and preaching, the church has a weak theological base or none at all. So, people are therefore susceptible to error and pulled off to this group or that group.

And I think when there's no expository preaching and teaching the church doesn't understand God's plan and His program, so it just continually tries to reinvent itself. Come up with some new, slick program, you know, 30 days of this, or 40 days of that, or let's bring in the seekers, or unchurched Mary and Bob, or you know, whatever it may be. Let's come up with a different program. Now it's the emergent church. We've got to package it differently to appeal to a new generation of postmodern thinkers. Those I believe, from within and without the church, are the primary causes for this drift from a church centered life.

But I want us to look very briefly at why that shouldn't be - the reasons the church matters. Why should your life and my life be centered in the church, whether it's this church, or if God in His providence moves you somewhere else in another good, Bible-teaching church, why should your life be centered in the church? Why does it matter? Let me give you several reasons.

First of all, we have the example of New Testament believers. Let's look at several passages together. Turn with me to Acts 2. Of course, the church, as we'll learn in coming weeks, I believe was born at Pentecost; that day when under the power of the Holy Spirit Peter preached and 3,000 souls were converted to Christ. Notice verse 41 of chapter 2, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added..." Now, the first question you should ask is, "added to what?" The implication here is someone was keeping records, there is an official record of some kind, and 3,000 souls were added to the church. Now, this group of people "... were continually devoting themselves..."

Notice, to four things: "... to the apostles' teaching..." That is, to understanding the doctrine that the apostles were teaching them. They were devoting themselves, this group of people were, "... to fellowship..." to partnership together. We're going to talk more about this this fall, I have a plan to sort of lay out what true biblical fellowship looks like, and it's not coffee and Crispy Cremes, although that doesn't hurt. The "... breaking of bread..." that has to do with celebrating the Lord's Table together, remembering His death, that's what we share in common. We drink of one cup. We eat of one bread.

And then, verse 42 adds, "... to prayer." The church joined together in prayer, and, "Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common..." Now, this doesn't mean that they were behaving in some sort of a communal way. It simply saying, and he's explains it in verse 45, they began selling their property and possessions and they were sharing with anyone who had need. They were taking care of each other; they were reaching out to care for the needs of one another.

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple ... [At this point, they're gathering daily at the time of the morning and evening sacrifice for prayer and there joining together as followers of Messiah there, on the temple grounds.] and breaking bread from house to house, [This reference has more to do with taking their meals together there, as you can see.] they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart....

So, here's this group of people joined together in study, in prayer, in fellowship, in the Lord's Table, joining together in prayer at the temple, and visiting in one another's houses from day to day. Immediately, you see there is a community that is formed at the very early days of the church. Chapter 4, this trend continues. Chapter 4:32, "And the congregation of those who believed ... [Notice, immediately now we have this group of people. They] were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property...."

Again, the implication here is not that they gave up their property, as you can see in the example there in chapter 5 with Ananias and Sapphira. Instead, the implication is they're caring for one another. "... with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of ... [Christ], and abundant grace ... there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ... lay them at the

apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need." Again, you get the very real sense that there is a community in which they're caring for each other. These are not cyber churches.

Chapter 6, you see it again, the implication that there is a tight-knit community that is formed. "... at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* [that is, those Jews who'd been scattered by the diaspora, by the implication of Greek ideas, the buying into Greek ideas. They'd been influenced by that, and they come back and the] ... *native* Hebrews [that is, those Jews who lived, grew up in Palestine] because their widows [the Hellenistic widows] were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*." [They said, "Look, we think there's a little bit of an unfairness going on, in how our widows are being cared for." The implication here is that they were together, the implication is that the church as a whole was looking after both the Palestinian Jews that were there, as well as the Hellenistic Jews who'd been scattered] So the twelve summoned the congregation [the multitude] of the disciples [together. So, they all come together, all of these people who were attached to this body of believers. And the apostles say, 'You need to select from you,' verse 3] 'seven men of good reputation ... whom ... we'll ... put in charge of this task.'" Verse 5, "... the statement found approval with the whole ... [multitude]." Verse 6, "... these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

