

## God's Eternal Plan #11

### The Church

Matthew 16:13-18

**I can only imagine what Peter must have thought when Jesus made this sweeping statement as the disciples met and talked that evening.** Peter's quick and confident response to Jesus' question concerning who the disciples believed He was prompted Jesus to designate Peter, as it were, to be the starting point from which Christ would build His church. Reference to the church is made throughout the New Testament as "the bride of Christ" and "the body of Christ," but I doubt that Peter understood it was his legacy to be known as the one Christ pointed to that day as the "charter member" of the church.

**What did Jesus mean when He said that Peter was the rock upon which He would build His church?** There were no architects with their sketches drawn of a new building on a new parcel of land. Jesus was not making reference to a building or a denomination. **Peter had just confessed his belief in Jesus as the Son of the living God, and on that basis, Jesus established, or defined, the church.** However, as the body of believers grew, the local church was a natural outflow (i.e., church at Corinth, churches of Galatia, church in Smyrna, etc.). Thus, from the early days of the church down through today, we have come to associate the church with our particular fellowship of believers. Whatever name we apply to a particular fellowship, there is only one church, and it belongs to no particular denomination.

**The church is made up of those who have placed their belief - their faith - in the person of Jesus Christ.** Having established whom the church is, Jesus commissioned those who believed in Him to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19-20). It has always been the work of the church to bring others to belief in Christ and to experience a personal relationship with Him. **Jesus came to save the lost.** Those who believed in Him became His church and took on the responsibility that comes with belief - the commitment to continue the work of Christ.

**Jesus' reference to the church had a very different meaning from what we commonly think of today.** Jesus was not referring to the First Baptist, or First Assembly, or First Methodist, Church of Galatia when He spoke of the church. He was speaking of the body of believers who had placed their faith in Him as the Son of the living God. **When you and I speak of the church, we are apt to refer to a particular church or denomination that we are familiar with.** To be clear, we must learn to understand the difference between who we are and the name we apply to our identity. **We are the church.** The *place* we worship and carry out our work is just that - a *place*.

**I have been pastor of Mountain Grove Baptist Church for some twenty-three years.** However, biblically speaking, the church is not a denomination or a building. The church is you and I. **It is the woman who sings in the choir and the kid who leads a Bible study on Tuesday nights for his fellow high school students.** The church is not a *place*. It is a *people*, the body of believers who share their faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

**A denomination defines a particular group or belief system that focuses on a certain theological interpretation.** Buildings house the body of believers in *corporate worship* and administration. When we fall into the trap of looking at the church as a *place*, we easily separate ourselves from its mission because we think of the church as the *physical place* to worship together instead of understanding the church as our identity with a specific purpose. The church leaves in the cars that exit the parking lot after Sunday worship and carries on its work throughout the week.

**I am convinced that the church has one mission, although denominations may have different ways of accomplishing it.** The mission of the church is to make disciples - to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. It was true during the days of the disciples of the New Testament and it is true today; the church - those who believe in Christ - is to make disciples. In his book *A Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Leith Anderson reaffirms where we get our marching orders and who set us on our path: "The church of Jesus Christ was founded by Jesus, is owned by Jesus, and is run by Jesus. It is a theocracy, and we are citizens under orders. We are stewards who have been entrusted with the care of that which belongs to Jesus." He continues, "The practical implications are significant. The church does not belong to any denomination, synod, presbytery, association, session, diaconate, pastor or membership. It is his to do with as he sees fit." So how do we accomplish this task?

**Just as the passage of time necessarily brings change, the way we do things today may not necessarily be the way we did things last year or the way we will do them five years from now.** Some things never change, as in our mission, but in a world that changes faster than textbooks can record the changes; the church must be accountable to its timeless mission. Nothing is more relevant to our day than the message of salvation through Christ Jesus. However, unless we are willing to make the changes that will equip the church to do its work, the relevancy of the gospel will likely never reach those who are lost.

**Our world is *not* that different from that of Jesus and His disciples.** The church of the new millennium is still dealing with a generation that is discouraged, depressed, tired, lonely, and feeling guilty. The church is still

dealing with people that are more interested in learning what to *do* about their sins and struggles than being *told* they are sinners and strugglers. Much like the people of Jesus' day, we too much be open to recognize, not just the needs, but the mind-set of those we would reach to be effective.

One change that appears to be taking place is that people no longer cling to denominational lines as strongly as before. Almost every week we have people who come to join our fellowship from other denominations. It was considered true heresy in the fifties and sixties to cross denominational lines. Today most people feel it is more important to be in a church that teaches the Bible in a relevant way than to attend the church Mom and Dad always went to (although it may have served the parents' needs quite well). It is apparent from what I see in those who join our church and other churches that people are looking for Bible teaching that is practical and applicable; they are looking for churches that offer opportunities and ministries that meet their needs and the needs of their families.

