

## I. Intro

A. Today I want to talk about the church. C.S. Lewis once argued that best way to defend the Bible is to act as if it's a caged lion – which means you defend it by opening the cage and getting out of the way. The point is, the Bible can defend itself.

B. On many days, I feel that way about the church. Open to door and let it out to love and serve and many of the arguments surrounding her will go away. But not always. The church is complicated because she has both a glorious and a troubled past.

C. On the one hand, you have Christians working for the common good. The church has been the driving force in promoting literacy and founding schools. The church has been the driver behind higher education, orphanages, shelters and hospitals. Christians are the ones most likely to give away their money and volunteer their time. We don't need to make good things up.<sup>1</sup>

1. When you look at who flies over to Africa to dig wells, who staffs health clinics in India or fights sex trafficking in East Asia, you'll find it is mostly Christians. Not exclusively. Do not hear that. But as Nick Kristoff – who does not think highly of Christianity – has said in recent years. I can't get past the energy Christians invest in helping others. There is a lot to celebrate.

D. But on the other hand, we have: The Crusades, the Inquisition, southern churches defending slavery, sexual scandals and subsequent cover-ups and more. There are times when the church ignored the teaching of Christ. Those who want to throw stones have more than a few stones to choose from. I regularly hear:

1. The church is dated. It's full of hypocrites. It's on the wrong side of history. It's part of the problem.

2. The church is oppressive and misogynist. The people are poorly educated, small-minded and easily led.

3. Institutionalized faith is yesterday's story. People today are spiritual but not religious. They may like Jesus but they want nothing to do with the church.

E. This week Richard Dawkins, the British academic who is famously hostile to all religion, was kicked off Berkeley's campus for disparaging Islam. I watched an interview and he did note that he spends most of his time criticizing Christianity, and does not get disinvited for that. But then he issues one of his blanket condemnations, saying: "religion flies planes into buildings but science flies rockets to the moon."

F. My first reaction was to say. Two can play that game. "Religion gives us Mother Theresa and science gives us mustard gas."<sup>2</sup> But that doesn't help us see the truth. We need to own our mistakes.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason so many hospitals are called St. Lukes or Saint Josephs is because the people who initially said, "We need to care for the sick" were Christians. In the US today, at least 30 communities are only served by Catholic hospitals. Of the first 30 colleges in the United States, 219 were started by the church. Today, over 70 percent of all private schools are run by the church.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Michael Ward for this note. "A Time to Scatter Stones and a Time to Gather Stones Together," *Imprimis*, July / August 2017.

1. Over the last two thousand years the church has done quite a few stupid, selfish and horrific things. I know, in part because I did some of them myself.
2. I personally have done things I shouldn't have and not done things we have been called to do.
3. When critics come out firing against the church, I often say, "Time out. As many bad things as you can say about the church, I can say more! After all, I've been on the inside for nearly forty years. I not only know where the bodies are buried. I buried some of them myself.

II. But that is only part of the story.<sup>3</sup>

A. The church has done a lot of good:

1. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand's novel, she sets out to show what society would look like if all the entrepreneurs got fed up with the regulatory state and went away. In the 1,000 pages that follow, she describes the collapse of society.
2. It's made me wish someone would write, *Jesus Shrugged*. I'd like someone to explain what things would look like without the church.
3. I have been around the last few weeks, working on budgets and plans and performance reviews – but I did take one week and go to Portland as the guest of a science foundation that helped fund some of the research for the book I wrote on the future. And while I was there they were quite taken with the results of a study they had funded that revealed that a big percentage of the homeless in this country are being taken care of by churches.
4. And another study out of Nashville that showed that most people had no idea that churches ran programs: helping the poor prepare their taxes, providing foster care, teaching English to immigrants, teaching job skills, caring for prisoners and more – and, and this is what got my attention, it wasn't just the general public that didn't know. Many people had no idea what the church they attended was doing.<sup>4,5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the criticism that is inaccurate comes from within the church itself. During an interview with the Washington Post, Ed Stetzer – a pastor and Wheaton College professor – was asked, "Why do you evangelicals love to make up and say such bad things about yourselves?" He goes on to note that tragically the comments are neither grounded in humility nor humor, but reflect a sense from within the church that the church is in worse shape and doing less good than the facts suggest. (Bradley R.E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites... and Other Lies You've Been Told*, Bethany House, 2010, forward.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Smietana, "Good Deeds Done by Christians Often Go Unseen," Lifeway.

