

I Now Pronounce You Christ and Church

Turn with me to **Ephesians 5:21-32**. We are receiving members at the close of the service and I like to use that opportunity to focus our attention upon what the bible says about the church and our relationship to Christ. We typically use this passage to teach about marriage but in the process I think we often overlook the profound teaching that this passage offers us concerning the relationship between Christ and the church.

I've commented numerous times about the broad changes we are seeing in the evangelical church culture, the way we "do church", the way we try to market the church and what we offer. In many ways the church has tried to "re-brand" itself in our Western culture, trying to build bridges to reach out to those who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord. I understand the importance of that and we have tried to be faithful in building those relationship bridges with our community. I applaud those efforts to reach people with the gospel. However, we do need to be careful that in the process we don't spend all of our time and commitment and effort building bridges and then find we have built a bridge to nowhere – we have nothing of eternal value to offer a lost and hurting world.

And I might just point out that it is not only bridges that we are to build. The present church culture is busy trying to tear down walls and build bridges, but I've been thinking about the implications of that. Jesus spoke in John 10 of his followers as sheep and said he was the good shepherd. Then he also said that he was the gate through which the sheep must pass and whoever enters through him would be saved. If you have a gate, you must have a fence or walls or something. A gate implies an enclosure of some kind. No point in having a gate without having a secure boundary attached to it. We are to build bridges, but there is still only one gate or door through which we can enter the kingdom of God and there are still walls or fences to protect the sheep, to help us sheep stay where we belong and to keep the thief and the predators out.

I don't want us to stop building bridges to reach into every person's world, but I don't want to see the church fall into compromise in an attempt to build bridges. I don't want us to lose sight of God's transcendence and holiness in an attempt at being relevant. In making Christ known to our culture, I don't want us to try to strip Him of his awe-inducing resplendent glory that should leave us trembling and overwhelmed. I don't want us to water down the gospel and

the message of the cross just so it will sell better to the crowd.

In a USA today article about the church using edgy marketing, they quoted from a church researcher who wrote, “One of the things many of these new churches are trying to do is imitate culture to bring in people, instead of sitting back and critiquing it.” The article states that part of the reason for the change is because 17% of Americans now say they are “non-religious.” The idea is if the church can look less like the church and be edgier and trendier, we can build bridges to the non-religious and non-believers. I’m just suggesting caution for the churches lest we “trend and edge” ourselves out of our voice and calling. I think if the church (all of us) will just be authentic and genuine and real and love the people we come in contact with who are not believers, I think we can build appropriate bridges with appropriate walls and fences in place. But that’s not the gospel, that’s just my opinion. Something for you to think about.

As the changes have occurred in the church, I’ve watched people, even long time saints, become disenchanted with the church. People have stopped attending. I hear it: “We still love Jesus, we just can’t stand his people.” There is nothing new about this, people get offended at the church, at the pastor, at the members. We get hurt by things that are said or done and we give up on the church. We all get weary and tired, just tired of attending, tired of the effort involved and just wonder what’s the point? Let me show you some reasons why we shouldn’t give up on the church. Have you found Ephesians 5? Let’s read this passage (Ephesians 5:21-32).

Do you see it? Here is the reason why we don’t give up on the church: because Christ loves the church. In fact, this passage gives us several reasons. He loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this in order to sanctify or make her holy and clean so that he could stand beside her and present her to himself and to His Father and be united with her as one for eternity.

Let’s look at this. As we begin, notice that Paul mixes some metaphors. We the church are the body of Christ and Christ is the head. But notice also that Paul speaks of the church as the bride of Christ. Get past any sexual connotations that accompany the masculine and feminine roles and just take hold of the deeper meaning. Paul says in verse 25...

1. Christ loves the church. This is why we can’t give up on the church, because Christ loved the church and still loves his church. From before the foundation of the world he loved us. Maybe you know that romantic feeling that you loved someone before you even met them. In your heart and mind you knew this would be the person you would love. Jesus set his affection

upon us, before we were born, he loved us. Even when we were rebellious and living in sin, he loved us and called to us. He loved us then and he loves us now and he won't ever look away from us. Paul wrote in Romans 8 that nothing could separate us from his love. Nothing will make him stop loving us, so how could we stop loving the church, the one Jesus loves with an eternal love? Here is the second reason we mustn't give up on the church...

2. Christ gave himself for the church. Here we see the extent of that love: He gave himself for the church. We are talking about the incarnation and the cross. Jesus loved us so much the bible says he “**...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.**” **Philippians 2:7-8.** How amazing is the degree of his love for the church.

We are approaching the season of Lent, the time when the church prepares itself and reflects upon the passion of Christ in preparation for Easter and the celebration of the resurrection. Stop and think for a moment about what it means that Christ gave himself for the church. It was more than just the moment of death. More than just the hours of that terrible day we call Good Friday. He gave his life, i.e. he gave every moment of every day of his life here on earth as a sacrificial offering to redeem the church. Leaving the splendor of heaven to be born as an infant, living his life as a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief the bible says. He gave himself to the mental anguish of the Garden of Gethsemane. He gave himself to the soldiers that beat him and mocked him and nailed him to a cross. He gave himself for us that we might be saved. Oh, see how he loves the church! And why did he do this? Paul tells us as we see the third reason why we mustn't give up on the church...

