

3/27/2022

College and Young Working Retreat in Columbus, OH

Message 5: The local churches: a church in the city expressing the one Body

[00:00]

I'm glad we all woke up this morning. This is the overcomers meeting. 9:00am. Wow. Well, this morning, we want to continue talking about the church. You know, some meetings are to be touched, and some meetings are just to learn things. And so, this first meeting is to learn things, and then you can reserve your being touched for Vern's meeting—which is later. Anyways, it's kind of "learning things" this morning, so it's a little bit different brain operation or something, what we're going to go through this morning.

So, we're going to talk about the church and the churches. And then, this is kind of like the reason I'll read this: "We encourage every college student to attend a church meeting on Sunday." You know, it's almost a yearly ritual for me, personally. I get a call from Ken Nakajima, and he is the leader of InterVarsity at Case. And then he's like, "Can we have coffee?" It's like yes. And then this is what he says: "I don't want people in InterVarsity, just to be in the InterVarsity group. I'm trying to get every student in InterVarsity to join a local church, a local congregation." And then, I say, "Ken, that's a great idea. I'm all for that." And this happens a lot. I think next August, I'm going to have this meeting with Ken and then we're like, "yes!" And then we pray a little bit. And then, you know what, none of the students from InterVarsity come. I think he might do that with various different congregations all around, and then I feel bad for Ken, that poor brother, you know?

So, he says this: "We encourage every college student to attend the church meeting on Sunday." And then, it just flames out, and no response. But it's really good to do that, you know, because college is kind of like a bubble. I don't know if you know that—college is like a bubble. You're in your college bubble, and you just kind of feel like "that's my whole world," and then you're like, "whoa, there are old people! Oh, my goodness. And they're not my professors!" Or "there's actually people still having children. Like there's toddlers hanging around here." And then all that stuff, you get at the church—which is really good for you, to get something like that at the church.

[03:04]

But why do we do this? Because college is going to end. I'm sure that's like sad for some people, and really good news for others. When you think about your next final, the finals part of the semester, it's like, "it's going to end!" I remember after my last final, I was like, "I just don't know what to do." I was on my last final of my senior year, and I was like, "what do I do now? Like my whole life before, I never had to ask, for the last four years, 'what do I do?'" Because I always had so much to do and then it ended. It's like, "oh, what do I do?" Well, it's the same thing; college's going to end, but the church was going to continue.

And we know how long the church is going to continue. You know how long the church is going to be there? Forever. It's the body of Christ; it's not going to end. This meeting will end, but the church will not end, and so it's really good to talk about church.

[04:17]

I think it's good for all of us just to know about church. Like, what is the church? Don't just know your college group but know the church. And so, the here comes teaching part: in the Bible, there is the 'church'—singular—and there are the 'churches'—plural. And I encourage everyone of you to do a Bible word study on 'church'. It doesn't take that long. It doesn't. What's it? 40? Yeah. Like 40-something, maybe more—maybe 50. What do you think, Ben? 40 or 50? More? Okay, it might be more, don't quote me on that.

But the Church *singular*: It's not that not that complicated. It's like the big one—the Church—and listen, “He put all things under His feet, gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body.” That is the whole thing. And again, listen to the famous verse from this weekend: “I will build My Church.” That means all across time, all across space, every single Christian, they're all part of the Church. I am in the same Church as the apostle Paul—praise the Lord. If I meet any Christian of any flavor anywhere, I say we're part of the same Church; it's a big church. And then, this plural also, and you say, “wait a minute, is the church divided?” It's plural. “What you see, write in a book, send it to the seven churches.” It's like, “wait a minute, is there one church or many churches?” Yes, it's both in the Bible.

[06:16]

So, first thing, when you do this, kind of study, you have to realize like is singular ‘church’ referring to the big thing, or is it referring to an individual church? And if you look, both uses are there. So, you can't say every time you see the singular, that means the big one—you can't say that. You have to like, look at the context of it, that's how to study that the Bible. So singular church is used to refer to the universal Church that includes all the believers throughout the time and space, and then a local church—or local churches—are referred to by singular ‘church’ or plural ‘churches.’ So, every time you see the word ‘church’, you have to ask, “Is that the big one or is that a little one?” And every time you see ‘churches,’ you have to realize it's a bunch of little ones, because there's not two universal Churches. And then universal Church is made up all local churches plus all believers who have ever lived. So, then you just look in the Bible. It's like a pattern that you can see.

