

Falling deeply in love with the Bride of Christ—Specifically my local church

Ephesians 5: “22 For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. 24 As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.

25 For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her 26 to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word. 27 He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. 28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. 29 No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. 30 And we are members of his body.

31 As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” 32 This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. 33 So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”

The Holy Spirit gives us the analogy of marriage to represent our relationship with Christ and His Church. Both are designed by God to bring great joy and enrichment to our lives. Both are distorted and perverted by our enemy as he seeks to kill, steal and destroy.

I love the local church. There are 3 relationships that have shaped my life more than any others—my relationship with Jesus, my relationship with His church, and my relationship with my wife. When I have them in the proper, divine order, each one supports and empowers the others. When Jesus is #1 in my life, that relationship fuels and protects my relationship with His church and with my wife. I’m a better church member and husband when that relationship is #1. When my relationship with my church is functioning as it should be, then my church empowers and equips me to be the husband Sheryll needs and the Christian man Jesus wants. Put them in order, and the divine flow is released from Jesus through His church to my family, friends, and every other relationship. And I personally find the rich and satisfying life Jesus said He came to give us. (***John 10:10***).

I love my church because Jesus loves my church. I love my church because my church helps me to grow up into everything Jesus wants for me. I love my church because my church equips me to love my wife, my kids, my grandkids the way God designed it. I love my church because it enriches every other part of my life.

But today, more than anytime in history, church membership is under attack. Our homes, our communities, our nation and our world need us to be great church members more than ever before. The church, the local church, is the hope of the world. It is the only institution that has the power to transform whole communities, even nations. We have the answer everyone is looking for and in a time when the world is getting crazier and crazier, we need to shine brightly. We need to love our church more than ever before. And, as functioning church members, we need to be able to help those in our circle of influence understand the importance of being a member of a local church. In the same way that the world is redefining and abolishing Biblical marriage, it is seeking

to redefine and abolish the local church. As church members, as people of the Word, we should know why we go to church and why we love our local church.

We are in week 3 of our series I Love My Church and I've had several of you ask me how to explain to your friends why church is still important. So let's dive into that today, looking at what the Word says and examining why the Bible compares church with the marriage relationship.

- **Let's look at the case for the local church in the Scriptures:**

- Jesus modeled the importance of the local church. ***Luke 4:16*** ***"When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures."*** (This also addresses the "I don't like organized religion" or "I can't find a church where I agree with everything" criticism. Jesus didn't agree with hardly anything being taught in the synagogue or with the direction of the organized Judaism religion. He didn't just come to save us—He came to show us **the way**. Yes, He came to die for us, but He also came to model how to live for God. And He models that those living for God will have the 'custom' or habit of being part of a local house of faith.)
- Look at the first thing the new believers did in ***Acts 2:42-47***. The heading in the NLT even says, **"The Believers Form a Community"**. The word 'fellowship' in verse 42 specifically describes a local large gathering. The first believers, instructed by the hand-picked disciples of Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit, devoted themselves to 4 habits: I love the Word, I love my local church, I love prayer, and I love my connect group. (This also addresses the "I don't think we need to gather in churches. My church is my small group." Or "I don't like small groups. I just want to come to the large gathering.")
- Jesus gives 'gifts' to His church: ***Ephesians 4:11*** ***"Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers."*** These gifts are given to help every believer 'grow up', becoming more and more Christ-like. Remember, Jesus didn't save us to make us better—He saved us to make us Christ-like. One of these gifts He gave us—pastor or shepherd—is specifically given to a local church. So Jesus thinks it's important for believers to have a pastor, a shepherd, which means He thinks it's important for believers to belong to a local church.
- Just look at the construction of the New Testament of the Holy Bible. **2 Timothy 3:16** ***"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."***
 - To whom are the books of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians and Hebrews written? Local churches.
 - To whom are the books called 'Pastoral Epistles' written? (Timothy and Titus) Pastors of local churches.
 - So 14 books, more than half of the New Testament, is written to local churches. The Holy Spirit, the author, must think the local church is pretty important.