3. Christ cleansed the church and set us apart for himself. Look at this whole passage again. “**...just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**” **Ephesians 5:25-27**

It says he gave himself for her in order to make her holy. That's how our translation reads while others read “sanctify or set apart”. That's what an engaged couple or a bride and groom do, they set each other apart from all the rest. Jesus gave himself so we, the church could

be made clean and set apart only for himself. We reject all other lovers and turn away from all other admirers because his love for us has washed us clean and made us his own. Think of it, with all of our imperfections and failures, he still loves us. One of the ancient church fathers, Cyprian wrote, “There is only one church that Christ loves. It is this church alone that is being cleansed by his washing.” Jesus has only one bride, one wife, the church. He has only one body, us, the church.

He set us apart and he cleansed us. Since the context here is speaking of marriage, some bible scholars believe Paul is referring to a ritual bathing or cleansing before marriage. The Jewish bride would wash and then be perfumed, anointed, dressed in her wedding dress. One commentary said they referred to it as “the sanctification of the bride.”

After a long list of sinful behaviors, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “**And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**” 1 Corinthians 6:11. He cleansed us, washed us, washing our sins away by his cleansing blood, and sanctified us, setting us apart to himself. Paul says he did this in order that he might present the church to himself. Here is the fourth reason why we shouldn’t give up on the church, because...

4. Christ has prepared the church to stand beside him as a bride. He washed us and cleaned us up because we couldn’t do that for ourselves. We would have been one nasty looking bride if it had been left up to us. And since we couldn’t wash away our sin and our filthy nature and habits and make ourselves pure and clean enough to marry one like Him, Jesus did that for us. Remember, he had set his sights on us before we were even born. He was determined to marry this bride, so he made us holy and clean, so we could stand beside him without being ashamed, without guilt, without stain, but covered by his grace in a beautiful wedding gown made of his righteousness. And here we stand, next to Jesus, and what does verse 27 say, he presented us, the church to himself as a “**radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless.**”

Isn’t that what we say about a bride on her wedding day? “She looked radiant!” Here’s the deal for us, the church: We know on our own what we were like. We were the homeliest looking girl around, but Jesus loved us and gave himself for us and cleaned us up and made us holy and blameless and radiant by his mercy and grace. Now we stand beside him, presented to

him as his bride, presented with him to the Father and how grateful and thankful and humbled we are by such love.

And with all of that said, how could we stop loving the church when Jesus loves his church so very much? Here is the fifth reason we mustn't give up on the church. Because...

5. Christ is united with the church as one. Paul quotes from the Genesis passage to show this amazing union between Christ and his church. **“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.” Ephesians 5:31-32**

We talk easily about a husband and wife being united in marriage and becoming one flesh. But Paul says this is the mystery of the union between Christ and the church. We become one with him. We are to be so intimately united with him that we are considered to be part of him. 2 Peter 1 says we are partakers of his divine nature. We are united with him and become as it were, one flesh. So Paul switches metaphors and through our union with Christ we become not only wed to him in this covenant relationship but a part of his body. He writes in verse 23, **“...Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”** And in verse 29-30, **“After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body.”**

Christ loves us and feeds and cares for us, his church, his body, his bride. He nurtures us and protects us, he cares for us and carries us. So how can we say we hate the church when the church is his body and we are in fact, part of that body? How can we give up on the church when he loves the church and cares for it and feeds and nurtures it as a loving husband cares for his bride? We can't give up on it because we are the church, the body and the bride of Christ.

Paul says it is a profound mystery when we talk like this about Christ and his relationship to his church. How can it be that he would love us, give himself for us, cleanse us set us apart for himself, present us by his side to heaven and earth and continue to care for, nurture and feed us, making us wholly and completely united as one with Him.

See the love he has for us. He loved us, saved us, gave himself for us.

See the expectation he has for us. He set us apart and made us holy, clean and blameless. Now he expects us to remain clean and faithful as his betrothed. We have pledged our fidelity to one love and he has set us apart from all the others. We must live a holy life,

staying true to Christ alone.

See the care he provides for us. He promised to never leave us alone and to supply all of our needs according to his riches in glory. He lavished his grace upon us and continues to provide all we need.

See the future he has planned for us. It is the final event of the wedding. Quoting from one commentary, “After the bride’s preparation, the next stage in a Jewish wedding was the bride’s removal from her father’s house to the groom’s house, followed by the bride’s introduction into the groom’s home.” ...Craig Keener.

He has planned to take us home to his house, to present us to his Father and to all of his family and the consummation of the marriage and of all things happens as we celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb, rejoicing, as we are one with him, sharing in his glory forever.

How he loves his church. And think of it. All of this happens in the context of us being united with Christ and with each other as his body and his bride.

We may still be pretty messed up at times, but we are his bride and he loves us. He nurtures and cares for us and expects us to keep ourselves clean and pure as his bride. And we are all part of this together as his body. He expects us to love one another out of reverence for who we are in Christ. We are the church whom he loves. For his sake, let’s love one another and get along with one another as members together of his body, his bride, the church.

Married to him. One with him. “Lord may we be a faithful and devoted church and bride to you, our heavenly bridegroom. May we never even look at another love, but follow and serve you always. Thanks for allowing us to be with you. Teach us as members of your sacred body to never forsake our responsibility to love one another even as you loved us and gave yourself for us.”

Receiving members and celebrating their membership in Christ’s body and in this local fellowship as well. Please come forward as I read your names and stand facing the congregation.

Pledge to new members: “We want you to know we are committed to you. You will never knowingly suffer at our hands. We will never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. We will always in every circumstance seek to help you and support you. If you’re down and we can lift you up, we will do that. Anything we have that you need we will share with you and if need be we will give it to you. No matter what we find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, our commitment to you will never change. And there is nothing you can do about it. You don’t have to respond. We love you, and that’s what it

means.” ...paraphrased from *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness* by Jerry Cook