



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

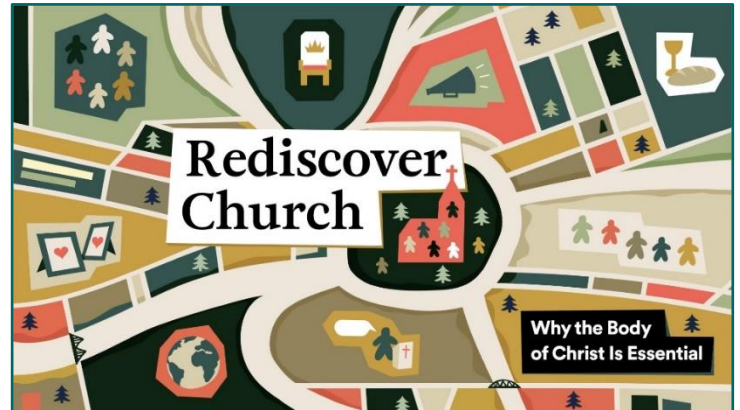
REDISCOVER CHURCH

What Is a Church?

Various Scriptures

Tim Badal | September 3, 2023

"A church is a group of Christians who assemble as an earthly embassy of Christ's heavenly kingdom to proclaim the good news and commands of Christ the King; to affirm one another as His citizens through the ordinances; and to display God's own holiness and love through a unified and diverse people in all the world, following the teaching and example of elders." (Jonathan Leeman and Collin Hansen, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential*, p. 124.)



We're kicking off a series titled "Rediscover Church." In 2020, with the global pandemic striking the world, the question came out: what things are essential? As we sought to understand what Covid 19 was all about and how bad it was going to be, the governments around the world said, "We need to establish what can continue and what needs to stop." Then they used this word "essential." What is essential? What is necessary to continue on? The question of whether church was essential or not was debated by churches everywhere and by society everywhere. Actually that discussion had been going on in America long before Covid 19 broke out and the results are staggering.

Over the last 50 years, many would say church attendance was an important thing for Christ followers, hovering around 70%. In the last 20 years, the question of whether the church is essential or not has fallen on hard times. We have dropped from the average of 70% down to 47% of Americans who agree that church is an important thing. To give you an idea of how significant this drop is, if this trend doesn't change, in 40 years there won't be any churches at all. That should sober us.

We need to realize these statistics also tell a grander story. We have fallen for a myth that probably isn't just being believed here in America, but actually all over the world because of globalization—the myth that the church isn't necessary. People believe, "I can be a follower of Jesus Christ and don't need the church. Give me Jesus; you can keep the church." In fact, one of the most viral spiritual videos on YouTube is a young man who boasts about his personal relationship with Jesus Christ and his hatred for religion. "Anything institutional, you can keep. Just give me Jesus."

We can applaud that as being right, even uber spiritual, but it's shortsighted. If you're tempted to think you don't need anything more than your relationship with Jesus, let me tell you something. What you're going to hear in the next nine weeks is that the church is essential. The church is necessary.

It would be like saying, "Tim, I want to hang out with you. I want to be involved with you. I want to live life with you. But here's my one condition: keep Amanda away from me." I would say, "I can't do that. She's my bride, my wife." Some of us are saying that to Jesus' bride. "Jesus, I want You. I'll spend time with You and interact with You, but just keep Your church out of it. Keep Your bride away from me."

We have personalized our faith to a level the Bible is altogether uncomfortable with. We're asking, "Do I need to go to church? Do I need to participate in church? Do I need church to be an active part of my life?" The popular cultural notion is no, you don't need it. It's unessential. Yet this Book will tell us over and over again that this thinking is wrong. Absolutely, positively wrong.

So the VBC campus pastors believe now is a better time than ever for us to rediscover church. We need to understand the place the church holds in God's eyes and heart. We need to stop thinking that the church is something we can take or leave. We need to realize the church is the very thing Jesus died for; the very thing Jesus is sanctifying today. This is the very thing we will spend eternity with.

One of the reasons we need to rediscover church, according to one author, is this: "The Christian without a church is a Christian in trouble." Do you believe that? During Covid, we said, "No, all we need is a TV, a camera and broadband internet, then we've got the church right in our living room." We must recognize that the church is more than a program. Many of us are saying, "I'm doing church at home." No, you're not. You're watching Netflix, just a religious variety. You'd better have a good reason why you are there and not here. Can it be a valid place for some? Absolutely. We have a lot of people watching right now online because they can't be here for a variety of valid reasons. But Covid 19 said, "You can do church in your living room." Why can that be said? Because we define church as a place, as a program; we rarely define it as the people for whom Jesus died.

