

## WHY BOTHER WITH THE CHURCH?

Church doesn't rate all that high on many people's idea for a dream Sunday. There's scads of neat things you can do instead of brave winter winds or MN heat waves to take in a church service. A steaming cup of Cappuccino with the Sunday morning newspaper. A trip to the lake or a round of golf. A great flick. A romantic walk or bike ride around a Lake with the man or the woman of your dreams. I mean, why bother with the church? One wag put it this way: *"The first time I went to church they threw water on me. The second time I went to church they married me. The next time I go it'll be over my dead body"* [Erik Johnson, *Moms, Dads & Kids*, p. 8]. He's probably right. A lot of people see church for little else than to baptize, marry, and bury [newly bred, wed, or dead; hatch, match, dispatch]. A lot of people wouldn't dream of connecting with a local church. They figure....

- ❖ It's loaded with hypocrites.
- ❖ It's a waste of time.
- ❖ It's boring.

So the question we want to ask this evening is why bother with the church?

**I. YOU NEED A PLACE TO GET BETTER.** There they were: the dirty dozen, the twelve. What a motley crew of fresh recruits! They looked like a bunch of 17 year old High School students sporting twelve year old shirts and pants. They were too big for their britches. And their personalities were spilling out all over the place. They weren't well-dressed, well groomed, well-trained theologians. Not a group of elite scribes, Pharisees & Jerusalem rabbis. These were a bunch of fishermen, doubters, political terrorists, and tax collectors. Think of impetuous **Simon Peter**, making promises he couldn't keep. Denying the Lord. Stepping out of the boat to walk on water, but almost drowning because he couldn't keep his eyes on Jesus and off the waves. Or **James and John**, the sons of thunder, a couple of hot heads. Tony Campolo says they probably rode their chariots around Galilee wearing long leather robes with lightning bolts and their racing insignia, **The Sons of Thunder**, emblazoned across their backs. Then there was **Matthew** the rip-off artist, a tax-collector and collaborator with Rome. It was like he worked for the Italian Mafia. **Simon**, the Zealot was a **political** terrorist; **Thomas**, a diehard pessimist and pathological doubter. And then there was **Judas Iscariot**, also probably a Zealot, one of the band who carried daggers beneath their garments. That's why he's called Iscariot or "*sicari*." The name means stabbers. The sicari were cutthroats. Not Swiss Knives, sicari carried Los Angeles switchblades and Judas was one of them.

If you think the church is loaded hypocrites, you're right. Zig Ziglar put it this way. Sure the Church is loaded with hypocrites. But hey, come on in. We could always use one more. Like the disciples we're all inconsistent, living breathing walking contradictions. We don't walk the talk. We're messed up. Don't measure up. But those are just the kind of people Jesus welcomed into the circle of his closest disciples. They weren't flawless, handsome, bigger than life, bronzed heroes. They all had a host of rough edges. Jesus chose them anyway. And He fully intended to whip them into shape. Knock off their rough edges. If I was really sick, really messed up, I'd rather be in the hospital getting better, than outside the hospital complaining about all the sick folk in the hospital. Jesus said, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* [Luke 5:31]. People are sick inside the church and out. You need a place where Jesus

can bind up your broken heart, heal your wounds, put you on the mend. You need a place to get better. You need a hospital. You need the church.

**II. YOU NEED A PLACE TO STAND.** Jesus said to His disciples, *"On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* [Matthew 16:18]. Here's the story. Jesus took His motley crew to the foot of beautiful Mt. Hermon in Northern Palestine at Caesarea Philippi at the source of the Jordan River [pictures]. A place called Paneas. They were camping out in a huge cave by a rushing stream surrounded by massive rocks and stones. It was there Jesus popped the question: *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* [16:13]. The Disciples threw back at Jesus a list of people Jesus could possibly be. The rumors were flying. Herod was chilled to the bone. He had murdered John the Baptist. He feared that this Jesus was John back from the dead to haunt him. Malachi announced the return of Elijah. Perhaps Jesus was Elijah in the flesh or another prophet like Jeremiah.

