

Married to the Church: *Joining the Glocal Church*

Selected Texts

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on September 16, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ Last Sunday I began a new sermon series called “Married to the Church” that is challenging Christians to not settle for casually dating the church but to engage the church in a formal, active, and exclusive commitment – much like you would expect in marriage.
 - ▶ **And last week I tried to inspire within us a greater love for the church by demonstrating Jesus’ own great love for her.** We saw how he calls her his Bride, and how he gave himself up for her. How he went to hell and back to rescue her from sin, and how he’s personally preparing her for their future wedding day. We saw how madly in love he is with the church.
 - And just as we all want Jesus’ heart for the lost or the poor or the sick, I urged us to pursue, at the same time, Jesus’ heart for the church. *How can we rightly call ourselves his disciples if we do not strive to love what he loves?* That was our main point last week.
- ❖ Now this morning you may be sitting here in agreement. You agree that every Christian should fall in love with the church. You believe that it is important for Christians to love one another, to care for fellow brothers and sisters of the family of God. You share this theology.
 - ▶ **But there is a big difference between identifying with and loving the *idea* of church versus identifying with and loving an *actual* church.** My point is not that we need to generally love the people of God more. I’m being much more specific.
- ❖ **My point is that we need to fall in love with an actual local church** – one that is concrete, organized, and institutional. I’m talking about the kind that usually meets in its own building, which usually has its own ‘unique’ smell and old furniture from the 80’s.
 - ▶ I’m talking about the kind with elders and deacons and a staff. It has committees and subcommittees and sub-subcommittees and meetings and pre-meeting meetings. It has pews filled with imperfect saints who keep forgetting your name, who double park, who loiter all the time, and who ring a bell in your ear if you loiter too long.
- ❖ I’m talking about *that* church. That’s the church Jesus madly loves. That’s the church he expects us to fall in love with. That’s the church we are to revolve our lives around. That’s the church God intends to play a central role in our discipleship to Christ.
 - ▶ I realize that may sound strange. **Many Christians in our generation don’t see a formal commitment to an organized local church as necessary for the Christian life so long as you have a personal relationship with Jesus – so long as you’re part of his Bride.**
 - Sure, actively committing to a church is a good thing for your spiritual growth. But so is doing a daily devotional or memorizing Scripture. They’re good things we can strive for, but they’re not necessary. **What’s necessary is having that personal relationship with Jesus. What’s necessary is being part of his universal, global Church.**

- ❖ So operating out of this mindset, when asked by a pastor which church she belonged to, a young believer simply answered, “The universal body of Christ.” And technically she’s right. **Every authentic Christian is a full-fledged member of the global Church** – that mystical communion of saints in heaven and on earth, comprising all who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ in the past, in the present, and into the future.
 - ▶ But the point I’m making today is that just being part of the global Church and just loving that conceptual entity is not enough. **My point is that our membership *in* and love *for* the global Church should always be expressed through an active commitment to a particular local church.**

Disenchantment with the “little-c” church

- ❖ I realize this is countercultural. A few years ago, a book came out called *Revolution* that describes a movement happening among American Christians where the importance of the “little-c” church (local church) is being downplayed and instead the focus has been on one’s participation in the “big-C” Church (global church).
 - ▶ Let me read you a quote from the author, “*Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me and to God for that matter . . . What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e. a local church), but who you are*”.¹
 - He goes on to say, “*The core issue isn’t whether or not one is involved in a local church, but whether or not one is connected to the body of believers in the pursuit of godliness and worship. . . . You see, it’s not about church. It’s about the Church.*”
- ❖ The argument is that as long as you are finding fellowship with other believers in one way or another, as long as you’re experiencing that mystical communion with the Bride of Christ, then being associated with and involved in a local church is optional.
 - ▶ So we’re not talking about “lone ranger Christians” who want nothing to do with other believers. **We’re talking about a generation of Christians who really want to experience authentic Christian community, but they’re just not convinced that the local church is where God intends that kind of community to be found.**
- ❖ Now this is not the first generation to be disenchanted with the local church. There is nothing new about being disillusioned and dissatisfied with church. But what *is* new these days is the way it’s being glamorized.
 - ▶ In the past, you would leave the church and be considered either a backslidden Christian or maybe not one at all. But now you can leave the church and be seen as innovative – as revolutionary!

