

Why Should We Learn About and Love the Church?

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on January 6, 2008

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

New Years is traditionally a time of resolutions. If you visited an athletic club this week you probably noticed a far greater number of people working out than you saw last month. Maybe you were one of them who hadn't exercised in weeks but you have now vowed you're going to get in shape in 2008.

The workers at the Sports Club next door to our church know that January is a peak month, especially the first few weeks. The parking lots are more full than usual, the machines are much busier, you have to actually wait for some exercises, etc. But they also know that this will drop off as new years resolutions wear off. There is some value in physical discipline, as the Apostle Paul –but I want us to consider a *spiritual* resolve and commitment this morning.

Three centuries ago, Jonathan Edwards was an 18-year old young Christian man who in one sitting wrote down the first 21 of his famous resolutions (eventually 70), which were quite different than the types of resolutions most of this country made this past week.

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake. Remember to read over these Resolutions once a week.

1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriad's of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.

2. Resolved, to be continually endeavoring to find out some new invention and contrivance to promote the aforementioned things.

3. Resolved, if ever I shall fall and grow dull, so as to neglect to keep any part of these Resolutions, to repent of all I can remember, when I come to myself again.

4. Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.

5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

8. Resolved, to act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same infirmities or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God.

9. Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.

10. Resolved, when I feel pain, to think of the pains of martyrdom, and of hell.

11. Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances don't hinder.
12. Resolved, if I take delight in it as a gratification of pride, or vanity, or on any such account, immediately to throw it by.
13. Resolved, to be endeavoring to find out fit objects of charity and liberality.
14. Resolved, never to do anything out of revenge.
15. Resolved, never to suffer the least motions of anger to irrational beings.
16. Resolved, never to speak evil of anyone, so that it shall tend to his dishonor, more or less, upon no account except for some real good.
17. Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
18. Resolved, to live so at all times, as I think is best in my devout frames, and when I have clearest notions of things of the gospel, and another world.
19. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour, before I should hear the last trump.
20. Resolved, to maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking.
21. Resolved, never to do anything, which if I should see in another, I should count a just occasion to despise him for, or to think any way the more meanly of him.

There is an urgency and an earnestness you see in his writings that is not normal for a teenager (#5-7, 19), much less far older Christians. Edwards had what one book calls “A God-Entranced View of All Things” – his concerns were:

- God-oriented, God-centered, driven by God’s glory for the best good of man, living wholeheartedly for the Lord
- He was very much concerned with his fellow man, how others should be treated and even thought of (#13-16, 21)
- His focus was not just on this life but the afterlife, not worldliness, but other-worldliness (#18b), God’s kingdom
- #3 reveals his concern that if he were ever to grow dull spiritually in his commitments, he would repent

I want to ask you this morning if you have fallen or grown dull in your love for God’s people? Have you grown apathetic in your commitment to and love for the church? My concern for many of you this morning and for us as a congregation is that we do not think enough on these things that Edwards wrote about nearly 300 years ago. There’s a lot of goals or desires you may have for 2008, but I want to plead with you this morning with the time I have for a spiritual resolution and commitment to God and His people, that we would be eager for *learning* about the church, as well as *longing* to be more involved in and devoted to the church, and more than that to *love* Christ and His church as God desires us to, above everything else we have resolved in 2008. If we have grown dull in our love and spiritual life and commitment to Christ and His kingdom and His church, we need to *repent* and pursue this by God’s grace.

Timothy Dwight was the grandson of Edwards who was a great theologian in his own right, and put this view of the church to music in what is believed to be the oldest hymn written by an American that is still sung in common use today

#134 – I LOVE THY KINGDOM LORD

1. I love Thy kingdom, Lord, The house of Thine abode,
The church our blessed Redeemer saved With His own precious blood.
2. I love Thy church, O God. Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye, And written on Thy hand.
3. For her my tears shall fall For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given Till toils and cares shall end.
4. Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, Her hymns of love and praise.
5. Sure as Thy truth shall last, To Zion shall be given
The brightest glories earth can yield And brighter bliss of Heaven.

Do those words sound strange to you? Christians used to think this way, but I suspect not enough of us today even think in such terms.

My former pastor John MacArthur wrote:

‘A young man contemplating conversion to Roman Catholicism wrote me to explain why he was thinking of leaving Protestantism:

Protestants don’t seem to appreciate the Church. The Bible describes the Church as an institution Christ founded and loves. The Church is everything to Catholics; it is nothing to most of my Protestant friends.

... Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that the word church “to Protestants has the sound of something infinitely commonplace, more or less indifferent and superfluous, that does not make their heart beat faster; something with which a sense of boredom is so often associated.”

