

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

© Christ Community Church, Larry Kirk

Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

Joshua Harris is a young Christian writer who has written some provocative books. His first was a book about relationships titled *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. A lot of people reacted to the title of the book and disagreed with its details, but his main point was that Christian singles should avoid relationships that were romantic and physical but lacked direction and had no intention of moving toward commitment. What's interesting is that in a recent book Joshua Harris talks about coming to a realization about which he had previously been blind. He talks about the message of his book about dating and then says:

The irony of this was that even though I had stopped playing the dating game with girls, I was perfectly happy to keep playing it with the church. I liked attending on weekends, and I enjoyed the social benefits of church, but I didn't want the responsibility that came with real commitment I wasn't interested in settling down. So though I gave the appearance of commitment, I mostly just flirted with different churches and kept my options open (*Stop Dating the Church*, p.14).

So now Joshua Harris has written a new book titled *Stop Dating the Church*, and fall in love with the family of God.

I think there are a lot of reasons why people today are tempted to just flirt with the church or use the church without committing to a real relationship. Some people have been disappointed by the church, and some people have been hurt by the church. Yet, what's hard to avoid, when you listen to Jesus and look at the Scriptures, is the importance of the church.

As we continue this series on basic Christian teachings, we're using the Apostles' Creed as an outline. It's interesting that this Creed, the most ancient and widely honored creed in all of Christian history, includes an important statement of faith in the church. In the Creed we confess faith not only in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, not only in the Holy Spirit, but also in the holy catholic, or universal, church.

The best way to understand why we should believe in the church is by understanding what it means to believe in the church. If you understand what that means, you'll see why it matters. So what does that mean? To believe in the church in light of the Scriptures is to believe that . . .

The Church Is the Holy Temple in Which God Himself Dwells

Many places in the Bible teach this, and let's look at just a few. First Peter 2:4-5: "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--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." Notice especially or even underline in verse 5 the words "*you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.*"

Now look at Ephesians 2:18-21. "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." Notice that last statement: "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."

Look at 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." Notice the last two statements: "God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

What is a temple?

A Temple Is a Place Where God Lives and Where God Is Worshiped

Before the days of Christ, there was a temple in Jerusalem that was built for and blessed by God. He was worshiped there, and He revealed His presence there.

But today the temple of God is not a building. When God's people gather together as the church, that congregation of worshiping believers itself is the temple of God--the place where His presence can be both revealed and revered. God's temple is not a building. It is the people who are gathered in His name. Together they are a living temple in which God is present and in whom God is to be worshiped.

The Bible teaches that God is omnipresent. His is present everywhere at all times. But when God says that the church is His temple and that His Spirit lives in us, He is talking about something that is not at all the same as His omnipresence. God is saying, "I will personally manifest My presence in your midst. I will be there, speaking to you, guiding you, leading you, strengthening you. I will show you your sins, and I will assure you of My love. I will be present in your midst to minister to your needs."

Friends, we are God's temple, and His presence is here in our midst. This is a holy place, not because of cinder blocks, rebar, and concrete but because we gather here and God lives in us. The little children that we pat on the head and laugh with, the old friends that greet us in the lobby, and the new friends we meet every Sunday, 1 Peter 2:5 says are "living stones . . . being built into a spiritual house for God."

In 1910 a man named Charles Jefferson gave a series of lectures on the church at Yale. In these he said:

A sharp distinction ought to be made between a church and an audience. An audience is a group of unrelated people drawn together by a short-lived attraction, a conglomeration of individuals finding themselves together for a brief time. . . . An audience is a crowd. A church is a family. An audience is a gathering. A church is a fellowship. An audience is a collection. A church is an organism. An audience is a heap of stones. A church is a temple.

In the Bible God is constantly asking us to see, by faith, a different reality than that which is perceived by the naked eye. The idea that the church is the holy temple in which God is present is not something that is visually or physically obvious, but it is something that we need to know and ought to know. Look at 1 Corinthians 3:16. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"

A temple is a place where God lives and where God is worshiped. So . . .

