

**Fall Core Class: on the Church**  
***Churchless Christians: Fact or Fiction?***  
Delivered by Pastor Jason Tarn on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009

## **Introduction**

This evening is about one thing, about one goal in particular: that is, to offer an unabashed defense and declaration of our love for the church, in particular our love for the organized, visible local church. We're here to say that we love not just **the Church universal** (that mystical communion of saints stretching across time and space) but **the church local**, that concrete, tangible institution with its leadership structure, board, staff, committees, weekly programs, meetings and imperfect saints. That's the church we love!

A generation ago this core class may not have been necessary. Church affiliation was normative. Churches and church leaders had some semblance of influence and respect in the public square. Of course we're not naïve to believe everyone loved the church, but at least there was no need to defend its existence or necessity. It was more or less assumed. **But our generation is witnessing (and even celebrating) the demise of the local church and the diminishment of its importance in the life of the believer.** Churches are struggling to stay relevant. Attendance is dwindling.

Now ours is not the first generation to be dissatisfied with the church. There is nothing new about being disillusioned and leaving the church. But what *is* new is the attitude that glamorizes this disenchantment. The church is seen as this oppressive institution and those who leave are celebrated as liberators. Leaving your church is often applauded as if it were a heroic achievement. Bad-mouthing the church or incessantly apologizing for the sins and shortcomings of the church is not only approved – it can sell books!

**So even though disillusionment with the church has always been around, the glamorization of this attitude is a relatively recent phenomenon.** In the past, you would leave the church, and you would be considered either a backslidden Christian or not one at all. But now you can leave the church and be seen as a cutting-edge, innovative, revolutionary Christian!

In the book *“Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion”*, the co-authors put their finger on the pulse of our generation. They write, *“Increasingly, we hear glowing talk of a churchless Christianity. It is easy to read any number of personal memoirs where professing Christian men and women tell their tale of disenchantment with the local church and their bold step away from church into what, they would say, is a fuller, more satisfying Christian life. These days, spirituality is hot; religion is not. Community is hip, but the church is lame. Both inside the church and out, organized religion is seen as oppressive, irrelevant, and a waste of time. Outsiders like Jesus but not the church. Insiders have been told they can do just fine with God apart from the church.”*<sup>1</sup>

## **Two Popular Examples**

So who is actually saying these things? Well I could list a number of examples, but two stand out in particular. The first is **George Barna**, the pollster who tracks trends related to Christians and the church. In 2005, he wrote a book called *Revolution* about a trend he was witnessing in North America: the rise of a new breed of Christians – what he calls “Revolutionary Christians”. These are born-again, evangelicals but with a redefined understanding of church and its role in

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 12-13.

the life of a believer. According to Barna, revolutionary Christians “*are devout followers of Jesus Christ who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshiping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ.*”<sup>2</sup> Their lives are marked by intimate worship, faith based conversations, intentional spiritual growth, servanthood, spiritual friendship, family faith, and investing their resources in others.<sup>3</sup> But notice what he leaves out: **an active commitment to a local church.** Revolutionary Christians don’t believe you have to attend or join a church in order to live a God-glorifying life.

According to Barna, their motto is: *I am not called to attend or join a church. I am called to be the Church.*<sup>4</sup> The emphasis is on your character and influence (in our community, workplace etc), not your affiliation to a particular church body. Now lest he be charged with promoting radical individualism, Barna makes sure to stress the importance of the Church universal. He writes, “*Revolutionaries realize ... that the core issue isn’t whether or not one is involved in a local church, but whether or not one is connected to the body of believers in the pursuit of godliness and worship. . . . You see, it’s not about church. It’s about the Church.*”<sup>5</sup> So as long as you are finding fellowship with other believers in one way or another, you don’t need a local church.

The second example is **William P. Young**, who wrote the New York Times bestseller, *The Shack*. For those unfamiliar with the book, I would describe it under the genre of “theo-fiction”, a fictional novel that tries to communicate theological truth. *The Shack* is about a character named Mack who encounters God as he wrestles with the brutal murder of his young daughter. I think the reason it sold so well is because many readers felt that the book articulated their frustrations with traditional conceptions of God’s nature or character, the problem of evil, our view and use of scripture, and our doctrine of the church.

