

# The Centrality of the Church

Matt. 16:18

**Intro.** This being the first Sunday in November, I want to draw your attention to the second of ten core values our leadership team has identified as vital to the ministries of MBC. By core values we're talking about basic underlying beliefs. Our doctrinal statement defines what we believe the Bible teaches. But core values are guiding principles that direct our behavior and support our purpose and vision. It's unfortunate that political campaigns often focus on everything except what a candidate really believes...his/her core values...how they voted. But core values define who we are. Because our core values derive from God's Word, they're not elastic but consistently applied. As we said last time, "Each core value could be said to represent a hill worth dying on."

Because of their importance, we've provided a bookmark version of our core values at the Welcome Center for those who didn't pick one up last month. We hope you'll keep this bookmark in your Bible and become familiar with these values. If someone asks what your church is about, you can say, this is who we are and these values are most important to us.

So let's consider the second one this AM. **The Centrality of the Church – *The Church is the center of Christ's ongoing redemptive activity in the world.*** If I don't say so myself, the graphic illustrates this value pretty well. The target or focal point of what God is doing today is His Church. The verse we've chosen to support this core value is **Matt. 16:18** where Jesus told Peter, "**...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.**" In this promise, Jesus indicated several things:

- First, He is the builder. Even though Jesus is seated in heaven at His Father's right hand, He is the cornerstone, chief architect and builder of His Church. Christ's handiwork is evident in the lives of all who believe and are saved.
- Second, the Church is built on a solid rock...a foundation that is indestructible and forever. As the old hymn declares, "*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.*"
- Third, the structure Christ is building is a church, singular. The Greek word translated church is *ekklesia* which refers to an assembly of people, not a building or an organization. Believers were first called the church in **Acts 5:11 - Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.**
- Fourth, Jesus indicated ownership of this new entity when He said, it is **my church.**
- Fifth, though greatly opposed and persecuted, the Church will ultimately succeed...because even **the gates of Hades will not overcome it! Amen?** So, if you want to belong to a group that is guaranteed to succeed...trust Christ and become a member of His church!

Instead of a single verse or passage, I want to direct your attention to several verses that support six reasons why we're convinced the Church is the center of God's redemptive program in the world.

## 1. The church is central to God's program because the church is...**The Temple where God is uniquely present**

In 1961 it was widely rumored that Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin peered through the window of his spacecraft and said, "*I don't see any God up here.*" Later inquiries found it was Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev who put words in Gagarin's mouth. Regardless of who said it, in 1963 Russian astronaut Valery Bykovsky told newsmen, "*No Soviet cosmonaut believed in God and none of them had seen anything to change their minds during their space flights.*" To Bible believers, an unseen God comes as no surprise. We know God is Spirit and the Bible says, **no one has ever seen God. – I Jn. 4:12.**

As a Spirit being, God is invisible unless He chooses to reveal Himself. It's sad so many men of science seem unable to detect evidence of God despite the glories of His creation. **Psa. 19:1 - The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.** Those astronauts are as blind as a medical doctor who sees incredible design and denies the existence of the designer.

So where is God? We can't see Him because He is Spirit. The Bible teaches that God is omnipresent which means He is everywhere present at the same time. While all of God is present everywhere, the Bible also says God can be uniquely present in a specific location. Don't ask me to explain that. In the OT, the glory of God was present in the Tabernacle. Because the Tabernacle was portable, it was designed for Israel during the nation's wilderness wanderings and occupation of the land. The word, **tabernacle** means "*place of meeting*" or "**tent of meeting.**" The Tabernacle was unlike any other structure on earth because God was there. For approximately 400 years God chose to reside and to meet with His people in this one holy place.

Later during the reign of King Solomon, the tent of meeting was replaced by a majestic Temple built on a sacred parcel of ground in Jerusalem. Because God was present in His Temple, every Jewish male 20 years of age and older was required to worship there 3 x's each year. In the days of Ezekiel and because of the nation's sins, the Lord abandoned His temple. When Jesus came, He said, **Look, your house is left to you desolate. – Lk.13:35** God's glorious presence was no longer there. Though the Lord turned away from His chosen people, He didn't abandon the world He created. He came to earth in the person of His Son, Jesus. **Jn. 1:14** says, **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** The phrase translated **made His dwelling among us** can literally be translated, "*tabernacled among us.*" But those who already refused the rule of God the Father also rejected the grace of God the Son. After His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus ascended to Heaven where He remains today. But as promised, Jesus sent His Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Today His Spirit lives in all who have trusted Him for salvation.