<sup>5</sup> Back in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Enlightenment thinking – the Enlightenment was the movement that "dethroned God and replaced him with man and reason." As Enlightenment thinking carried us into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many pundits were saying, "Finally, Christianity is being set aside by reason, rationalism will rule and everything is going to be good and wonderful. All our problems are going to go away." You should go back and read this stuff. The promise was that we were all going to hold hands and share everything we had while sing songs about love and peace." And Nietzsche said, "You guys are idiots." It will take a few years, but as faith in Christ fades, the world will get darker and uglier. And what we got was two World Wars, oppressive governments, the Holocaust and ugliness at entirely new levels.

5. The church – not buildings but people who say, “I’m with Jesus and I’m going to do my best to apply what he taught and modeled” – the church has been a force for the common good.
- B. And the church is doing better than you might think. You do not read about any of this in the papers. Most of the coverage you see suggests that Christianity is in full scale retreat, collapsing on every front. Not so.
1. There will still be tens of millions more people in church this weekend than will go to the movies or attend a sporting event.
  2. And though the church is declining in the West – the US and Western Europe – it is surging ahead almost everywhere else in the world. In fact, one of the church’s chief critics recently complained that the church is, “the most powerful political, social, cultural, economic and intellectual institution in the world.”<sup>6</sup>
  3. There are churches in one hundred thousand villages that do not have a McDonalds, Starbucks or Walmart.
  4. And that the church creates more volunteers than anyone else.<sup>7</sup>
- C. And the Church is doing a lot of good. In fact, not long before his death in 2005, Peter Drucker, who argued that while the most significant sociological phenomenon of the first half of the 20th century was the corporation. The most significant of the second half of the 20th century was the advancement of the church. Went on to say, “It is the only organization that is actually working in our society.”
- D. From time to time I’ve paraded the good things that are happening here because of your time, effort and money.
1. The CARS ministry providing cars and car repair for single Moms;
  2. The HOGS teams doing home repair for shut ins;
  3. The Justice Center provides legal counsel out of the Grayslake campus;
  4. The Jobs Initiative is working to expand employment in North Chicago;
  5. I can go on talking about Matthew Homes, Changing Closets and North Chicago Community Partners, and MOPS and I haven’t even mentioned the primary ministries like Saint James and others.
- E. And we are just one of 300,000 churches in the United States.
- F. I get letters. It doesn’t feel appropriate to publish them, but I get letters from people saying, “thank you thank you thank you.

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<sup>6</sup> Bart Erhman

<sup>7</sup> Speaking at Davos a few years back, Rick Warren told the attendees, “I could take you to ten million villages in the world. There is nothing in them but a church. The church has more locations than Wal-Mart and Starbucks and everything else combined. It also has more volunteers. The church was global 200 years before anybody started talking about globalization. Nothing has as many people groups, operates in as many languages or has as many contacts as the church.” *The Future of Evangelicals: A Conversation with Pastor Rick Warren*, Friday, Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