Like in Barna’s book, *The Shack* promotes a low-view ecclesiology. In one chapter, the Jesus character speaks affectionately of his Bride, the Church. Mack then wonders if he has ever met her because she is not like any church he’s experienced. The Jesus character goes on to say, “*Mack, that’s because you’re only seeing the institution, a man-made system. That’s not what I came to build. What I see are people and their lives, a living breathing community of all those who love me, not buildings and programs.*”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say that church is “*all about relationships and simply sharing life.*”<sup>7</sup>

The premise is that Jesus left his disciples on earth with a mandate to be the church – a community of believers sharing life together – but we corrupted it by institutionalizing it, adding structure, centralizing power, restricting freedom and creating bureaucracy. So organized religion is bad. Relationships are good. Near the end of that chapter, Mack wonders aloud if living freely in love and relationships is really all it means to be a Christian. The Jesus character immediately retorts, “*Who said anything about being a Christian? I’m not a Christian.*”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2005), 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), 178.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

Technically, you could argue that is a true statement. But of course it was written to be provocative. Young is trying to say that Christianity – in its institutional form – is completely man-made and often works against God’s purposes on earth.

### **The Claim of Churchless Christianity**

So these two examples really encapsulate the primary claim raised by those who oppose the traditional doctrine of the church. **CLAIM: Christians do not need to belong to a local church.** Christianity is not a religion but a way of life. It’s about your relationship with God and others. What is important is that you are growing in your faith and bringing Jesus into every aspect of life. What is secondary is your identification with and commitment to a local church. This is Churchless Christianity – a vibrant Christian faith devoid of church. So this raises questions: Can you be a churchless Christian? ***Can someone say “Yes” to Jesus and “No” to the local church?*** Is public identification (baptism) and association (membership) with a local church necessary in the Christian life?

**My goal is to demonstrate that the idea that you can be a churchless Christian is simply foolishness.** It makes as much sense as a houseless basement or a brideless groom or a bodiless head. I get these metaphors from the book *Why We Love the Church*. The authors ask the following, “*Is a head still a head if it doesn’t have a body? Is a basement still a basement if there is no house on top? Is a friend really your friend if you can’t stand his wife?*”<sup>9</sup>

Consider this: In the Bible, the church is described as a **building** with Jesus as its foundation (1 Cor 3:11). Quoting the authors, “*Who wants to live in a basement without the rest of the house on top? No one I know, except for Christians who want Jesus but not the church.*”<sup>10</sup> The Bible also describes the church as a **bride** with Jesus as the groom (Eph 5:22-33). Quote: “*Who wants a friend who rolls his eyes and sighs every time your wife walks into the room? Apparently, some people imagine Jesus wants friends like that. They roll their eyes and sigh over the church.*”<sup>11</sup> A third metaphor in the Bible is to call the church the **body** of Christ, with Jesus as the head (Eph 1:22-23). Quote: “*Most of us don’t see too many heads bobbing along apart from their bodies. If we ever did, I imagine our first instinct would not be to cuddle with the little cranium and sing it a love song.*”

So I plan to address this claim by advocates of Churchless Christianity. In doing so, I’ll allude to the metaphors of the church as building and bride at various points. And in Dr. Frank’s lecture, he’ll pick up on the metaphor of the church as body. So again, the claim is that Christians do not need to belong to a local church. Our imaginary church leaver claims to have said “Yes” to Jesus but “No” to the church. He wants a relationship with Jesus but has no desire to be baptized or join a church. What do we say in response? There are three voices that speak into this discussion: 1) The biblical witness, 2) The Nicene Creed, and 3) The Reformers.

### **The Biblical Witness**

Let’s first consider the Greek word that we translate as church – *ekklesia*. The term suggests a visible, defined group, literally meaning the “called out ones”. They were called out of the world

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

to stand *visibly* distinct as followers of Christ. Now outside the NT, the word was used to denote a public assembly of citizens gathered to address city affairs (cf. Acts 19:32).<sup>12</sup> **So a first-century person would not hear the word *ekklesia* and immediately think of a mystical entity stretching across space and time. Their first thought would be of a concrete, defined, public assembly of individuals.** So it is no surprise that out of the 114 references to *ekklesia* in the NT, 92 of them (80%) refer to a visible group of Christians in a particular locale, that is, the local church.