You get this feel of what the church was like in Jerusalem, but not just in Jerusalem. Turn to Acts 11. In Acts 11:9, those who were scattered because of the persecution that came in connection with Stephen, made their way to various places north and to Cyprus and to Antioch, "... speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone ... there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and *began* speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent [off] Barnabas ... to Antioch." When Barnabas arrives, he's thrilled with what the Lord is doing there and he encourages them to stay, "... *true* to the Lord..." Verse 25, he leaves for Tarsus to look for Saul, "... when he had found him, he brought [Saul]... to Antioch. And for an entire year... [Saul and Barnabas] met with the church [get that? Met with the church together] and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."

Again, this sense of belonging, of community. This was the example of the New Testament church. This is why the church matters. This is what the church looked like from the beginning. In Jerusalem, and then in Antioch, it's the pattern that was laid in the New Testament.

A second reason the church matters, is not only the example of New Testament believers, but the teaching and pattern of the apostles. The teaching and pattern of the apostles. Ephesians 2 says that the church was "... built on the foundation of the apostles..." So how exactly did the apostles think, and what did they say, and how did they respond to the church?

Well, first of all, they established churches wherever they went. Acts 14 says that,

After they had preached the gospel to that city and ... made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. [Here are these believers in these different communities and they were all connected to the churches in those communities and elders were appointed here by Paul for those churches.]

In Acts 20:17, Paul sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church, for he had established it. 1 Corinthians 4:17, "For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church."

Not only did they establish churches, but they ministered in churches, the apostles did. Acts 15:41 says that Paul "... was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Plural. Individual churches in individual communities. Acts 16:4 - 5,

"... while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by [the Jerusalem council] ... So, the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily." [You became a believer, you attached to a church, the church in your community, that is, where you were and that resounded with your own heart.]

1 Corinthians 7:17, "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. [Paul says] ... so I direct in all the churches." The ministry of the apostles was to churches. You can see it in the reality that the apostles wrote their letters to churches, or to the leaders of churches. And I won't belabor this point, but you know it's true. Let me just remind you, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul writes, "To the church of God ... at Corinth..." Galatians

1:2, “To the churches of Galatia...,” I write this letter. Philippians 1:1, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons....” He’s writing to the church at Philippi. 1 Thessalonians 1:1, “To the church of the Thessalonians....” The same thing in 2 Thessalonians. And John the Apostle in 3 John, describes himself as having written something “to the church.”

And in fact, when you look at the apostles, their greatest concern was in fact for individual, local churches. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 11, “Apart from ... [these] external things, [I face, he says, all of these pressures I’ve just described] there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches.” This was Paul’s heart. It was for the individual local churches in all of those towns and communities and places where he served in ministry. So, when you look at the pattern of New Testament believers, when you look at the practice of the apostles, it’s clear that the church is the center of Christian life and experience.

But we can go one step further. Look at the commands of the New Testament. Scripture very clearly commands us to assemble together for worship. Hebrews 10, “... let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together....” It was the practice of the church, we find from a number of places in the New Testament, to gather on the Lord’s day, to gather together as believers, as the church, to worship. And here it’s commanded. We are not to forsake. We are not to abandon. By the way, this doesn’t mean that you can’t occasionally miss a Sunday; it’s not what he’s saying. He’s saying, where’s your heart? Is your heart in the church? Don’t abandon the assembling together, “... as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day [of Christ] drawing near.” We’re commanded to assemble for worship.

We’re commanded to give, and I prefer instead of “to the church,” “through the church.” We give to the Lord, but we’re commanded to give through the church. First Corinthians 16:1, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.” We dealt with giving at length back a year or so ago. This is commanded in a number of places for us as believers.

