

## I. Set Up

A. We have been in a series called Planted, where we are looking at the big ideas – the foundational truth claims, the most important spiritual realities – that shape the Christian faith, and that should shape how we think and live.

B. Next week we will be at the Genesee Theater – a not-to-be-missed Sunday. That service – which will pull all three campuses and all ten services together – will celebrate what has happened over the last two years of the REACH Initiative.

C. Today, Mike is looking at the church – paying special attention to why it is so central to what we are called to, and why it has been such a big part of the REACH Initiative.

D. There are lots of New Testament passages about the church. One of the most famous starts in Acts 2:42. This is the description of what happened in the days after Pentecost, which is when the church started. That is where we are told that:

1. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (communion) and to prayer. And that everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs being performed by the apostles. And also that they were sharing and carrying for each other.

E. The passage that Mike is going to be looking at today comes from Matthew 16:13. Let me read it:

1. When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

2. They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

3. "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

4. Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

5. Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it

F. Right now...

## II. Intro:

A. Forty years ago, Dr. Charles Malik – a Lebanese Scholar with a PhD from Harvard and a long list of diplomatic accomplishments (he is the only person in the history of the UN to hold all five of the top spots, including Secretary of the Security Council and President of the General Assembly)<sup>1</sup> wrote a small book called, *A Christian Critique of the University*.

B. In it he lists seven major institutions – family, church, state, business, the professions, media, and the university. He then argues that the University is the most important because the leaders of the other six are almost always shaped by the university. Consequently, he claims that the single most important question is: "What does Jesus think of the university?"<sup>2</sup>

C. When I was working in college ministry, I loved to cite Malik's book – and I think it was an important one. However, for a variety of reasons – including some significant failures on the university's part – I would now argue that Malik was wrong. If I had to pick, I'd go with the church. Not because it's the most influential, but because: 1) the church is going to win; and 2) because unless the church does her job, none of the other institutions have a fighting chance.

### III. In Matthew 16,

A. Jesus asked the disciples what people were saying about him. They said, "you're a prophet, maybe John the Baptist, or Elijah, some say Jeremiah."

B. Jesus asked them what they thought, and Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

C. Jesus says, "right answer Peter. Perfect in fact, so we know it wasn't your idea. My father in heaven must have told you. Yes, I am the Messiah. And, I am going to build my church and it will win.

D. Men and women, the church is going to win. The church of Jesus Christ is going to be used by God to help see His Kingdom come in all its glory.

E. To be part of ushering in His Kingdom, which will be marked by love, grace and justice. Where loves will be rightly ordered. Where there will be no tears. Where – to quote Tolkien - "Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost."

IV. Yesterday, 100 of us were involved in helping get the old Carson, Pierre, Scott furniture building ready to hold the launch of the Vernon Hills campus. It was a lot of work. The place was filthy. And I'm a guy. I lived in a fraternity for four years. I don't see dirt until it start to trip over it. But this place was dirty. Why would 100 people give up four hours to clean a building? Because we want to be part of seeing the kingdom of God expand.

V. Now, in order to understand all of this, we need to back up – for starters we need to be sure a biblical definition of the church.<sup>3</sup>

A. When people use the word church today, they do so to refer to: 1) a building; 2) a worship service; 3) a legal entity, and; 4) a community of people.<sup>4</sup> They all have a point, but it's the last use I want to focus on.

B. I want you to think of the church as a community – as a collection of people that starts with you. I thought about bringing in a big mirror today and hold it up and say, "here is how you should define church,"

C. Of course, that is not quite accurate, so we have been saying, a church is a community, of grace, hope and love that is based on the life, death and teaching of Jesus.

D. Done right, there is nothing like her. It is people from different walks of life gathering together to:

1. look up (to worship, pray and study the Bible);
2. to look in (to support and care for one other);
3. and to look out (to be salt and light, to share the Good News of God's love and care for others, especially the poor and hurting).
4. And as I just said, done right it changes everything.

