

I. Intro

A. About ten years ago we attended an orientation for a travel soccer team for one of our boys. He'd been invited to join the team. Sheri said that the coach had called, and that in order for him to join the team we both had to be at this meeting. That didn't make a lot of sense to me. It should have. But it didn't. I walked in quite naive about what was about to happen. But I wasn't clueless long.

B. After 30 seconds of welcome and introduction, the coach – who had played professional soccer in Europe – said, “I want to start the year by being very clear. If you decide to have your son join this organization, it must become your family's highest priority. Not just for him, but for you. This team – it's practices and games – must be more important and a higher priority than any other team. Higher than any other sport. Higher than school. Higher than vacation. Higher than your job. This is what is expected and required.”

C. I looked at Sheri and said, “There is no way we are agreeing to this. Let's leave.”

D. I was mad. She urged calm. We agreed to stay. And during it I found myself shifting from anger to amazement and then – to be honest – admiration. This guy had guts. He had clear priorities, he knew what mattered (to him anyway) and he was willing to demand people step up. I thought, “This guy's priorities are wacko, but the church needs more guys like this.”

E. Today I want to borrow some of his bravado to make a case: you need to be all in with God.

II. Last week I noted that, 2,000 years ago, a first century Jewish rabbi changed just about everything. Jesus Christ was – and is – God. He has always been God. He existed as God from eternity past. Two thousand years ago he showed up in the flesh. And the combination of how he lived, what he taught and what he did was so revolutionary that history remains divided by his life.

A. I then noted that, in addition to all of the other amazing things he said and did, he launched a movement called “the church.”

1. Matthew 16 reports his first mention of the idea.

2. The Greek term he used was *ekklesia* – which did not refer to a building or a worship service. It was an obscure political term used to describe a gathering of people who shared some common convictions and a common assignment

B. I went on to note:

1. That the church is not principally a building, a worship service or an institution, it's a collection of people called out by God to carry out his mission.

2. That Jesus not only founded and commissioned the church, he promised that it was going to kick down the walls of hell.

3. I noted that four things need to be in place for a gathering of people to be a church: teaching, prayer, fellowship and the sacraments.

4. I admitted that, in spite of all of the lofty language from God about the church, it has done some stupid and tragic things over time – the Crusades, Inquisition and ugly things like that. There have been times when those claiming to be following Christ head in the exact opposite direction.

5. But I also argued that the church has also been a driver of the common good – that, historically, those involved in the church have been the drivers of literacy, shelters, orphanages, hospitals, food banks and education and more.

6. And I further marveled that, though the early leadership was not very impressive, and just about everyone – from the Roman Emperors on down – lined up to wipe it out, the church has not only survived, but today it's the oldest, largest, most geographically and ethnically diverse, and most significant organization on the planet.

C. Finally, in the last part of the message I noted that the church ends up being described by a dazzlingly array of metaphors. We looked at three found in the Bible - family of God; body of Christ and bride of Christ. And several outside it: local bar, field hospital and aircraft carrier.

D. My goal was to get you to take a new look at the church.

E. Today I am going to argue that the soccer coach had the right idea – we need to have priorities. Some things need to matter more than others. The coach was out of line for suggesting that a ten year's old soccer team was the most important thing in the world. But he is right in pointing out that we need focus. This morning my argument is that God is the coach we need to listen to – and we need his priorities to be our own. And that almost certainly means, we need to make some adjustments to our schedules.

III. Before we jump in, let me tie up a few loose ends:¹

A. For starters, I want to stress that the church is not a collection of people who are better than others.

1. Some make this claim. Others think Christians make this claim. But it's not an idea we get from the Bible.

2. When I meet with my Hindu or Muslim neighbors, or talk with an atheist, I am under no illusion that I'm a better person than they are – a better husband, a better father, a kinder person, smarter or that somehow I have greater value.

3. The Biblical claim is two fold:

a) That I am forgiven on the basis of what Jesus did.

b) And that, with Christ, a better version of me emerges.

4. There are more than a few Christians who need to get this memo because they suggest that they are better than others.

B. Second, please understand that God's plan for you is based on his love for you. Don't think of his call to be the church as an assignment, think of it as an opportunity.

1. Walking through life with other Christians – along the pathway laid out by Jesus – is the best plan you are going to find. If we had perfect understanding and the will and ability to do the right thing all the time, the path God lays out is the path we'd follow.

2. God is for you. He loves you. He wants you to be part of his family and part of his unfolding plans.

C. Third, I am stressing all of this because you have options. Boy howdy do you have options. Options are what characterize life today.

1. With money comes choices and with choices comes ... stress. Because we cannot do it all. As a result, we feel overwhelmed. The way forward is to say no to lots of things. But we are not very good at that.