**Now when we read the NT, the normative pattern after a person is converted to Christ is to be baptized and joined to a visible body of believers.** Just consider the book of Acts. At Pentecost in chapter two, we read that Peter preached the first Christian sermon and three thousand were saved. *“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”* (Acts 2:41) And immediately what follows? *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* (2:42) The passage goes on to say how they shared everything in common and continued to meet together in the temple courts and in homes.

Prior to Pentecost, these three thousand individuals were simply strangers passing by on the streets of Jerusalem, unknown to each other and unidentifiable to the general public. BUT from that day forth, everything changed. They didn’t go on with their lives as strangers, content knowing that they all belong to an unseen mystical communion called the universal Church. No, they became aware of each other. They became family. This growing church was clearly identifiable by the general public, even labeled in a number of passages by friends and foes alike as “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22).

Consider in particular Acts 9:4 when Jesus revealed himself to Saul on the road to Damascus. He asked, *“Why are you persecuting me?”* But when did Saul ever persecute Jesus? Jesus had been crucified years before Saul came on the scene. If you look back at Acts 8:3 it says, *“Saul was ravaging the church”*. So he was persecuting the church *and* not in a general sense (ie. slandering the Church, etc). No, he travelled to specific cities, to specific churches to drag off Christian men and women and throw them in jail. As Mark Dever says, *“Jesus so closely identified Himself with His church that He said Saul was persecuting Him when he was persecuting the church.”* So in the same way, Jesus so closely identifies himself with visible, local churches that it is unthinkable to say “Yes” to Jesus but “No” to the church. **Saying “No” to the church is the same as saying “No” to Jesus.**

Stepping outside of Acts, in the rest of the NT, we see letter after letter written to local churches. In fact, all the NT letters were written with the local church in view. Even those addressed to particular individuals were full of instructions on how to lead and guard the teaching of a local church. **And nowhere in the NT can we find an example of a Christian willfully separating himself or herself from the local church.** The only times the NT mentions Christians disassociated from the local church are in cases of church discipline where the individual is removed (or put out of) their fellowship (1 Cor 5:2). So leaving the church was never seen

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<sup>12</sup> Stanely Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 465.

positively. In sum, the biblical witness is clear. You won't find any evidence supporting the idea of a churchless Christian.

### **The Nicene Creed**

Now the next voice to speak into this issue is **the Nicene Creed**, which was formulated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The Creed's primary accomplishment was to uphold a Trinitarian doctrine of God, particularly in regards to the Second Person. But it also articulated a doctrine of the church that was largely influential, especially in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation.

In the Creed, we confess to believe in **“one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.”** The emphasis on *one* relates to our concept of a universal Church. Despite all our differences, all who, by faith, share in this confession are one – sharing a spiritual unity in Christ. The word *holy* is referring to both a present and progressive reality. The Church is holy in the sense of “set apart” from the world for the service of God and holy in the sense of being morally cleansed by the Spirit we share. The word *catholic* means universal. It affirms that the Church exists for all people regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or any other barrier. The Church receives all people who receive Jesus by faith.

**Now the word *apostolic* means that the Church is built on the foundation of apostolic teaching contained in Holy Scripture.** This raises the biblical metaphor of the church as a building. This is found in two passages. First look at **Ephesians 2:19-22**. **[READ 2:19-22]** Paul says that those who were once strangers are now fellow members of the same household of God. He goes on to describe his readers, the local church in Ephesus, as a structure, specifically a temple for God to dwell by his Spirit, which is built on “*the foundation of the apostles and prophets*” with Jesus as the “*cornerstone*”. **So the church ultimately rests on Jesus himself, but its foundation is identified as the teaching of the apostles and prophets.** *And what did they teach the people but the very gospel of Jesus Christ?* So the church is founded on the gospel message that exalts Christ as the cornerstone.

**1 Corinthians 3:9-11** says something very similar. Previously in vv6-8, the Apostle Paul was working with a field metaphor. The church in Corinth is God's field. He and Apollos are workers laboring for God. Paul's job was to plant the church, Apollos' to water it and God's to make it grow. Now in v9 he switches to a building metaphor. **[READ 3:9-11]** So in this metaphor, Paul is the master builder who laid the foundation of the church, which is Jesus or more specifically, the gospel of Jesus that he preached. **And now Paul warns those who are teaching in the church to make sure what they are teaching conforms to the foundation, the gospel.** In a building, the foundation determines the shape of the building, size of the building and materials used for the building. So Paul is warning these teachers, who are adding to this building, not to teach anything is incompatible with the Gospel or anything that goes beyond it.