The Church, As the Temple of God, Is Sacred and Should Be Treated As Sacred

First Corinthians 3:17 says: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

The background for that statement is important. If you go back to the beginning of 1 Corinthians 3, you will find that Paul says there was jealousy and quarrelling in the church at Corinth. So it's against the background of self-centered jealousy and quarrelling that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write these words: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. "

Paul was saying, "Don't you realize to whom the church belongs and what the church is? This is God's temple. Not the building, but the people. They are a sacred people. They are holy people. And what these people have together, this church, this congregation, this community of believers, belongs to God and is sacred to God. So treat the church as something that is special, holy, and sacred." Our church is a holy thing in the eyes of God, and so is every church that is a true church of Jesus Christ.

To believe in the church is also to believe that . . .

The Church Is the Flock for Which God Cares

First Peter 5:1-4 says: “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

Two main ideas are conveyed by the picture of the church as God's flock.

1. **The Flock Is Vulnerable**

The church is a flock of sheep in the midst of a world of wolves. In Acts 20 the apostle Paul gathers together the elders of the church at Ephesus. In verse 28 he says this: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Why is it that he urges the elders to keep watch, first over themselves and then over the whole flock, the whole church at Ephesus? He tells them why in the next verse, Acts 20:29. “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.”

When you think of the church as the temple of the living God, you picture a great, strong building. But when you picture the church as a flock of sheep, you picture people who are vulnerable. Yes, in the final day Christ will be victorious. He will build His church, and nothing shall prevail against it. But in this present day each local church is vulnerable.

The church is always under threat of attack. Satan never takes vacations. Sin is always lurking around, looking for moments of doctrinal or moral

carelessness. People can be self-centered and short-sighted, and they can do all kinds of damage. So the command for the elders was “Keep watch.”

Verse 28 begins, “Keep watch over yourselves.” That could mean that each elder is to watch over his own individual life, or it could mean that the elders need to especially watch over each other. I believe it means both. You see, in the church even the shepherds are sheep who need to be looked after.

Because the church is vulnerable . . .

2. **The Flock Needs Special Care**

God Himself cares for the flock. In Luke 12:32, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

Jesus says the reason we do not need to be afraid is that God is there for us. Don't fear even though you are only sheep in the midst of wolves and even though you are only a little flock. And remember the reason for your fearlessness is that you have a Father who owns and runs the world, and He really loves giving the kingdom to His sheep-like children. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." God Himself cares for the flock.

God wants us to care for the flock also. In Acts 20:28, He says to the elders, “Your first responsibility is to watch over yourselves and each other and then to watch over all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Because the church is vulnerable, she needs to be cared for and looked after.

Look at the two powerful and poignant incentives that are given to the elders: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

The first incentive is that the Holy Spirit has made the elders overseers and shepherds for the flock. When we go through the process of nominating and voting for elders, we ought to be prayerfully asking God to work through that process to choose through us those who will serve in this way.

The second incentive is found at the end of verse 28: "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." The argument is plain. If God Almighty, sinless and free and high above all things, was willing to shed the blood of His Son for the people who make up this church, then the shepherds must be willing to devote themselves to caring for that flock.

Suppose I am a single dad with three sons. You and your spouse and my family are deep sea fishing off the coast of Ponce Inlet. My youngest son gets too close to the edge, and when a wave tilts the boat, he loses his balance, falls into the water, and disappears beneath the surface. In a split second I dive in after him. After about ten seconds of breathless suspense, I burst out of the water, and I've got him. I hand him up over the side, but just as I am about to get into the boat a shark cuts out of nowhere, hits me from behind, and takes away half my side. You pull me into the boat, and just before I bleed to death I look up into your face and say, "Take care of my boy for me."