*"But what about you,"* Jesus asked. *"Who do you say, I am?"* [16:15]. God planted the truth in Simon's brain and Simon cuts to the chase: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* [16:16]. Jesus, you are great David's greatest Son. You're the promised Messiah, the Kingdom builder par excellence. You are the Savior of the world. Simon got it right. His faith was getting rock solid.

All this moved Jesus. He sized up Simon's leadership potential. He saw in Simon some powerful fruit beginning to ripen. So Jesus gave Simon a new name, a new identity. Simon had said to Jesus, *"You are the Messiah!"* Jesus said to Simon, *"You are rock, and on this rock I will build my Church."* [16:18]. Simon's new name, Peter or Cephas in Aramaic, is the exact word for rock. Jesus creates a pun out of the word rock. In Aramaic it would read: *"You are kepha and on this kephas I will build my church."*

Jesus Christ is building God's house. A big, big house exploding with people from every tongue, tribe, nation and people. Now this New Testament Temple is not a physical building. It's a living, breathing, massive organic household of faith. It's a movement of people that's out to change the world. And this people movement is built on the foundation, on the bedrock of this infallible Christ-centered book. Cross-reference Jesus' promise here. *"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ"* [1 Cor. 3:11]. *"God's household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."* This book that introduces us to Jesus Christ is our Rock of Gibraltar. This book is fundamentally all about Jesus Christ. His coming, His rescue on the cross, His resurrection, reign, rule and return. That's what the whole OT foretold. That's what the apostles and prophets spoke and wrote about in the NT. Getting centered and anchored in this exciting book, gets you deeply connected to Jesus Christ.

Some would argue that reading this book personally or studying it with others is a consummate waste of time. Computer Mogul Bill Gates isn't dumb. He says, *"Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning"* [World, Feb. 22, 1997, p. 22]. But let's say you believe in the work ethic, and you put in a lot of hours. If you're in the computer field. Would you carve out

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time to pick the brain of Bill Gates, if you could have his undivided attention? If politics was your passion, would it be so hard to spend an hour or two with the President of the United States? And what if you were in the search mode for a partner, would you break from work to share a meal with a beautiful, articulate woman, or a brilliant and handsome man? The President, the CEO of the cosmos, the most scintillating person in the universe wants your undivided attention, wants you to pick His brain, wants to get close to your heart. He wants to lavish His time on you. He wants to be your Lover! If time with Him will recharge your batteries, replenish your store of wisdom, and give you a greater passion, greater chutzpah for life, would you call Sunday worship, a waste to time? Jesus is my teacher. He is history's greatest Rabbi. The world is getting blown here and there by every wind of doctrine, every new intellectual fad. You need the Church, because you need a place to stand. *"How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in His excellent Word. What more can He say, than to you He has said. To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled...."*

**III. YOU NEED A PLACE OF REFUGE.** Jesus said, *"On this rock I will build my church, [my ecclesia=community, the assembly of kingdom citizens, the assembly of the city of God] and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."* In the OT distinct cities in the Palestinian countryside were set apart to protect fugitives of justice. In many ways American society has become a wasteland of emotional, relational, spiritual refugees, fugitives. The Church of Jesus Christ can become an oasis in the desert for the walking wounded. How many of you have had relatives in your immediate family who have gone through the nightmare of divorce? I know what it is to lose a cousin to AIDS and a youth group friend in High School. I've had three sisters suffer through divorce, another sister who struggled with a highly dysfunctional family, and my brother who's struggled through over four marriage breakdowns. My Dad experienced a tragic mid-life crisis that sent him reeling from one job to the next. I ache for broken people. It's in my DNA. And so do you people of God. You feel people's pain in your gut. Our son-in-law Layton Devries was killed in a tragic auto accident. We were brutally crushed by the nightmare, especially our daughter Heidi. But here's the good news. We didn't suffer alone! 100's of people showed up at the funeral and memorial services; many sent cards and expressed sympathy to bear our sorrows and carry our griefs. God's people *"Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn"* [Romans 12: 15]. There are tear catchers and burden bearers all over this place. Our job is to *"lift up the drooping arms and steady the knees that give way"* [Hebrews 12:12]. The church is a place of refuge. You don't have to suffer alone. Here's a place to believe, to belong; a place of refuge.