- After His ascension, we will only find Jesus speaking directly to the earth in the Book of Revelation. And to whom does He speak? Local churches.
- Then there is the specific Biblical command to be part of a local assembly of the saints—a local church: **Hebrews 10:25 (NCV)** *“You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the day coming.”*

Falling and Staying in Love with My Church

Ephesians 2:19 (NKJV) *“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and **members of the household of God**”*

As a church member - I am not to merely like my church.

As a church member - I am not merely to serve the church.

As a church member - I am to fall deeply in love with my church.

Again, using the marriage analogy given to us by the Holy Spirit:

- I'm not dating my local church; I'm married to her! Big difference. When I'm searching for the local church where God wants me (**that's a key thought—God places the members, individually, where He wants them. 1 Corinthians 12:18**) it does resemble the 'courting process'. Not the way the world's culture defines dating—which is more like practicing divorce because it is based on what I want—but the way the Word defines it: courting—preparing for a lifelong relationship based on what God wants for both of us. The dating model the world gives us is based on a 'failure foundation'—unless I find the 'perfect soul mate' through a process of elimination then chances are the relationship will fail. Dating means we are checking each other out to make sure you will fit nicely into what I want and into my plans—**into my 'will'**. If not, I simply 'break up' or 'dump' you—practicing and perfecting the art of divorce. The courting model—given to us in Scripture—is based on a 'success foundation'—God intends for us to spend the rest of our lives together **mutually pursuing His will** for our lives. So courting means I'm not looking for reasons to 'dump' you, rather we are getting ready to spend the rest of our lives together for His pleasure.

The courting process starts with the assurance of a lifetime commitment that means we are going to find out how to make it work. The dating process starts with a lack of commitment that means we don't need to find ways to make it work, we look for reasons to quit. When we are looking for our local church we must look with a courting mindset rather than a dating mindset. Instead of looking for reasons not to become a member because it doesn't 'fit me' (and you will always find them because of the way Christ builds the Church—He fills it with imperfect people being led by imperfect people) I am looking for the place where I fit. Once I become a member, I am now looking for ways to make this lifelong relationship more enriching for both of us, not looking for reasons to withdraw. There are things I do that bug Sheryll, but she doesn't use them as excuses to leave me. (Example: Cornuts. We adapt and adjust to each other to assure we don't allow it to hinder our greater purpose.)

In fact, there are only two Scriptural reasons for disconnecting from my local church: I physically move from the geographical area, in which case I now re-engage in another local church. Or, the vision of my church is no longer Biblical; in which case I

pray for them after having completed Jesus' prescribed 4-step process to challenge it with no avail. Then I quickly find and engage with another local church, refusing to let a bad experience define my future as a functioning member of the Body of Christ.

- **Keys to falling and staying in love:** Whenever I perform a wedding ceremony I usually instruct the couple to guard their love, telling them that no one 'falls out of love', they just quit doing what caused them to 'fall into love'.

Note the way the Bible talks about love in the [Ephesians 5](#) passage above and in the famous [1 Corinthians 13](#) love chapter:

- *"Wives, submit to your husbands as unto the Lord"*
- *"Husbands, give up your lives for her as Christ did for the church"*
- *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."*

The Bible defines love as a verb—an action—things we do. You don't stop loving your wife or husband; you quit doing the things love does. In the same way we don't fall out of love with our church, we quit doing the things we did when we were in love with her.

