

## “Commitment to the Local Church”

### Selected

- INTRO. - I have no idea why my mom and dad chose to call me Kirk, but it has turned out to be very appropriate because it means “dweller at the church.” I have spent a lot of time around the church – and those of you who know me, know that I have a high regard for the church.
- Long before I ever became a pastor, I was very involved in the church, and I considered my church family as my extended family. I (really) grew up in the church, and I cannot imagine living life without a church family.
- The church was the place where I was taught the Word of God. It was the place where I heard the gospel and put my faith and trust in Jesus Christ for eternal life. It was in the church where I began to grow in the faith, and ultimately became involved in full-time Christian ministry.
- I can remember all those years of Vacation Bible School and memorizing Scripture and going to Sunday School and learning all the events of biblical history, in both the Old and New Testaments.
- It was in the church where I learned how to show grace and forgiveness toward others. It was in the church where I learned about God’s moral standard. It was in the church where I learned how to pray and how to share my faith with others. It was in the church where I learned ministry skills that have carried me through 40+ years of ministry.
- It was in the church where I met my life partner, my wife Julie. It was in the context of the church where I raised my children, and it has been in the context of the church where I have made life-long friends.
- And you might think that the only reason it is that way is because I am a pastor and I get paid for going to church. But I want you to know that my commitment to the church of Jesus Christ has nothing at all to do with the fact that I am a pastor or that I get paid by the church.
- I would be just as committed if I was *not* a pastor because I love Christ, and the church is His bride – so how can you love Christ without also loving His bride?
- Now, if I was *not* the pastor, I would probably drive the pastor crazy, but I would still be just as committed to the church, because the church is my life – and I am committed to the church with every ounce of my being.
- And my love for the church is what motivates me to preach the truth of God’s Word with great passion. It is the love of the church that causes me to want to protect the church from falling into error and false doctrine. It is my love for the church that

leads me to do everything in my power to conform to His design.

- In fact, several years ago I heard a sermon by John MacArthur on having a commitment to the local church, and it resonated with me to such a degree that I came to the same conclusion, that I cannot understand a genuine believer in Christ who does *not* love His church. (In fact, I want to say up front this morning that this message was inspired by that message – we give it to everyone who attends our orientation class.)
- But folks, how can you explain a true child of God that has no desire to be in fellowship with other believers, worshipping God and growing in His Word? How can you explain a truly born-again saint that sees no need to be faithful to a local, New Testament church?
- And listen, don't give me this stuff about the church being the invisible, universal church. It *is* true that all born-again believers are part of the bride of Christ as a whole, but every expression of the church in the New Testament is of a *local* assembly of believers.
- It *is* true, that if you are “in Christ Jesus” you are (therefore) part of the universal church – but God never intended for Christians to be out there floating around, *not* connected (and committed) to a local New Testament church. It is clear (from the

teaching of the NT) that every believer is to be plugged in to a local assembly of believers.

- MacArthur says he heard someone make a comment (one time) which he could *not* understand. The person said, “Our church has a service on Saturday evening, and I love it because I can get everything over with in one hour on Saturday night.” He said he couldn't understand that because Sunday is the Lord's Day, and no true believer would be content with just an hour of corporate worship with other believers.
- Someone else said, “I like our early service because it's over in an hour and I don't end up blowing the whole day.” I agree with his conclusion that this makes no sense for a genuine child of God. Surely we can devote to our Lord one day a week! Surely we should have a spiritual appetite that is greater than one quick hour and then being done.
- I don't know about you, but I love being here on Sunday mornings, and I love being here on Sunday nights. I love being here on Wednesday nights because I love being around God's people. I love worshipping the One true God, who alone deserves all glory and praise.
- I look forward to other times when we study the Bible together and enjoy each others' fellowship, and pray and minister to one another in Jesus' name. In fact, we probably don't do this enough. In previous generations Christians devoted the entire

Lord's Day to corporate worship – we have a hard time giving more than one hour – and some don't even do that on a consistent basis.

- Now, my intention this morning is *not* (just) to *berate* people, but I don't think that previous generations of Christians would ever have thought about surrendering to Christ as Lord and Savior, and *not* becoming fully committed to His church.
- It used to be a given, that once you became a Christian, you also became committed to the church. It used to be that becoming a Christian meant uniting with other believers in the fellowship of the church – but that has changed in recent times.
- The emphasis in the church (at least in America) today, has shifted to the idea of having a “personal relationship with Christ,” to such a degree that many Christians no longer see a commitment to His church as important. We've lost the *corporate* aspect of Christian discipleship.
- In fact, there are many gospel presentations today that focus on having a “personal relationship with Christ,” but very few that ever talk about the importance of the church.
- Some churches don't even have membership anymore, and others (that do) never really emphasize it – the idea has become that it is optional for those who want it.

