



Recovering the Priority of the Local Church

Selected Scriptures

May 24, 2015

We're continuing our series that we're calling, *Support Your Local Church*. I've been encouraged by the elders to extend this series a bit, so I have done that. I'm going to expand it just somewhat. We're going to keep going on the series. I was going to cut it off in May, but we're going to go into the month of June and we'll come back to Luke and his Gospel after that. What I want to do this morning is provide a bit of an introduction to the next couple of weeks. This, just trying to set some things as a foundation for what we're going to cover, talking about involvement in the local church.

I want you to see, if you get one thing from this morning, what I want you to understand and see is the vital significance of your membership and your involvement in the local church. I want you to see the vital significance of your membership and

GRACE CHURCH



Grace

your involvement in the local church. If any of you ask someone who has been serving their local church for a lifetime, if you ask them at the end of their life, in their seventies, in their eighties, and you sit down with them in their rocking chair and just have a conversation and say, Listen, do you regret your investment into the local church?, I can guarantee they will say, Not one bit. In fact, I wish I could have done more. As I look back on my life, I wish I could have given to my local church more. I wish I could have invested in some lives more. I wish I could have shaped some minds more in my ministry, discipleship and evangelism. I wish I could have done it more. I wish there were more time in my life to do that. I guarantee that's what you're going to hear. That theme about the investment and membership in the local church is going to permeate everything we say over the next few weeks and the reason is that it is a huge theme in the New Testament.

I think it's obvious to all of us that we're living in a time when Christianity is being rejected wholesale by the wider culture. Whatever influence that evangelicals thought they had exerted in society, whether it was through politics, law, ethics, economics, whatever that influence is quickly fading. It

is eroding at a rapid rate and especially over the last decade. Articles written are often reporting on the research that indicates the decline of Christianity in America. The most recent study comes from the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life. It's a 2014 study, and it is showing a radical decline in the number of people affiliating with Christianity. In an article posted at their website titled, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, the subtitle tells us all, Christians decline sharply as share of population, unaffiliated and other faiths continue to grow. The study, a massive study, very thorough surveyed more than 35,000 Americans. That is a massive sample size, and it found, quote, "The percentage of adults who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years. From 78.4 percent in an equally massive Pew research survey in 2007 to 70.6 percent in 2014."End Quote.

With seventy percent of Americans still identifying as Christian, you might think we're not doing too badly. We still have the majority, right? But listen, statistically speaking, seven percent, almost eight percent, is a huge drop and the change occurred in just seven short years. That represents a

trend of decline with very significant implications for the future of Christianity in America. A large percentage of Americans, twenty-five percent, call themselves Protestant Evangelical Christians. That is, they are distinguishing from Roman Catholicism and mainline, mostly liberal, mainline Protestant. Twenty-five percent of America is still evangelical, according to the survey. People are leaving the Roman Catholic and Protestant mainline churches in big numbers, huge numbers. Both organizations have taken some significant credibility hits as of late and both of them are suffering an identity crisis.

In comparison, though, the departure from evangelical churches, while it's there is less dramatic. Still, with twenty-five percent of our country identifying as Protestant Evangelicals, we've got to ask some questions. Why do we find our country in such a rapid moral decline? With so many evangelicals, how did we get to the point where the US Supreme Court is actually considering whether or not to redefine the institution of marriage. Why is the permissive attitude toward sin so widespread? With seventy percent of America still identifying as Christian, with twenty-five percent of America still identifying as Evangelical, well, it doesn't seem to be

very well reflected in our social and cultural life, now, does it? What America says it believes doesn't seem to make much practical difference at all. There's a pretty big disconnect between faith and practice in this country, which tells us more about what Americans *actually* believe and what they *say* they believe, right? I wonder how that translates into foreign policy. As people sit down with an American ambassador, knowing what the country says it believes but what it truly believes, can you trust an American?

You gotta wonder in these surveys how they're defining the word Christian, right? Probably not in a biblical way. But listen, who is to blame them? They have been trained to see the word Christian as an all-encompassing term, embracing anybody who talks about Christ, embracing Catholic and Protestant alike, embracing the Charismatics and the Stoics, the Fundamentalists and the Liberals and everything in between. All stripes, all flavors, all colors of the rainbow are represented by the term Christian. They all work together in America's big events like Billy Graham Crusades. They all worship together at the big conferences. They all promote together, work together, gain the money together. Why shouldn't the world consider them all united

in the same universal church? Are they truly in union with one another? When it comes to influencing the culture? That is what evangelicals have wanted the world to believe. That is the message they have been sending to Washington D.C. They want Washington D.C. and all the politicians to see evangelicals and Catholics united together as one big, powerful, united voting block.

