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Great Words of the Faith **"I Will Build My Church..."** Selected Scriptures

Anyone involved in West Virginia politics spends a great deal of time at the capitol. Legislators, elected officials, staff, lobbyists, and concerned citizens all spend a lot of time in this building.

Any person involved in Christianity spends time in a building as well – the church! One of the marks of a person who calls themselves a Christian (or other religion for that matter) is they attend a place of worship and religious instruction. We would have to say "The Church" is certainly one of the great words of our faith we should study and understand.

Bible Meaning of the Church

"Church" is obviously a very important word in the Bible. Jesus promised, ***"I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it"*** The word for church is used over 100 times in the New Testament. (The name of the theological study of all the Bible teaches about the church, "Ecclesiology", is taken from this word. When the word is used, it may refer to two different things. As with some other great words of our faith, it takes just a bit of study to determine which meaning is used based on the context.

The word may refer to the *universal church*. In this sense the church is made up of all believers, from all places, who have truly repented and put their faith in Christ. This is what Jesus is talking about when He said, ***"I will build my church..."*** (Matthew 16:18). Paul regretted how he had ***"persecuted the church of God..."*** (1 Cor. 15:9). We see ***"Jesus is head over all things to the church, which is His body..."*** (Eph. 1:22-23). Many other scriptures speak of the church in this universal sense.

Hebrews 12:1 calls the biblical heroes of our faith listed in chapter 11 a "cloud of witnesses" – a stadium full of fans – urging us on in our own Christian race. Faithful believers who have gone before us and those in other countries who may be suffering greatly for Christ also make up this gathering and encourage us in our faith.

The New Testament also talks about the *local church*. This is the local gathering of believers in a geographical area. Paul writes to the churches at Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica. Paul exhorted Titus to appoint elders in the churches in Crete (Titus 1:5). Much of the instruction in the New Testament by Paul and other writers teaches us how we should live, act, and serve in our local church. Dr. Lester Pipkin, founder and longtime president of Appalachian Bible College defined the local church this way:

A local church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus Christ voluntarily united in a geographical area who subscribe to the authority of the New Testament in all matters of faith and practice and who have organized themselves in accordance with New Testament teaching for the purposes of worship, instruction, fellowship, service, and evangelism.

As we read through the New Testament and see reference to the church, we must stop a moment, consider the context, and determine which meaning is intended.

Acts 2:42 describes what took place in that early local church in Jerusalem:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

We want to be part of a local church that is faithful in these areas. There are other issues to consider, but we want to be part of a church that is faithfully preaching God's Word, presenting the true gospel, observing the ordinances (baptism & Lord's supper), and praying for each other and those outside the church.

Bible Pictures of the Church

God's word gives us some vivid pictures or illustrations describing the church to help us understand our relationship with Christ and with other believers and how we should live and serve in the church.

Kids in the Same Family – When we repent and trust Christ, we become children of God (John 1:12). God is our Father. Christ is our older brother. And we are all brothers and sisters in Christ – terms used often in the Bible. This is true in the universal sense as we can find great fellowship with believers from other places we have never met. It is certainly true in the local sense as

we seek to worship, fellowship, and serve together in our local church.

Members of the Same Body – True believers become part of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:4, 12, 16; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). Jesus is the head; all believers make up various parts of body.

Bricks in the Same Building – Every true believer becomes a part of a building God is constructing (Eph. 2:20-22).

Bride of Christ – The relationship between a husband and wife is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:25-32).

Why Be Part of a Local Church?

The Bible has much to say about why we as believers should be a part of a local church.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us not to forsake our own assembling together (Heb. 10:25). Some will say, *“I love Jesus, I just don’t like the church”*. This is actually saying, *“I love Jesus, but I don’t like His bride”*. If we truly love Him, we will love the church as well.

The church is God’s primary place to provide the means of grace for believers to grow in faith and Christian maturity. The preaching of the word, the practicing of the ordinances, and the accountability and fellowship with other believers all take place within the local church.

Every believer has been given a spiritual gift, an ability to help serve and minister to build up others in the local church (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:7-14)

In a local church we have accountability to leaders and other believers. The writer of Hebrews again exhorts us to ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.”*** (Hebrews 13:17). Jesus Himself taught us about church discipline – what the church should do if a professing member falls into sin (Matthew 18).

Why So Many Different Churches and Denominations

The question quickly arises of why there are so many different churches and denominations. It is because of various views and beliefs about what the Bible teaches. Jesus called us to have unity in the body of Christ, yet we have all these differences among believers. As we consider these differences, it will help us to understand the relative importance of these differences between believers and churches. We can divide these differences into three levels or “shelves”.

First level or first “shelf” issue are those truths which are essential to the Christian faith. Without a belief in these things a person cannot truly be saved and a part of the church. There can be no unity with individuals or churches who do not hold to these things because they are not children of God. These are truths such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, justification through Christ by faith alone, and the authority of Scripture.

Second shelf issues are those which are not essential to salvation yet may well be serious enough to cause some level of separation between believers. We recognize those who differ from us on these issues as believers and we can certainly fellowship together, but these differences might affect the unity of a local church. Baptism (baptizing infants vs. baptizing believers); views of the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit; the framework for understanding scripture and the church (covenant theology vs. dispensationalism); these and other issues might keep us from joining, teaching in, or leading in a church with different beliefs.

Third shelf issues are preferences. These are issues over which believers may disagree and yet remain in close fellowship and join, serve, teach, and lead together in a local church. These may include such things as Bible versions, music, eschatology (belief about end times), and elders vs. deacons. In Romans 14 we find Paul’s great teaching as to how believers are to get along with each other over such issues.

This leads us to another question of when we should leave a church. It seems people are quick to leave a church if they have conflict with others or the church across town has new facilities or exciting programs. If we remember the pictures of the church – the family of God; the body of Christ; God’s building; and the Bride of Christ – we will certainly be slow to leave those with whom we are worshipping, fellowshiping and serving together.

Our Response to Truths of the Church

First, we must make sure we are genuinely a part of the universal church. It is only when we come to recognize our sinfulness, turn from our sin and place our faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – we become members of this church.

Then we need to make sure we are part of a good, biblical local church. Not just attending but fellowshiping and serving together with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We also should remember to pray for and support our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering greatly for their faith in other countries as Hebrews 13:3 exhorts us:

Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

You can visit www.rememberthose.org for a ministry that supports orphans and widows of those who’ve lost their lives for their faith.

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

Thursdays

12:00 PM McManus Conference Room

(MB 254 located by House minority offices)