2. I am saying all of this because, right now is signup time. The options are going to assault you. I believe you need to lean in with God. I believe the way forward is a deeper connection with God. That requires certain things. The choices are yours to make.

3. God has set out a path and invited us to follow. You do not have to follow it, though I hope you will.

D. OK, well, today I want to make seven points. I want to argue that you should go all in for the church for six different reasons.

IV. Number One: Because the church is God's plan.

A. The church is not my idea. It wasn't the disciples' idea. It isn't an organization that emerged during the Middle Ages, the church is God's idea. It is his plan.

1. He has a mission – to bring His Kingdom, to save the lost, to restore the world – and the church (you and me) empowered by his Spirit – are expected to carry out the plan. God's plan is that His agenda is principally advanced as his people create these multiplying communities of grace, hope and love that are based on the life and teaching of Christ.²

B. Last week I noted that many people think God is good but they often also think that He is not very smart. That they know better. I've been in that camp. I'm not any more. Whenever I think I know better than God I stop and realize that is what I'm thinking and I double down on His plan and our assignment.

C. For starters, the first reason you should double down on the church – go All In – is because the church is God's plan. It's His Plan A and there is no Plan B, because Plan A is going to work.

V. Number Two: It's a good plan.

A. For starters, we should note that it's been working for 2,000 years. For 2,000 years the church has soldiered on. It has survived against great odds. There were times when it looked like it would not work.

1. For the first 300 years, it was illegal to be a Christian, and most of Rome was lined up against Jesus and his followers. But it was Rome that fell. Marxists set out to wipe out Christianity in China and Russia – but in both cases the church persevered.

2. G.K. Chesterton wrote that, "On five occasions it was stated that the church had gone to the dogs. But on each occasion, it was the dogs who died."

B. This is not insignificant. When I was a management consultant, I ran across a list of the Fortune 500 from ten years earlier, and I was shocked to realize how many prominent companies had cratered. They were sure bets. Blue Chip stocks. They would be around forever. Compaq, Polaroid, Blockbuster, EF Hutton, MCI, Pan Am, Woolworths. They didn't make it fifty years. Meanwhile, after two thousand years the church is still growing.

C. Why: It's God's plan and it's a good plan.

1. This is one of the reasons why we have restated our vision to read: we want to fuel a movement that reaches people and renews communities – which is all about seeing churches grow.
2. This is why we are committed to helping other churches grow.

VI. Number Three: The third reason you should go all in is because Jesus alone has the words of eternal life

- A. Towards the end of John 6, Jesus ups the ante for following him. The crowds have been getting bigger and bigger, because he has been healing people, feeding them, performing miracles. He has been advertising the upsides of following him. But then, as he will do on a couple other occasions, he gives the same talk the soccer coach gave. He talks about the costs and lots of people leave.
- B. And at that point he turns to the disciples and says, “What about you? What are you going to do?” And in John 6:68, Simon answers, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”
- C. Following Jesus – being part of his family, his body, being the church - is the right choice for today and for eternity.
- D. A plan doesn’t have to be perfect to work – which is a good thing because no church is perfect. And if you find a perfect church do not join it. Because as soon as you do, you’ll ruin it.
- E. A plan doesn’t have to be perfect, but it needs to be better than others. And when it comes to eternal life, I would submit that we do not have any other viable options.
- F. And this is why seeing churches expand is so critical. Lacking a church is not the equivalent of lacking a grocery store or movie theater. It’s like lacking a hospital or clean water. Areas need going, growing, Gospel-saturated churches.

VII. Number Four: You need to invest in the church because we need each other

- A. I beat this drum all the time. It’s a hobby horse for me because, for a longtime I didn’t get it. Like many other people – especially men – I kept busy at wor. And I had lots of work colleagues and I didn’t get the difference between a colleague and a friend. I didn’t see the need for others. It took a pretty direct conversation from my wife for me to finally see the obvious.
- B. I now see it much more clearly.
 1. As I’ve said before, I started to see it when I would visit people at the hospital and notice big differences in how they were being supported by others.
 2. I then experienced it first hand when I was in the hospital for six weeks and saw what kind of support network I had – starting with my family, for sure. But going on beyond that. And realizing that this wasn’t the norm.
 3. In recent years, I have become more aware of it in conversations with men who retire. And they often call to have lunch, and they either tell me or their wife calls and tells me, “He has no hobbies and no friends. He needs something to do or I am going to kill him.”
 4. I also have come to realize that for all of the upside technology brings our way, it tends to isolate us from each other.