So where is God today? The answer Scripture provides is very clear. Paul addressed individual believers in **I Cor. 6:19** and said, **Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?** Then viewing believers joined together as the church, he wrote, **And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. - Eph. 2:22 -**

If Google had a Bible voice app and we asked the question, "*Where is God?*" The correct answer would be "*though everywhere present, God inhabits His Church.*" Of all places on earth, God has chosen to reside in the lives of all who believe His Son and are saved. We referred to the first part of **I Jn. 4:12** a few moments ago. Now listen to the whole verse. **No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.** Why is the Church central in the plan of God?...Because God lives in this specific assembly of people. His perfections are witnessed or put on display in and through us. We showcase His glories...especially when we love each other! And this is God's undergirding purpose in the world...to be glorified. **Eph. 1:11, 12 - In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.** So why is the church central in God's program?...because we are His temple...the place where He resides. The Church is God's billboard...His showcase...His trophy cabinet. We display His wisdom, power, love and grace.

**2. The church is central to God's program because the church is...Treasure God desired and purchased at enormous cost**

I'm a sucker for romantic stories. One of my favorite movies is, **Leap Year**. Peggy and I have watched it a dozen times. One scene sums up the story. Anna Brady meets a tall Irish guy in Ireland while hoping to get to her boyfriend in Dublin in hopes he will propose marriage. Because the Irish guy has fallen for her, he asks her a question. *"If somebody hollered fire, what would you grab?"* (In other words, what do you value most...what is most important to you?) Later in the movie, Anna, who is uncertain about her fiancée's love, sets off a fire alarm only to see Jeremy grab his computer.

Back in September we unpacked the parables of **Matt.13**. We found that the parable of the **treasure hidden in the field** refers to Israel. God chose to set His love on this nation. He claims the Jewish people as own special treasure. In the parable that follows, **the pearl** represents the Church. In the first parable Christ is the merchant who sold all He had to purchase the field or the world, so He might have the treasure hidden in the field or Israel. Jesus is again represented by the man in this next parable who sold all He had to purchase the pearl of great value...the Church. The enormous price paid to redeem the world, Israel and the Church involved the sacrifice of His life on Calvary's cross.

These parables and other clear statements in the Bible demonstrate what is most important to God. And that's something I want to know. I want to know what God values most, don't you? I want to know what is most important to the One who gives me air and holds my life in His hands. And wonder of wonders...the Bible says the Lord values you and me above everything else in His creation! Though the universe is destined to be burned, God has snatched us from the flames. He loves us that much. Our challenge is to learn to love this assembly of rescued people as much as Christ does.

John shouts the wonder of God's love in **I Jn. 3:1 - How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!** Our value to God is proved by the enormous price paid to redeem or purchase us for Himself. **I Jn. 4:10** says, **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.** Just ask yourself...how much love was behind the brutal sacrifice of Jesus? Heaven's corridors will resound with songs of wonder / triumph / praise / and thanksgiving as we worship the Savior who purchased us by the sacrifice of His own life. **Rev. 5:9 - And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.**

So the second reason we know the church is central in God's program is because above anything else in His created world, we are the Treasure He loves and purchased for Himself... **I Pet. 2:9 - But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

**3. The church is central to God's program because the church is...Truth and Hope to a perplexed and perishing world**

In **I Tim. 3:15** the Spirit of God inspired Paul to make a remarkable claim. **He wrote, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.** Once again, the church is referred to as **God's household**...the place where God lives. But there's more here. The church is also called **the pillar and foundation of the truth**. Some say this means the Church is the source of truth. But that view is incorrect. God is the source of truth and Jesus is embodiment of **"the truth."** – **Jn. 14:6** Here Paul was affirming the crucial role of the Church as the main support and testimony to God's truth. God has never left the world without a witness to the truth about His love and grace. It may seem arrogant to claim the Church has the truth and everybody outside the Church doesn't. But we didn't say that...God did! Because all the wisdom and knowledge of the Universe resides in Christ (**Col. 2:3**) and Christ lives in this specific assembly of people, the Church is **the pillar of the truth**.

Because we are **the pillar of the truth**, we're also the hope of the world. The flood of information available today is unprecedented! If something around the house breaks, there's sure to be a *youtube* instructional video that shows how to repair it. Information is available for every conceivable subject. Yet despite all of this information, the world is still perplexed and perishing. People are still searching for life's meaning and purpose. Despair has led to an epidemic of suicide. In the last days, the NT says, **though always learning**, many are **never able to acknowledge the truth**. And nothing at all suggests world conditions will improve except for one promise. Jesus said, *"I'm coming back and I'll make all things right."* The sad reality is this...truth is found only in the Savior most want nothing to do with. Yet the mission committed to one specific group on earth is to present Christ to a world that has been deceived and is in serious trouble.