- Other churches seem to be content with a handful of the people doing all the work, and never emphasize the priority of the church in Christian discipleship. A lot of Christians today have no concept (at all) of the church as the family of God and the bride of Christ.
- The trend in the American church has become that of Christians floating in and out of a number of churches, never committing themselves through membership – and there are many churches where there is no idea (at all) who is affiliated with the church and who is *not*.
- I've even heard pastors who teach *against* the idea of church membership. There are thousands of churches across this land that expect nothing at all from those who attend, and there are even more who never hold believers accountable in any way.
- Some don't require baptism. Some don't even have a doctrinal statement (or if they *do*, it is so generic that it is almost meaningless). Some don't have elders who are taking their responsibility to shepherd the flock seriously. And some have no expectation of their attenders at all. They can just come and go as they please – and some go for months at a time before they are pleased to attend.
- Now, Dr. MacArthur points out that we can see this idea of commitment to the local church in one of three ways. First, we can see it in regard to the

*pattern* by which professing Christians *relate* to the church.

- We can safely say that people (generally) do *not* see the church as being *significant* anymore. We live in a day of “ecclesiastical consumers” (or, to put it another way) “church hoppers.” The value of being fully committed to a local church has greatly diminished in our day and time.
- Faithful attendance in a local body of believers is *not* a very high priority in our world today. There are a lot of Christians that just (kind of) float around from church to church – or maybe they don’t even bother to meet with other Christians at all.
- The church may meet, but they don’t see any need to be there. The church may gather to pray or to study the Scriptures, but they don’t think *that* is important enough to devote their time to. After all, they are pursuing a “personal” relationship with Christ.
- They don’t seem to understand that God’s desire for them includes a life connection with a visible, local assembly of redeemed saints. And this trend away from commitment to a local church is becoming more and more pervasive in our day and time.
- But there is another way we should see this issue – and that is in regard to the neglect of the biblical

ordinances. The ordinances (based on commands by Christ) are administered in the context of the church.

- But we have many, who call themselves Christians today, who have never been baptized and never participate in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. These are ordinances commanded by Christ Himself, and yet there are a large number of (so-called) believers that have no desire (whatsoever) to keep these ordinances.
- And even more alarming than that, there are churches that never emphasize these ordinances. Some never (or seldom) observe them. Some think that the observance of these ordinances will be offensive to seekers – so if they ever *do* observe them, they put them at some other time than “prime time” on Sunday morning.
- And then there is a third way we should be thinking through this issue, and that is in the massive development of the para-church organizations. There has been a significant shift in Evangelical Christianity (over the last four or five decades) away from a commitment to the local church, and toward para-church ministries.
- Now, *many* of these are fine organizations, but we must always remember that this is *not* the church – this is *not* the bride of Christ. Some of the best of these *do* support the local church, but they do *not* have the same priority as the Lord’s church.

- And listen my friend, if any para-church organization becomes a substitute for the local NT church, I promise you, it is *not* pleasing to Christ. It is a perversion of His priorities.
- Remember now, there is only one institution that Christ established, and that is the church. Back in the Book of Genesis, God the Father established the family – but there was only one institution established by the Lord Jesus in His earthly ministry, and that is the church. It is *not* a para-church organization. There is nothing outside of the church (according to Scripture) for the furtherance of the work of Christ on earth.
- And, by the way, there are a couple of problems with many para-church organizations. First of all, in some para-church organizations national Christian celebrities become elevated as the “heroes” of the faith, while local pastors are maligned and criticized.
- Secondly, because they need to appeal to a very broad base, they are often “a-theological” and ecumenical. They can’t afford to take a stand on any controversial issues of theology, so they keep everything very broad and general, so just about anyone can come under their tent. They stick with the most basic things because they don’t want to offend anyone.
- In fact, some of these organizations imply (or even outright teach) that doctrine is *not* important. They say, “All we need to do is to love Jesus.” And they are quick to squelch anyone in their organization who tries to teach doctrine, and label them as divisive, lacking compassion, and threatening the unity of the organization.
- Now, my intention (this morning) is *not* that of bashing para-church organizations, but to make the point that Evangelical Christians are turning away from the biblical priority of the local NT church. We are busy winning people to Christ, but *not* to His church.
- And yet, that is something that is completely foreign to the NT Scriptures. This is something that would have been inconceivable to the first century Christians. For them, coming to Christ meant coming into His church. Any idea of experiencing biblical salvation without becoming committed to His church was absolutely foreign to them.
- The epistles (in the NT) were written to local NT churches. And in the few cases where they were written to individuals (such as Timothy and Titus) they were written to them as *leaders* of local NT churches.
- The general epistles were written for the benefit of many churches, but they were all local churches. As John MacArthur puts it, “You don’t have to read very far in the NT epistles to understand that the

Lord assured that the believers would be in gathered assemblies, *not* running around loose like range chickens.”