How is a singular church divided? What makes it special? What differentiates it? And you find that it refers to a local church; it's connected with a city and it's an amazingly consistent way to look through the Bible and an amazingly consistent fact in the Bible.

[07:47]

So, it's like, “angel of the church in Ephesus,” so the church was defined by the city of Ephesus. “...to the church of God that is in Corinth,” so the church was defined by the city of Corinth. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,” And then you know, notice like Ephesus, that's a people know about Ephesus, right? Anybody who knows ancient history knows Ephesus. Corinth—still a city today. And Ephesus is no longer a city. Where's Cenchreae? If you look at the isthmus of Corinth, which is between Achaia and Macedonia in Greece, Corinth is the city on the west side of that isthmus. And Cenchreae is a small city on the east side—about seven miles from Corinth. And then there's a small city there, and look, there's a church, in a small city. And then, even Cenchreae is sometimes called the port of Corinth—you can find a coin that says Cenchreae is the port of Corinth—but still, it's like “the church in Cenchreae.” So, it's kind of interesting.

And then when the plural ‘churches’ is used in the New Testament, it refers to regions, and why does it refer to regions? Because there are many cities there. It's very interesting. So, it's like, he doesn't say “to the church of Galatia,” Galatia is like a state—like New Jersey. You know, it's not “the church in New Jersey,” it's “churches in New Jersey.” So, it's “churches of Galatia,” because there are many cities in the region of Galatia. And then, “I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea.” So, when you see a region, it's plural. And when you see a city, it's singular. You start to see the pattern here. “What you see, write in a book; send it to the seven churches...” So, seven churches, and then you know what he does? “...to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.” Seven cities.

[10:17]

Okay. I've studied the Bible, and rarely do you get something this clean. Usually, it's like there are two sides to the truth, but rarely do you get something in the Bible that is this clean and this clear and I encourage you—get a thesaurus, you know, Google it, whatever, and look through the Bible and you see this pattern. And when we consider church, when we consider, what do we want about church, we want to follow this pattern. And what's our response to that? It's like, “Wow, I'm a Christian. I live in this city. I'm just part of the church in that city.” And you're a Christian, you live in the city, you're part of the church in the city. And that's who I am. I'm a human being, no matter how much I say, I think, that I am a rhinoceros, it's just not the fact. And when we look at church in this way, it's like, “I don't want to be a part of the

church in the city.” It doesn't matter if you don't want to—you are. Because that was how the Christians were differentiated, and the churches, were differentiated in the New Testament. So, the whole point is this: I just want to be who I am. I want to say who I am, and, as much as possible, live as who I am. And so, this is the new testament pattern. And that's what we see in the New Testament.

And there are very many arguments. I don't want to go through all argument, but this is God's dream. He wants believers to be one in every church. Listen to this: “I appeal to your brothers, by the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that all of you agree.” Oh, my goodness. Sometimes, you put 12 Christians in a room, and you got 13 opinions. It's really hard. All of you agree.

“...that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. It's been reported to me by Chloe's people...” —Is Chloe good or bad? I don't know. She's like reporting to Paul. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. I don't want to be Chloe. That's all I know.

“...that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ ‘I follow Apollos,’ ‘I follow Cephas,’ ‘I follow Christ,’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

One thing is, like, when it says ‘Apollos,’ that doesn't mean like a Greek god. Some people say, “Oh, Apollos. Was that a Greek god?” No, he's a brother. So, don't get weird—just study the Bible. And if you don't know this, maybe you should join the Ten Months Labor. You'll find out Apollos is not a Greek god. But basically, in the church, one faction says, “I'm one of Paul,” “one of Apollos,” “one of Cephas,” “one of Christ,” and Paul didn't say this: “Look, just make four churches, no problem. Good fences, make good. Neighbors.” He says, “No, work it out.”

Welcome to a church in the city. And you would say, “Rex, how has that gone in your experience?” I would say, “well, we're not good at oneness, but at least we're aiming at it.” But, what a great thing—it's all still “church in Corinth,” You got to work it out; “...there be no divisions.” Again, he says like this: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel.” —So, the whole Church—“...worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”

So, Paul's, like “that's the church in Philippi,” and he's like, “oh, I just want all of you to be in one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” So, that's kind of God's dream: all the Christians are in the church in their city, and then they just have this unity there. And it's just for the gospel—striving. And isn't that a great dream?

[15:39]

Well, I'm going to go through “How do we put this into practice?” Well, number one: I just have it in my heart. I have it in my heart and I look at this as a great big experiment. I want to move in that direction. I want to be that as much as possible. There are some things that, because I have that in my heart—that kind of unity, that kind of thought—there's some things I just can't do, and then other things, I want to fight for.

