

# Combating Society's Perspective of the Church

Pastor Marc Estes

## I. Introduction

Throughout the ages, there has been an ongoing pressure to minimize, if not dissolve the church and its influence from society. From the beginning of its conception in the Book of Acts, all the way through to modern times, the church has experienced great pressure from every front. The Church is the Eternal Purpose of God. It is His Divine Instrument and the vehicle He has designed to fulfill His purposes and extend His kingdom. There is a rising swell of opposition on every front, both externally and internally to minimize or redefine the church. Therefore, understanding the church, its purposes and its tensions are critical to the area of evangelism.

### A. Reasons for Understanding Role of the Church in Evangelism

1. The Church is God's Divine Instrument for extending His kingdom.
2. How a person perceives the role of the Church and its relationship to God is critical to their destiny.
2. How we present the Church to the unchurched and dechurched has a huge bearing on a persons' receptivity to God and the plan of salvation.
3. Due to society's perspective of church, the issue of the Church has become a normal part of the evangelism process and presentation.

### B. The Challenges for the Church Ahead

The challenges for the church today are broad and deep. We can be confident that Jesus will build His church and the gates of Hell will not prevail, yet we must do our part to discern the times and seasons in which we live and do our part recognize the tensions that we are facing:

1. Redefinition of Church Tension –
2. Redefinition of Church Doctrine Tension –
3. Emergence of Ministry Trends –
4. Increase of Ministry Fads –
5. Decline of Christian Influence –
6. Increase of other world religions –

## II. What is the Church

The church isn't a building, nor is it a club or committee. It isn't man-made, and it isn't defined on man's terms. The church isn't some parenthetical revelation that God came up with because our forefathers couldn't get their act together. It's the bride of Christ. The church is the sovereign will of God and the central fact of His will. From the very beginning, God dreamed of a Church, He desired a Church, He willed a Church ... and He will have His Church. So let's put some legs to the term. The word *church* is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is made up of two other words: *ek*, which means "out of" and *kaleo*, which means "to call." Thus the word *church* literally means "the called-out ones."

### A. The Universal Church

1. The body of Christ spans the globe and has literally invaded almost every nation and people group. It's an awesome thing to consider that we're part of the largest network of people on the face of the planet.
2. The universal Church stretches beyond denominational lines, age, race, culture, and time. In fact, we're even part of all those who have gone before us (Heb. 12:1-2), who are counting on us, the universal Church, to be part of ushering in the return of the King.
3. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus is talking about the Church universal: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it" (TNIV). He will build His Church, a global Church that will be vibrant and victorious.
4. It will span every tongue, tribe, and nation. It will expand through the generations and reach to the ends of the earth. God's people, the universal Church, are everywhere.

## **B. The Local Church**

1. There cannot be the universal Church without the local church; the universal Church is mainly comprised of millions of local churches.
2. The Bible confirms this with the ongoing use of the term *church*, which is used some 114 times. Ninety-six references are clearly to the local church.
3. In one case found in Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gives instruction on how to properly deal with offenses. It is evident that when the issue of disciplining those mentioned, that it must involve some form of leadership, direction, accountability, understanding of the issues and overseeing of these process on a localized level. We would be hard-pressed to see the requirements Jesus defines practically carried out solely in the context of the universal church. This is not to say that these principles don't apply to the church universal. Therefore, we come to the logical conclusion that is impossible to carry this particular process out to its end without the involvement of the local church. This is only one of the many reasons why the local church exists!
4. This is the church Jesus speaks of in Matthew 18:15-20, when He refers to dealing with offenses of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Imagine if He meant the *universal Church*, and you did something that required you to go before the whole church? I can see the global communication strategy needed to pull that one off. Jesus was clearly referring to the local, not the universal church.
5. God needs the local church. The task of the local church is to care for people. Here we are encouraged and exhorted, built up and humbled, loved and disciplined. We meet with God and meet with others. We learn about His Word and about ourselves.

## **III. The Challenges with those who don't attend Church**

### **A. Defining non-church attenders**

1. According to a recent survey (2009), there are 298,444,215 people living in the United States.

2. Researcher George Barna reports that 85 percent of those identify themselves as Christians, yet only 45 percent say they attend church regularly, leaving 164,144,318 who are not attending church at all.
3. Barna states that the number of unchurched adults in America has doubled since 1991.