C. Men and women, the Christian life is impossible on your own. The New Testament contains a list of marching orders for us, many which require other people. Think about it. We are told to:

1. Love one another
2. Serve one another
3. Be devoted to one another
4. Care for one another
5. Confess our sins to one another

D. We cannot be a Christ follower alone.³ We need – you need – the church.

VIII. Number Five: The fifth reason you should invest your life in the church is because it's a great investment. Nothing will ever pay higher returns than the kingdom of God

A. There are a couple ways to think about this. One is the economic value of a church.

B. A few years ago, an econ professor at the University of Pennsylvania set out to measure the value to Philly of twelve congregations – 10 Protestant, one Roman Catholic and 1 Jewish synagogue. He devised 54 value categories and measured the economic “halo effect.” To his surprise, his team of researchers determined that the annual value to Philly of those 12 congregations, was over \$50M annually, and that the value of a congregation of 200 was about \$1.5M.⁴

C. But when I say the church is a great investment I mean something different. Occasionally hear people lament not buying McDonalds in the 60s; Walmart in the 70s; Microsoft in the 80s; Starbucks in the 90s; Google or Netflix ten years ago or Bitcoin ten months ago.

D. There is always some stock that has shot up. And people say, “If only...” No! Stop focusing on returns on invest that will only pay out for the next fifty years and start focusing on returns for the next 50,000.

E. If Jesus is who He claims to be, then you are going to live forever. And you need to look past retirement and store up treasure in heaven, where moth and rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot break in and steal. You want to go all in for the Kingdom of God.

F. All of this leads to the sixth reason I'll list.

IX. Number Six: The sixth reason to invest in the church is because, if the church doesn't thrive nothing else has a chance. This argument is developed in a number of different ways:

A. In a book critiquing higher education, Charles Malik, a Lebanese academic with a PhD from Harvard (a man who not only helped the UN draft its statement about human rights but who later served as the President of the UN itself), argued that society is made up of seven institutions: the family, state, business, university, media, church and the professions.⁵ He went on to argue that for the other six to work, the church needs to thrive.

B. Some of our Founding Fathers made related statements. For instance, John Adams said: Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

1. Which could be updated this way: If people do not develop some kind of fear of God, society will be unable to hire enough police to keep people in line.

C. Os Guinness makes the same point when he speaks about the Golden Triangle, arguing that what has set America apart is a vibrant church, which has led to virtuous people, which has allowed for greater freedoms. He notes that Freedom requires virtue; virtue requires faith; faith requires freedom. And of course, faith must be nurtured and cultivated – thus a church.

X. Finally, Number Seven: The last reason I will set before you for going All In this fall is because: the church will win. God is going to win. He will prevail.

A. I know some people think that things are spinning out of control. And there are plenty of a lot of disappointing things happening out there right now – on both the national and the international front. But this is not at all of of line with what we were told would happen. Read the Book. This world is broken, but Christ’s victory is certain. You have a chance to play for the winning team in the contest that matters most.

XI. Let me start to wrap things up by trying to put a sharper point on all of this.

A. Let me start by noting that I went down this path because on more than one occasion I have wondered if this was the right plan. Even more than that, I have thought that the church was a bad plan.

1. I’m not just talking about when I was young and my parents made me attend church. I’ve shared about all my ways of avoiding going to church or how, having been taken there I jumped out the second floor window to escape; and how Scott Reynolds, Doug Murdock and I lead a coup in our fifth grade Sunday School class.

2. For that matter, I’m not talking about waking up on a Sunday morning and thinking, “You know, what I really want to do is sleep in, or go for a run, or get a bagel and the NYT and sit on the back deck reading the paper.

3. I’m talking about the feeling I’ve had when the things I’m working on are not working or “the church” is underfunded or we are overwhelmed with hurting people, and I’ve thought, “God, it seems to me like you could have come up with a better plan! Having a bunch of selfish, broken, people get together to try and love and serve others into submission, well, it seems to me like you didn’t’ think this through.

4. But then I see it work. I see hurting people helped. I watch people change and grow. And I realize the genius of his plan. It’s not perfect because we are not perfect. But the plan is idiot proof. It does work as we lean in.

B. And then let me circle back to note, some of this is a simple matter of choosing from between options. We’ve got options. We’ve always had options, but now we really have them. Our lives are flooded with options. Way more than we can take in. We cannot do everything. We have to pick and choose. We have to say no to a lot more things than you say yes to. Are you committed to directing your time to the things that really matter?