So, first, we're going to say what I can't do—and this is not an exhaustive list, maybe other brothers have more things on their list. But I don't want to have any special name. Why? Well, it just makes a difference between me and other believers, and I think we've tasted that.

This is one verse we don't follow—Romans 16:16. How many people followed that when you saw all the Saints? You say you follow the Bible. Be careful. I wasn't kissed once. “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.” It's just “churches of Christ.” It's a very plain name; it's the church in the city, church of Christ. And so, if you would say, “can you have another name?” I just wouldn't be able to do that. This is brought to me by Vern—and this is from Mark Mongow—just different names, and I'd just like to go through this. You could be in the ‘Little Hope Baptist Church,’ or you could be ‘Run for your Life International Chapel.’ You notice all this stuff happens, and on Sunday, it's “normal church.” Here's the ‘Burnout Missionary Baptist Church,’ the ‘Church of Uncertainty.’ Here's the ‘Guided Missiles Church.’ Would you like to be part of the Guided Missiles? “Setting free, raising standards—If you're with us, you'll

become like a guided missile Christian.” And then, here's the ‘Helicopter of Christ Church’ with Bishop Thomas Wahome, “meet the anointed man of God.” Well, you could either be one of these, or you could just be “Church in Columbus.”

[18:47]

You know, just try to be as plain as possible. Why? Because that's my vision. Also, there's no special teaching or practice. Sometimes, in order to be a member, you need to fill out a commitment, and then part of that commitment is believing certain items. So, sometimes, it's something about the millennial kingdom, sometimes, it's something about rapture, sometimes, it's something about Arminianism versus Calvinism. If you don't know what that is, come to the Ten Months Labor. My conscience won't allow me to do that, and we'll go through why.

I just like to have all of that; I like to see all the Christians together. Now, if you want to come to me and talk about Arminianism and Calvinism, I would rip you apart with my argument. I might not win but, I'll try to rip you apart. But it's not going to be a reason to kick you out of the church, and that's what it is to live this kind of life with this kind of vision.

So, I might sit beside Vern, I might sit beside an Arminian, and worship the Lord with an Arminian. But he's a brother and that's part of the vision.

[20:45]

Look at this slide, I teach them everywhere in every church. So, what should the church be? It's as vanilla as possible, as plain as possible, just Christians.

Why are we here? We just live in the city by God's sovereign arrangement. What is our standard for membership? You believe in Jesus—standard. No particular race. We're not the ‘Chinese church.’ There's a lot of Chinese people, but we're not the ‘Chinese church’—sorry, Chinese people. We're not the ‘White church,’ we're not the ‘Black church.’ We're just *church*.

And look at this: “Here there's not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” How many groups can say that? Maybe not many groups can say this, but this is the dream.

No particular teacher, not even a spiritual teacher. All right, “I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas, I follow Christ,” No, we're not centered around a particular teacher, and no, we're just church in the city. So, which teachers do you have? All of them. And then, are some good? Are some bad? Yes. Do you have to receive all the bad teachers? Absolutely not. You don't have to receive their teaching, you just got to make sure the leaders of the church have some discernment. If it's a bad teacher—there's some bad teachers.

One sister asked, “just let me have the floor, let me have the floor. I will bring in the spirit.” That's what she said. This was at a small group meeting, and she's asking me, “let me have the floor on Sunday morning. I'll bring in the spirit. Just let me have the floor.” And then I was like, “Well, just bring in the spirit right now. Why do you have to wait for Sunday? You just bring it in right now.” She never got the floor.

What is that? Receive all good teachers. We're not centered around a particular teacher, but does that mean you have to be open to everyone? No way, have some discernment, but at the same time, we're not in existence for a teacher.

[23:25]

One time, there's a small group. “We are a small group because we don't like that church.” What kind of thing is that? No thought about what we're talking about here. So, it's easy to say the negative things—like no race, no particular race, no particular teacher—but what is the positive thing? What things would we aim for? And then I would say look for these three things. And if you just want to doze off, you can just doze off. I get it because this is maybe way above, but I think it's good to know actually what is the thought here?

Three things. Number one: What is that? What is church? You could say, “Rex, what you just described is so diffuse. It's so ‘I just want to be one with everyone.’ It's like ‘I want to be one with the universe.’” And then, you become nothing. If you want to be one with everyone, there's a chance that you become nothing because I'm just one with you. And I would say these three things are pretty important.