As we change, we must also stay the same. Does that sound contradictory? Not really when you consider that the church has one mission and many avenues by which to accomplish it. When we consider how to make the work we are doing effective in today's world, it is wise to consider what made the church work in the days of Jesus. The key was recognition of the mission and willingness to change. The book of Acts is filled with illustrations of the church changing. The mission stayed the same, and as the church changed, it grew. What the church understood then, we must cling to now. As long as we keep our priorities straight and continue in the work Jesus commissioned us to do, we will seek better ways of reaching the lost for Christ without being threatened by the thought of change.

As the church, we are going to change if we are to continue to lead people to Christ. With changing demographics, changing financial needs, changing family structures, and other major considerations, the church must be equipped to minister to those within its reach and capabilities. Not every church has the same needs or abilities. Producing cookie-cutter churches would be a mistake. However, the church must keep abreast of some basic elements of a changing world and make an effort to incorporate them into its methods of reaching lost people for Christ.

Over the past forty plus years of ministry, I have found that a great many churches really do not want to grow. Growing a church will require change, the exercising of spiritual gifts, stepping forward on faith, incorporating newcomers who are unlike the old-timers. Comfort zones will be invaded. A new identity may have to be forged. While very few, if any,

churches would ever tell the Lord that they are not interested in following His will for growth, their real answer is, "We would rather not!"

Now that we know who the church is, how do we deal with church attendance? The Biblical answer is found in Hebrews 10:23-25, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 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" (NASB).

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. The new believers were struggling with how to incorporate their Jewish heritage into their faith in Christ. The writer spent a great deal of time explaining that Jesus Christ prepared the way for uninterrupted fellowship with the Father. He was the new High Priest. His death provided the way for individuals to have personal access to God without a series of complicated steps.

That was difficult for the Jewish Christians to accept. They were accustomed to participating in a variety of ceremonial washings and offerings to be cleansed from their sins. Immediate access to God apart from those things was something new. But the writer of Hebrews insisted that they could go directly to the Father through Christ. Jesus Christ, the High Priest, provides unlimited access to the Father.

The author knew the challenge it would be for the recent converts to remain faithful to their newly formed faith. So he exhorted them to "hold fast." Then he took it one step farther. He instructed his readers to help one another "hold fast." He knew they would have a tendency to drift away from the truth. He anticipated their need for other believers to help them stay on track. So he said, "Stimulate one another to love and good deeds." The Greek word translated "stimulate" literally means "to irritate." In essence he was instructing them to spur one another along, watch out for one another, take responsibility for one another. With that backdrop he instructed them *not to stop meeting together.* They needed one another. To give up meeting together would spell disaster. In meeting together they found the *mutual encouragement* to keep going.

God wants His children to meet with other believers on a regular basis. He wants His people in church! One reason so many believers do not take this instruction seriously is that they do not know the reason behind it. How often I have heard this statement: "I can worship at home. I don't need to go to church to be a Christian." Many believers are convinced that the primary reason we meet together is to worship. And understandably so. After all, we call it a *worship service*.

Now, listen very carefully, if worship was the primary reason we are commanded to meet, those who claim they can worship at home would have a strong argument. After all, in some instances it is much easier to worship at home. But worship is not the sole reason we are commanded to meet together.

Certainly then, it must be so that we can be taught the Word. Not entirely. We can turn on our radios and televisions and hear good Bible preaching and teaching. On the surface it would seem that anything we can do at church, we can do just as well as home alone.

So why are we commanded to meet? Why go to church? The writer of Hebrews says it is to safeguard against drifting!

We are surrounded by forces that work to blow us off course. Sheer individual commitment alone is not enough to keep us in line. There are times when we feel as if our faith makes no difference. We see no fruit in our lives, and we do not seem to be making any difference in anyone else's life, either. During those times, we are tempted to pull up anchor and drift. After all, everybody else is. At least that is the way it seems.

And then we drag ourselves to church and discover that we are not alone. We hear others share how God came through for them when they were in a tight spot. Someone else shares about the pain experienced when he left the faith. A new believer tells her story and rejoices in God's grace. And something begins to happen inside us. We are spurred on to faithfulness!

The accountability and encouragement found in church fellowship anchor us against the tides that work to sweep us away. We can develop a network of relationships with other believers that works to ensure we do not abandon our faith when the pressure is on to do so. To neglect regular assembling with other Christians is to miss out on this essential element in the development of our faith.

In Hebrews 10:22, the writer said, "Let us draw near (to God) with a true heart in full assurance of faith." God desires a relationship with His children. By becoming active in a local church, you safeguard yourself against missing out on all that God has for you. Your participation in a local church protects your personal fellowship with God. When you drift away from the family of God, it is only a matter of time until you drift away from fellowship with God. Solomon said it this way in Proverbs 13:20, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed."

**But, what about church membership?** There really is not biblical foundation for church membership as such (such as church letters, etc.) But listen to the statement: You cannot become all that God wants you to be unless you get plugged into and committed to a local church! **You need people who know you, and who can support you, and who will hold you accountable, as you go through the storms of life.** The real need is church involvement, accountability and consistency. Church membership is simply a way that we have of knowing who you are so that we can better minister to your needs.