

More Than a Building
If You Only Knew
October 20, 2019

Good morning everyone.

That's a great way to kick off this five-week series called *More Than a Building* (and not "more than a *feeling*") because we need to talk about ... "the church."

And when I say "the church" I don't mean just *this* church; North Heartland. I mean *the* Church in general.

And the reason we need to talk about *the* church is twofold.

1. Number one ... *this* church is in a season of transition.

As I said at our 25th anniversary celebration

a couple of weeks ago, “North Heartland 1.0” has come to an end and “North Heartland 2.0” lies ahead (which means we’re somewhere in the middle).

And as we consider what *this* church is *going* to be, it only makes sense to talk about what *the* Church is *supposed* to be.

So that’s one reason we need to do this series.

2. But a second (and probably more important) reason is that, for a lot of us – especially those of us who are Christians – our understanding of “church” needs to change, and radically so.

That video we sawⁱ a few minutes ago is obviously intended to be a parody, but the thing about parodies – what makes them funny – is that they contain an element of

truth.

And the truth is that a lot of us – and, again, I’m talking specifically about Christians – a lot of us approach “church” with a predominantly consumeristic mindset: “what’s in it for me? How does this *thing* <whatever church is supposed to be> fit *my* tastes and *my* desires and *my* schedule and *my* <whatever else>?”

And you don’t need to be a Bible scholar to know that something is not quite right about that.

In fact, even people who aren’t “church people”; even people who aren’t followers of Jesus understand that

They look at how Christians around them ...

- Think about the church

- Talk about the church
- Treat the church

... and they see the disconnect.

For instance, did you know that 225 million Americans claim to be believers in Jesus? And that, of that number, on any given weekend 52 million gather with other believers for worship?

That means that less than a quarter of those who claim to be “Christian” will actually be in a church service today.ⁱⁱ

And people who aren’t Christians see that. They see the disconnect between what we say and what we do.

By the way, if you’re *not* a Christian and you’re here in this room right now or watching online ... you’ve picked a great day to be with

us because you're going to get to hear and understand some things about the church that a lot of Christians don't even understand. So, I'm glad you're here.

Now, if you are a Christian, please don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not trying to be critical or condemning.

After all, more than a few of us have been part of churches where *that* church hasn't been what "*the church*" should be and we said "no thanks. I'm out."

And I get that because, quite frankly, there've been times I myself have felt that way.

I'm sure you've heard the joke about one Sunday morning when the alarm goes off and the husband keeps hitting the snooze button.

Eventually his wife shakes him and says <sing-song>, "honey, it's time to get up and go to church."

Husband says, "I'm not going. Those people up there are inconsiderate and mean. And I don't think they even like me."

To which the wife replies, "I'm sorry honey but you *have* to go. After all, you're the pastor!"

Not that that has ever happened to me. Or here at this church.

But I get it.

From our perspective, as Christians ...

- Sometimes church just doesn't seem to fit us.

- Sometimes it feels like it's more trouble than it's worth.
- And sometimes it feels like an pointless appendage to our faith. We think "you've got to believe in Jesus to be a Christian, but *that* part – the being involved in church part – isn't really necessary."

And that's all understandable.

But what I want to do in the time I have today is to expand our vision of the church beyond the limited perspective of our personal experience.

And I want to do that because I'm convinced that ...

- Most believers in and followers of Jesus just *do not know* what the church really is and is really about.

- We just *do not know* the incredible value God places on it.
- And we *just don't know* the importance of being involved and connected.

... which is why I believe that our understanding of "church" needs to change, and radically so.

What You Need to Know

So, today, I'm going to tell you three things you *need to know* about "church" ... that you probably *don't know* ... that if you *did know* ... might change the way you think about it.

And by the way, even if you're *not* a Christian this might change the way you think, too.

Here's the first thing you need to know. And

I'll be surprised if it doesn't surprise you at least a little bit.