¹ George Barna, *Revolution*.

- ❖ *So what can we say in response? First, we should affirm that there is something healthy and good in emphasizing that every Christian is part of a “big-C” Church.* It’s good to be reminded that our local church is not the end all be all of what God is doing in this world.
 - ▶ **We need to remember that God’s Church is not a building but a people – a global people.** That means we should be concerned with world evangelization, with world missions. We should be praying for the persecuted Church. We should be greatly concerned with the challenges and needs that face the global Church.

- ❖ But when someone says, *“It’s not about church. It’s about the Church”*, they’re usually trying to draw sharp line between the local church and the global Church. They’re forcing a dichotomy that I believe is spiritually unhealthy and simply not found in Scripture.
 - ▶ **I’d argue that it makes absolutely no sense biblically to call yourself a Christian and yet be disengaged with a organized local church.** That would be a foreign concept from a biblical standpoint. The Bible really has no category for such a person.

- ❖ Of course I want to show you this in Scripture. Now our usual practice is to work through individual passages, but this morning I’m going to zoom out and provide a big picture look at the NT’s teaching on the inseparable connection between the global Church and local church.

The Global and Local *Ekklesia*

- ❖ **Let’s begin by zooming out all the way and consider how the word “church” is used in the New Testament.** By considering its usage, I think you’ll find it clear that a sharp dichotomy between the local and the global is simply not found in Scripture.

- ❖ Just consider the Greek word that we translate as church – *ekklesia*. The word literally means *“the called out ones”*. That’s a good description of God’s people because Scripture says we’re a group of people called out from the world to live distinct and holy lives.
 - ▶ Now let me show you one particular instance. Turn to Colossians 1. **There are a number of places in the NT where *ekklesia* is used to refer to the “big-C” Church**, and here’s one of them. Look at chapter 1:18, *“And he (Jesus) is the head of the body, the [ekklesia].”*
 - If you consider the context, it’s clear that Paul is not thinking right here of a specific body of believers in a particular geographic location. He has in mind the global Church.

- ❖ But then turn with me to **Colossians 4:15** and notice how *ekklesia* is used here. *“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the [ekklesia] in her house.”* Now clearly Paul is not suggesting that the global Church meets in Nympha’s house. **Clearly he is using *ekklesia* in reference to a local, visible manifestation of the global Church – that so happens to meet in Nympha’s house.** He’s talking about a local church.

- ❖ **So the same word can be used to refer to both the global or the local, and it really depends on the context to know which is in view.** Now as we've said, Christians today tend to place a greater emphasis on the global, but what's interesting is that out of the 114 instances of *ekklesia* in the NT, 92 of them (80%) refer to a visible group of Christians in a particular locale, that is, to a local church.
 - ▶ And that makes sense when you consider how the word was used in ancient Greek literature outside of the NT. ***Ekklesia* would usually refer to a public assembly of citizens gathered to address city affairs.** So to a first-century believer, an *ekklesia* was naturally understood to be a visible, defined group of people.
 - Their first thought would not be of a mystical spiritual entity stretching across space and time. **Their first thought would be of a visible, defined, public assembly of individuals centered on a common cause or mission.**

- ❖ But here you might be thinking, "Ok, an *ekklesia* is a visible, defined, public assembly of Christians. Well then I'm already a part of one. I'm already actively involved in my campus fellowship, in my small group. Can't that be my *ekklesia*? Why do I have to join a local church like HCC?"
 - ▶ That's a good question. **What distinguishes a local church from any public gathering of believers** – whether it be a parachurch group or a small group or a few Christians gathering to worship and study the Word?

- ❖ Well the NT identifies for us at least four distinctive marks of a local church. **First**, a local church preaches and teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Second**, it rightly practices the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. **Third**, a church holds its members accountable and practices church discipline if necessary. **Fourth**, it is led by qualified elders and deacons.
 - ▶ So five Christians meeting in Starbucks for bible study is not a church according to the NT. A Christian club on campus is not a church. And your small group, which is a vital ministry of a church, is still not a church.
 - Certainly we're not trying to downplay the importance and spiritual benefit of these gatherings, but let's be clear, these are not the local church.