1. Not long ago it was a single Mom struggling on every front asking for help. This week I got letters from several government officials and community groups thanking us for the serving you did.
  - G. I keep most of these because there are times when I think we are not making a difference. I want to be reminded that we are. (Pull out folder).
- III. My decision to be a Christ follower was grounded in Christ himself.
- A. I eventually decided that there is no one like him. He was the most significant person who ever lived. The greatest teacher and the most amazing leader. Between that and the way he lived and fulfilled prophecy I decided to go all in.
  - B. The chief reason I believe is that there is no one like Jesus.
  - C. But I'll be honest, the church inspires me as well. She is an unmatched vehicle for hope and redemption. It is a privilege to be a part of God's work
- IV. So, why am I telling you all of this?
- A. In two weeks we launch our fall series. As in the past, we've done a lot to make it a great way for you to dust off the summer and jump back in.
    1. We've written daily devotions that tie in with the sermon series;
    2. We are launching new small groups at all three campuses;
    3. We have filmed video support to kick start small group discussions.
    4. We want you to invite your friends and jump in. We want you to start new small groups, revitalize old ones, sign up for the devotion. We want you to go "All In."
    5. That is in two weeks. Between now and then I want you to think about the church.
- V. I am doing this because I realized that I needed to.
- A. I've been in an ongoing conversation with someone who shares few of my assumptions about the church. In fact, he shares few of my assumptions about anything. And while he didn't directly ask, "Why are you wasting your life working at a church?" he asked that question all the same. And I realized I needed to go on the offensive – and make the case in a way he could hear.
  - B. When I look around at what is going on – the way society is being pulled apart – I think, this is one of those times where following Christ is mission critical. It is the way forward.
  - C. I also ended up here because we are doubling down on the church. As I have been writing and saying and trying to get in front of people, we recently updated our new mission and vision.

1. In the series that starts on Sept. 2 & 3 I'll be unfolding both our new mission statement - which is, "to help people discover life with God" – and also our new vision, which is "To fuel a movement that Reaches People and Renews Communities."<sup>8</sup> I want to be sure you realize that the church is at the center.

D. Between now and 2020 we want:

1. Baptize 500 people
2. Tally 100,000 service hours
3. And we want to do this primarily through the front door of the church. We think this is God's plan. In fact, we want to help start ten new communities of faith, hope and love based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Six overseas through our global partners and 3 in the area. I am jazzed. Next week I'll tell you a bit more about why.

VI. But let me step back and get a running start. What is the church?<sup>9</sup>

A. If you listen carefully today you realize that the word is used in a variety of ways

1. Some use it to refer to a building. "Go two blocks and turn left at 'the church.'" Some use it to refer to a worship service. "We missed you at church last week." It can be used to refer to a legal entity that has leaders, budgets and programs. "The church is running a deficit." Some use the word to refer to a community of people – the church really helped us through a difficult time in our marriage last year.

B. When theologians get involved they multiply the complexity,<sup>10</sup> making distinctions between: the visible and invisible church;<sup>11</sup> the local and the universal church; the church triumphant, the church militant and the church latent.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> If you have been around, you realize that this is not very different from the vision we adopted 15 years ago. Shortly after I became senior pastor we said: we want to Proclaim the Good News – which sounds a lot like Reach People; and that we want to Engage in Good Works – which sounds a lot like Renew Communities.

<sup>9</sup> A few years ago, I got a panicked call from the pastor of a church not that far from here. We'd met a couple of times, but I knew very little about him or the church he served. So, I was a little surprised when he called me saying, "I need your help. We're being shut down" Can you please come right away. I need help." Given the panic in his voice, I drove right over. I was expecting some kind of freedom of speech issue. I expected to find the sheriff and the ACLU and some challenges concerning religious liberties. When I got there, there were a half dozen other pastors gathered. And though it took a while to get find out what was happening, what we eventually learned was that: the church was down to 30 people and a group of those thirty were trying to force him out. And what they were fighting over was the building. In his mind, the church was a building. Now, he was not the first or last to make this mistake.