1. The word “church” – and the imagery that it conjures up for most people – isn't even in the original Bible.

I know that sounds crazy because there are so many passages in our English translations where the word “church” is literally there in the text ... so let me explain.

And let's look at the very first place it shows up, which is in the biography written by one of Jesus' first followers, Matthew. (And by the way, if you made a list of people “least likely to ever to be found in a church,” Matthew would be near the top of it. But that's a story for another day).

Anyway ... Matthew tells us that one day Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

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

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

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

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."

Alright, now get ready because here's the first place the word "church" shows up in our English translations.

Jesus continues ...

*"I tell you that you are Peter
[he's giving Simon a new*

name – Peter which means
“rock”], *and on this rock I will
build my church, and the
gates of Hades will not
overcome it.”* *Matthew*
16:18 (NIV)

Now, we could talk for hours about what that statement means as it regards Peter and Hades, but that’s not our focus today.

Instead, what I want you to focus on is what Jesus was predicting ...

- Something *completely new*
- Something that had never before existed
- Something that long-into-the-future would include many of us

And that “something” got spelled out as “c-h-

u-r-c-h" in our Bibles.

But here's the problem.

Whereas the majority of our English New Testaments are a word-for-word translation from Greek, this word "c-h-u-r-c-h" is an exception. This word "church" is not a *translation*.

It's a *substitution*. And a misleading one at that.

The word "church" is a derivative of the German word *kirche* meaning: *house of the Lord* or temple. And it – *kirche* – was used to *interpret*, rather than *translate*, the Greek term "ekklesia" throughout most of the New Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ

So, think of it like this: when translators saw "ekklesia" they thought "kirche" (House of the Lord) and they transliterated that word into

“church.”

However, *ekklesia* does not mean *House of the Lord* or temple. The Jewish people already had one of those and Jesus was not prophesying the coming of a new one associated with Peter.

In fact, when it came to that Temple, what Jesus *actually* predicted was its destruction^{iv}, which happened 40 years later (in A.D. 70) when the Romans literally “left not one stone upon another.”^v It’s the greatest fulfillment of prophecy in the entire Bible.

But that’s also a topic for another day.

So what does *ekklesia* mean?

It’s a generic word that simply means “a gathering” or “an assembly.”

It's used in Greek literature to describe town hall meetings or an assembly of soldiers. An *ekklesia* was simply a gathering of people called together for a specific purpose. Any specific purpose. In any place.

It most definitely was not and is not a religious term. *Ekklesia* to a Greek-speaking first century man or woman did not mean "church" or "house of the Lord".^{vi}

Point being ... this mistranslation of what Jesus *said* detracts from what Jesus *meant*. Jesus did not predict a new place. He predicted a new people, a new assembly signaling a new movement^{vii} ...

... which is why a church can own a building or rent a building and do ministry in a building but a church is always *more* than that building.

And just to be clear, that building – *this* building – is *not* “the Lord’s House.”

It’s not a place where you have to “stop running, be quiet, don’t make a mess, don’t say a bad word.”

Of course, the obvious question is why don’t our English Bibles say “gathering”? Why do they use a German derivative, *church*, instead of a direct translation?

Why didn’t “ekklesia” get translated “assembly” or “congregation,” neither of which are strictly religious terms?

It’s a long story which I’ll try to make short but, bottom line, this is one of those places where “church” went bad; this is our dirty laundry ...

In 1522, a guy by the name of William Tyndale began translating the Greek New Testament

into English. But instead of superimposing the widely-accepted German word *kirche* and using its English equivalent *church* in passages like the one we just read, he used the term *congregation* ...

... which, obviously, makes you think of people instead of the buildings and hierarchies of the established "church" of that day ...

... which, along with the fact that Tyndale *also* used the word "elder" instead of "priest" and "repent" instead of "do penance" in his translation, got him into trouble with those hierarchies ...

... so much so that they condemned him as a heretic and turned him over to civil authorities, who then bound him to a beam, strangled him with a rope, burned his body, and scattered his remains.