- And we could go to many examples, but to the local church in Corinth, Paul wrote, “Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth...” (and then he proceeds with the letter).
- When the HS wanted to instruct believers concerning law and freedom in Christ, He inspired the Book of Galatians, which starts out, “Paul, an apostle (not *sent* from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia...” (Notice, there were more than one, but they were *all* local churches.)
- And we see this pattern in all the NT epistles. So what is the correct assumption? God wants His saints to be gathered together in local assemblies of believers called His church (His ekklesia).
- In fact, the author of Hebrews admonished Christians to be faithful to assemble together with the corporate body of Christ. Heb. 10:24 says, “...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.”

- Christians are to make sure they are *not* forsaking the assembling of themselves together on the Lord’s Day. Why? So we can “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” and so we can encourage one another.
- Notice that the focus is *not* on what *we* get out of it, but what we can do for *others*. But the *command* is *not* to forsake our assembling together with other believers. We are to be faithful in our attendance. God never intended for there to be any “lone ranger” Christians out there on their own.
- The spiritual implications of being a part of the bride of Christ is always expressed in the corporate identity of the church. You and I are *not* islands unto ourselves. We are part of His body.
- Jesus Christ is the head, and then (under His leadership) you have a plurality of godly pastors (or elders), who lead and equip those who serve – and that is the biblical definition of the church.
- And the clear implication of the NT is that the early church knew who was a part of the church. In Acts 20:28 Paul admonished the Ephesian elders, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

- Now think about it – it is pretty difficult to shepherd the flock of God if you don't know who that is. Sheep don't survive very well roaming around on their own – and if the shepherds are going to be able to take care of the sheep, they have to know the sheep. So there has to be a way of knowing who belongs to the flock.
- Think about what it says in Acts 2:41. We went through that passage in Acts 2 that describes the very foundation of the church. But v. 41 says, "...those who had received [Peter's] word were baptized..."
- Of course they were baptized. That was the first priority of NT believers in Christ – and it was the way the disciples were identified. This is how everyone knew who was part of the church.
- But the next phrase of that verse says, "...and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Three thousand souls were "added." Added to what? Added to the number of believers.
- How many believers were there prior to this? The NT tells us there were 120, who had gathered in the upper room to pray and wait for the coming of the HS on the Day of Pentecost.
- But what does this imply? It implies that someone was keeping a list. There was some kind of

membership roster. They knew who was part of the church.

- And verse 47 tells us that there were others being added to it every single day. But the point is, that the use of the word "added" (in the Book of Acts) means that there was something the new believers were being "added to."
- And as you go through the Book of Acts, you see that other churches began to be established in other places, and any time someone moved from one city to another, the Christians would send letters with those believers to commend them to the church in their new location.
- We still do this today. We call it "joining the church by transfer of letter." But there are several examples of this in the NT. One of those is found in Acts 18:27 where it says (speaking of Apollos), "And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him..." Another example is in Rom. 16:1, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea..."
- And this is very typical. Whenever a believer, who was part of one particular church, would move to a new location, their home church would send a letter to commend them to the new church.
- And this is part of the record keeping of the first century church. They kept track of the sheep. They

were very concerned about maintaining the purity of the church, and of protecting the flock of God from false teachers, so they sent letters to let the churches know who was in the fellowship of the believers.

- And we could look at other examples of this, but the point is that church membership is biblical. Most of you (here this morning) are members of PBC. That is how it should be. But for those of you who have *not* made a commitment to a local NT church, I just want to say that failing to do so (as a Christian) is something foreign to the NT.
- John MacArthur said to his congregation, “Some of you are *faithful members* and some of you are *not faithful members*. Some of you are *not members*, and some of you who are *not members*, are *faithful not members*. And some of you are *not faithful not members*.”
- Now, I know that sounds confusing, but the biblical ideal is to be a member, and to be a faithful member. And (according to Heb. 13) pastors are accountable to God for how we shepherd the sheep – but how can we faithfully shepherd the sheep if we don’t know who the sheep are?
- There has to be a way of keeping track of the sheep, and membership in the church is that way. It is clearly implied in the account of the early NT church.