Again, using the marriage analogy, let's look at some of the ways we fall into and stay in love with our church:

- **Spending time together. Worship and church life.** I don't look for ways to avoid being around Sheryll; I look for ways to be around her more. After I finally got her to go out with me, and knew she was the one I wanted, my other pursuits took a hit. My other buddies knew they had dropped down the list of my priorities. When our family grew with children (birthed out of our intimacy with each other—there's a whole message in that!), it was important to me that our children saw how much I loved her. I taught them to respect and honor her, and I modeled it with the way I treated her. As church members, we model our love and respect for our local church for our family. And don't fall into the trap of 'just staying together for the kids'. My parents made sure I was in church. They were involved and made sure I was there. But after we left, their involvement with church began to decrease, eventually to the point where church was no longer part of their life. And their life changed, becoming more and more dysfunctional. **Their dysfunction seemed to increase at the same rate their functioning as a church member decreased!** Don't just 'stay together for the kids'. Stay together for you too!
- **Valuing what she values. Investing our time, talent and treasure in her and what she is doing.** Jesus tells us our hearts will be wherever our treasure is. In other words, you will value whatever you are investing in. The more you invest, the more you will value it. Great marriages have figured this out and invest heavily in each other. They know what their spouse likes, they know their spouse's interests and concerns and they increase their investment in those areas. Weak marriage partners keep investing heavily in themselves, looking out for what they want

instead of preferring their spouse, instead of caring for him/her as if they were caring for their own body. (*Ephesians 5:28-29*)

- **Finding ways to increase intimacy with her. Prayer, real prayer, is an act of intimacy.** When part of my daily prayer life is sincerely praying for her good, I become more committed to her. You'll find yourself blessing her in prayer, speaking God's blessing over her and for her. And it is hard to curse what you are always blessing!
- **Telling others about her.** After my first date with Sheryll my two best friends heard all about it. I didn't want to talk about music, cars or basketball anymore, things that had dominated our conversation before Sheryll. I wanted to talk about Sheryll. Probably to the point that they were thinking, "I wish he would talk about something else." But they didn't say that because they knew how important she had become to me and to dismiss her would not be acceptable to me. In the same way, our other relationships should be able to tell how important our church is to us just by listening to our conversation for a little while. And I also wanted my buddies to find their girl, someone like Sheryll for them, because I knew they would love it. In the same way, I want everyone I know to find their church, because I know how much richer their lives will be.
- **Guarding my eyes and my thoughts.** Protecting her place in my life. I've been married to Sheryll for over 40 years and she is more beautiful and more desirable to me today than ever. Watch any marriage where they have been together for a long time and still are crazy about each other and you will find a common thread. They all protect what and who they allow themselves to look at and they protect how they speak about their spouse. They don't give place to complaints or nitpicking. They have learned to turn their eyes away from things that could compromise their relationship with their spouse. I turn my eyes away from the windows of Victoria Secret in the mall. I turn my eyes away from scantily clad women on TV or on the beach. Don't start the comparison thing. First of all, most of the women in those ads aren't real—they are touched up images. Secondly, when you start comparing, everybody loses, including you. I don't find people or groups where I can join in with complaining about my wife. If you complain enough about anything, no matter how strong that relationship was when you started, it won't take long until you are looking for a way out. (Example: my dog Jake and his shedding.) My church and my marriage are too important to allow the enemy to trick me into belittling them. They both are worth guarding and protecting. For their good and for my good. But most importantly, for the good of the Kingdom!
- **Making sure that anything I am devoted to before her is worthy of that place.** I don't mind being second or third on Sheryll's list as long as whoever is in front of me is worthy of that spot. That's a short list—God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus and His Church. Put anything else in front of me and it's not going to be pleasant. Don't let the other pursuits in this life move in front of your devotion to your local church. I know we have things, responsibilities and even hobbies, which cry out for our time and attention. Just make sure you don't let them re-order what God has divinely ordered. *Ephesians 1:22 (MSG)* "At the center of all this, Christ rules the

church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church.

Conclusion:

Ephesians 3:10 (MSG) "Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!"

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As a church member - I am to fall deeply in love with my church.

I love my church. Not just the Church universal, but also my local church. I love it because Jesus loves it. I love it because of how it enriches my life and my relationship with Christ. And I love it because it is God's plan for transforming my home, my community and the world. It is His divine plan for making Jesus famous and I want to be a fully functioning member of that plan. What a privilege! What an adventure! Thank you Lord for giving me the local church!