We’re also commanded to use our spiritual gift within the church. First Peter, Peter tells us we’re to “... employ [our spiritual gift] in serving one another....” And in 1 Corinthians 12, we’re told that that is to happen within the context of the body, within the context of the church, as Paul writes to the Corinthians.

So, when you look at the reasons the church matters, it's clear from the New Testament example, the New Testament believers and how they lived their lives. It's clear from the practice and teaching of the apostles. It's also clear from the commands that are given to us, but I think most of compelling of all is the priority of Christ Himself in regards to the church.

Let's look at Christ's heart for the church. First of all, He promised to build it. Turn with me to Matthew 16, this famous passage. Matthew is the only Gospel to mention the church. This is foundational. Jesus is promising what is still going to come, what is yet to come. In Matthew 16:13,

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some *say* John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." [There's a lot of debate among the people about who You really are. And then He turns very directly to them and He says] ... "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter ... [always the one to speak first, answers] "You are ... [Messiah, Hamashiah] the Son of the living God." [You are the One promised and You are God the Son] ... Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood [didn't] reveal *this* to you..." [In other words, there were glimpses of the reality of this Coming One in the Old Testament, but this was directly revealed to Peter by God Himself.] Verse 18, "I also say to you that you are Peter, [Petros, a stone] and upon this [large] rock [this bedrock, this boulder] I will build My church..."

Probably a play on words, we can't be absolutely certain, but it seems that the Lord is saying, playing off of Peter and his name, and saying this thing that you have just said, this huge confession that you have just made is that upon which I will build my church. "I will build My church." Look at those words. "I," the One who is Messiah, the One who is the Son of God. "Will," it points to the reality that it in fact will happen, as well as the fact that it's not yet happening. We'll talk about when the church originated, but He's promising something that appears to be yet future. "I will build," He's says, it's going to happen. "I will construct, I will make sure this happens." "My," He takes personal ownership as the Creator, the Originator and the Sovereign. "My church," the word "church" simply means *those called out, those called out for assembly, those assembled together*, which speaks of the reality of what the church is to be and to do.

And "... the gates of Hades will not overpower it." What does that mean? There have been a lot of interpretations of that phrase. *Hades* is a simple reference to death, to the grave. Jesus is saying this, "The greatest tool that Satan has, death itself, will not overpower My church." Isn't that true? The seeds of the church were sown, they say, in the blood of the martyrs. Death itself can't stamp out the church that Jesus promised to build. So, Jesus says, "This is what I'm going to do." By the way, the church is the only organization on earth that Christ promised to build. There are other good institutions, good organizations, but this is His passion, the church. "I will build My church."

When you look at Christ, you also see that He planned to carry out His work in this age through the church. Turn to Ephesians 3. You see this, and in the interest of time I'm not going to take a lot of time here, but I want you to see it. Ephesians 3, we really should be looking at verses 1 - 11. Let me just briefly walk you through a section of this. He says, I've been given this special stewardship, verse 2, and it's been revealed to me, this mystery has been revealed to me, this is what I'm a steward of. A mystery being something that was once not revealed but now has been made manifest, has been revealed. So, he keeps building toward this mystery, verse 4 he speaks again of the mystery of Christ. It was "... in other generations not made known to the sons of men ... [but] it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.

So, what is this mystery, Paul, tell us. Verse 6,

"... *to be specific*, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel..." [And he keeps going, verse 8,] "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light [Here's he's back to his mystery. To bring to light] what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things..." Paul, what is it? Verse 10, "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities [that is, to the heavenly beings] in ... heavenly *places*."

You know what Paul is saying? He said, "I received a special stewardship for this time from God Himself, and it's to make known to you this amazing mystery, something that was once hidden but is now revealed and the mystery is this: the church of Jesus Christ, in which both Jew and Gentile are united in one body." This, Paul says, is the administration of God's plan or program for this time. And notice what he says in verse 11, "*This [plan] was in accordance with the*

eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord....” This was the plan; the plan that God had in Christ mediated through the apostles, was the church.