Does that mean that without the church you can't be a Christian? No. A Christian without a church is still a Christian, but you're in a troubled spot. You can't be the best you can be and all God intended you to be. I like what Dr. Tony Evans said recently on Twitter: "I hear people say, 'I don't have to go to church to be a Christian.' Maybe you've said that and you're absolutely right. Salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone." But I love what he said next: "You don't have to go home to be married, but stay away long enough and your relationship will be affected."

How has your lack of relationship with the church affected your relationship with Jesus Christ? That's what we want to dig into in this series. At times it may be altogether uncomfortable for us, deep down inside, even in a place like Village Bible Church. After all, our church is growing in numbers. But that still doesn't mean we've got this thing called church all figured out. We need to rediscover and understand it because once we see church the way God wants it to be and what He says it is, then we will relate to it in a completely different way.

To accomplish this, I'm going to preach a very different kind of sermon today. I need you to follow along because we're going to go on a journey. We're going to ask the most fundamental question: what is the church? Have you ever asked that of yourself? What is this church I'm part of?

When I was a little kid, I was told to put my hands together and say, "This is the church. This is the steeple. Open the door and there's all the people." Let's close in prayer. Right? That's all I needed to know. But if you define the church as a building—as a place—it's a pretty sad place.

Maybe you've invited family and friends from other church traditions who leverage the church more as a place than anything else. They're like, "Where's the architecture? Why are you bringing coffee into this place? This is a sacred place. Why do you hold things like Trivia Night in here? This is a sanctuary, a place for worship."

In our tradition, the church isn't just a place. That doesn't mean this place should be a free-for-all. But it's not just a place. It's not just programs. We don't just come here for the program. That's simply doing church online has a tension factor. It's not just something you can tune in to. It's not a cafeteria where you can choose what you come for—the programs, the singing, the preaching—then leave.

The church is a place that has programs, yes, but much more than that, it's a people for whom Jesus died. To understand this we're going to answer the question, "What is the church?" in four ways.

Grammatically

The first mention of the word 'church' is in Matthew 16. We'll be looking at a lot of different Scriptures this morning and you need to know where they are. Matthew 16 is the first mention of the church in the New Testament. Jesus says this in Matthew 16:13-18: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' After a little bit of silence, Peter speaks up on behalf of the disciples: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* That's the right answer. Ding, ding, ding, ding. What do we have for him, Bob?

Jesus turns and says to Peter, *"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."* What in the world was Jesus talking about? This was the first time He ever mentioned church. It was the first time it was written in the Scriptures. What does He mean?

The word He uses is a very generic word, *ekklesia*. It means an assembly of people gathered together. So when the disciples heard Him say, "I'm going to build an assembly of people who are gathered together," they were confused. "Do you know what Jesus is talking about?" Simon replied, "I have no idea." So Jesus was bringing a group together.

Ekklesia referred to any group of people who were gathered together for a specific purpose. We see *ekklesias* at Wrigley Field. We see them at the United Center. We see them at movie theaters. We see them at concert venues. A group of people who are gathered together for some purpose. That means it's not just any mass of people. Even when we go to Aldi or Jewel, even to a local restaurant, we see an *ekklesia*. What's the difference? If you can connect the people to a single purpose, you have an *ekklesia*. The people who are guaranteed seats at Wrigley Field are an *ekklesia* for baseball. When you go to the movies, they're an *ekklesia* for a movie. When they're at a restaurant, they are an *ekklesia* for a certain variety of food.

The church is a group of people who are gathered for the intended purpose of worshiping Jesus. We'll get to a more extended definition in a moment, but this is a useful start. Jesus said, "I'm going to build a gathered people who live for Me, who worship Me, who love Me and who live like Me." There are two types of *ekklesias* in the church.

The invisible *ekklesia*: the church that only God sees

You and I can't see this *ekklesia*. This is the church that will reside for all eternity in heaven. In this church, everybody is saved. In this church, Jesus is the only pastor. In this church, there are no denominations. In this church, there is one membership roll. Revelation 20:15 says, *"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*

This church includes the living and the dead. The apostles Paul, Peter, James and John are part of this church. Every faithful believer throughout time is a part of this church. You and I today, if we are true followers of Jesus Christ, are a part of this church. This is the church God sees.