Let’s be honest: there is too much truth in those criticisms to dismiss them lightly. Evangelicals are far too prone to indifference about the church. Some evangelicals live on the periphery of the church, attending and observing without ever really becoming an integral part of the body. Many who profess faith in Christ remain totally impassive about the church.’¹

I want to give you some biblical reasons why we are going to learn about the church in this series in the weeks and months ahead. But more than merely *learn about* the church, I want to tell you why you should *love* the church of Jesus and devote yourself wholly to it for as many more years as God gives you breath.

My prayer is that you would be able to sing from the heart that your prayers ascend for the church, your tears fall for the church, beyond your highest joy you prize the church’s sweet communion, her hymns of love and praise. As the church is dear in God’s sight as the apple of His eye, the church would be precious in your sight, too, as saved with the precious blood of Jesus Lover of my soul, graven on His hands, dear to God’s heart and dear to your heart. That you would sing and really mean it “I love thy church O God!”

WHY WE SHOULD LOVE THE CHURCH

#1–It’s Built by Christ (who we love)

To say it another way, it's the only institution He Promises to Build and Bless
 Matthew 16:18 "I will build my church ..."

This is one resolution that will not wear off, like human New Years resolutions so often do. This is the resolve and promise of the Sovereign Omnipotent Infinite Almighty King of Kings and Lord of Lords whose immutable and invincible plan will never be thwarted, overpowered, overthrown, or conquered. "I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH."

Last week I we looked at the details of this text and context, and we will return to this verse on more than one occasion in our series, but today rather than *expound* all the details of this text, we'll *expand* on its truths further in relation to other passages on why we should study the church and why you should love the church with a passion our Lord desires.

Why should we be passionate about the church and pour ourselves into the church? Because first of all, Jesus was passionate about the church and poured Himself into the church, and it is the only thing on earth He promised to build and bless. You can pour yourself into a lot of things, a job, a career, a business, that may fail or go out of existence or all be in vain. But the true spiritual church of Jesus will always be marching on, victorious and glorious, because it is built upon a foundation that never changes, a Jesus who is the same yesterday today and forever. It is built from Him and by Him.

Jesus did not promise to build a parachurch organization, or a school, or extracurricular ministries, or Christian businesses or endeavors – those may have a place, but are not to take the place of the one institution Jesus Christ is commits Himself – the church.

It is the one reality that will be a winner and I want to be part of the winning side. If you focus on externals or numbers or worldly definitions of success, you can be discouraged, but there is great encouragement when you realize the spiritual true church of Jesus Christ is guaranteed to succeed and grow by Christ Himself - not a single local church but a work much bigger than us is going on in God's plan and will always be built on Christ, from Christ, and by Christ, That's something I want to devote to, something that will be triumphant, nothing can prevail against it, not even the gates of hell, or literally "Hades" (death). The church will win in the end. Satan tried to kill the head of the church but the gates of death could not prevail because He rose again – if death cannot prevail against the head, death will not prevail against the body of Christ.

But first, what is the church?

1 Corinthians 1:2 "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours"

Note:

- It is *God's* church (Paul never speaks of Peter's church, or John's church, or James' church, or Apollos' church, or his church – Paul over and over calls it the "church of God" in a particular area)

- It meets *at* a place, the place is not the church (at the end of 1 Corinthians Paul says “Priscilla and Aquila greet you ... with the church *that is in their house*” (the building is never the church in NT, that’s just a place where the real church meets, and as far as we know, the early church met in houses at least well into the 2nd or 3rd century)
- It is a *local* church that is predominantly referred to in NT
- It is only “in Christ Jesus” not apart from Him that the church exists (scripture elsewhere describes those “in Christ” as being saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone)

Last Lord’s Day I said that the church is only made up of those who believe like Peter said that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the only Lord and Savior and only way to heaven. I also said even if your sign says “Church” of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, you’re not a true church or Christian if you don’t believe this. That should be obvious, but ironically that very past Sunday, the pastor of the largest church in America was on Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace where the host asked him:²

WALLACE: And what about Mitt Romney? And I've got to ask you the question, because it is a question whether it should be or not in this campaign, is a Mormon a true Christian?

OSTEEN: Well, in my mind they are. Mitt Romney has said that he believes in Christ as his savior, and that's what I believe, so, you know, I'm not the one to judge the little details of it. So I believe they are.

And so, you know, Mitt Romney seems like a man of character and integrity to me, and I don't think he would — anything would stop me from voting for him if that's what I felt like.

WALLACE: So, for instance, when people start talking about Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, and the golden tablets in upstate New York, and God assumes the shape of a man, do you not get hung up in those theological issues?