Number one: a church has to have authority of the Holy Spirit. What is that? And I would say this: you'll know it when it hit you on the head.

Number two. It's got to define the truth and sin. So, it has to be able to do something authoritative. This is the truth.

Number three: It has to receive all the believers.

So, this these three things. First, authority of the Holy Spirit. Listen to this: “When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’ And then He says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” Can you believe Jesus would say that to the apostles? That's authority.

Now, you got to interpret this correctly—it's not just Peter's whim as like “I like you, I don't like you, your sins are not forgiven, your sins are forgiven.” Actually, the Catholic church has, in the past, done that, and it has not gone well. If you go to Jerusalem to fight violent war against the Muslim invader, your sins will be totally absolved forever. No matter what you do.

If you don't believe that that ever happened, you know the solution. But it happened. It happened as a crusade. That was the promise—not correct interpretation of this. But it's like this: somebody can say, “your sins are forgiven” by the fact of Christ's redemption and the authority of the word of God, and then they can confirm it. I could just say this to somebody; “Ben, your sins are forgiven. I know your sins are forgiven,” and then, if another person was here and they didn't believe in Jesus, I could assure them their sins are not forgiven. I've just fulfilled that verse. There needs to be somebody who can finally say something like that. And that's part of the church. It's like a stand where there's some authority there, and it also has some validity.

[27:58]

This is the way to deal with an offended brother: “If your brother sins against you tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you've gained your brother. If he doesn't listen to you, 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 then if he refuses to listen, even to the church, let him be to you as a gentile and tax collector.”

Couple interesting things—this is the recipe for resolving offenses, and boy, has this been abused, so don't abuse this. So, I don't want to talk about the use of this, but I want to talk about this. Some people say, “well, two or three—that's a church. Two or three are gathered, that's the church.”

But here, it's not. Look at this: two or three *witnesses*. There's two or three there, but it's not the church. Because if they do not have an effect on this situation, you escalate. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And so, some people say, “well, where two or three are together, it's the church.”

I would say yes and no.

Yeah, that's part of the church. It's a more definite, a little bit more richer experience of the Lord, but it's not yet the church. This is college group—two or three—but then, you tell it to the church, and it's interesting.

[29:46]

This matter of authority of the Holy Spirit—it's kind of real. It doesn't mean you just got to listen, but it's kind of real. You kind of see, the church, when they say something about the truth, it kind of has impact. Also, I've noticed, the church can be so nice—it can be filled with the nicest brothers—and people still get mad at it.

One time I said this: "Husband is head of the wife," and then...so offended, they left the church and it's true.

In Cleveland Heights church, that statement is funny, because "husband is head of the wife," and then you look at that people in Cleveland Heights Church. There's myself and Rose. Who's really the head? And then, look at Peter and Betsy McNaughton, if you know them. Who's really the head. But the Bible still says, "husband is head of the wife." My goodness, these are very strong sisters. Like, "Okay, yes, we'll go to Chinese, no problem. We'll eat Italian food. Yes. Yes." Who's really the head? But it still says, "husband is head of the wife."

They couldn't take it, but they still came to Bible study in the church. That's fine, but they didn't come to the church meeting. Why? It's something [about] authority. And I'm a nice guy, right? As you touch it, it's like, "Oh, wow; something's there." It's a part of the church.

[31:38]

The second: it's able to define the truth. Wouldn't that be funny if the world just had the Bible, but no churches. Imagine that. If the world had the Bible and no churches, you could read this and you could just like, "oh my goodness, people have argued for centuries just about what it is for Christ to be divine and human."

Homoousion [ὁμοούσιον]. Do you know what that means? If you don't...

Homoousion. Oh, my goodness. You need the church to be like, "This is what it says." And you say, "Why can't we all read the Bible?" We all have tried to read the Bible, and some parts are simple, and some parts are not.

But look at this: "...how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." So, imagine if it was just a world with just the Bible and no churches. Oh, my goodness, but there's something there, and there's something clear.

[33:12]

Third, it should receive all believers. You know, if we say, "Hey, we're part of the church in the city," then the church should really receive all believers. I like this: "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him..." Welcome and receive—same word. "...but not to quarrel over opinions." You welcome him, but don't do it to quarrel over his opinions. "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." Sorry, vegans. No, this is not vegan. Maybe it's somebody who is before the Lord, feels like they should not eat meat because it's been sacrificed to idols, and that is a violation of their conscience. And then, other people can eat anything—like, I can eat meat, no problem. You know, bring it on—I love hamburgers. Praise the Lord.