The visible *ekklesia*: the church that we see

There's another church that is the visible church—the visible *ekklesia*. We're representing that right now. This is the church we see. We are a small depiction of the visible church. The problem with the visible church is that it's a little uglier than the invisible church. It has problems. It has warts. It has all kinds of issues. This is the kind of church you see on Facebook, where people say, "I don't want anything to do with church. It's so full of hypocrites." There's probably some truth to that. It's filled with sinners. This church is the church we see. And here's the thing. Membership in this church doesn't guarantee you're a believer. Why? Because you can lie and we won't know.

Village Bible Church has right around 350 members—not including attenders—just members who have signed on the line and said, "I am a follower of Jesus." I'm going to tell you right now with almost 100% surety that not all of them are going to heaven. That might cause you a bit of consternation. Here's what I know: the heart is deceitfully sick. There are a whole lot of reasons why people join a church and they aren't always the right reasons. So don't say, "The reason I'm going to heaven is because I'm a member of Village Bible Church." That means nothing. Don't take that to Jesus. Don't tell him Pastor Tim told you that. I don't want to get in trouble with Jesus.

Not all the members of the visible church are saved and that's what creates some of the scandal. That's part of the problem. There are a lot of denominations. We're only part of the body of Christ. We're not the totality of it. You don't have to be part of Village Bible Church to be with Jesus. You do need to be part of a church. Knowing the difference is altogether important.

Now, the Bible speaks of both. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, *"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* If we take the visible church—the visible *ekklesia*—as being the church Jesus is talking about, every time a church closes for any reason, we make Jesus a liar, because the devil has prevailed against it. The church was up and going, but now it's closed. Church lost.

Jesus is saying, "I'm building this church—these people I've saved whom I will sanctify and one day glorify—and the gates of hell will never advance on it. It's already victorious. Why? Because I have won the battle through My sacrifice on the cross."

Now, the Bible uses many metaphors for the church that are incredibly helpful. We need to know and recognize them.

The bride of Christ

We see in Ephesians 5:25-27 that the church is called the bride of Christ. What does that mean? That means Jesus has a significant and intimate relationship with this thing we're talking about. The entity, this organization, this group of people, Christ calls it His bride. That's special. It shows what He's doing for her and how He's caring for her. For those of us who are married, this is the most significant relationship we have. Jesus is saying, "My most significant relationship in the cosmos is with the church."

The flock of God

This speaks of His oversight of and His care for us. This speaks of who we are. We are sheep who, without a shepherd, are lost, harassed and helpless. Peter speaks of this in 1 Peter 5:2-3.

The body of Christ

We are also referred to as being the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:27 which speaks of our inner connectivity within the church. A lot of us have this notion: "I'm fine without the church. I don't need to be part of the church. I can show up every once in a while and just keep a peripheral connection to the church." That's like the thumb saying, "I'm fine by myself." Well, what good is a thumb without a nervous system? What good is a thumb without a brain directing it? What good is a thumb without a hand? What good is a thumb without an arm? What good is a thumb without the rest of the body? It's of no value. But when it is connected, it has great value.

The family of God

The church is the family of God which speaks of the commitment God has to us, as well as the forgiveness and love He extends to us. Parents, you know better than anybody about the love we have for our children, the forbearance we have for our children, the things we'll do for our children. Jesus says, "This is who you are. You're part of this church."

The house of God

Finally, we're called the house of God in 1 Timothy 3:15. This speaks again of our differences within the body. There are different rooms within a house for different uses. In the same way, we're being built together, many rooms joined into one house. What this is really talking about is the process of how Jesus is building His house, one brick upon another. When His house is finished, He will usher in eternity for us to enjoy what He has created, which is the church. Do you see how we have dumbed this thing down to a place and a moment when we attend, on any random Sunday, when nothing else is going on? When we have no better options?

I was asked this week, "What's going to happen to church attendance when Bear season starts next week?" Are you kidding me? That's how we determine our church involvement? We've missed the boat. This is not what Christ died for. Do we think, "The kids have this; I don't need to be there." Or "It's going to be a long weekend." Does that mean we have to be here every Sunday? No. There are things going on. I get it. But is our priority something more than just coming to a place where nothing else is going on?