- Now, we’re almost out of time this morning, but with the few minutes we have remaining, I want to give you a list of observations from Dr. MacArthur as to why church membership is important. First of all:

## I. IT IS AN OBEDIENCE ISSUE

- In light of the fact that new believers (in the NT era) were always baptized into the church and faithfully assembled themselves together with the other believers; in light of the fact that their names were put on the list and that they were identified as part of God’s flock with spiritual shepherds overseeing them; in light of the fact that when they would move from one place to another the shepherds would send letters of commendation to their new church; we can conclude that this is the biblical pattern.
- There is never any assumption (in the NT) that there would be Christians floating around on their own. That was totally foreign to their thinking. So we have to conclude that the biblical pattern is church membership; and anything other than that is an act of disobedience to God.
- The question is, “Are we going to line up with what we see in the NT? Are we going to follow the biblical pattern?” Secondly, we see that:

## II. IT IS A FELLOWSHIP ISSUE

- In the NT, believers were brought into the fellowship of the church to share a common, corporate spiritual life. Paul told the Corinthians that they had been called into the fellowship of God's dear Son.

- The Apostle John said (in 1 John 1:3), "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

- Listen, we are saved to enter into a fellowship with other believers. And (of course) the word for fellowship is "koinonia," and it means "a life partnership." It means "the sharing of life together."

- If we just show up every once in awhile, that is *not* the sharing of life together. In fact, there are some Christians who are so infrequent in their attendance that other church members don't even know their names – much less what is going on in their lives. That is *not* how God intends it to be!

- We already read Heb. 10:24, but how in the world are we going to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and how are we going to encourage one another in the faith if we never see each other? That's why the Bible says we are *not* to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. It's a fellowship issue.

- In fact, the author of Hebrews even says that there are some who in the habit of not assembling together with the other believers; and we are *not* to be like that.

Why? Because the fellowship needs of the body of Christ are too important for us to neglect.

- But we don't think in those terms in the contemporary church in America. We have a consumer mentality that only thinks in terms of what I can get out of it.

- Very seldom do Christians *today* think in terms of, "Hey, I'd better be there because there might be someone there that needs me to pray for them and encourage them in the faith." Or, "I'd better be there because I need to be using my spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ." Or "I need to be there (when the church gathers) because I need to be built up in the faith so I can go out and be a faithful witness for Jesus Christ."

- We don't think that way anymore. Instead, we think, "I don't think I'll go to church today because I need to stay home and work in the yard." Or "I can just listen to my favorite Bible teacher on the radio." Or "I don't want to go to that church because they're *not* meeting my needs."

- We often do *not* think of the church biblically. Perhaps this is why a lot of churches no longer even have a Sunday evening service, or why the attendance drops off between Sunday morning and Sunday evening so dramatically. We often don't understand the fellowship issue. Thirdly:

### III. IT IS AN AUTHORITY ISSUE

- The NT pattern is that believers are to be brought into the church under pastoral authority. And that authority comes from the Word of God. I don't have any inherent authority over your life – but I do have spiritual authority given by God to oversee your spiritual development through the faithful teaching of God's Word.

- And you have the responsibility (according to Scripture) to place yourself under the authority of the shepherds of the flock of God. As Heb. 13:7 & 17 say, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith...Obey your leaders, and submit *to them*; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

- Paul said in 1 Thess. 5:12, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work." That is talking about the pastors – the elders.

- The biblical principle is clear – God's design is for believers to line up under spiritual shepherds who watch over their souls and give them instruction from God's Word and help them grow in the faith. Christians are *not* to be out there on their own – they

are to be under the authority of spiritual shepherds. Fourthly:

#### IV. IT IS AN IDENTITY ISSUE

- You are (by title) a Christian. That means "a little Christ." You have been joined together with Christ. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. You are *not* your own – you have been bought with a price – the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are "in Christ Jesus." You bear His name. You belong to Him.

- According to Scripture, you are part of His body, His bride, His building. And the question is: "Are you ashamed to belong? Are you ashamed of Him? Are you not willing to publicly identify with Him and His church?"

- Think about it – He is *not* ashamed to call *us* His – are we ashamed to call Him ours? And are we ashamed to identify with that which is His – His church, His body, His bride? Fifthly:

#### V. IT IS A LOYALTY ISSUE

- Folks, that church is a spiritual family. According to Eph. 2:19 we are members of the household of God. It is the family of God on earth. The question is: "Are we loyal to our family? Do your fellow family members know they can count on you? Do your fellow family members know you are there for them? Sixth:

#### VI. IT IS A SERVICE ISSUE

- All the spiritual gifts are to function in the context of the church. The gifts are given for the purpose of edifying the body of Christ. 1 Cor. 12:7 says, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

- Do you understand that your spiritual gift is needed to help build up the body of Christ? All Christians have been given at least one spiritual gift, and God expects you to use that gift in service to Him.

- 1 Peter 4:10 clearly says, “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (Expound)

- Folks, the church is the place where God intends for each of us to serve each other. When you become a part of the church, you are saying, “I’m ready to serve.” And when you are unwilling to commit to a local NT church, you are really saying, “I’m *not* willing to serve Christ.” I have a lot more to say, but we are out of time...

- PRAYER