1. Three years ago I read that Netflix viewing went up by 20 billion hours between 2014 and 2015. Last month Time reported that Netflix viewing went up by over seven trillion minutes between June 2016 and June 2017.
 2. Maybe that's not your thing. Maybe it's golf not TV. Or it's sleeping in. Or it's doing some other really good things. I am doing my best impression of the soccer coach and saying: God – and his plan – need to be a priority.
- C. I am not promising easy. Church will be messy and hard. It will require effort and sacrifice. It has always been that way and it will be that way until He returns.
- D. But I believe going All In is your best bet.
- XII. Next week we start our fall series. We want this to be easy and clear.
- A. We are encouraging you to do three things:
1. Pick a service – there are nine to choose from across the three sites. Make showing up a priority – even if it's hard.
 2. Second, pick a group: We have men's groups, women's groups, couples' groups. There are groups that meet in the early morning, during the day or in the evening. There are groups meeting at each of the three campuses.
 3. Third, find a way to serve others. There are lots of serving opportunities inside the church and the world is full of them as well. Find some way to intentionally and consistently use who you are to love and care for others.
- B. You can sign up on line for any of these things. Do it today.
- C. While you are there, please note that among the extra supports for this series we have daily devotions available on line that will link to the sermons. They will start a week from Monday.
- D. And don't forget to invite someone to join you. Over the summer we have been encouraging you to BLESS your neighbors
1. Begin with prayer
 2. Listen to them
 3. Eat with them
 4. Serve them
 5. And finally, to share with them.
- E. It might not be time to make the ask for them to join your small group or come with you to church, but maybe it is. I know some of you have told me that you are teed up. I am personally planning to make five asks.
- F. The Discover Life with God series that starts next week is a great series to invite others to attend.
- G. By the way, just to make it easy, we have gifts for you to give them.
1. They are mugs with postcards in them about the series.
 2. Next week we'll make these available for everyone. This week we are encouraging you to take one if you are going to use it to invite someone. Give them the mug.
 3. Hey, take two if you are ready to invite two people to attend.

XIII. OK, well, we turn now to the table. I gave you a half dozen reasons why you need to go All in as it relates to God’s church.

- A. Ultimately, the church is unique because our Savior is unique. There’s no one like him, and we are all in because he was the first to go all in.
- B. Let me pray that the church – you and me – take a step closer to being like him and to be shaped by His call.

XIV. Prayer.

XV. Campus Pastors:

- A. As you heard last week, one of the marks of a church is the “breaking of bread.” This refers to Holy Communion. The time when we focus on the death of Jesus Christ and our need for Christ. At Jesus instruction, we rehearse the events of the Last Supper, when the Passover Meal was updated. When Christ noted that He was the Lamb of God sent to take away the sins of the world, and that the Passover Celebration had always been pointing ahead to him.
- B. This meal is a visual sermon – one that focuses us on Christ’s death. And one that highlights how much we need Jesus by having us eat the bread and drink the cup.
- C. At CC, the communion table is open, provided....

¹ In the first sermon, I argued that the four things listed in Acts as the minimum – teaching, prayer, fellowship and the sacraments – do need to be accompanied by other things: love, leadership, a commitment to multiply, accountability, church discipline, etc.

² In “Why Plant Churches?”, Tim Keller writes: Virtually all of the great evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are basically calls to plant churches, not simply to share the faith. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) is a call not just to “make disciples” but to baptize. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41–47). The only way to be truly sure you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches. Why would this be? Much traditional evangelism aims to get a “decision” for Christ. Experience, however, shows us that many of these decisions disappear and never result in changed lives. Many decisions are not really conversions but are only the beginning of a journey of seeking God. (Other decisions are very definitely the moment of a “new birth,” but this differs from person to person.) The greatest missionary in history, Saint Paul, had a rather simple twofold strategy. First, he went into the largest city of a region (cf. Acts 16:9, 12), and second, he planted churches in each city (cf. Titus 1:5—“appoint elders in every town”). Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had “fully preached” the gospel in a region and that he had “no more place . . . to work in these regions” (cf. Rom. 15:19, 23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions: (a) that the way to most permanently influence a country was through its chief cities, and (b) the way to most permanently influence a city was to plant churches in it. Once he had accomplished this in a city, he moved on. He knew that the rest that needed to happen would follow.

³ Church never refers to an individual, lone-ranger Christian who goes about his or her Christian duties, never gathering together to worship with other believers. The church, by its very nature, means multiple believers, who live out Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

⁴ To be clear, the researchers – who were not Christians, this was a secular study – were not just measuring the volunteer hours that come your way from a church. They are measuring the impact of calling people to care for others and advocating for families and investing in children.

⁵ Malik wrote: The university is one of the greatest creations of Western civilization. There is the family, the church, the state, the economic enterprise, the professions, the media and the university. These seven institutions with all their living traditions and with all that they mean constitute the substance of Western civilization. And while in other civilizations there are families, religious institutions, states, institutions for the creation of goods and wealth, a profusion of crafts and professions, and even certain public modes of disseminating information, the university, as universally recognized today, is more distinctive of Western civilization than of any other.