VI. So, as you have heard, next week we gather at the Genesee to celebrate some fun things and to look ahead. You do not want to miss it. Two years ago, we set out to double down on our mission.

- A. Under the mandate of reaching people, we said we want to:
  - 1. Plant ten new communities of grace, hope and love: six overseas, three new campuses and one extra
  - 2. And we want to see lots of people come to faith – which we would measure by baptisms – with a goal of 500.
- B. And then, under the mantle of ReNewing Communities – we said we wanted to mobilize to provide 100,000 service hours outside the church.
- C. We set out to raise \$19M to do all of this – roughly 11 for ongoing operations and 8 for the new work.
- D. One of the questions I got two years ago – and a few times since – is: why the church? REACH is very church-centric. The plan is to grow the big C church by starting new churches and expanding this one. There are lots of good things you can do, why this?
- E. Today I want to remind you of what we said – it comes mostly out of Matthew 16. And it's important, motivational and encouraging.
- F. So, let me frame all of this as the six things you need to know about the church.

VII. One: The Church is God's Plan.

- A. Jesus is the one who launched the church. After Peter said, “you are the Messiah,” Jesus responded by saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...
- B. This is first time we hear the word church – *ekklesia* in the Greek – in anything like this context.<sup>5</sup> Jesus reached back into Greek philosophy, commandeered an obscure political term and claimed it for the movement he was launching.<sup>6</sup>
- C. The church is not my idea, it's not your idea. It wasn't Paul's idea, or Augustin's, or Billy Graham's. Jesus launches the church.
- D. If this was all he did, it would qualify him as a better leader than Abraham Lincoln, Elon Musk, Henry Ford or whoever you want to champion.
- E. At the time Rome was massive. Jesus had a few followers – and they were not impressive. But he said he was going to launch something that would prevail, and two thousand years later it's the biggest thing going. The Roman Empire has subsequently collapsed, and the church has become – in the words of one of the church's chief critics - “the most powerful political, social, cultural, economic and intellectual institution in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

VIII. Two: The Church Has an Assignment

- A. Today it is common for local churches to have mission statements. We do. I just cited it.
  - 1. During the first fifteen years I served we said: we want to lead people into life-changing relationships with God and others by proclaiming the Good News and engaging in Good Works.

2. As we moved into REACH, we tweaked it a bit. We said, the mission remains the same, but we need it to be more results oriented. Instead of just saying “Proclaim the Good News,” we said we want to see people come to faith. Instead of just saying, Engage in Good Works, we want to measure results. It now reads: We want to fuel a movement that Reaches People and Renews Communities. We have a mission statement.

B. But if we step back and consider why Jesus launched the church, we will talk less about the church having a mission and more about God’s mission having a church. God is on record stating that His Kingdom will come. He is going to reclaim and restore all that is His. One day, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is King, master, sovereign.

C. Jesus started His church to advance His plans.

D. It is his Kingdom that we organize around. And this requires attention along two main areas. Sharing the story and living it out. Inviting people to align with Christ and embracing His vision and values and living them out for the common good.

E. Some churches only focus on evangelism and some churches only focus on social action. We are called to both. Now, I do think the order we talk about them is important - evangelism and then serving. Not because the spiritual is more important than the physical, but because:

1. The eternal is more important than the temporal.

2. And because others are helping the poor, but only the church is talking about Christ;

3. And because, if you want to change the world, having someone come to faith, and realize the way up is down is the way to do it. In spite of the claim that “religion poison’s everything,” Christians give 3.5 times more to charity than their secular peers, volunteer twice as much, are half as likely to engage in domestic violence and 43 other crimes.