We have dumbed this thing down and wonder why we're not having an impact in the world. The reason is we're not connected to the very lifeblood of what God's Kingdom is all about—the church. You were never created or intended to do the Christian life disconnected from the church. The devil loves that, thinking, "If I can get you alone, I'll eat you up before lunch." But when you are in a strong, healthy, vibrant church, now he's got a battle. Now he has a problem.

So what is the church? Again, "A church is a group of Christians who assemble as an earthly embassy of Christ's heavenly Kingdom to proclaim the good news and commands of Christ the King; to affirm one another as His citizens through the ordinances (Lord's Supper and Baptism); and to display God's own holiness and love through a unified and diverse people in all the world, following the teaching and example of elders."

You're like, "Wow, that's a mouthful." It is. Church is more than what we've made it. So our next question is: how did we get here? We know how it started in Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost, the church was born through the Holy Spirit and quickly grew. Then fast forward to 2023; here we are at Village Bible Church in Sugar Grove. How did we get here?

Historically

Now that we understand the church grammatically, we have to look at it historically. We didn't just show up here. How did we get here? What's our family tree? How did the church function after Christ ascended to heaven? It can be broken into four divisions. I'll go through this quickly, covering 2,000 years in about the next eight minutes.

Post-Apostolic times—33 A.D. to 6th century

The first era we have in church history is what we call the post-apostolic time, from 33 A.D. to the 6th century. I'm painting with a broad brush here. We have the death of the last disciple, John, who died around 90 A.D., about 60-70 years after the ascension of Jesus. What happens after that? Who takes over the reins? Now we no longer have a person who was an eyewitness of Jesus. As John said, "We saw Him, we touched Him, we heard from Him. We've taken what we heard from Him and are telling it to you." That's what he says at the beginning of 1 John.

What happens when there's nobody who's heard audibly from Jesus, who has seen Jesus, who was part of Jesus' inner circle? Who takes over? We call these people the early church fathers. These individuals were the disciples of the disciples. The most notable one I will share about is a guy named Ignatius. We name schools after him. There are churches named after him. He's about as close to Jesus as anyone who wasn't one of His disciples. This means he was a disciple of the disciple John. John gave him, according to Ignatius' words, the job of making sure there were pastors in all the churches. "Make sure they're taught everything we've told you; make sure the people are doing these things."

So Ignatius did. He put men in place who were called bishops, men like Tertullian, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and others. Many of their lives are written about in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. There you can read how men and women, like their mentors, preached the gospel clear up to the point of death. One of the greatest stories of all time is the story of Polycarp. It's impressive, so be sure to read it. He was fed to the lions in the Colosseum and professed Christ even then. Pretty amazing stuff.

Now, during this time there were no published Bibles. There was no ability to write out things like a church constitution. They relied primarily on oral traditions and creeds. The first one we know about was the Didache, which was written at the end of the first century, probably around 125 A.D. It was a church manual that you can find on the internet and read today. It was a description of what the church does: Gather on Sundays, take an offering, preach the Word, sing songs, recite Scripture, baptize people, celebrate communion, fellowship together, give announcements so the people of God know what's going on. Listen, you wonder why church is boring? It's because it's done the same thing for the last 2,000 years. We're doing the same thing today.

People would say, "You're a Christian. What do you believe?" You couldn't send them to your church website, so confessions of faith—also called creeds—were created and passed along. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ His only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." That's how the Apostles' Creed begins. It was developed around 200 years after Jesus' ascension. This became the standard for Christian faith. When you say, "I'm a Christian," it means you believe these things.

Then around 300 A.D., something amazing happened. Constantine, the emperor over the Roman Empire, had a dream in which Jesus appeared to him. Prior to this, to be a follower of Jesus meant they were outlawed, fed to the lions in the Coliseum or were otherwise persecuted. But after Constantine had his dream, he converted to Christianity, then the Christians went from being outcasts to being part of the state church.

This was the beginning of the cathedrals and basilicas because the king had become enamored with Jesus. He wanted to know fully what Christianity was about, so he called for a meeting of pastors in a city called Nicaea. In 324, their task was to come to a unified belief regarding what Christianity was. So they did. The first thing they did was determine what books were to be in the Bible. Some of you thought this thing just fell from heaven. No. By 324, the 39 books of the Old Testament were already codified as the Jewish Scriptures, so those weren't in question. To decide what should be in the New Testament, they looked for writings that were approved by men like Peter, James and John. What did the disciples say were Scriptures? There was debate, but eventually they agreed on the 27 books of the New Testament. They also agreed on Who Jesus was, that He was 100% God and 100% man. For the first time, they articulated what we know to be the Trinity. It was of course baked in the Scriptures, but they affirmed it as a non-negotiable doctrine. A lot of us haven't been aware of this.