But we have to wonder, emerging for more than a century of massive evangelical influence, how is this current moral decline possible? Why the dive in our power and influence? *Time Magazine* has dubbed Billy Graham, America's Pastor. He's been personal friends with and spiritual advisor to a number of sitting US presidents. Dwight Moody before him had massive influence in the culture. So many others have been involved in American public life trying to reform the culture, such amazing, amazing influence and at the highest levels. Not just at the top, but at every level from top to bottom, evangelicals have been working hard, investing a lot to exert influence on the population, to effect change in the culture. Massive investments of energy, of effort, of time, of money to start and build, maintain evangelical parachurch organizations. You know, *para, para* is



the word that means, it's a Greek prefix that means alongside, so parachurch, alongside the church. These big organizations, built to come alongside the church and they're huge.

Political climate has been quite tolerant of Christian cultural influence over the centuries. Tax exemptions for the parachurch nonprofits and tax benefits that make charitable giving attractive to people. It's an environment that has allowed these parachurch organizations to merge, to grow, to thrive, to exert influence. Some of them have huge budgets, huge massive budgets. Some of the best known household name parachurch organizations have annual revenues exceeding \$100 million dollars a year. Some are more modest. The parachurch organization I worked for had an annual budget hovering around 20 million. Still, that's a lot of money.

The Goliath of parachurch organizations is Campus Crusade for Christ or just plain, Cru, as they like to be known today. They've opted to deemphasize the word crusade in the post 9/11 climate. Billy Graham also came to regret that as well. So he's trying to pull back on that word, crusade. But the annual income

of Campus Crusade is \$544 million dollars. Every year that's what they're bringing in, and that puts it at number 19 on the Forbes Fifty Largest U.S. Charities list. Half a billion dollars to spend every year, that's enough money to buy some real influence, to make a big difference in the culture. Right? But in actuality, the money, the size of the organization, the efforts, the energies, the investment of resources do not seem to be making a dent. Does it? And that is exactly what Bill Bright intended to do with Campus Crusade for Christ, to make a dent, to make a difference. He wanted to change the culture, to reform the culture. He wanted Crusade to be the instrument of evangelizing the entire country and taking back the culture for Christ. Bill Bright, along with his friend and YWAM founder, Youth With a Mission, Loren Cunningham, they both believed that God spoke to them personally, individually, audibly telling them the following, quote, "If the church is to impact any nation for Jesus Christ, it needs to get out of the church and engage the culture in seven spheres: business, government, media, arts and entertainment, education, family, and religion." End Quote.

Get out of the church. By that, I guess they would say God meant get out of the local church, get out of the church walls.

Don't become so navel gazing, right. Get out. I can say without fear of contradiction, God didn't say that. Nevertheless, that is what Bill Bright believed. That is what he spent his life doing, trying to impact the nation.

Some of you may remember the *Here's Life America* campaign run by Campus Crusade in 1976. Anyone old enough to remember the *I found it* slogan? Anybody remember that, printed on tee shirts and bumper stickers everywhere? It flooded the country. Don't feel badly if you don't. I was only six years old at the time. Not too culturally aware at six years old. But I read about what was going on. There's a lot written about it. And the *I found it* slogan was everywhere using mass media, mobilizing thousands of churches. The express goal of the *Here's Life America* campaign was to evangelize the entire country. That campaign came close on the heels of something else you might remember in 1972, it was *Explo'72*, it was a series of youth meetings at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, Texas. They were capitalizing on the popularity of the Jesus Movement, tapping into the youthful energy from that movement. Campus Crusade sponsored the event, booking Billy Graham to speak several times through the week. For the Christian musicians that performed at *Explo'72*, it was a

massively important conference because it launched the entire Christian music industry.

More than 80,000 students attended that series of meetings, which is why Explo'72 was dubbed *The Christian Woodstock*. The revenue from that event enabled Campus Crusade to double in size, staffing up to three thousand employees. The popularity of the event, the visible success marked by the attendance figures and the money, don't forget the money, all of that allowed Bill Bright to build on the momentum. Bill Bright planned to capitalize on America's celebration of its bicentennial. The man was brilliant in his strategies, brilliant in his, in his organization. And in 1976, he saw an opportunity there in the country's celebration of its 200th anniversary of its birth, he saw an opportunity to promote his plan to evangelize America and capture the culture for Christ. So Bill Bright targeted 250 of America's largest cities. He sent his staff out to enlist 14,500 churches to mobilize them, to train their members to be a volunteer force working for Campus Crusade. They were to blitz the cities with a mass media evangelistic campaign, this campaign called, *Here's Life America*. Radio promotions, tee shirts, bumper stickers, door-to-door, on the phone, multiple

millions of dollars, many thousands of hours, the effort, the energies of local church members, all to promote the campaign with the catchy *I found it* slogan to introduce them to Christ through the four spiritual laws and all the rest.