And they did it because they knew that if Tyndale's work continued, the common people would discover that the church of their generation was nothing like the church described in the New Testament.^{viii} It's very sad.

Fortunately, it wasn't too long until Reformers (like the German ex-priest Martin Luther) came along to set things right.

Unfortunately, however, the terms *kirche* and *church* had become so deeply entrenched in culture and conversation, there was no going back^{ix} ...

- Which is why our English Bibles today say "church" instead of "assembly."
- And why most of us – Christian and non – have in our heads a faulty model of

church:

- A model based on the Old Testament Jewish Temple that anchors God and His people to a specific location and a specific hierarchy.
- A model which resulted from church officials slowly abandoning Jesus' vision for his ekklesia.

So that's the first thing I think you *need* to know about church ... that you probably *didn't* know ... that now that you *do know* ... might change the way you think about it:

The word "church" – and what most of us think of when we hear it – isn't even in the original Bible.

What *is* in there is so much better than that ...
and we'll talk about it in just a bit ...

... after we look at the second thing you
probably *didn't* know ... that you *should* know
... which is that ...

**2. “Church” – meaning the ekklesia, the
assembly, as Jesus described it – had no
reason to exist beyond his lifetime.**

Now that might not be obvious because
“church” has been around since the first
century.

Since that day when Jesus first predicted it,
it's spread all over the world beginning first in
Jerusalem and surrounding areas, then
expanding ...

- To all over the Roman Empire, including
the city of Rome
- Then to Africa and Europe

- And then to Asia and the Far East
- And then to North and South America ...

... until, now, there are churches literally all over the world ... so much so that "church" is one of those things that just "is" so we don't think about *why* it is and how it came to be.

But let's do think about it.

How could it be that an poor, itinerant preacher from the backwoods of Northern Israel starts a movement – a global ekklesia – that not only survives his execution by the most powerful force in the world at that time (the Roman Empire) but, 300 years later, actually becomes the official religion of that Empire?

As we've talked about on more than one occasion, Jesus wasn't the first to go through Palestine proclaiming himself to be the

promised Jewish Messiah. He wasn't the first to gather a committed band of disciples and a large following of the common people.

And he wasn't the first to wind up on a Roman cross. History records several would-be Messiahs who met their end in the same way that Jesus did.

But we don't remember their names let alone sing about "what a beautiful name it is" in worship.

And we don't remember the names of their followers because they all quit and the movements they started quickly came to an end.

That's just how it worked when your messiah was killed.

And when it came to *Jesus'* followers, Luke

(the first-century historian who carefully researched the life of Jesus) wrote that they, too, were distraught when He was executed. They believed He was the Messiah. They believed He was sent from God and literally was God.

But, since a dead messiah is no messiah, they were ready to quit ... which is why I say that "church" as Jesus described it had no reason to exist beyond his lifetime.

But it did and it does exist because Jesus' followers *didn't* quit. Instead, they took his message and His ekklesia all over the world.

Why?

Because something happened in the case of Jesus that did not happen with those other supposed messiahs.

Something happened that caused Peter – the

guy to whom Jesus had made that prediction of a future *ekklesia* – something happened that caused him to stand in the Temple in Jerusalem just six weeks after the crucifixion and boldly proclaim to thousands of people, including the religious leaders who had colluded with the Romans ...

"This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

Acts 2:23 (NIV)

That is bold, friends!

So what happened that led Peter to risk his neck in calling everyone out like that?

"You put him to death," he said.

"But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him ... and we are all witnesses of it."

Acts 2:24,32 (NIV)

What happened, Peter said, was the literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus.

- And that's why he and the rest of the disciples were so bold.
- And it's why 3,000 people listening his message believed in Jesus and then become part of the first ekklesia in Jerusalem.^x
- And it's why churches – ekklesias of Jesus – eventually spread all over the world.

... which means that the fact that, on October 20th, 2019, you are even *aware* of what “church” is and actively *participating* in the life of a church is a miracle. You’re part of an ongoing miracle.

