

West Valley Church  
08/30/20  
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## We Are the Church Part One

This is a time when there is a great deal of public, legal, and private debate about whether or not churches should be open. Of course the debate is different in each state, and even in each county within the state, depending on what phase of being open they are in. Each week I try to stay informed on this issue by keeping up to date with our county and state health departments, reading articles and professional journals that discuss this issue, and through regular conversations with other pastors. You don't have to read for long to realize that there are strong opinions on all sides. There are national Christian leaders and pastors of mega-churches who have decided to stay closed for the remainder of the year in order to be able to maximize their planning and ensure the safety of their people. There are other megachurch pastors who are suing their states for the "right" to stay open and disputing fines that have been levied against them. There are pastors who defiantly stay open, and there are other pastors who, in real tears, admit that their insistence on staying open was a mistake because of the people in their churches who have died from the virus that was spread at their church gatherings.

If you are a member or regular attender of West Valley Church, you know that the county has now opened the door for us to begin meeting inside in small numbers, and outside in larger numbers. If you haven't received an email from us yet, you will, because we are shifting our approach to worship now. Still, we are doing what every Church of the Nazarene around the globe has been instructed to do: abide by the local health authorities.

Let me just say this: for the sake of your health and the health of the most vulnerable in our beloved church family, we will abide by the county health department's recommendations and mandates – including masks. What's the worst-case scenario if we're wrong? We've been inconvenienced for a short period (in the long and great history of God's church at West Valley). If we disregard the health department's recommendations and defiantly open up, what's the worst case if we're wrong? Our own beloved family members get sick or even die.

So, in light of all that, as I've been praying for you, West Valley Church, as I've been seeking the Lord, and as I've been in discussion with our leaders, it seems like this is a good time to review what it means to be the church.

This is the start of a new sermon series entitled, "We Are the Church." In this time when a great deal of attention is given to whether or not we should be allowed to meet, and how many can meet in our building, we are going to look at some of what the Bible tells us about the church. I think we can all agree that the church is *not a building*; the church is the *people*. So even though we use phrases like, "I'm going to church," or, "I was at church," those really are misleading because it sounds as if church is a place to go to. We even have a beautiful sign out on the corner of 72<sup>nd</sup> and Nob Hill that identifies "West Valley Church."

But that's not the name of the *building*; that is the name of the *people*, whether it is the community of believers who gather there, or the people who are a part of the recognized non-profit organization. The church is not a place, nor is it a weekly event; the church is *people* - but so much more than just a group of people.

So what exactly *is* the church? It might help to understand that when the word "church" is used in the Bible it's used two different ways. (You might remember this from our membership 101 class.)

One way that the Bible uses the word is to refer to every Christian who's ever lived throughout history. We call that the "Universal Church." That's every believer all around the world regardless of the denominational label, regardless of whether they meet in a church building, in a tent or under a tree; wherever around the world or throughout history, they are a part of the Universal Church.

But the other way the word "church" is used in the Bible is to refer to a local group in a specific location: like the church at Ephesus or the church that met in Lydia's home. Or like our dear friends at the church in Victoria, Guyana, when they met at Sister Hilda's house or as they now meet in that beautiful building you helped them build. The word is used in a local sense.

Here's the thing: it's only used *four times* in the Bible in a general or universal sense. Almost every time you see the word "church" in the Bible it's used to refer to a specific group of believers, like we are today. That's over 75 times.

So in this series we are talking about *our* local church - West Valley Church. We want to see what "church" means for us - even when we can't all meet together in the worship center (and maybe especially so!). You probably already know some of this, but in the words of the Apostle Paul to the church that met at Philippi, "I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith." (Philippians 3:1, nlt)

So, first of all, let me remind us that the church is...

## **1. The church is a *building*.**

*Wait a minute!!* Didn't I just finish going through all that introductory stuff saying the church is NOT a building?! How can I turn right around and contradict myself? I know it sounds like I am, but I'm not, because the church is not a brick and mortar and wood building, it is a flesh and blood and Spirit building.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church that met in Corinth and said, "...you are God's building." (nlt)

Think about bricks that make up a building; that's what you and I are. Remember from our series in Peter that he said:

"You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."  
(1 Peter 2:5, niv)

As individual believers, being placed together, we depend on each other for support and protection and stability. As a building, every part, every brick, every person is important – we can't do without anyone; we can't do without *you*. All of us have an important place in the church, and without you we are left with a hole in the building. We work together, serve together, pray together, worship together, and accomplish impossible things together. And in God's Kingdom, doing so together is as real in spirit as it is in person.

There are three things about this building that we are, that we need to keep in mind:

**- Christ is the builder.**

Remember way back from our series on Peter, that there was a time when the lights went on for him and he acknowledged that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus said that it was on *that* faith – the same faith you have if you have become a true follower of Christ – it is on that faith that Jesus said:

*"I will build my church."* (Matthew 16:18)

So Christ is the builder.

**- Christ is the cornerstone of the building.**

In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, he says that:

*"Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself."* (Ephesians 2:20, nlt)

He is the chief cornerstone – the first, the one that the entire building is anchored on and squared true to. That must be true of your life and of our church.

**- Christ is (also) the occupant.**

Not only is Jesus the builder and the cornerstone, he is the one who lives in the building. He lives in you and I, and he lives in the church through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the next verse of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, he says:

*"We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you ...are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit."* (Ephesians 2:21-22, nlt)

Christ lives in each of us individually and collectively by the Holy Spirit when we are submitted to him.

Secondly...