Not everyone was enamored with Campus Crusade's ambitious efforts at the time. Jay Randolph Taylor, a Presbyterian, criticized the *Here's Life America*, campaign saying, quote, "The glorious Gospel becomes a commodity sold and delivered to the doorstep like a brush or a bar of soap." End Quote. He said further that it depends on gimmicks and quote, "it's fairly superficial, largely irrelevant and unusually expensive." End quote. That's pretty critical. Honest efforts going into a campaign like that. Was he right? Was the expense worth it? Did the investment payoff? Well, by targeting the population centers, 250 of America's largest cities, Bright believed that he brought the Gospel to millions of Americans. He claimed the *Here's Life America* campaign reached three quarters of America with the Gospel. And he reported 535,000 decisions for Christ.

535,000 decisions for Christ, listen, if even a fraction of those numbers were legitimate, true conversions, what would America look like today? Would it look like this? In the well-researched book, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America*, John Turner reported the actual results of the *Here's Life America* campaign. He writes this, quote, "Crusade invited Peter Wagner of the Fuller Evangelistic Association's Department of Church Growth to measure the growth of churches that participated in the campaign. Wagner reported that only three percent of those who indicated decisions became new church members, and churches on average gained only one new member per 22 campaign volunteers." End quote.

Turner follows that up with a comment saying, "Billy Graham's crusades had long been plagued by similar statistics." End Quote. One of the ways these big parachurch organizations have enlisted the, the help of the local church, one of the ways that they solicited funds was by pointing to the potential benefit to the local church, that is, converts, new church members. Look, it's not that local churches have wanted to count noses and nickels. They were led to believe they were doing the

Lord's work evangelizing people. They wanted to see some fruit for their sacrifice. They wanted to see people come to Christ, to join their churches so they could disciple them. They were excited at the opportunities and the possibilities. Sadly, there just weren't too many real converts. Still, no matter what the data said, parachurch leaders have been free to interpret statistics however they want to. They don't have to give an account to any denominational authority. They aren't in submission to any ecclesiastical body. So they can say what they want to.

For example, the architect of the Here's Life America campaign, Bruce Cook, he saw silver lining in these statistics. The data from Bill Bright's friend, Peter Wagner, did not demonstrate that the campaign had come even close to achieving his ambitions, but Cook replaced the original goal of evangelizing all of American with a higher ambition, a new ambition. "The campaign," he said, quote, "moved Crusade up because we are no longer a campus ministry, like Young Life or Youth for Christ." End quote. Crusade was bigger than that now, more popular; it had outgrown its juvenile campus ministry to

become a real force in America for impacting the culture. And after all, that was the real goal all along, wasn't it?

The *Here's Life America* campaign is just one example of many that illustrate, the more you look past the marketing hype, the more closely you scrutinize the numbers, the more you look at the real return on investment and ask hard questions about stewardship, doctrinal accuracy, real spiritual benefit, you know what, the harder it is to justify these kind of campaigns. This campaign had come at a great cost to the local churches, to real people, exhausting resources, spending money, using up energies of regular Christians like you and me. Why did so many Christians then, why do so many Christians now, feel compelled to leave their local churches behind and give their time and energy and life to big parachurch organizations at the expense of their local churches? Why don't they feel the same compelling to get involved in the local church? Why do people leave for these greener pastures?

Listen, the very existence of the parachurch in America is a critique of the local church. Almost without

exception, parachurch leaders have made conscious decisions to operate outside the boundaries of the local church, outside the boundaries of denominational structures. There is a common belief in the parachurch that the local church is not getting the job done. Parachurch then, is there to shore up the weaknesses, to do what the local church cannot do, provide the training and the resources the local church can't provide for itself. As I said, it's an inherent critique, and I think there's been an element of truth in that critique in many cases. Frankly, many local churches and denominations have failed to stay focused on their main purpose to carry out the Lord's mandate in Matthew 28:18 to 20. They failed to stay focused on their job of making disciples, baptizing them into the church, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus said.