And then, they both have to welcome one another. Look at this: "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him." That's what the church should be. You could be very different in many different ways—many different flavors of Christian. And you know what? I'm going to welcome you and I have to. And our best solution is not to say, "Let's just make a 'meat-eaters' church—" which I probably would join, "—and a 'vegetarian church—' which I would definitely avoid. Let's not do that. Let's keep them together and have a love feast—have eating together. How do you do that? Welcome to the church in the city. That's the dream.

And it's like this: "Therefore, welcome one another as Christ as welcomed you." So, as a believer following this dream, when I see another believer, I'm like, "There's room for you in the church." Even if they think a little different from me act—a little different from me.

And you would say the question is "Are you letting sin in the church?" Because a lot of Christians now openly agree with sin. Many Christians now openly agree with sin. They even advertise it. What about that? Would you let them in? No.

[36:09]

There's a good statement. It's attributed to Zinzendorf—Count Zinzendorf—who was part of the Moravian brother in 1700s; had a lot of different Christians together, and they all came from different backgrounds, and they were all trying to be just together.

And so, this phrase is attributed to him. Whether or not he actually said it—it's one of those things, you know. It says this: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love." In the essential things of the faith—like, *what is it?* That would be an essential thing. Do you believe that salvation is by faith in Jesus alone? That's an essential thing. Do you believe in Father, Son, Spirit? That's an essential thing. It's like all those people [can] be part of it, but in non-essentials? Oh, liberty. You're an Arminian, I'm a Calvinist—I don't like that. I'm a son of God, I'm not a Calvinist—but let's try to be together.

We'll argue. It's fine, it's good. Let's argue.

It'll sharpen us in the Word of God together. You know, There's just a lot of non-essentials. Christian's divide over the smallest thing—piano benches, carpets. One brother said this, "You can go to a church, and you can change the doctrine. People will hardly know. They won't even notice. You just changed the doctrine of the church; they didn't even notice. Change the music and you have war."

We're talking about unity; we don't do unity that well. I just have to admit it, and you look at our own history—we just don't do unity that well. You would say, "How's that going for you?" And I would have to say, "Not well, but it's my aim."

If this can happen, you have all different flavors of Christians together. Some believe in pre-millennial, some believe in post-millennial, some think baptism should be that way, others think Lord's Table should be that way, others think whatever, and some vegetables, some eat meat, but we all are together with Jesus Christ in the essentials.

Then this: "Together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ." And people would come and see that church and say, "Only God can do this. Only God can do this." That's why verse 5 is before this. Look at this: "May the God of endurance and encouragement—"

Sounds like you're just going through some terrible suffering. So, you always wonder why was that verse before this? You should try to be in a church like this for a while. You're like, "Oh man, that brother again—going off on premillennialism. My goodness. We just went through that." But then you get it, and it's like *wow*.

[39:57]

"—with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ." The vision of the church. Well, this becomes a testimony and Vern's going to share more about this. You know, the seven churches—they're called lampstands, and you just see this shining forth of something marvelous. God's work was there, God's people are there. They've been through such a journey together, and they're like, "We're still one."

Only way that the lampstand can be removed from a church in revelation is this: "I have this against you, that you've abandoned the love you had at first," and then, "...remember where you've fallen...do the first works. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. Unless you repent."

You see, the love in the church is what keeps that lampstand—keeps it shining. And then look at this: "...you love one another...by this, all people will know that you are my disciples." This is a view of church.

As we're in college, I don't know how relevant this is, but I hope every college student does go to a Sunday meeting. According to Ken Nakajima of InterVarsity, that's his hope for you. And also, it's just healthy. But then what kind of church do we want to build? I hope this is all in our hearts; it's definitely on my heart.

I like to see lampstand after lampstand after lampstand, and it might be the biggest challenge of life. Why? Because Christians are so weird. They're so weird. And God commands all of us weird Christians be together.

[42:20]

I'll tell you one weird story. One brother was in a meeting, and there's a prophesying meeting, and then he's like, "Rex, I got prophesied over." And I was like, "What is your prophecy?"

"They said I would get a car."

Now, I'm sorry, but that's one of the easiest prophecies to get. You just look at a person, it's like, "Theresa, I think you're going to get a car. Sometime in your life, you're going to get a car." What a weird Christian. And then, the funny thing is, he died—never got a car. But the person that prophesied is still a brother and, you know, he's part of the church.

So, this is our challenge; this is our goal. So, I'll stop there.