Jesus also loved the church because He purchased it with His own blood. Acts 20:28, Paul says to the Ephesian elders, “... shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The church is a priority to Christ because He promised to build it. He planned to use it as His primary instrument in the world, and He purchased it with His own death. But it’s also a priority to Him because He loves it. Ephesians 5, “Husbands, love your wives ... as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her....” Now we usually make the application that a Christian husband is to love his wife the way Christ loves the church. And that’s true, that’s the point Paul is making here. But the opposite is also true. If you are a Christian husband, and you truly love your wife, that’s how Paul urges us to think about Christ’s love for His church.

Church is a priority to Christ, and He currently works on behalf of the church. Ephesians 5, notice what he says, Ephesians 5:25, just after he says love your wives as Christ loved the church. Why did Christ give Himself up for her? ...

so that He might sanctify her, [He’s in the process of sanctifying us, the church] having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [and He’s doing it so] 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. [Right now, Jesus Christ is working on the church, to make her a bride presentable for Himself. And notice in the next portion there in verse 29, He explains a little more about this.] He says, verse 28, “... husbands ought ... to love their own wives as their own bodies ... no one ever hated [verse 29] his own flesh, but nourishes [literally, feeds it] and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church.... [Right now, today, Christ is providing for His church, and He’s cherishing His church. This is where His heart is.]

One last statement of the priority of Christ. When you look at Christ and His love for the church, you see His commitment to it by the reality that His last communication that we have recorded for us, was to local congregations. Revelation 1:11, He tells John, “I want you write in a book and I want you to send it to seven literal churches in Asia Minor. I’m concerned about what’s going on in each of those individual local churches.” And of course, in Revelation 2 and 3, you have that delineated, what was specifically said to those local churches there in Asia Minor. And the book of Revelation ends, in Revelation 22:16, with Jesus saying, “I, Jesus, have sent My

angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright [and] morning star.”

Let me ask you: Is the gathering of the church for worship the high point of your week? Is the church really your highest priority? Outside of your own time with Christ, and your ministry to your family, and the work that you have to do to support your family, does the church consume most of your available time each week? Do you regularly attend? Do you consistently give? Do you faithfully serve and use the gift God has given you? Is there any organization or activity that gets more of your time, that demands more of your resources, or has more of your heart?

Think for a moment of all the activities and organizations that you and your family are involved in. Just make a brief mental list. And let me ask you: which one of those organizations or activities will best deepen your knowledge of God and your relationship with Him? Which one will build the greatest character into your life and the lives of your children? Which one is eternal? Which one has God commanded you to be involved in? Which one is Christ’s highest priority? The obvious answer to all of those is the church of Jesus Christ.

Why does it matter? Why should it matter to you and to me? Because of everything else you are doing or possibly could do; it matters most to God. Matthew 16:18, “I ... say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church...” My call to all of you, and of course I realize tonight I’m preaching to the choir. You’re here this evening; hopefully you are engaged in the church. But my call to all of us is to pick up our trowels and get to work in the church, joining Christ as He builds His church. Does it matter? Nothing in all the world matters more to God than the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray together.

Father, it’s so clear to us when we look at Your Word, and so many other passages and approaches we could have taken, that make it transparently clear that our lives as believers are to find their center, humanly speaking, in the church. We’re to gather for worship. We’re to gather around the apostles’ teaching. We’re to pray together. We’re to celebrate the Lord’s Table together. Father, we are to join ourselves in meals together. We’re to combine our hearts in true fellowship. We’re to encourage each other. We’re to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. We’re to attach ourselves to the local manifestation of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, I pray that You would give each person here a renewed commitment to make whatever changes that they need to make, streamline their lives in whatever way, to reflect Your priorities. Lord, help us to remember that someday we will stand before You, and what will matter to You are Your priorities and not our earthly ones. Help us to live in light of that Day, for the glory of Your Son, and for the glory of His bride, the church.

We pray it in His name. Amen.