OSTEEN: I probably don't get hung up in them because I haven't really studied them or thought about them. And you know, I just try to let God be the judge of that. I mean, I don't know. I certainly can't say that I agree with everything that I've heard about it, but from what I've heard from Mitt, when he says that Christ is his savior, to me that's a common bond.

Let’s be very clear. *Saying* you believe in Jesus is not a common bond, especially when it’s the wrong Jesus who Mormons believe was the spirit brother of Lucifer who became one of many gods. God *is* the judge of who’s saved, that’s true, so let’s let God speak for Himself and not downplay what He has said in His Word. Everyone believes things about Jesus! In Matthew 16 as we saw last week, Jesus begins by asking what people say about who Jesus is, but that’s just the intro or the lead-in to the real question of all questions which is “who do *you* say I am, who do you believe in your heart of hearts Jesus to be?” This is not a “little detail” or something a pastor or Christian can say “I don’t know, I’m not one to judge” – this is the most important question of all – who Christ is and who a true Christian is! If a pastor of 50,000 people and many thousands more on Christian TV is not clear on this, there’s no wonder many churchgoers will be confused on this, not to mention many in the world who watched that broadcast.

When that same pastor was on Larry King Live awhile back, he made some equally disturbing comments:³

KING: ... we've had ministers on who said, your record don't count. You either believe in Christ or you don't. If you believe in Christ, you are, you are going to heaven. And if you don't, no matter what you've done in your life, you ain't.

OSTEEN: Yeah, I don't know. There's probably a balance between. I believe you have to know Christ . . .

KING: What if you're Jewish or Muslim, you don't accept Christ at all?

OSTEEN: You know, I'm very careful about saying who would and wouldn't go to heaven. I don't know . . .

KING: If you believe you have to believe in Christ? They're wrong, aren't they?

OSTEEN: Well, I don't know if I believe they're wrong. I believe here's what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person's heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don't know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don't know. I've seen their sincerity. So I don't know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.

This is not spin or slander or second-hand or out of context, you can read the transcripts on CNN or FOX and watch the videos.

Need I say more, that in our confused and compromised world, we need to reaffirm a biblical understanding of Jesus Christ and His church and what the gospel is? This is urgent for us to study the church, who is the church, and who is a part of the true church? If you love the truth and the church, that should grieve your heart. If the church does not make these truths clear, how will our confused world ever understand the truth, much less embrace the truth about the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, that there's salvation in no one else, there's no other name under heaven by which men must be saved?!

A true church and true Christians believe there is One and Only Living God who has revealed Himself in three persons and Jesus Christ the way, the truth, and the life, and no one gets to the Father except through Jesus by faith in Him as the only Lord and Savior.

Back to 1 Cor. 1:2; the church is described not only as those who are saved, it is made up of those who in Christ Jesus are sanctified – this means consecrated or set apart by God

The verse also uses the word “saints” which is a related concept. The church is made up of those who are saints (holy ones, ones set apart from world – they are not to be as much like the world as they can be, but as much unlike the world as they can, they are to be different)

The verse also says the church is made up of those who have been called (elected, chosen) by God and who as a result call upon the name of Jesus as their Lord (see v. 23-31)

The church is not limited to one local church or place, but includes all who call on the Lord Jesus wherever they are

We should love the church not only because it's built by Christ...

#2 – It's the Body of Christ (we love Christ, His body is inseparable)

In 1 Corinthians 1:2, the focus is *corporate* not individuals. I believe 1 Corinthians may have more references to the “body” than any other book. It is a crucial N.T. emphasis.

We live in such an individualistic world that we may not realize how much that affects our view of the Christian life. We often ask the question, “what does this verse mean to *me*” and it's a subjective feeling-based thing, when the relevant question is what does this verse mean to GOD when He inspired it to the original people *group* it was written to. Once a passage is studied, there comes a time to ask “How should *we* then live” or “what does this mean for *us*” (if we have understood it rightly), but the focus on me, myself, or I outside the context of a body of believers can become a very unhealthy focus. The *body* dynamic is crucial to NT

Art Azurdia has expressed this concern well: ‘We have lost this very thing [corporate body-life focus], beloved on the altar of individuality. And one of the reasons for this particularly at our place in church history is that for far too long we have read the Bible with the presupposition in view that it is a book written *primarily* to individuals. I would remind you that of the 27 N.T. books, only 5 of them are written to individuals, and of those 5, 3 are written to pastors of a church about the church. Do you realize that many of the promises, many of the blessings, many of the encouragements, and exhortations, and even warnings, that we often apply to our lives as individuals, are not directed to individuals primarily but to the church? We have learned to read the Bible with a hermeneutic of individuality rather than recognizing the Bible is the book of the church, reading it with *corporate* vision in mind! We spend our time asking what is God saying to *me* and in so doing often miss what God is intending to say to us!