- ❖ Here is my point: **In the Bible there is only one *ekklesia*, but this *ekklesia* has two distinct expressions.** It can manifest itself in two ways. **It is both global and local. It's glocal.** We are called to join a glocal church.
 - ▶ **So those who try to minimize the central importance of the local church have made the mistake of turning a distinction into a dichotomy.** They have separated the glocal church into two separate churches, one being essential (the global) and the other optional (the local).
 - Only then does it make any sense to say it's not about church but about the Church. But what I'm proposing is that such a dichotomy would have made no sense to a first-century Christian.

- ❖ There is only one *ekklesia* that is both global and local. **And our invisible membership in the global was always designed to find its visible expression in the local.**

The Global and Local at Pentecost

- ❖ So let me zoom in a little and try to show this in a particular passage. Turn to **Acts 2**. Here we see, **at the start of the early church, the entire global Church expressed itself visibly in one particular local church.** Never since was the inseparable relationship between the two more clear than here.
- ❖ If you recall, not too many weeks prior, Jesus was crucified and buried, yet on the third day he rose again and appeared to his disciples before ascending to his Father. And before he left, in Acts 1, he promised to send the Spirit to empower his disciples to be his witnesses.
 - ▶ Then on the Day of Pentecost, we read the Holy Spirit fell on them in power, and now enabled by the Spirit, Peter stands up and preaches to a few thousand people.
- ❖ Look starting in **v36**. *“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”*
- ❖ Now watch what happens in **v41**, *“Those who accepted his message...”* Okay, in context, that refers to those who repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus as both Lord and Christ. And we would all agree that at that moment they were united to Christ and his Bride.
 - ▶ So what does Peter tell them, “Congratulations! You’re now members of the global Church. That’s what really matters. Now if you like, you can join our church, but otherwise have a nice life!”
 - No, keep reading, *“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*
- ❖ Prior to Pentecost, three thousand individuals would pass each other on the streets of Jerusalem unknown to one other and unidentifiable to the general public BUT from that day on, everything changed. **They didn’t go on with their lives as strangers, content just knowing they all belong to an unseen mystical communion.**
 - ▶ No, they became aware of each other. **They got baptized, which was the way you publicly affiliate yourself not just with the unseen global Church but with a visible local church.** The passage goes on to say how they shared everything in common and continued to meet together in the temple courts and in their homes.

- ❖ They were numbered together. They even took attendance (someone must have counted that 3,000 were added that first day). **And this growing church was clearly identifiable by the general public.** They're labeled in a number of passages by friends and foes alike as "The Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). Sounds sort of like a church name.
 - ▶ There is a consistent biblical pattern throughout the book of Acts. The apostles went about preaching the gospel. When people repented and believed, they were baptized and a church was formed. And then elders were appointed to lead them.

The Global and Local on the Road to Damascus

- ❖ Let me show you another example of this inseparable connection between the global and the local. Turn to **Acts 9**. If you recall, Saul the Pharisee had been going around persecuting churches and was actually on his way to persecute the church in Damascus.
 - ▶ But on the road, he was struck down by a bright light and Jesus himself speaks to him. Now notice carefully Jesus' words in **v4**. "*And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*"
- ❖ Wait, when did Saul ever persecute Jesus? Jesus had been crucified years before Saul came on the scene, so how can that even be possible? And if you look back at **Acts 8:3** it says, "*Saul was ravaging the church*". He was persecuting the church. And in that verse, *ekklesia* is clearly not referring to the global Church.
 - ▶ It's not as if Saul was just slandering the idea of Church or issuing general threats against the "big-C" Church. No, in that passage *ekklesia* refers there to specific local churches that Saul sought out in order to drag off Christians to jail.
- ❖ So when Jesus said, "*Why are you persecuting me?*", he was essentially identifying himself with visible local churches. So to say "Yes" to Jesus but "No" to the local church really makes no sense at all. **Saying "No" to the local church is essentially the same as saying "No" to Jesus.**
 - ▶ **According to Jesus, a local church is a visible localized manifestation of his Body on earth.** So to strike at a local church is to strike at Jesus Himself. To disregard a local church is to disregard Jesus Himself.
- ❖ **Try as you may but you will not find in the NT an example of a Christian willfully separating him/herself from the local church.** The only times the Bible mentions a Christian disassociated from a local church are in cases of church discipline where the individual is removed from membership and barred from the communion table (1 Cor 5:2).
 - ▶ So leaving the church was never something to celebrate. Yes, it would have been considered revolutionary, but not in the positive sense people are suggesting today.
- ❖ Friends, the biblical pattern is consistent. Marriage to Christ was shown in marriage to one of his local churches. Union with Christ meant union with one of his local churches. **The local church is the global Church manifested in any one place.**

- ▶ Therefore, you cannot speak of the local without reference to the global. Vice versa, you cannot speak of the global without reference to the local. That's because there is only one church – the global church.