As an example, one man named Matt Walsh recorded his experience at a church he visited in a recent article. The title of his article doesn't leave you guessing at all. It says, *Maybe Christianity in America is Dying Because It's Boring Everyone to Death*. Walsh describes his visit to what he believes to be a pretty typical evangelical church. He says, "Everybody is dressed comfortably, choir members in shorts and flip flops,

nontraditional music, the kind of easy listening people hear in restaurants or malls.” He says, “The pastor comes to the stage warming up the crowd with jokes, making sure his sermon is,” as Walsh puts it, quote, “jam packed with youth slang and pop culture.” End quote.

He continues, quoting from him here, “The word Gospel made maybe one appearance in his message. The words truth, sacred, reverence, sin, hell, virtue, obedience and duty were conspicuously absent just as they were absent from most sermons delivered in most churches everywhere in the country.” Skipping ahead about halfway in, he said, “I turned around to get a look at my fellow congregants. Do you know what I witnessed? Hundreds of captivated church goers.” Then he says, “Just kidding. Actually, a lot of empty seats. A disinterested yawn echoed through the hall. I could see the guy next to me fighting to keep his eyes open. I understood where he was coming from. I guess it’s supposed to entertain us, but our faith isn’t supposed to be merely entertaining. It’s so much more than that. When you reduce it to mere distraction and spectacle, it loses its substance and without its substance, it is, among other things, boring.” End quote.

Listen, Matt Walsh is by no means a cranky old fuddy duddy. Okay? You might describe him as a hipster. You have to know that the hipsters, the young people of this generation, want substance. They're dying for truth. They don't want gimmicks. They don't want to be marketed to; they get enough of that. It's coming through their iPhones, through their computers, better than the church could ever do it. And they can smell it when it's coming at them. What they want is truth. What they want is gospel. What they want is to understand, How can I be clean from all these pornographic images that are in my head from so many years of sitting on the couch playing video games and watching porn? How can I have a cleansed conscience before God? How can I know I'm going to go to heaven? That's what young people want to know. Matt Walsh continues in his article to call Christians back to a distinctive, historic, orthodox Christianity. And I couldn't agree more. It is so disturbing to find an eroding commitment to the local church among evangelicals. But when this is the local church that people experience, can you blame them for leaving?

It's not as though the large parachurch organizations are doing any better. To stay large and influential, to keep the

money coming in, they have to lower the doctrinal bar not raise it. They can't afford to make doctrinal distinctions. They can't afford to be too clear. They have to expand their borders to engage in ministry with almost anyone, including Roman Catholics, because they need to broaden their constituency, expand their donor base, keep the money coming in. Their existence and their growth and their perpetuation depend on it. But when you come back to the local church, many people have the Matt Walsh experience and they just want to give up. How often do you hear people say, yeah, I'm a Christian, but I'm not too interested in the organized church? Or Sure, I'm a member of the universal church. Local church? Huh, no way. I've been burned too many times by local churches. It kind of reminds you of those people who say, yeah, I love humanity. It's people I can't stand. Same sentiment. I love the church universal, but I'm not going near the local church, too painful, too complicated, too messy, too whatever.

That's so sad, isn't it? It's so sad. But I know from talking to many of you that's exactly what you've experienced. You've felt forced to choose between bad and worse. That is so tragic. You don't, you don't get that picture of the local

church by reading the New Testament. The local church in Scripture is described as a vibrant, dynamic place. Here's what Luke said about it in Acts chapter 2. He says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." That's three thousand people, by the way; the first mega church right there in the Bible. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." They loved teaching. They devoted themselves to the "fellowship and to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They loved prayer meetings. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Did it take a parachurch organization? No. Did it take some big, massive campaign throughout Jerusalem distributing leaflets and bumper stickers, well, I guess it would be like stickers on donkeys and such, but donkeys, whatever! They didn't just do any of that. That church sounds like a great place to be, right? When you read the rest of

the New Testament and you see how the local church is supposed to operate, it sounds absolutely delightful. The local church is a place where we practice the one anothers of the New Testament. The local church is the place where we're to accept one another, care for one another, serve one another and encourage one another. Paul says in Colossians 3:12 and 13, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another forgiving each other." That's because we've been forgiven, right? "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