As a consequence, the individual Christian has been acknowledged, and the church in all of her magnificent purposes has been lost. When the N.T. is read properly, however, one comes to find that its emphasis lies in the opposite direction [of individuality – i.e., no Lone Ranger Christian mentality].⁴

Christ has ordained His body to be the primary vehicle through which we grow and live, not as individuals in isolation.

Even when we pray, Jesus taught us to begin with “*Our* father who art in heaven ... give *us* this day our daily bread and forgive *us* our sins as *we* forgive those who sin against *us*. And lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil” (not self-consumed in prayer)

God has appointed the church to be a place where people use spiritual gifts from God to edify and build up others in the body.

1 Corinthians 12:7 (NASB95)

⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (NASB95)

¹² For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body is not one member, but many. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a *part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a *part* of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a *part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a *part* of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. ¹⁹ If they were all one member, where would the body be? ²⁰ But now there are many members, but one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; ²³ and those *members* of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, ²⁴ whereas our more presentable members have no need *of it*. But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, ²⁵ so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. ²⁷ Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 14:12 (NASB95) So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

The church is the body of Christ in such a real way that when Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the church of Christ, the Lord confronts him from heaven and says "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?" To persecute Christ's church is to persecute Christ Himself, because the body and head are inseparable.

In turn, if we love Christ, we'll love His body – they're inseparable

So we should love the church because it's Built by Christ (who we love), it's the body of Christ (who we love) and ...

3. It is Beloved to Christ

If we truly love Christ, we will want to love what He loves.

Christ's greatest affection and attention is put upon the church.

Ephesians 5:25-33 (NASB95)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, ³⁰ because we are members of His body. ³¹ FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³² This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

Christians often speak of our Lord's love or sacrifice in general terms or in relation to the world, but there is a very particular emphasis in this passage and others on the church as His bride. There's no contradiction with "God so loved the world that He gave" and verse 25 here that says "Christ loved *the church* and gave Himself up for her" – it is the church that is the object of His particular love and particular redemption and the object of His particular affection and passionate pursuit and purifying love (sanctifying her, cleansing her) and protecting love (nourishing and cherishing her).

Verse 29 says Jesus “cherishes” the church. Do you?

Theologians speak of a general call (gospel invitation) and a special (internal, effectual) call or choosing, ex: “Many are called but few are chosen.” They also speak of common grace (rain and goodness and both believers and unbelievers) which is not the same as saving grace. And in the same way, God’s general love for His world and His creatures does not negate or nullify the special and particular and intimate passionate love He has for His church.

I love all of you in this room, but I have a higher love for my bride.

Jesus Himself loves His church, His bride, with His highest love, near and dear to His heart, and in fact it *is* His heart, in the sense that it is in fact His body. And it is this selfless serving supreme love, *agape* love, that we are called to love in the same way, if we’re a part of Him.

One of the ways I know people love me and care about me is when they show love and care to my wife. If we love Jesus, He wants us to show love to His bride.

If Jesus is precious to us, how can we not view as precious, the redeemed community that was redeemed with the most precious blood of the perfect lamb, the blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19)?

Paul tells the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:28 to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”

- The church has been bought with the most valuable and precious and priceless sacrifice – how can we not sacrifice to serve the church?
- How can we see it as an optional thing, or something that’s not very valuable, or very low on our priorities?
- How can we be content to just sit on the sidelines and do nothing for the church that Christ gave up everything for, how can we be uncommitted, unattached, uninvolved?
- How can we be disengaged or disinterested or disregarding fellowship in Christ’s body that He loves so dearly?
- How can we be indifferent to the beloved bride of Christ and not offend the husband of the church, who is Christ?
- Why is it that we do not seek to be around the body of Christ as much as we can? What’s the real reason?
- Can we honestly say to Christ we love Him as head of the body, but separate Him from the body?

The church is actually redeemed and purchased with the precious blood of the Lord we love. Elizabeth Elliot wrote once how when her husband Jim Elliot died for the Auca Indians because of his love for them, this caused her to love them. Knowing that the precious blood of her husband was shed to reach this tribe with the gospel caused her to want to love this people group that had been so loved by the husband she loved so deeply. And that love that transformed the Auca culture has impacted many lives as well.

If Jesus died for the church, can we not live for the church?

¹ “Why I Love the Church,” by John MacArthur, p. 1. <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/jm-233942.htm>

² Aired 12/23/2007 on Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,318054,00.html>

³ June 20, 2005 -full transcript is available at:

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/kl.01.html>

⁴ “Renewing Your Passion for the Church,” Part 1. Available online at www.spiritempoweredpreaching.com