## **B. Eight common concerns of the unchurched regarding the Local Church:**

The following excerpts represent the eight most common concerns people have with the Local Church and have been written in a 'first person' context to assist you sharing your rebuttals with those who have issues with the church:

1. *"Church is really boring."* The sad part of this statement is that it is partially true. Some churches today that start at eleven o'clock sharp and end at twelve o'clock dull. On the other hand, some churches have a vibrant, life-giving culture. I've always told those who use the boredom excuse, "You'll always get out of it what you put into it." Regardless of the atmosphere of church, there is always the opportunity to change the atmosphere instead of reacting to it! Take the challenge to make it exciting, yourself! Remember, Jesus came to give life abundantly, not sparingly (John 10:10).
2. *"Church is irrelevant."* Unfortunately, this statement can be true as well. Many churches still use archaic methods to reach people who no longer exist! Use methods that have been extinct for some time. Those same songs they were singing in 1976 ... they're still singing them. Don't get me wrong; I love the golden oldies, too ... but I love them for nostalgic reasons that would mean nothing to today's searching soul. More often than not, yesterday's revolution is out of context today. Cultures change, and so should the church. The apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22, TNIV). That doesn't mean you have to abort biblical principals principles and values; it simply means that you should adapt them to be more relevant to those you intend to reach.
3. *"Church doesn't meet my needs."* In many cases, this frustration is a legitimate concern. Most people who come to church for the first time bring with them what seems to be an entire grab bag full of personal issues that need attention. They aren't looking for a sign-up sheet for the next Sunday school class, but for someone who will help them iron out the warps and wrinkles of their life. They need someone like the Good Samaritan, who found the desperate man half-dead in the ditch. "And when he saw him, he had compassion" (Luke 10:33, NKJV). We have an obligation to reach out to guests those who need help. They are in every service, and God wants to help them discover their purpose. You can help.
4. *"I don't fit into that Church."* Not all people fit into all churches. Each of us is a little different and may require a different kind of church. I know many churches where I absolutely love the people, but the church itself leaves more to be desired. That doesn't mean what they're doing is wrong; it just fits them better than it fits me.
5. *"I don't have any relationships there."* Eighty-six percent of all people who ever visit church and decide to stay do so because they had a relationship connection with someone there *before* they ever attended in the first place. Relationship is key; people knew someone, so they stayed!

Likewise, many people attend a church and don't stay simply because nobody reached out to them and they never experienced the joy of building healthy, lasting relationships within the congregation. How sad. If you find yourself in this dilemma, step out and build a relationship with someone at your new church. Remember, relationship is a two way street. If you already are part of a church, reach out and touch someone (sounds like a great advertising idea). New people are counting on you.

6. "People there have offended me." Life is full of offenses. It is guaranteed that wherever you go in life, offenses will happen. They'll pop up in your marriage, with your children, or at your job. You'll experience disagreements ought with your parents, your neighbors, your friends, the guy in the yellow car that cut you off ... even people at church. Offenses happen. In order to repair them you must face them, not run from them. The Bible admonishes, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do" (Prov. 4:23, NLT). God knows that dealing with offense is paramount to you having a clean heart. If someone has been offended and therefore leaves the church, they run the risk of turning their back on their Christian family, friends, and maybe even God. Don't let offense run you off.
7. "I don't see any value in Church." A person with this view of church probably hasn't looked far enough. We perceive many things in life to be without value, not because they actually lack value, but simply because we don't understand them. If God created church and said it was of the utmost importance, we should trust He knows more than us.
8. "All they talk about at church is money." Actually, that's all they talk about on the news, in magazines, and in movies. That's all they talk about at the town hall, the mortgage company, and the school board meeting. Why doesn't *that* bother you? Most people talk about money ... a lot. So do you! Every day we talk about budgets, salary raises, shopping, expenses, debits, credits, vacations, house projects, gifts, and entertainment. Jesus actually talked about money more than almost any other topic. Please don't misread me; there is a balance. Of course, there's much more to life than money, but money is pretty important. In fact, money has more to do with ministry and carrying out the daily operations of the church than you may realize. One of the reasons I believe pastors should talk about money is because so many people today need help with it. Debt is so ingrained into our culture that it seems almost foreign to consider living a debt-free lifestyle. In fact, recent studies show that seventy percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. It is no wonder, when we look at the \$660 billion in credit card debt that is on the shoulders of the American people. I am sure it doesn't help matters that 5.3 billion credit card offers are mailed annually. With the daily barrage hitting us from every angle like a Mack truck, we should talk about ways to be wise stewards with what God has blessed us with. If the average American family didn't have more than \$8,000 in credit card debt or overspend each year approximately 5 percent more than what they earn, things would be different. But the financial landscape in America looks bleak for many families. And so we should talk about it.
  1. Finances are a personal matter and should be handled delicately. However, the Bible gives the church great room to provoke each other to good works, healthy living, financial stewardship and spiritual growth.