These men weren't the original disciples, therefore they weren't fully authoritative; nevertheless, they became the framers of our church 'constitution.' We're indebted to them. They weren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination. They sometimes said some really dumb things, but we would be lost as a church without the work they did.

Roman Catholicism–6th century to present

Now we get to the second era and I'm already eight minutes in; I need to move fast so we'll be done by 4:00. The second era of church history is that of the Roman Catholics. Right away, if someone here is a Roman Catholic, you may be thinking, "Wait a minute, Badal. We go back to Peter. In Matthew 16 Jesus says, 'You are Peter and upon this rock (Petra) I'm going to build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'"

Catholics believe Jesus built His church, not on Peter's confession, but on Peter the person. Because of that, Peter became the first pope. Peter was the leader of the church; the first of what would become the papacy. Roman Catholics start with Pope Francis today, then back up to Pope Benedict, Pope John Paul II, going all the way back to the first century, to Peter. They'll say, "Here are all our popes. We are the church." The problem with that is church history doesn't give that picture at all.

In fact, church history says that while there was a leader of the church, it was nothing like we see in the papacy today. That's because a guy by the name of Pope Gregory the Great, in the 6th century, came to power and began a bunch of things we know of as modern-day Catholicism, including the beginning of the mass. The mass is significant. People say, "Well, I go to church because I go to mass. It's the same thing." No, it's not. The mass is the re-sacrificing of Jesus on the cross through the communion elements. So if you've been to a Catholic church, you have seen incense and heard bells being rung. At the point when the bells are rung, Catholics believe a miracle is taking place at the hands of the priest. He is changing the wafer and the wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus which is necessary for you to have salvation. You're probably thinking, "I had no idea. I just thought they all just wore some costumes."

Then in Roman Catholicism, they also believe in salvation by works, not by faith. Not by grace. They believe that you work for your salvation. You do certain things, certain sacraments that the church offers you, then you can be saved.

There's also the elevation of the papacy. The papacy went from being a pastor to now being the mediator between God and man, to being the one who can speak *ex cathedra*, which is Latin meaning "from the seat." They believe when the pope speaks, his words are infallible. They added the extra-biblical doctrine about Mary during this time. They also added the requirement of celibacy for the priests.

This stuff wasn't taught in biblical times. So we're wondering where all this came from. It started when the church and state were merged together, and it was decided that everyone needed to do church the same way. What resulted from this was a church split in 1054 called the Great Schism that created the separate Orthodox church. Some realized that the church was doing things that weren't written about in Acts, so they decided to separate from the Roman Catholic church. The word "catholic" means universal and they were claiming to be universal. "Orthodox" means theologically true, so they were claiming to be the true church. So it was universal versus true.

Orthodox–1054 to present

There were actually a couple reasons for this split, which essentially was represented by western Catholics versus eastern Orthodox, or Europe versus Asia. One issue between them was where the capital city was going to be. The east wanted Constantinople, Turkey, and the west of course wanted Rome. Also, the Orthodox church believed the use of images and statues in the church should be an aid for worship. A kid with ADD loves going into an Orthodox church because there are pictures everywhere. The Catholic church said, "No, that's not what the statues and pictures are for. They're not to be part of worship."

There were also issues over the doctrine of the procession of the Trinity and the celibacy of the clergy. As a result, the two groups parted ways. This time is what is called the Dark Ages because the church was a pretty corrupt place. In the midst of this were the Crusades when, in God's name, lots of people were just massacred and they had reasons for it. It was not the best season of the church. The church did grow, however, getting more wealthy and more powerful, while at the same time getting more lax in its beliefs.

Protestant–1517 to present

Then in the 16th century, a Catholic man in Germany named Martin Luther who was pastoring a local church began to be unhappy with a lot of what he was seeing in the church at large. When he made a pilgrimage to Rome, he witnessed priests visiting prostitutes. He saw money everywhere and thought, “This is not the church I thought it was.” However, he wanted to remain faithful because the Catholic church was the only Christian church in Europe. So he continued to preach and read his Bible.