We, therefore, have attitudes of honor and respect for one another. In humility, we prefer one another above our own selves. We teach one another. We exhort one another and in humility, we submit to one another's loving correction. All of that because, after the pattern of our Lord's example and in joyful obedience to his command, we are a community of people who love one another. Jesus said in John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." How? "As I have loved you." That is why Paul said we are to "Owe no one anything, except to love one another," Romans 13:8. Or as Peter put it, we

are to "love one another earnestly from a pure heart," 1 Peter 1:22. And to "keep loving one another fervently." 1 Peter 4:8, "since love covers a multitude of sins." Listen, it's by that kind of love with all its attendant humility and compassion and kindness and encouragement, by that kind of love, Jesus said, "All people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34,35. Church like that sounds like it's such an exciting place to be, doesn't it? What a joy! Who wouldn't want to be part of a community that treats one another like that? So what's gone wrong? How have we gotten so far off track? What's the way back?

I want to try to bring some clarity to the situation here, and just understand that I'm not saying all of this about this church. We had some folks over to the *Dessert with the Pastor* thing on Friday night, and pretty much everyone of them described this church as being such a loving, outgoing fellowship. You have to know that, that your reputation among others, especially those who visit, is good. But we need to understand the attitudes that pervade our culture, that come in the doors of our church, that affect us, that affect everything we're reading.

This is all introductory, by the way. I've got two brief points to cover in a few minutes, but we've got several weeks to unpack it. So don't worry, I'm not going to shortchange you, okay?

But listen, just to bring some clarity to the situation of how things have gotten off track, the first way evangelical churches have gone off the rails is theological, it's doctrinal. That's obvious. Whether it's the local church or the church universal, Christians have been failing to trust the Bible. So they've stopped teaching it, and they've turned to gimmickry and faddism. They've tried so hard to be contemporary and relevant. Some call it contempervant. They've, they've just failed to achieve either one. They've come across as nothing more than juvenile, nothing more than stupid and silly, not to be taken seriously at all. That's exactly what Matt Walsh was describing. So many are bored and unimpressed and unmoved that they dropped out of the local church altogether, and that's why we tried to reestablish the true purpose of the church as a repository of the truth, the pillar and ground of the truth. That was our first message in this series, we're guardians of the truth. We

guard it by giving it away. We proclaim the truth in all its distinctive, divinely revealed glory. Listen, so the church must be distinctively and unapologetically Christian. People can get entertainment anywhere. They'll only go to the church to tell them the truth. That's what we've got to be here for, folks. They'll only get the truth if we're bold enough to tell them.

There's a second way evangelical churches have drifted over the past century. Back to that failed *Here's Life Campaign*, we need to ask the most fundamental question of all: What gospel did millions in American hear during that campaign? The same one Bill Bright had nearly, had neatly packaged for them in the *Four Spiritual Laws*. You've heard of the *Four Spiritual Laws* before, right? God loves you, number one, God love you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Um, is that how the Bible starts the Gospel message? Doesn't Romans start with, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and righteousness of men." Listen, if the Gospel starts with bad news of God's anger over our personal sin, then that first law seems pretty misleading, doesn't it? It's more like a sales pitch that appeals to a narcissist, making him think God is all about you. No, God is all about *God*, and he's calling you to

repent and put your faith in him, so you can be saved from his wrath. Listen, if you get the message across that people are in danger, then Jesus makes sense as an answer.

Law number two: Man is sinful and separated from God; thus he cannot know and experience God's love and plan. Well, that's true. But doesn't it seem that something really important is missing from that statement? The real issue at stake with man's sin and separation is the consequence of eternal judgment. Failing to know God's love and plan is only half the story. And knowing God's love and plan, the motivation for that point, that's only interesting to those who have been, been delivered from and abandoned self-love, who've abandoned self-will of their own plan. So many people are satisfied with their own plan. They don't care about God's.

Law number three: Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Again, very true, but woefully minimal. The exclusivity of Jesus Christ is there, which is good, and I commend that. What about substitutionary atonement? What about imputation? What about justification by faith? What about the

denial of any human effort whatsoever? What about the affirmation of salvation wholly by divine grace? Is that in that point? I've read a lot of presentations of the *Four Spiritual Laws*, and I've never found them to get to any depth on that point. But that is the fundamental issue is what are you going to do with Jesus Christ? How is he a provision for my sin? How can my sin be taken to him and his righteousness to me? How, how is that explained? How is that understood? We don't respect people and their thinking and their understanding if we don't speak to their minds, if we don't answer those questions.