<sup>10</sup> In the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the church comprises "the whole number of elect, that have been, are or shall be, gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof," (25.1)

<sup>11</sup> The Visible Church is made up of "the faithful throughout the world who outwardly profess faith, together with their children. (25.2)

<sup>12</sup> The church triumphant refers to those who have already lived and died and who are now in heaven, forming the company of just men made perfect but who are still waiting for their resurrection body which will be given to them at the consummation of the Kingdom. The church militant is that part of the church who are now

C. And these spins hardly begin to exhaust the options.<sup>13</sup> I have a file with about thirty different definitions of the word.<sup>14</sup>

D. If you turn to the New Testament for a specific definition, you eventually realize that you are not going to find one.

1. The Greek term that we translate church is the word, *ecclesia*, which means assembly or gathering. It was not a religious term when Jesus started using it. It had more political overtones than anything else. He reached back into ancient Greek writings and pulls out this term.<sup>15</sup> And it's first use is in the text that was read earlier, when he says:

a) "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

2. Which is true, by the way. It was an audacious statement. Jesus is surrounded by a bunch of "also-rans." Looking at the disciples does not lead you to think they are going to launch the enterprise that will become the largest, most significant, most global, longest lasting organization in the world.

3. We tend to think that Jesus is good but not smart. That's a big miss. Jesus is not just amazing for his insights and his example and his death, he's a more impressive entrepreneur and leader than Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, or whoever.

E. As we read further in the New Testament we get more detail about the church. In the Book of Acts we see that it pivots around four things: teaching; prayer; fellowship; and the breaking of Bread (or sacraments)

F. But we do not get a crisp definition. Instead, the Bible ends up describing the church using metaphors – word pictures.

VII. I want to set a few of these in front of you, because a more complete picture emerges as we come at this from multiple angles.

A. The Family of God:

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living by faith in the world, serving Christ. And the church latent refers to those people who have not yet placed their faith in Christ but who will

<sup>13</sup> Others write about the church as: a disruptive voice advocating justice for the poor and oppressed. I heard undertones of this two weeks ago when one of the refrains issued was to step up and be a rebel, a fighter and a champion of change. Recently I have been taken by the idea that the church is a multiplying community of grace, hope and love based on the life and work of Jesus.

<sup>14</sup> A colony of heaven in the country of death; A strategy of the Holy Spirit for giving witness to the already inaugurated kingdom of God (Eugene Peterson);" A global humanitarian effort designed to promote reconciliation, equip leaders, assist the poor and care for the sick ;

<sup>15</sup> At the time Jesus first used it, there was nothing religious about the term. In fact, it shows up in Acts 19 twice, once to describe a rioting mob and a second time to describe a civic assembly. See Acts 19:32 and 19:38f

1. In John 1 we are told that if we accept Jesus, we are adopted into his family. We become His children. The idea of a family is interesting for a few reasons. It's immediately obvious that being in a family isn't something you earn. Nor is it something that you can get fired from. It's a community of grace.

2. Twenty years ago, one of my favorite cartoons was Kudzu. It made a bit of fun over Southern culture, but it was mostly about the challenges of being a 15 year old clueless boy - naming him after the weed that was taking over the south at the time. One of the side characters was a sane ten year old boy, whose father was a CEO – the classic greedy capitalist baron – and whose sister was a prima donna. One of the ongoing themes was that the father kept trying to fire his son. The point is, that can't happen. That is not the way a family works. You do not earn your way in, you are in.

3. The poet Robert Frost said that your family is the place where, “if you have to go to them they have to take you in.”

4. A secondary point about family is that it's a cross section of people. One writer said, “The quick and the slow. The wealthy and the struggling. The athletic and the disabled. Uncle Charles, who drinks too much and can't hold a job and cousin Bill, who wreaks havoc most times he walks into a room. There is no drumming them out. They are one of us.”

5. “Failure does not cancel our membership.”<sup>16</sup>

6. So, a family is not a merit based group, but a grace-based one.

B. A second metaphor for the church that is developed in the Bible is the Body of Christ

1. In I Cor. 12 Paul talks about how we are all different parts.

2. More forceful, I think, is not just that the church acts like a body, but that it is Christ's body. At the time of his conversion, Paul is knocked down and he hears Jesus say, “why are you trying to persecute me?”