Then a man named Johann Tetzel came to his town who had been assigned to go throughout Europe on behalf of the pope. His mission was to tell the people about a project that was going on in Rome—building St. Peter’s Basilica in the middle of the Vatican. Some of you may have traveled there and seen it. It is the residence of the pope. They needed all the churches to support this project, so Tetzel went from city to city to raise funds. His plan, which was masterful, had the blessing of the pope. He told the people, “If you give money to the building of St. Peter’s Basilica, the pope will shorten the stay of your dead relatives in purgatory.” Sounds like a deal. Where do I sign up?

Tetzel put on a play in each city and people report that the play was incredible. Why was that? It scared the daylights out of them. In fact, it was said by Catholic, Protestant and secular writers that people would vomit as they watched the play. In this play, they depicted people who lived, died, then went to purgatory, a place where their souls were on fire. They were experiencing intolerable pain and suffering. One of the ways Tetzel made it realistic is he had individuals who would literally burn their own flesh to provide the realistic smells, which is why the vomiting happened. At the end of this incredible play, Tetzel would bring out a coffin that served as an offering basket. He said, “If you give to this, your family members who are experiencing this right now can be freed from it.” He would sing this song: “As the coin in the coffin rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” How much money do you think they raised? Tons.

Well, Pastor Luther saw this and thought, “This is not in the Bible. What in the world is going on?” So he wrote out 95 concerns he had and nailed the document to the door of the Wittenberg church. He was sometimes a little brash—kind of like your pastor, but way more brilliant than your pastor. One of his masterful arguments something he said to the pope that no one had ever said before. No one ever talked back to the pope. Luther said, “Pope, if you really have this power to shorten or alleviate people’s time in purgatory, I have two questions for you. Number one, why not give it to everybody? And number two, why do you charge for it?” Beautiful. Drop the mic. I’m a Protestant already.

With that, the Catholic church unloaded all kinds of pain and sorrow on Martin Luther. They called him a heretic and sought to kill him. Eventually a war broke out, a war that lasted 30 years, then another war 100 years after that. All of Europe was turned upside down and the work of the Reformation went on for 300 years, eventually making its way into colonial America.

In fact, America was founded as a Protestant country. The Pilgrims came to get away from the state church so they could have their own place where they could worship as they chose. That’s what Plymouth Rock was all about.

So fast forwarding, where in all of this do we get to Village Bible Church, to the present? Well, we’re not Lutheran, so we have a problem with Luther but do like a lot of what Luther says. We’re not Presbyterian; we don’t agree with everything John Calvin came up with. We’re not Methodist; we don’t agree with everything John Wesley came up with either. So who’s our guy?

You’ll love our guy. It’s Ulrich Zwingli. You didn’t even know but he’s your guy. You can’t even spell his name. “Where do you go to church?” “I go to Zwingli church.” “Really? What’s the logo like for that one?”

Zwingli said, “I agree with you, Luther, on everything you say, but I have two problems with you. Number one, unlike you, I don’t see anywhere in Scripture where an infant is baptized. The only baptism I see is for people who believe. Believe then baptize. Believe then baptize. Second, Luther, you’re way too close with the Catholics on communion. I believe communion is a memorial, not the actual body and blood. It’s a symbol. Just because Jesus said He’s the vine doesn’t mean He’s a vine. Just because He says He’s the door doesn’t mean He’s a door. Just because He says He’s the Shepherd doesn’t mean He’s an actual shepherd. So when Jesus says, ‘This is My body,’ He’s speaking symbolically.”

These differences brought Luther to the point where he said, “Zwingli, you’re a heretic. Get out of my sight.” Zwingli then started what’s called the Anabaptist movement. It’s the first mention of Baptist, meaning we baptize differently. So maybe you’re new to this church and wondering why we don’t baptize babies. We want to focus on what the Bible says, and the Bible says only believers are baptized. Not babies.

Now, there's a whole lot more I don't have time to address right now. We'll talk more about this when we talk about the ordinances. But this was a big deal. These things are important. You may be saying, "I'm here because I like the music. I'm here because I like the carpeting. I'm here because I like the preacher." But there are a whole lot of reasons why we are today.

So our closest affiliation is that we're Baptist. Let's look at an acronym that might help.