Application

- ❖ *What's the whole point? Why make such a big deal about the local church? **The reason this is so important is because, as I said before, God intends for the organized local church to play a central, soul-shaping role in your discipleship to Christ.***
 - ▶ Joining yourself to a local church is not just one of many Christian disciplines that can help you spiritually grow. It's more just than a good thing – it's a necessary thing. **I would go so far as to say that you can't be a faithful disciple of Christ if you don't belong to and involve yourself in a local church.**
- ❖ I don't say that to be provocative. I believe it's true. There are at least 37 distinct "*one another*" commands in the New Testament. These are ethical commands directed towards one another, that is, towards fellow Christians. Things like: **Love one another** (Jn. 13:34), **honor one another** (Rom. 12:10), **live in harmony with one another** (Rom. 12:16), **bear with one another** (Col. 3:13), **serve one another** (Gal. 5:13), **care for one another** (1 Cor. 12:25).
- ❖ I looked through all of them, and when you combine them with commands to not give up meeting together (Heb. 10:25), to baptize disciples (Mt. 28:19), to partake in the Lord's Supper (Lk. 22:19), and to obey your leaders and submit to them (Heb. 13:17) – **I just don't see how you can practically keep all these NT commands if you're disassociated or disengaged with the local church.**
 - ▶ To actually carry out them out, as a faithful disciple of Christ, you would have to commit yourself to and involve yourself in an organized local church.
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, do you long to be more faithful to Christ? Do you want to fight your sin and experience the freedom that Jesus purchased for you with his blood? Do you yearn to be a better father, mother, husband, wife, friend, or neighbor?
 - ▶ **The local church is God's plan for your sanctification.** It is God's family where his children grow up into Christ-like maturity. For this to happen, I need you to commit to me. You need me to commit to you. We need each other and the grace of God working through this church to shape us into the image of Christ.
- ❖ So let me conclude by asking two questions. **1) Are you a member of the global Church, the mystical communion of saints?** Do you see the sinfulness of your sin and your needfulness of Jesus to be your Savior and Lord?
 - ▶ Have you heard the good news that Jesus came to rescue sinners, to gain a people, to win a Bride? Have you repented of your sins and confessed Christ as Lord? Upon doing so, you will be united to Christ and to his global Church.

- ❖ **2) Have you demonstrated your invisible union with Christ and his global Church by becoming a member of a visible local church?** Can you point to a local church and say, *“This is my home. This is my church family. These are my people. I am committed to them and they are committed to me. I will serve them, love them, care for them with all the gifts and grace God has given me.”*
 - ▶ It doesn’t have to be the Houston Chinese Church. As long as you can point to a local church of believers who love Jesus, preach the Gospel, and submit themselves to the authority of his Word. If you find one like that, don’t date her. Just marry her.
 - Inquire about church membership (or whatever equivalent process or practice they use). Make your commitment formal and official.

- ❖ ***So what step do you need to take today?*** Is it to become a formal member of your church? If you call HCC home but have yet to officially join, then mark your calendar for Sunday afternoon, October 7th, and come to our next membership class.
 - ▶ Or perhaps you consider yourself a member of the global Church but not only have you never joined a local church, you've actually never been baptized. Well there will be a baptism class on that same afternoon. Come and make your allegiance to Christ public through baptism and be added to our number here at HCC.

- ❖ And then there are those of you who are baptized and members. What step should you take? Perhaps it's to make this church more of a priority with your time. Perhaps God is convicting you to demonstrate your Christian love by actively serving and ministering to one another? What step do you need to take today?

- ❖ Friends, there is nothing revolutionary about disregarding the local church. **If you want to be truly revolutionary, then quit living for yourself, plant some roots in a local church, and spend yourself on others** – devoting your time, talents, and treasures to a church and its mission. That would be revolutionary!