And if it’s not a miracle, it’s – at the very least – a highly unlikely convergence of fortuitous events; a serendipity of monumental proportions never before seen in the history of mankind.

I mean, nowhere in the world today is anyone is worshipping the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses of that same era. There is no ekklesia of Artemis or assembly of Dionysus. But there is *everywhere* the ekklesia of Jesus of Nazareth.

And if a miracle happened (and I believe it did because the resurrection of Jesus is what best fits all the historical data – both secular

and biblical) ...

If a miracle happened, then God must be up to something really big in this thing called "the church."

And that's exactly what the Apostle Paul wrote.

You remember Paul, right? He's the guy who hated Christians and then became one. He's the guy who singlehandedly destroyed ekklesias of Jesus and then went around starting them all over the Roman Empire.

After God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come ...

Paul says that "God placed all things under his

feet and ...

*... appointed him to be head
over everything for the
church, which is his body, the
fullness of him who fills
everything in every way.*

Ephesians 1:22-23 (NIV)

God did what He did in Jesus ... Jesus did
what He did, Paul says, for the church – for
His ekklesia.

In fact, a few paragraphs later Paul writes that ...

*Christ loved the church and
gave himself up for her.*

Ephesians 5:25 (NIV)

And I suspect that's a strange thought for a
lot of us who are Christians because we focus
so much on what Jesus did for us *individually*.
And that's good and true but there's a much
bigger picture.

What Jesus did is about all of us *together*, collectively, as the ekklesia – the church ... which means that it's a really big deal.

So, that's the second thing I think you need to know about church ... that you probably *didn't* know ... that now that you *do know* ... might change the way you think about it:

“Church” as Jesus talked about it had no reason to exist beyond his lifetime. But it did.

And *because* it did – because you are experiencing right now one aspect of the life of this ekklesia known as North Heartland Community Church – you are part of a miracle ...

... something God did for all of us *collectively* not just individually, which means this church thing is a really big deal to God.

Now, here's the third and final thing you probably *didn't* know that you *should* know ... although the first part of this you *do* know.

So let me just put that out there first.

3. You were made for more.

You and I were meant to be more than we are right now.

We're meant to be better men and better women;

Better spouses, better friends, and better students.

We were made to love more than we do

To give more than we do
To work harder than we do
To laugh more than we do
To worship more than we do

We were made to be more creative, more hopeful, more focused, more courageous, and more patient.

In so many ways – and it's different for all of us – we all fall short of what we could and should be. And we all know it. We all know we were made for more. And we long to become that.

So that's the first part.

Now, here's what you probably *don't* know that you *should* know about the church.

3. You were made for more. And – if you're a Christian – you need the church to help you get there.

Listen ...

- You can study the Bible.
- You can go to seminary.
- You can sing along with K-Love every day.
- You can serve on a mission team.
- You can run a Christian business.
- You can volunteer with one of our Impact Partners.
- You can do all sorts of really good and spiritual things in your life ...

But until you join yourself to a church – a local assembly of believers, an ekklesia – and become a functioning part of that body, you will never be what you could be – what you were meant to be.

Why?

Because in order to be more than you are, you need to be connected to a group of people who ...

- Teach one another
- Love one another
- Accept one another
- Bear with one another
- Forgive one another
- Encourage one another
- Pray for on another
- Rebuke one another
- Speak truth to one another
- Help one another
- And care for one another

And that's what Jesus' ekklesia does – that's what the church is or is supposed to be – which is why I said before that it's so *much better* than the imagery most of us have in our

heads.

**And when the ekklesia is healthy and growing
and we're engaged in it ...**

*... we become mature,
attaining to the whole
measure of the fullness of
Christ.*

Ephesians 4:16 (NIV)

We become more like Him than ourselves.

We'll talk more about that in the coming weeks but, for now, that's the third thing you need to know ... that you *may not* know ... which now that you *do* know ... hopefully impacts the way you think about church.

You were made for more and God designed the church to help you get there.