F. So, we do list them in a particular order, but we are all about both.

#### IX. Three: The Church is Flawed

A. This hurts to admit, but it is clearly and obviously true. We need to own it. The church has made some big mistakes – and it will continue to do so. Sometimes people say to me, “You know, the church is not perfect.” I feign shock. And then I say, “You think for a second that you know more about the church’s faults than I do. I work at a church. I see our failures up close and personal – I cause a lot of them myself. I get that today’s version falls well short of what it could and should be. And that grieves me. It frustrates me that we miss things, hurt people and fall short.

1. By the way, if you find a perfect church, do everyone there a favor and stay away. Because you are not perfect.

B. I was a university student when I first became aware of some of the many ways the church failed in the past. The list famously includes everything from the Crusades and the Inquisition to being slow on Civil Rights and ten thousand lesser mistakes.

C. As a pastor I know better than most just how deep church flaws go. We work hard to do the right things the right way. I grieve when we get things wrong or someone gets hurt or overlooked.

D. We need to humbly and openly own our mistakes. We are “the Bride of Christ” and we want to be more beautiful. We need to own our failures and do better.<sup>8</sup>

X. Four: It’s Better than you Think

A. The Church is Flawed, but the news is not all bad. And we do well to recognize what the church has done right. Millions of Christ-followers have promoted literacy, founded schools, staffed orphanages and established hospitals. Christians regularly give away more of their money and time than others.<sup>9</sup> And as *New York Times* foreign correspondent and frequent critic of the church Nicolas Kristof admits, when you look at who is digging wells in Africa, staffing clinics in India, fighting sex trafficking in East Asia and tutoring in the urban centers in the US, you’ll find it is mostly Christians.

B. Those who want to throw stones have more than a few stones to choose from. But the church does many things right.

C. In Ayn Rand’s novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand sets out to show what would happen if all the entrepreneurs went away. If you haven’t read the book, I can summarize the 1,200 pages she uses in two words: society collapses. Reading it made me wish someone would write, *Jesus Shrugged*. Nietzsche talked about what Western culture would be like without the church. Others have tried to imagine what the world would be without it. And some keep acting like John Lennon’s song, *Imagine*, would describe things. No. Everything collapses.

1. It was the church that pulled Europe out of the Dark Ages.

2. It was the church that provided the worldview that allowed science to take root.

3. It was the church that promoted higher education and hospitals.

D. We need people to study history – or economics

1. A recent study<sup>10</sup> by an economist at Penn notes that the average congregation of 200 provides several million dollars of value to the local community. A similar study done in Toronto suggests the value may be higher.

2. A different study showed that most people had no idea that churches were running programs: helping the poor prepare their taxes, providing foster care, teaching English to immigrants, providing job skills, caring for prisoners and more. And it wasn’t just the general public that didn’t know. Many people who attend churches had no idea what the church they attended was doing.<sup>11, 12</sup>

E. A while back I had a conversation with my Uncle, who is a character – I had called him a few months ago to complain that he had given me asbestos to play with as a kid.

1. He was silent and then he said, “Uh, *no abla Espanol*.” I said, “nice try. I’m lucky to be alive.” He said, “Uh, different Uncle.” I said, “No, only one Uncle gave me rocks at Christmas.” “Uh, the statute of limitations is long gone on that buddy.” And then he said, “but I remember that rock and it was museum quality. If you still have it, it’s worth something.”

2. My Uncle is not a Christ-follower. We talk about this with some frequency. I keep giving him books to read. And he is reading them. But we disagree, and a while back we got into a little dust up over whether churches should be required to pay taxes. He said they should. And I said, well, I suspect they will be, but I think everyone loses if that happens. In fact, there are all kinds of things being done for free that you are going to have to pay for.