Law number four: We must individually receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. True. But perhaps we could state it just a little more accurately. You must repent and believe the Gospel so the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will receive you. That's the issue. It's not about you receiving him; it's about him receiving you. As Gary Oedy preached at the beginning of April, so many of these attempts in our Gospel tracts and our Gospel presentations, so many of these attempts to boil down the Gospel, to present an acceptable Gospel, to make the Gospel easy to share, easy to understand, you know they fall so far short of what the Bible actually teaches. They fall short of the Gospel



Jesus preached. They don't involve faith, repentance. They don't involve judgment and hell.

Listen, that's the significance of the second message we preached in this series, on baptism. We underscored the significance of baptism. And by doing that, we have to reckon with the profound meaning of the Gospel and salvation. The Gospel is about death, burial, and resurrection. It's the death of you. It's the burial of your former self, and it's your resurrection to an entirely new life in Christ. That's why only those who are baptized are legitimate candidates for local church membership. That is why we call baptism the initiation ritual of the local church. By obeying Jesus' command to all new converts, you know what, they demonstrate they recognize who he truly is. They recognize his authority over their life and they do what he says. They recognize his Lordship. In the land of a thousand gospels, all but one of them is false.

We need to make sure people understand the right Gospel and that they truly embrace it. It's a Gospel of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the worship of the Triune

God. It's a life of sanctification and repentance and discipleship. We need to make sure people joining the local church understand that, that they're truly saved, that they've embraced the true Christ through the right Gospel. Only those kinds of people are going to understand what's at stake in evangelizing the lost as they go out. Only those kind of people are going to have the changed heart, the changed life, the spiritual enlightenment necessary to proclaim a distinctively Christian message and to live a distinctively Christian life. So first, we've got to be distinctively Christian. Secondly, we've got to make sure we're preaching an accurate Gospel.

There is a third way evangelical churches have lost their savor. They've dimmed their light. This is so tremendously significant, so important. It actually leads us into our outline. This is what connects with the message last week on the Lord's Table, the fellowship ordinance of the local church. One of the problems with these massive evangelistic campaigns and not that I'm against that. I mean, I say, let's go as a church and have an evangelistic campaign in the park. Let me preach the Gospel there and call them all in. Let's do it. That's great. But listen, one of the problems with that, and especially when

you get to a national scale or a global scale, set aside questions about doctrinal content for a moment. What, what happens is that many of these large parachurch ministries, what they've done is they have uncoupled the Gospel from the local church. Through mass media, big initiatives, they have disembodied the message from the messenger.

Listen, why is that a problem? Why is that a problem? Isn't it the message of the cross, the words that save and not some group of people? Yeah, that is absolutely true. But there is a realness to all of this. There is an authenticity to what we preach when the Gospel's power to transform is on display in changed lives. I'm not talking about just one changed life. We certainly cannot and we should not criticize Billy Graham, Bill Bright or any of these others by saying, lives weren't changed through these ministries. You know what? They were. They were. I'm convinced the Lord used those men's ministries to accomplish much good. Obviously, there are things to criticize, but there's no doubt in my mind that many people truly found Christ through exposure to those ministries.

Louis Zamperini, he's the subject of the book, *Unbroken*; recent movie made about that, coming out of that book. That guy was truly transformed while attending the Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles in 1949. Radically saved and while that story is absolutely inspiring, if you haven't read the book, read it. It's an attention grabber, to be sure. It's a real headliner. But it's one thing to hear the story, to read about it in a book, and you know what, it's quite another thing to share life with Louis Zamperini. It's quite another thing to watch him live out a transformed life in the context of his local church.

For a number of reasons that we're going to get into in the coming weeks, I firmly believe that the local church is a missing aspect of much of today's evangelism. I believe evangelicals over the last century have erred significantly in emphasizing the universal church to the diminishment, to the exclusion, and to the detriment of the local church. Broad interest and wide ambitions have eclipsed local church ministry. And that's bad, beloved. I in no way want to denigrate the significance of the universal church. This is a beloved truth. But we cannot let the pendulum swing to emphasize one at the

exclusion of the other. They have to both be maintained; both be proclaimed.

So with the time remaining, let me turn this little lecture into a sermon by actually getting into the Bible. How about that? Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 16. Matthew chapter 16, we're going to look at all the places in the Gospels this morning where Jesus directly discusses the church, every single text where Jesus talks about the church. Do you know how many passages that is? Just two. Some of you were sweating. Just two passages Matthew 16 and Matthew 18. Just two places that Jesus used the word church and talked directly about it. Isn't that interesting? It may seem surprising at first glance that Jesus, the head of the church, only really directly addressed the church in two places. But you have to keep in mind that Jesus came as the Messiah to the Jews. He presented himself forthrightly, transparently to his own nation, Israel. He called for their repentance, their allegiance to him in faith so that God would fulfill his promises of restoration to the nation. John 1:11 says Jesus "came to his own, and his own did not receive him." Paul taught in Romans 9 through 11 that that rejection, Israel's rejection of its Messiah, that opened the

door for salvation for all of us. While I don't rejoice in Israel's rejection, I do rejoice in the opportunity to know Israel's God. Don't you?