That's a pretty strong incentive. And there's a truth here that's not just for the elders. It is for all of us. If we are not willing to give of ourselves to take care of the flock of God, we don't understand the worth of the blood of the Son of God.

To believe in the church is to see the church as God's holy temple and the flock for which He cares. To believe in the church is also to believe that . . .

The Church Is the Body Through Which Christ Works

Romans 12:4-5 says: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Romans 12:15-16: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. “

Ephesians 4:16: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Many important truths come out of this God-given picture of the church as the body of Christ. Consider these four . . .

Every Believer Is a Minister

Everyone in the body is a member of the body with a ministry to perform for the good of the body. The body is one organism made up of many members, and each one has a function to perform, a role to play, a work to fulfill. Ephesians 4:16: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Every believer is a minister.

Every Ministry Is Important

“The whole body grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:16).

Romans 12:4 says that we need each other, because each of us has a specific function. Your nose smells, and your feet run. Sure, sometimes your feet smell and your nose runs. But that’s not literal. In the body of Christ each member has a special and vital role to play. We all are important. No one can say, “I’m not important,” or, “I’m not needed.” Yes, you are! Some ministries are

up front and very visible. Some are behind the scenes. But all are valuable. Every believer is a minister. Every ministry is important.

We Are Dependent on Each Other

Not only is every ministry important, but all of these different ministries are intertwined and interdependent. No single ministry can accomplish all that the church is intended to do. We have to depend on and cooperate with each other.

“But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don't need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don't need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:18-22).

Our culture is preoccupied with independence and individualism, but in the body of Christ we are intertwined with each other and dependent on each other to do the work of God.

Christians who don't need others are almost always Christians who aren't doing what God has called them to do in the body of Christ. The reason they don't need others is that they have abdicated their responsibility to do the work of Christ in the body. Every believer is a minister. Every ministry is important. We are dependent on each other.

We Belong to Each Other

“In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). Let that sink in. “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. In the body of Christ, because of the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God, I belong to you and you belong to me. We belong to each other. The church is the *body* of Christ.

We believe that the church is the temple in which God dwells, the flock for which He cares, and the body through which He works. But to believe in the church is also to believe that . . .

The Church Is the Bride Whom Christ Loves

Ephesians 5:25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, 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."

The Church As the Bride of Christ Is Deeply Loved

When Jesus tells us by His Spirit in His Word that we are His bride, He is telling us that He loves us passionately and personally. The Bible is a love story, and Christ has chosen us to belong to Him.

There is a sense in which Christ loves the whole world and has given Himself for it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). His death is of infinite value. His payment for sin is sufficient for all men. Anyone who believes in Christ is welcomed into His open arms, forgiven, and given the gift of eternal life.

But notice, Ephesians 5:25 does not say Christ loved the world and give Himself for it. It says Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. There is a special sense in which Christ loved the church. There is a special sense in which He gave Himself specifically and especially or particularly for her.

We must never think of the love of God as a sort of general kindness, a diffused warmth, a broad philanthropy. His love is broad enough for the whole world. But it is directed specifically at His bride, the church. That's why Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." As

His bride we are a people who are deeply and sweetly loved by Christ. Our response should be the response of purity and loyalty and love in return. The bride of Christ is deeply loved, and . . .

The Church As the Bride of Christ Has a Wonderful Future

Revelation 19:7 says, "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." What's it talking about? It's talking about a day to come when we--the bride, the church that has existed throughout history and in every place--will be united with Christ, our Lord and Savior and the lover of our souls, in His eternal kingdom.

We will be wrapped up in the love of Christ and filled with all the fullness of God. All of the good hopes of all of humanity for all of time will be fulfilled and consummated for all of eternity.

Thus we have four pictures of the church: the temple in which God dwells, the flock for which God cares, the body through which God works, and the bride whom God loves. Each is different from the others, and all are very different from the way the world sees the church. Let's listen to what God says about the church and see the glory of the church as God pictures her for us in His Word.