**IV. YOU NEED A PLACE TO SERVE.** You need a mission in life, a reason to wake up in the morning. You need fire in your belly. *"On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* [Matthew 16:20]. Imagine again the place Jesus took his disciples. Caesarea Philippi, there at the foot of Mt. Hermon, 30 miles north of their normal stomping grounds, the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was a very wicked place, a *"stronghold of pagan worship. Here, a river of spring-fed water rushed forth from a deep cave at the base of a rock cliff more than one hundred feet high. The place was called 'the gates of Hades' because the cave was believed to be the entrance to the under world (Hades), through which the fertility god Pan would pass on his way to and from the underworld"* [Ray Vander Laan,

*Faith Lessons On the Early Church* Vol. 5, p. 14]. Pan was the Shepherd's fertility god. Half man, Half goat. Goat ears. Sexually suggestive. Playing his pan pipe. There was a goat enclosure there. Other fertility gods were carved into the small niches on the flat face of the cave grotto's wall. Dancers would do an erotic dance to stir up this god of Pan. You can only imagine the brazen filth of that place [Ibid., p. 34]. It was said that when the Messiah comes, the gates of Caesarea Philippi would fall.

You need to get the right picture in your head. See the empire of evil is a rugged fortress city. The Bible tells us that a dark horde i.e., principalities and powers have infiltrated government, religious, and university institutions. Dark powers are involved on Wall Street, Hollywood, the Media to build a huge cosmic military machine. It looks imposing with its high walls and sturdy gates. Who could tear down the strongholds of evil in our culture? How can we combat crazy ideas of sexual prowess, financial success, new age spirituality? Jesus is raising up a powerful army. It's the Church of Jesus Christ. And that army is on the move, on the offensive. Jesus isn't saying the *"gates of Hades"* are on the offensive and we're safe in the fortress of the church. [I mean, have you ever been attacked by a set of gates before?]. The church is on the offensive. We're an army and we're taking back enemy occupied territory. We're tearing down the walls and kicking in the city gates of the empire of evil.

People say the church is boring. One wag said, *"I'd rather clean under my refrigerator than spent part of my day off in church"* [Erik Johnson, p. 8]. But when you think about it, if church is so boring and life outside of church so exhilarating; why are people who never darken the door of the church so bored to death? So empty. Could it be that Pascal, that brilliant 17th century French mathematician was right? That there is *"within man a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill"* [E. Johnson's paraphrase, p. 8]. *"That an infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite [reality], that is to say only by God Himself"* [Penses, 113]. You want to discover passion? White hot zeal? Get fired up, energized by Jesus' Spirit. Sign up in God's army. Discover what God has engineered you to do in that redemptive army. Then do it. Go to work, reclaiming lives for the Kingdom of God. Pour yourself into it, heart and soul. Why bother with the church? Some say...

❖ **It's loaded with hypocrites. Jesus says, it's a hospital for sinners.**

**Why wouldn't sick people want to get better? Unless of course, they're so pathologically sick, they don't know they're sick and so they don't want to get better.**

❖ **It's a waste of time. Sitting at the feet of Rabbi Jesus? Connecting with God, deeply, beautifully, passionately, a waste of time?**

❖ **It's boring. Frankly, fighting the good fight of faith is the only way I know to beat boredom and give you fire in the belly.**

You need a place to stand, to serve, a place of refuge, a place to get (relationally, spiritually, emotionally) better. Jesus said, *"On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."*