## **2. The church is a body.**

The Bible says that you and I, we are the body of Christ and each one of us is an important part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27). We are a body, and...

**- Christ is the head.**

(Colossians 1:18) He's the one that makes the decisions, he tells us as a church what to do and where to go, he disciplines us to stay in shape, he feeds us healthy food from his Word,

he keeps us from getting fat and lazy; he decides, and we obey. We stay connected and obedient to the head.

Folks who suffer from cerebral palsy or Parkinson's understand how important this connection is. Because of their condition, their mind says one thing but their extremities or their voice or their mouth does something different; it must be terribly frustrating. But I've seen churches with cerebral palsy or Parkinson's, too. Christ the head will tell the body to do something, but the body goes off and does something completely different – or does nothing at all.

The Bible tells us not to lose connection to the head:

“For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.” (Colossians 2:19, nlt)

The church is a building, a body, and...

### **3. The church is a bunch of sheep.**

This was Jesus' favorite term for the church. He called it “my little flock.”

Now, I'll admit that it may not seem flattering because sheep are not known for their intelligence, but it's pretty accurate, because we're not always that smart either; we often wander into foolish or sinful situations and away from the Lord. But the point of the analogy is not to put the attention on us as sheep, but on the tender and loving care of the shepherd, because...

**- Christ is the shepherd.**

Jesus is the *good* shepherd (John 10:11-18) who went so far as to lay down his life for us. So as a church we must carefully follow the loving, good shepherd's leading.

Fourth...

### **4. The church is branches.**

You and I are branches (John 15:5-6) and we are connected to, nourished by, and can only live if we remain connected to...

**- Christ (who) is the vine.**

Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches, apart from me, you can do nothing.” The picture is of a vineyard, and the vine is the trunk, the branches are what run along the trellis and grow fruit. And that's our job as a church – to remain connected to Jesus and to grow in him and produce fruit – to do good and to reach others for Jesus.

So again, all of us are branches, and that means all of us are to bear fruit. It's not just *my* job, or the pastoral staff's job; it's the job of the entire church – every branch that is makes up the church. The point is that it takes the entire vineyard – each and all of us – to produce the harvest that God expects; to do the ministry.

We are a building, a body, a bunch of sheep, branches, and...

## 5. The church is a ***brilliant treasure***.

Each one of us are a precious gem in a cherished treasure. You'll see that one of the last words of Scripture that closed the Old Testament and echoed down the centuries until Christ appeared on this earth, makes this statement about you and I:

"On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him." (Malachi 3:17, niv)

We are a treasure and...

### - Christ is the ***buyer***.

The Bible says that even though Jesus was rich, he became poor in order to purchase us (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Let me tell you, the world and the devil will tell you that you aren't worth anything. Maybe that's what your parents told you. Maybe that's what you tell yourself. If there was a price tag on you, you'd be sold on the clearance rack at the dollar store. But Jesus saw you and me, he saw us, and he didn't agree with that price on the tag. He haggled for us, not bartering *down*, but bartering UP! He determined that we are so valuable that he would have to pay the very highest price he could pay to purchase us; that price was his own life.

The value of something is determined by the price you are willing to pay for it. Jesus determined that we are worth his life. There is nothing more valuable than us because there is no higher price that God could pay than the life of his one and only son. (John 3:16). The Bible says that we are not our own; we were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) He became poor in order to buy us. We are a brilliant treasure.

And...

## 6. The church is a ***bride***.

That means that...

### - Christ is the ***groom***.

This is a prominent theme throughout Scripture. Over a hundred times the Bible talks about God as the groom and the church as the bride. In the book of Revelation the church is described as a bride all dressed up for the groom (Revelation 19:7-9). In John 3 (3:29), Jesus says that he couldn't be happier than to be married to the church.

That is as close as God could come to describe how deep our relationship with him can be, and how deeply he loves us, the church. That he has made a forever commitment to her – to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death gives us life. And it's amazing that he would love US. It's like he's Prince Charming, but instead of picking Cinderella, he picks the ugliest and wickedest step sister! And when

he picks her, she suddenly becomes more dazzlingly beautiful than Cinderella could ever be. He is LOVE, and we are unlovely and unlove-able with sin. But he was without sin, so he took on the ugliness of our sin so that we might become beautiful. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21, niv)

He found us in our sin and loved us right where we were.

Physician Richard Selzer has written a book called *Mortal Lessons* (Touchstone Books, 1987), and in the book he describes a scene in a hospital room after he had performed surgery on a young woman’s face:

“I stand by the bed where the young woman lies...her face, postoperative...her mouth twisted in palsy...clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, one of the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be that way from now on. I had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut this little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to be in a world all their own in the evening lamplight...isolated from me...private.

Who are they? I ask myself...he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously. The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It’s kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with the divine. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers...to show her that their kiss still works.”

In Scripture we are told of Jesus – the perfect, unblemished, beautiful Son of God "making himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (Philippians 2:7). In so doing, God bent down, 'twisted his lips" and kissed the crooked lips of a world, misshapen by sin and despair, with His love and grace. Jesus became twisted in death on the cross to show us that the kiss still works. God still loves us.

Oh, my dear friends...West Valley Church, please know that you are the beloved of God. You are a building, a body, a bunch of sheep, branches, a brilliant treasure, a bride. You are his beloved.

So listen – if you and I don’t learn anything else from this time, it ought to be this: *the church is about relation, not location. The church is about relation, not location.* The church has everything to do with our relation to Christ, not our location in a building.

*Pray*