3. Paul asks some questions about this because he did not think he had been attacking Jesus. But what he hears is that any attack on a Christ follower was an attack on Jesus. We become part of his body.<sup>17</sup>

C. We get a similar vibe in Revelation where the church is described as The Bride of Christ:

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<sup>16</sup> Yancey, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus further develops this in Matthew 25:40, where he says: Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

1. In Revelation 21, the Apostle John describes a vision of the future. In particular, he describes a day when God recreates the cosmos for his people to enjoy in perfection forever. It's an amazing vision. But please do not miss this. One of the most startling things he does is describe the church – which he refers to as “The New Jerusalem” as Jesus’s bride. I’m reading, Rev. 21:1: Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.
2. John has already told us in John 19 that Jesus is the groom.
3. “If you want to understand how committed Jesus is to the church, here’s your answer. He doesn’t just create it and let it be. He marries it. He is not just our almighty King; He is our perfect Husband. That’s how much concern he has for every member of his church. That’s how much he cares about the local church. That is how committed he is to us, forever.”<sup>18</sup>

VIII. There are other metaphors I hear people use that I like. These are not found in the Bible but I think they help.

A. The first is the local bar.

1. In his book, *The Church: Why Bother*, Philip Yancey says that while he can come up with many possible metaphors for the church, such as God’s welfare office - an institution set up to heal the blind, feed the hungry and bring Good News to the poor – he favors the neighborhood bar.
2. I really like that analogy because, back in the 80s I used to watch Cheers. And I was always taking by the song, “Sometimes you want to go, where everybody knows your name. And they’re always glad to you came. You want to go where people know, their troubles are all the same. You want to go where everyone knows your name.”
3. If you watched the show – with Sam Malone and Fraiser Crane and Cliff Claven and Norm – you know that this was an odd collection of people – but they were real and honest and they cared for each other.<sup>19</sup>

B. A Field Hospital

1. In his book, called *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World*, William Cavanaugh develops this idea. He likes the idea of a field hospital because it suggests a place that is in the middle of the action and designed to heal.

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<sup>18</sup> Allberry, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Yancey says, I like to think of the church as “a hangout like the television show Cheers for people who know all about your lousy boss, your mother with heart trouble back in North Carolina, and the teenager who will not do what you tell him; the church is the place where you can unwind, spill your life story, and get a sympathetic look, not a self-righteous leer.”  
Yancey, p. 67.

2. It recognizes that people are hurting, and it puts itself in harm's way in order to help.
- C. Aircraft Carrier
1. The one I have focused on over the last ten years is an Aircraft Carrier. For a while it was common to refer to denigrate the church by suggesting it was either a big battle ship fighting culture wars or a cruise ship full of people who are being pampered with an easy life and lots of food.
  2. I like the idea of an aircraft carrier because it suggests that – like fighter pilots – we all have assignments. We do them, coming back to the ship for refueling, rest, and new instructions.
  3. And since then, I have gone back to watch and re-watch the first few minutes of Top Gun – where there are no words, just the set up for launching a jet. I do think, that is what we are trying to do.
- IX. There are other metaphors and definitions.<sup>20</sup>
- A. And it needs to be said that, no church I know of fulfills the promise of all the metaphors mentioned here. And in fact, many fall well short – they operate like private clubs designed to serve the members.
  - B. But what I want to say as I close is, there is nothing like the local church when she is true to her call, and that is the plan.
  - C. I hope you are ready to go “all in.” I hope you are ready to double down. Because that is what we are called to do and be.

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<sup>20</sup> A multiplying community of grace, hope and love that is based on the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ. The church is a disruptive force that will challenge power and be challenging. A movement – a gathering in a certain location of God's people, who are meeting in his presence to hear and respond to His word.