## IV. Jesus Loves the Church

### A. A Personal Reality Check

Before we go any further, pause for a moment and ask yourself these questions: "Do I love my local church?" "How passionately involved am I in both serving and supporting my local church?" Hopefully, these questions are more of an encouragement than an exhortation.

### B. Jesus' Heart for the Church

1. What if we were to ask Jesus the same questions today? "Jesus, do you love the Church?" Scripture answers that one quickly, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25, TNIV).
2. Next question: "Jesus, how passionately are you involved in serving and supporting the local church?" Again, Scripture answers, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25, TNIV).
3. It seems pretty clear. Jesus died for the church, and He also lives, always interceding, for her. Jesus loves the Church. As a young boy at the age of twelve, Jesus' parents thought He was lost, so they went on a massive search to find him. Three days later they found Him. Where? In the Jewish Temple! He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49, TNIV). His answer states the obvious. Why would you even consider looking anywhere else but in the Temple?
4. On many occasions Jesus referred to the Church as His bride. I have been to many weddings in my life, perhaps hundreds. While the crowd stares at the beautiful bride walking down the aisle, my eyes are set on the groom. Oftentimes he is crying, overwhelmed with emotion, as the love of his life walks down the aisle to be presented to him.
5. As an illustration to help us attempt to comprehend Christ's love for the Church, God compares it to a man's love for his bride. In his book, *Stop Dating the Church*, Joshua Harris says, "Is it possible that God didn't get His inspiration for loving the church from marriage, but the one reason He created marriage was to illustrate His love for the church? God invented romance and pursuit and the promise of undying love between man and woman so that throughout our lives we could catch a faint glimmer of the intense love Christ has for those He died to save. What a passion He has for His church. The strongest argument I know for why you and I should love and care about the church is that Jesus does."
6. Many interpret the passage of scripture in Ephesians 5:22–33 to be Jesus speaking about the Church (big C Universal), and I would agree with them. But this must also be interpreted in context to the components that make up the big C Church, which is the small c local church. Jesus loves His Church, and He loves every local church. We are to love it the same!

## V. Reasons why we need the Church

We are not only to love the church, but we really need the church! Rick Warren says, “A Christian without a church home is like an organ without a body, a sheep without a flock, or a child without a family. It is an unnatural state.” Without a local church, our lives are incomplete. You may have needs that aren’t being met through your local church, but God intends for it to provide the following needs:

- An environment of spiritual growth.
- An atmosphere of God’s presence.
- A place to belong to a genuine community.
- A family to help meet your needs.
- A place of covering and protection.
- A place for accountability and safety.
- A place for wisdom, direction, and counsel.
- A place to make a difference.
- An opportunity to pour your life into others.
- A safe atmosphere to raise families.
- A place to give of finances, time, and energy.

## V. The Church Jesus is building today

Jesus intends the Church He is building to be of greater proportion in both size and scope than any building you could imagine. He has called us to partner with Him in building His church. Finding and fulfilling your purpose Who you are and where you’re going is intricately intertwined in God’s greater plan of extending His church. The Church that He is building today is *in* you and *with* you. The following statements regarding the Church apply to you. *You* are the Church!

- The Church is unified (John 17:20–23).
- The Church is victorious (Matt. 16:18–19).
- The Church has authority (Luke 10:19).
- The Church has dominion (Eph. 1:19–23)
- The Church is multicultural and multiethnic (Rev. 5:9).
- The Church is influential (Matt. 16:15–20; Acts 5:28) Acts 2:47).
- The Church is glorious (Eph. 5:23–32).
- The Church is the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11–13).

- The Church is intended for all people (2 Pet. 3:9).