You know what, it's through us Gentiles who attained what Israel tried to attain but couldn't because they tried to attain it by works. It's us Gentiles who attain it by faith, that is, the righteousness of God that comes through faith by believing in Christ. You know what? We're going to provoke the nation of Israel to jealousy. Isn't that neat? We're on the scene. There is worldwide significance to what we do here. Through us, the church, God is going to show Israel that, again from John 1, "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God."

So in Matthew 16, this conversation with his disciples, Peter's great confession, it comes immediately on the heels of yet another confrontation with the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The nation here, by this time, is demonstrating its rejection of Christ. And so Jesus is about to

reveal a mystery. He's about to reveal something that's been hidden from long ages past, but now has yet to be revealed, and it's this entity, this body called the church; us.

Take a look at Matthew 16:13, "Now When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' And then he strictly warned or charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." verse 21, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests, and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Stop there.

Here's the first point for today's outline it's in your bulletin. Point number one: We Possess Membership in the Church Universal. We Possess Membership in the Church Universal. When Jesus tells Peter there in verse 18, "I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church," you know, some people, like the Roman Catholics, take that to mean that Jesus will build the church on Peter. There's actually some exegetical warrant for seeing it that way. There is no warrant for seeing Peter as the first pope, or anything about papal succession. But it's not entirely without exegetical warrant to see the text that way. Others see Jesus referring to Peter's confession in verse 16, as the rock. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That's the rock on which Christ would build his church. And there are very strong reasons to take it that way. But you might also think of it this way, that Jesus is announcing his intention to build this newly revealed entity called the church on those who make the same confession that Peter made; so it's truth and it's tied to people. The confession here is not separate from the people. The truth is *embodied* in the people, in the church, the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Heard that before?

Peter seems to have understood that in a similar way. In 1 Peter 2:4 and 5 he writes, "As you come to him," Jesus, "a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Listen, this reference in Matthew 16:18, this is a reference about the church universal. Alright? It's about the church of which we are all a part by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. All of us who make the same confession that Peter made, all of us who believe what Peter believed, who know Christ as Peter knew him, are known by Christ as Peter was known by Christ. Notice verse 17, "Blessed are we." Huh. "For flesh and blood has not revealed this," to us, "but our Father who is in heaven." All of us who make that confession are united in one body. As it says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Listen, by virtue of that baptism of the Holy Spirit, we all possess membership in the church universal in union with the Triune God: Father, Son

and Holy Spirit. Our union with one another is unhindered and unaffected by space and by time. Geography doesn't hinder our unity; neither does our location on the timeline of history. We're all united in Christ. That's the church universal. And the membership we all possess in the church universal, it's an amazing reality that we're going to come back to again.

But I now want to introduce another concept, and that's the reality and the authority of the local church. Point two: We Practice Membership in the Church Local. We practice, we possess membership in the, local church, in the, ah, church universal and we practice membership in the local church. Turn two chapters ahead to the second, the only other reference to the church in the Gospels, look at Matthew 18:15. Matthew 18:15 and Jesus says there, Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say whatever you bind on

earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Wow, that's significant! This is the process and the practice of what we call, restorative church discipline. This is church discipline. We call it restorative discipline because that's the emphasis in the text: Restorative. We're trying to gain our brother. But notice what happens if our brother refuses to listen to us. Well, then, a small group; then the call to repentance by the entire church. According to verse 17, Christ says we're to pass judgment. Based on what we see in this man's unrepentant attitude, we're to pass judgment. We're to treat this guy like an unbeliever. We're to excommunicate this guy from the church, but not vindictively; sorrowfully, lovingly. It's crystal clear to everyone now, by sending him out of the church, that this guy is not someone who needs better discipleship. This guy isn't someone who needs six more months of counseling. This guy needs some evangelizing.