- **B:** We believe in Biblical authority. We don't have a pope. Who's our pope? The Word of God.
- **A:** We believe in the Autonomy of the local church. We're not part of a magisterium. We are our own authority. There are good and bad things that can come with that. We own our own destiny. As long as we follow the Scriptures and do what God says, we have freedom.
- **P:** There's the Priesthood of every believer. There isn't a division between clergy and laity. There are certain things in the Roman Catholic church that only the priest can do. Listen, I can't do anything you can't do; there's nothing special about me. That's a difference between us and Roman Catholicism.
- **T:** We believe in Two ordinances, not a bunch of sacraments. We believe in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholicism believes in a lot of other different things.
- **I:** We believe in Individual soul liberty, meaning the Holy Spirit is in you. You don't need me to tell you what to do. You don't need me to absolve you of your sins; you have freedom because there is one Mediator between God and man, the person Jesus Christ.
- **S:** We believe in a Saved baptized church membership.
- **T:** We have Two offices: elders and deacons. We don't have monsignors, cardinals, bishops, priests, fathers, popes. We have elders and deacons. Why? That's what the Bible says.
- **S:** And we believe in the Separation of church and state. You say, "No, we don't." Yes, we do. We do not want a Catholic government. We don't want a Lutheran government. We don't want a Baptist government. We don't want any church to govern us. What we want is a church that is separate from the government, but a government that allows all churches to do as they believe is right. We want separation.

Thus **BAPTISTS**. We're Baptists, but in name only. Because we are not associated with a Baptist denomination, our name doesn't include that word.

Organizationally

So how are we organizationally to function? Write these down today, then we'll talk about them in the days to come. We are here for these reasons:

We follow the same Lord.

We pursue the same way of life.

We submit to the same qualified leaders.

We partner together as laborers.

Here's why: because the Bible tells us that's how we are to function.

Biblically

This all leads us to our final point, which is understanding the church biblically. Why do we do things this way? Because the Bible tells us so. The Bible tells us three things about the life of the church.

It involves a special Person.

Jesus says this in Matthew 16: "*I will build...*" help me out. What's that little word that comes before "church"? It's not your church or my church. It's His church. Folks, understand this. This is not about you.

So you might judge a church. "Do they sing the songs I want? Do they talk about the things I want? Do they engage in the things I want? Did the place look like I wanted it to? Did it serve the coffee I like? Did they park me where I wanted to park?"

Listen to me—the church isn't about you. It's not about me. It is altogether about Jesus—beginning, middle and end of story. It's all about Him. Make it about Him. Always make it about Him. "I am here, Jesus, because of You. If that guy up front doesn't preach about You, I'm out. If they stop singing about You, I'm out." So we should not determine where we attend church based on times or other personal preferences. It's all about Jesus. This is His church.

It involves a secret plan.

The church is God's secret plan to change the world. Throughout the Old Testament, God was gearing up for the beginning of the church. Ephesians 3:10 says the manifold wisdom of God is being made known to all creation—angels, demons and human beings. How? How does the cosmos know about Jesus? The answer is the church. You cannot have a relationship with Jesus without the church. Why? Because the church is making the world know that Jesus is needed. You cannot separate that. The church is the way God is revealing Himself. God uses creation to reveal Himself and He also uses the church.

It involves a specific purpose.

That means our specific purpose is to make much of Jesus. How will the world know? By the church being the church. By the church doing what the church needs to do. That means we lock our arms together with others and say, "Will you join me in this journey of following Jesus?" As we do that, Jesus says, "This is the last great hope of the world." We're it. There's no Plan B. Jesus has given the church the job of changing lives.

So as the worship team comes and as we close our time by gathering around the Communion Table, what in the world will we think about? We should be asking:

- What is my relationship with this church?
- What's my relationship with the family of God?
- What's my relationship with the body of Christ?
- What's my relationship with the household of God? What's my relationship with the bride of Christ?
- What is my relationship with the flock of God that Jesus laid His life down for?

By "church" I don't mean Village Bible Church *per se*. I mean this church Jesus died for and that we've now heard more about. Is this just a place you go? Is it a place you date? Or is it a relationship you have, such that you love this church and love the people who fill the church, to the same extent that Jesus does? That should be your passion.

So with the time we have left and a few moments for quiet meditation, let me ask do you love this church to the extent that Jesus does? Are you even close to that? If not, what's keeping you from it? Take some time and ask for forgiveness for making the church what it was never intended to be.