

If You Don't Love the Local Church, You Don't Love Jesus

I love people. I love community. I love family. The local church is all three. She consists of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and brothers and sisters. She is Christ's body and His sole possession that He purchased with His own precious blood.

That last thought should make you pause and ponder the high and precious state of the church.

I am a preacher and I have a responsibility to preach the Word. According to the following verse of Scripture, preaching consists of convincing, rebuking, correcting, warning, urging and encouraging, which are all used to show in what way people's lives are wrong.

"Herald and preach the Word! Keep your sense of urgency [stand by, be at hand and ready], whether the opportunity seems to be favorable or unfavorable. [Whether it is convenient or inconvenient, whether it is welcome or unwelcome, you as preacher of the Word are to show people in what way their lives are wrong.] And convince them, rebuking and correcting, warning and urging and encouraging them, being unflagging and inexhaustible in patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).

While fulfilling my calling and responsibilities to the church as a preacher and a guardian of men's souls, I am also conscious of whom I am preaching to. She is not only the church, and the body of Christ, but also the radiant bride of Christ.

I am happily married. I love my wife. She is my bride. So don't pretend to love me while disrespecting and speaking evil of my bride. Don't pretend to love Jesus and disdain, divide and damage the church at the same time. You do not love Jesus

if you treat His bride that way.

It's easy to love your wife when she is young, clean, beautiful and sexy. It's easy to love her when she is agreeable, compatible and conforming to your desires, and always unselfishly meeting your needs. But that's not reality and that's not life. Your young bride will not always be young and she will not always look radiant, and she will not always please you. It takes a higher level of Christlikeness to love your spouse on days when she is not so pleasant in conduct and temperament—when her flaws are glaring and she seems so self-centered. It is the same exact way with the local church.

Griping and complaining about the church's flaws and selfishness are not going to make her any brighter or any better. If you griped and complained about my wife that way, you would wound me and hurt me. Jesus is jealous of His bride, and you wound and hurt Him the same way when you speak ill-will of her.

If you want the church to be better, you've got to see her through the blood of Jesus and His finished work on the cross. Each individual member of the church, the body of Christ, has a story of redemption. Listen to their stories. Hear their hearts that have been broken by sin, deep disappointments, and life's hardships and trials. Hug their necks that have sometimes been stiff toward God and their fellow man. Squeeze their hands. Pray for them. Love them, not only in word, but also in deed.

If you are young, listen intently to those who've lived twice or three times longer than you and have served Jesus well. Honor their lifelong commitment to the Lord. They have so much to teach you. If you are older, listen to the younger ones who are living in a culture now that is five times more dysfunctional than yours was. They need unconditional love and acceptance. Be gracious and give them hope.

The church doesn't need to be relevant, trendy and cool for it to be effective. Those modern day traits are so overrated—as if we can't survive without them. The church universal has survived for 2,000 years, and her extinction is a theological impossibility. The church's existence really doesn't even depend on her success and maturity. Throughout the centuries, she has faced many challenges—often been unfaithful, undesirable, hypocritical, manipulative, unproductive and abusive, but God has sustained her to this hour by His mighty power and grace. In her worst times, she still remains Christ's beautiful bride. Remember that.

Instead of being a divisive force in the hand of the enemy, I want to see every member of the body of Christ be as a cheerleader for the local church in this hour and add to her unity and corporate power. We are so divided over doctrine, style, ministry philosophy and so forth. We find so much to disagree on and so little to agree. If your local church is preaching and teaching the Word; if they are interested in winning lost souls and making disciples; if they are open to the moving of the Holy Spirit then help her accomplish the commission she's been given.

There are good and scriptural reasons people leave local churches, but there are also many poor reasons. As I said, the local church is a family, and you just don't walk out on your family that easily and casually. The cross must be applied to our souls as we learn to love as Jesus loved.

Sometimes people leave because they are easily offended, spoiled and selfish, restless, easily unsatisfied and discontent, and critical and hypocritical. Some legitimate reasons to leave a local church would include sin and lack of integrity in leadership, heavy-handed control, poor feeding, unscriptural and unethical practices and the like. but more often than not, people leave for the formerly mentioned reasons.

Don't be of the generation that was fickle and caustic as the people were in the days of John the Baptist and Jesus.

"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a gluttonous man, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is justified by her children" (Matt. 11:18-19).

These people were never satisfied with those God sent them. John came fasting, and they found fault. Jesus came feasting, and they found fault again. Such is the way of fickle people. If you have a legitimate complaint, be a part of the solution and not the problem. It's not all about you.

Churches and pastors are flawed and imperfect. If the heart is right, and love rules, change will be forthcoming.

Look at the Corinthians. Paul said they were carnal and contentious, and there was envy and strife among them (1 Cor. 1:11, 3:3). They had a sectarian spirit, sexual immorality was in their midst, some were eating food offered to idols, and there were theological and cultural problems. But with Paul's help, they worked through them.

We cannot be a glorious church if we are divided. We cannot be a glorious church unless there is love and unity among us. Whether you are young or old, let us be the generation that cheers loudest for the local church and adds to her unity and power. Let us be the generation whose faithfulness to Christ's church, and devotion to the saints, is in direct proportion to our faithfulness and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In spite of her many flaws, let us be a part of the generation that sees the best of the church and loves her just the same. Whether the local church is thriving or struggling, let us be a contributing factor to her growth and a champion of her change.

In the end, she will shine forever and ever with the glory of her Bridegroom.