Notice the reference there in verse 18 to the keys. That refers back to what Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:19. "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," or we could translate that, it's actually literally, "shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven." That is, Peter, the disciples, the apostolic church, everybody, who like us, who are recipients of that apostolic truth, when we pronounce judgment in church discipline, we're pronouncing the judgment of heaven: has been bound in heaven. Peter, the disciples, all the Jews who heard that would understand the keys as a clear reference to binding authority. In fact, in John 20:22, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And then he said this in the next verse, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Is that because Peter, the Apostles, inherently had something in them that gave them the authority in and of themselves to forgive sins? No. But they pronounced it. In a vivid way, Jesus pointed to the Holy Spirit there, his work to help Christians declare the certainty of forgiveness to those who repent or to deny the certainty of forgiveness to those who don't repent. So it's here in Matthew 18:15 to 20, it's in the context of the

church discipline, that the authority of the local church is here put to good use.

And that's why it says, Jesus says there, verses 18 to 20, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them."

Listen, two or three gathering together, that is not talking about a small, intimate prayer meeting, folks. In the context, it refers back to verse 16, where the two or three of you Christians got together and decided about your unrepentant friend. Using the keys, then here, refers to the authority of the church in declaring the testimony of heaven about someone's salvation. Now, do we practice that in the church universal? Well, think about that. Obviously, not with other Christians in the body of Christ who are separated by time, right? I mean we can't confront dead Christians or Christians who haven't yet been born yet; seems to point us to a local practice within the

church, doesn't it? What about practicing this passage with Christians who are separated by space, by geography? Should I run over to disobedient Christians in other parts of the world and knock on their doorstep and say, hey, I'm going to bring you into church discipline and excommunicate you from the universal church. It gets pretty tricky, doesn't it?

Look, clearly, it's good and right for us to confront any professing Christian who's living in some open pattern of sin whether they attend church, our church or not, but we have no authority to enforce that repentance. We have no authority to enforce repentance of a professing Christian in any other church. It's only in the context of a local church that the congregation wields the authority to enforce restorative church discipline to use the keys, if you will, with its own members.

Now look, we're just unpacking this for right now. Were gonna, er, just introducing it, we're gonna unpack it later. I just want to highlight how important this is, as we close, in connection with everything I said before. The reason seventy percent of Americans can claim to be Christians, or even twenty-

five percent of Americans can claim to be evangelical while at the same time passing legislation in favor of erotic liberty and, get this, folks, to the detriment of your religious liberty; make no mistake where this is heading. The reason that can happen is because there is no authenticity to the Gospel that's being preached. Often times that's because a wrong gospel is being preached or a weak, watered down, distorted version of the Gospel is being preached.

At other times, there can be a right Gospel, but that it's disconnected with real life. People are not seeing the evidence of a transformed life; the divine power of the Gospel on display in and through lives of people like you and me in the local church. There's been too much investment, I think, in trying to build the glory and the grandeur and the power of the universal church. That is the same error of the Roman Catholic church. It's just an American version. It's in evangelical dress. While we never want to forget our membership in the church universal, we never want to diminish that value, that emphasis, that beautiful truth, neither do we want to neglect the duty and the joy to invest ourselves deeply in building the local church, this church. And that's because the local church, in the local



church, we put the message of the Gospel on display in real life, in real time and real space, in flesh and blood. The local church demonstrates the effect of the Gospel on people of all shapes and sizes, not just a segment, not just a market demographic, *all* shapes and sizes, all ages, in all life situations.

Here in the local church, ministry is from the cradle to the grave and everything in between, and the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all of it. You can see it working itself out, live and in stereo right here in the context of the local church. Unlike any other place on earth, we have the opportunity to provide the watching world with an undeniable demonstration of the Gospel's power. That is why Christ gave the church the authority to discipline its members, to make judgments about the spiritual condition with those that come into contact with it. This happens at the local church level on an individual basis, not so much on the universal level. Look, our sanctification says something about the Gospel beloved. It matters. When people walk into this building, they need to see something they cannot explain. When people encounter us in the culture, in society, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our



businesses, in our homes, and our neighborhoods, they need to see something they can't explain and something they cannot deny: life transformation through the Gospel. Bow with me in a word of prayer.

Father, I just want to thank you for the clarity of your truth and the balance of it as well. We want to learn to love and understand our part in the universal church, but most pointedly, we want to understand our responsibility, our duty, our joy, and our privilege to be his local congregation. We love your church, father. We love your church, Lord Jesus Christ. You are our head. You are the one who saved us. You're the one who by your Spirit gives us power to do your work, to glorify you at this time and in this place. Please help us to that end in this series as we teach it. Help us to live that out in real life. In Jesus' name, amen.