3. And he said, “churches do not do anything for people who do not attend.”

4. And I said, what are you talking about? And I started down the list of things we do:

a) We have a cars ministry - people fix up donated cars and give them to people in need, whether they attend the church or not.

b) We operate a justice center that provides free legal and financial counseling to whoever needs it, whether they attend the church or not. .

c) We have people fixing up homes in an under-resourced community and selling them to people who are going to love and serve their new neighbors;

d) We have people tutoring in public schools and people working to help urban private schools provide great education

e) We have teams of people who go to the of shut ins and single moms to do maintenance work – for free – whether they attend the church or not.

f) We are just finishing up a campaign in which one of our goals was 100,000 volunteer hours to people who do not attend the church. What do you think churches do?

5. And he said, “Well, uh, I don’t know anything about that.”

6. And I said, “We’ll the goal isn’t to talk about what we are doing. In fact, it’s poor form to do so. We do not want to say, ‘Look at us.’ But this culture is increasingly attacking its foundation – and many now think that society without Christians will be better, and all you have to do is study history to know that is not true.”

7. The church is not perfect – but it’s better than you think.

F. By the way, on a related note, the church is not only better than you think, it is healthier than you think. Many today think the church is in a full-scale retreat. That is not true.

1. Church attendance is declining in the West – mostly because people attend less often - but it is surging almost everywhere else.

2. There are churches in one hundred thousand villages that do not have a McDonalds, Starbucks or Walmart. And that the church creates more volunteers than anyone else.<sup>13</sup>

G. The Church is doing a lot of good. In fact, not long before his death in 2005, Peter Drucker claimed that the church was the only organization that was truly working in our society.”

H. The church is not what it could be or should be, but it’s doing more good than most realize.

XI. Five: The Church Will Win:

A. I know this sounds crazy, but the church will prevail. In fact, it will survive longer than any other institution, including the United States.

B. When Jesus launched her two-thousand years ago, Rome had all of the power, and all Jesus could point to was a dozen followers no one else wanted to hire. But, as another writer noted, today it is reversed. Back then, Nero and Caesar were revered, and Peter and Paul were in prison. Today, we name our children Peter and Paul and we name our dogs Caesar and Nero.<sup>14</sup>

C. The church is unstoppable. It is a candle you cannot blow out. She will prevail. Not because she is good. But God is going to prevail, and he has told us how he will do it.

D. This is why REACH has focused so much on starting new churches.

1. Some of you have thought – the world doesn't need another church. *Au counterair*. There can never be too many churches. Or more to the point, there can never be too many new churches.

2. For starters, starting new campuses (or churches) – we are doing both. When they are nearby, we are starting new campuses because: 1) they cost less; and 2) they are much more likely to survive. Starting new churches is hard work. Only 15% last more than three years. About 85 percent of campuses make it.

3. So in this area we are starting campuses – we are one church with one vision and one mission and one statement of faith and one staff and one budget. Overseas we are starting new churches – they are independent.

4. But, we are doing this because it's God's plan and because it works. This is what Christ called for, this is what Paul did

5. And we know from studies that after a church is 30 years old, it is very hard to get it to look out and take risks.

6. And we know that new churches reach about 600 percent more people than established churches.

7. And we know that we need new churches in the US because every year 4,000 close.

8. As is often the case, Tim Keller summarizes my thinking more eloquently than I could, when he writes: The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the body of Christ in any city, and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study at all, it is not even controversial.

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XII. Six: Your Involvement is Invited and Expected.

A. As has often been the case in the past, today some want to by-pass the church. “Institutional religion is not for me. I am spiritual but not religious. I will worship God on my own or with my own friends.”

B. I understand the sentiment. There are Sunday mornings when I'd like to stay in bed, sip coffee, eat bagels, read *The New York Times* and watch the talk shows. And I work at a church!

C. But that is not an option, because:

1. If you are a Christ-follower, you are the church.

2. Secondly, we are commanded to meet together. This is not just the pattern of the last 2,000 years, it is a directive we are to follow. In Hebrews 10:25 we are told, "Do not forsake the assembling together as is the habit of some, but instead, encourage one another to love and good deeds."