The hope of the world is Jesus. Amen? We are His peace-corps...His ambassadors. **II Cor. 5:17-20** says, **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are there-fore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.** Notice what these verses say. The world will never be right until people are made right with God. As new creations in Christ, we have a new mission as God's ambassadors. As the pillar of the truth we have eternal hope through faith in Christ. So each believer must **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. – I Pet. 3:15**

And the task of world evangelization is taking place just as Christ planned. Our missions conference gave us a small glimpse of what God is doing in the world. Yet none of this could happen apart from hundreds of thousands of local assemblies made up of believers who understand their role as God's ambassadors. So once again, the Church is central to God's program because we represent God's truth and hope to a world that is perplexed and perishing.

#### **4. The church is central to God's program because the church is **The Test Track for spiritual growth and maturity****

God's program for every believer is that we advance toward the goal of Christlikeness. Yet the NT never presents this process happening in isolation from other believers. God designed the church to be the place where faith in Him is strengthened / encouraged / tested / and refined. How could we ever hope to love sinners outside the Church if we can't get along with our brothers and sisters on the inside? That's why we say the Church is the test track...the practice field...the proving ground...the hot house where accelerated growth happens best. Because this is true, **Heb.10:25** says, **Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

In 2002 Bill Hybels wrote... *"There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, and the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. The potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp."*

To become a member of a church is to formally commit to an identifiable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific spiritual purposes. The plan for the Church is detailed throughout the NT epistles. All but just a couple of NT letters were written to local churches.

In the Revelation we find Jesus standing in the midst of seven very imperfect local churches of Asia Minor. The fact that Jesus stands among His churches says it all. You can't even begin to read the NT without realizing how central the church is to God's program.

#### 5. The church is central to God's program because the church is **Tenants whose home is eternal**

In **Acts 15:14** James spoke to the Church at Jerusalem and said...**Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.** This is what God is doing through Christ. He is separating from the Gentile nations a people who are distinctly His.

This reality is enhanced by the fact that the NT identifies the Church as the bride of Christ. And there's no polygamy with God...Jesus has only one bride...the Church. Like the customs of a Jewish wedding, Jesus is legally married to all who trust Him and has promised to return to take us to the place He has prepared for us. In **Jn.14:2, 3** - He said, **"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."** So, the Church is central to God's program because it consists of a distinct assembly of heaven-bound people who belong to Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we're taught not to love the world or hold the things of this life too tightly because they're so temporary. We surrender our lives and our things to Christ for His purposes. Like Abraham, we're looking beyond this temporary place to another place...an eternal place. **Phil. 3:20** says, **our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.** Though temporary residents on earth our true home and eternal citizenship is in heaven. We are earthly tenants en route to an eternal address. When there's only one flight off an island that's about to be wiped out by an erupting volcano, you don't want to miss that flight! The crowd headed for the airstrip is one crowd I want to be part of. Taken from earth's population, the Church is an assembly of people going somewhere. We're destined for an eternal home in the presence of God. Only one group on earth can make this claim. It's the legitimate claim of all who are saved by grace.

#### 6. The church is central to God's program because the church is **The Target of Satanic attack**

A final reason we know the Church is the center of God's program is increasingly apparent. It was illustrated by the video we saw just before the message. More of our brothers and sisters in Christ have been martyred in the last century than in every preceding century combined! The number is staggering. Yet what we see today is just the prelude to the wholesale slaughter of believers prophesied to take place in the Great Tribulation.

But ask yourself...why is there so much animosity aimed at Christianity? Why are Christians being singled out in every sector of society? Why did that gunman in Oregon fatally shoot those who refused to deny their faith in Christ? Why is there such animosity and hatred the Bible and followers of Christ? The answer emerges from a principle we've considered previously. It's a principle that goes like this... *"Wherever God expresses a choice, Satan commences a conflict."* What nation on earth has had more trouble than Israel? Why?...because God expressed a choice. He chose Israel to be His very own. Why was Jesus hated, rejected and crucified?...because God expressed a choice. He said, *"This is my chosen One."* Why are followers of Christ hated and martyred?...because God has chosen us to belong to Him. We bow to no king but Jesus. The arch enemy of God is the true active force behind the hatred of Christ, burning of churches and persecution of believers. It's not the most pleasant line of reasoning, but we can be sure we're engaged in what is most important to God if Satan and the world are against us.

Paul implied this in **Phil. 1:27, 28** when he wrote, **Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God.** In that last line, Paul said opposition and persecution is a sign that your life is right with God and you in fact, will be saved by Him. Yet listen to what Paul wrote to the Church at Rome. **Rom. 16:20 - The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.**

So these are six reasons among others, why we believe the Church is the center of God's purposes in the world. The church is the Temple where God is uniquely present / the Treasure God desired for Himself and purchased at enormous cost / The truth and Hope to a perplexed and perishing world / The Test Track for spiritual growth and maturity / Tenants whose home is eternal / The Target of Satanic attack. Because this is one of our core values...we firmly encourage every believer to be actively involved in and committed to a local church that preaches God's Word and exalts the Lord Jesus Christ.