Why It Goes Wrong

Now, at this point, some of you are thinking, "Ok, I get what you're saying, Rick. Church is a way bigger deal than I ever thought it was."

"But ... if church is *all that*, why does it sometimes get so messed up? Why do things go so wrong?"

We could talk about that all day but I think it comes down to two main reasons.

The first one ... well, let me put it like this: what's the number one requirement for becoming a Christian? What does a person need to know and accept before anything else?

It's not Jesus or anything about Him.

It's that they are ... that we are ... a sinner.

One of Jesus's friends, the Apostle John, once explained how you can tell who is a true Christian and who is not.

... and he put it like this:

*If we claim to be without sin,
we deceive ourselves and the
truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8
(NIV)*

Number one requirement for becoming a Christian is being a sinner and *knowing* you are a sinner.

Otherwise, you don't need saving ... which means you don't need a savior ... which means you don't need Jesus ... which means you aren't a Christian.

So one reason why the church goes bad and gets it wrong is because ...

1. The church by definition is made up of sinners. And wherever there are sinners, there is sin.

That doesn't mean it's OK and it's not meant to be an excuse for whenever the church goes off into the weeds either in one specific church like Westboro Baptist or in the church as a whole – like it did in the days of William Tyndale and Martin Luther.

But it shouldn't be a total surprise when it happens. The church is made up of sinners and wherever there are sinners, there is sin.

The other reason why I think church sometimes goes bad is that ...

2. We lose sight of “the main thing” – which is Jesus of Nazareth.

And when we lose sight of that – of Him and who He is and what He did and the new way

of thinking and living He introduced ...

- Church quickly becomes about *us* – what we like or don't like and *who* we like or don't like.
- It becomes about rules and regulations that lead to arrogance and pride and judgmentalism; legalism that has nothing to do with loving others as we ourselves have been loved by Jesus.
- It becomes about winning a culture war instead of binding up the wounds of people who have been broken by our culture's sinfulness.
- It becomes about keeping "us" in power over "them" ...

... which means, at times, that the church can feel a lot like other human institutions –

governments and corporations and dysfunctional families.

The Beauty of the Bride

But the church, even when it's messed up, is more than just a human institution because Jesus started it and it belongs to Him before it belongs to anyone else. He is the head.

And He is committed to making the church – us, collectively and ekklesias all around the world – as beautiful as a bride on her wedding day.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, Paul wrote.

And then he adds ...

To make her holy ... and to

present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Ephesians 5:26-27 (NIV)

And now that you know ...

- That the church is more than a building.
- That it's more than what the word "church" conjures up in our heads.
- That it's, quite literally, a miracle of God that it even exists.
- That God uses it to help us become "the more" that we all know we were meant to be.

Now that you know it is all these things and so much more, I hope you will grow to appreciate its beauty and that you will grow to love it and give yourself to it and for it like Jesus loved it and give Himself to it and for it.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you are able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to your power that is at work within us. So to You be glory in the church and in Messiah Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!

Amen

Feature – Something Beautiful (4)

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. Radically change the way we think about church ...

One other thing people get wrong about church is who it's really for. A lot of people believe they wouldn't fit in. But they're wrong. And we'll talk about *why*

that is next week.

2. At the beginning of the message I said that our church is in a season of transition. Come hear more about it this Wed/Thu 7-8:15pm in the café. Childcare provided thru 5th grade.

We don't have all the answers yet but we want to share what we know and where we think God is leading us. Hope you can make it.

3. Offering at the door and/or online or through the app.

Endnotes

ⁱ Church Hunters: Episode 1 by @johnbcrist.

ⁱⁱ <https://unlockingthebible.org/sermon/what-is-the-church-and-why-does-it-matter/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanley, Andy. Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World (p. 74). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Matthew 24:2

^v <https://hope4israel.org/jerusalem-70-ad-not-one-stone-left-upon-another/>

^{vi} Stanley, p. 76

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} Stanley, p. 78

^{ix} Stanley, p. 79

^x Acts 2:41