D. Men and women, if you are a Christ follower, your involvement in advancing the Kingdom of God is not optional. Let me be clear – God will get it done. His plans are not hanging in the balance. As Haman famously said to Esther when she balked at stepping up and doing what was needed (Esther 4:13f):

1. "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

XIII. Next Week we are going to gather at the Genesee. I'll have more to share. It will be a great day. Please pray – and don't miss it.

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<sup>1</sup> Malik was President of the General Assembly, President of the Economic and Social Council, President of the Security Council and Chairman of the Human Rights Commission.

<sup>2</sup>In view of the unique place and power of the university today I know of no more important question to ask than: What does Jesus Christ think of the university? All other questions, without exception, are relatively silly when this question looms in the mind. Malik, page 24.

<sup>3</sup> The Bible does not give us a carefully crafted definition of the church, instead it gives us a number of metaphors, such as the family of God or the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21). Modern authors use other metaphors – such as the local bar (where, like in the Cheers song, everyone knows your name), God's welfare office (i.e., an institution set up to heal the blind, feed the hungry and bring Good News to the poor) or a field hospital (i.e., a place that is in the middle of the action designed to heal hurting people). For some years I have liked 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. Which metaphor do you favor and why?

<sup>4</sup> Here are four different sentences that use the word church in four different ways: 1) Go three blocks and turn left at the church; 2) We missed you at church last week; 3) The church is running a deficit; and 4) The church really helped us through a difficult time in our marriage last year. And just for the record, there are other ways it is used. Theologians multiply the complexity, making distinctions between: the visible and invisible church –per the Westminster Confession of Faith, "the whole number of elect, that have been, are or shall be, gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof," (25.1) - the local and the universal church, and more. I have a file with about thirty different definitions of the word.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek term Jesus uses is *ekklesia*. It meant "called out" one.



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<sup>6</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

<sup>7</sup> Bart Erhman

<sup>8</sup> Not long ago, Richard Dawkins, the British academic famously hostile towards religion, was kicked off Berkeley's campus for disparaging religion, which, he says, "flies planes into buildings while science flies rockets to the moon." My first reaction is to say. Two can play that game. "Religion gives us Mother Theresa and science gives us mustard gas." But that is not helpful. We need to own our mistakes. 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.

<sup>9</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>10</sup> As church attendance continues to decline across the West, many have lamented the spiritual and social side effects, namely a weakening of civil society and the fabric of community life. What's less discussed, however, is the economic impact of such a decline. In a new study published by Cardus, Dr. Michael Wood Daly of the University of Toronto explores this very thing, researching the "economic value" of ten Toronto congregations, and finding "a cumulative estimated economic impact of approximately \$45 million," based on a combined budget of only \$10 million. The study refers to this as the "halo effect," noting the church's value to the community, whether through social capital, community services, or physical resources and infrastructure.

The research builds on an existing framework from a pilot study done in 2010 by Partners for Sacred Spaces and the University of Pennsylvania, which resulted in similar findings. Focusing on 12 congregations, the Pennsylvania study found an economic contribution of roughly \$52 million, concluding that local congregations can "now be viewed as critical economic catalysts." Both studies evaluated a range of variables in the seven key categories, including (1) open space, (2) direct spending, (3) education, (4) magnet effect, (5) individual impacts, (6) community development, and (7) social capital and care.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Smietana, "Good Deeds Done by Christians Often Go Unseen," Lifeway.

<sup>12</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.

<sup>13</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  
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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.

<sup>14</sup> This quote is cited by many. FYI, there are other things that could be noted here. 1) It has always been common to dismiss the church. As G. K. Chesterton noted: “Five times in human history the church has gone to the dogs. And every time it was the dog that died.” 2) We tend to think that Jesus is good but not smart. That overlooks things such as the fact that most people start organizations that have a thirty, or fifty year run. Christ launched something that prevails event today. He will prove to be a far more impressive entrepreneur and leader than Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, etc.