The main point is that a church is only the Church – that is, a local church is only a legitimate earthly expression of the universal Church – when all of its teaching is conformed to and built upon the gospel. If a church is not teaching the gospel or has strayed from it, it is not a genuine church.

## The Reformers

Now let's turn our attention to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Protestant Reformation. **The reason we're stopping here is because some churchless Christians see in the Reformation a precedent that justifies their decision to leave the church.** They reason, "*If Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers left the Catholic Church because it was going astray in teaching and practice, then why cant we? My church has so many problems, so I'm leaving in the spirit of the Reformation!*"

In a paper written by missiologist Timothy Tennent called "The Challenge of Churchless Christianity"<sup>13</sup>, he observed this rationale among supporters of Churchless Christianity. He notes how the late professor and missiologist Ralph Winter claimed we are in a "Third Reformation". Tennent writes, "*Winter's allusion to the Reformation is significant. If the first reformation was to move beyond the mono-cultural framework of Judaism and the second was to move beyond Roman Catholicism, this "third" reformation is "churchless Christianity."* Winter argues that we must now embrace the fact that the gospel has already moved beyond explicitly identifiable Christian communities and can now exist – and even prosper - within the communities and structural framework of non-Christian religions."<sup>14</sup> So the question is: **Does the Protestant Reformation set a precedent for leaving the institutional church and striking off on your own?**

Now from the 4<sup>th</sup> century until the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Christian church grew in size and influence. It remained a monolithic body until the 11<sup>th</sup> century when it split between the Orthodox Church (East) and Roman Catholic Church (West). In the West the Catholic Church grew in scope and power, so that by the medieval period, people had largely lost the concept of a mystical communion of saints called the universal Church. **Most were under the impression that the Roman Catholic Church was the universal Church.** The one, holy, catholic, apostolic church that we confess *was* the ecclesiastical organization based in Rome. And the Church claimed its legitimacy not so much on the basis of apostolic teaching BUT on the basis of a continued line of papal succession starting with the Apostle Peter.

This is why the actions of the Protestant Reformers to break away were considered so radical and heretical. In the eyes of Rome, they were damning their followers by luring them away from *the* one, holy, catholic, apostolic church. *So did the Reformers fracture the catholic and apostolic nature of the church?* According to Martin Luther, "No". What he does is argue for the legitimacy of the Protestant church by recovering a Nicene understanding of the Church as a mystical communion of saints, a universal Church. In his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, he defines the church as a holy *people* founded on *apostolic* teaching. The church is not an *organization*. So leaving the Roman church was not equivalent to leaving the universal Church.

Tennent writes, "*Luther responded by a re-articulation of ecclesiology which was not as tied to the structural and sacramental connection with a particular church organization, but the mystical communion of the saints which transcends all particular ecclesiastical organizations. The church is apostolic, not because of an episcopal chain of the laying on of hands, but the true*

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/papers/ets/2005/Tennent/Tennent.html>

<sup>14</sup> Tennent, 8.

*church is in apostolic succession when and only when it teaches what the Apostles taught.”<sup>15</sup> So according to Luther, a church was legitimate so long as it proclaimed the apostolic message (the Gospel), not because it could trace itself back along a historic line of bishops. In fact, because Rome had abandoned what the apostles taught (the Gospel), Luther said it was Rome who had abandoned the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.*

**Another contribution from Luther is the helpful distinction between the visible and invisible church.** He wasn't talking about two separate churches but simply two aspects of the same Church. So the visible church is the church we see on earth. It is a mixed company of regenerate and unregenerate persons, and in Luther's day its visible head was in Rome. But the invisible church is the church in heaven that contains all those mystically united in Christ.

*Now why was this helpful? By stressing its invisible nature, Luther effectively argued that the Church is not in essence an ecclesiastical organization with a visible head in Rome. But rather it is in essence an invisible body of persons (of saints) who believe in Christ as their head, who share in his common Spirit. Now at this point, it appears as if Luther is supporting the concept of Churchless Christianity. *By stressing the essence of the Church as an invisible communion, is he essentially saying that as long as you're a member of this invisible communion, your affiliation with the visible church is incidental?**

That is how a churchless Christian would apply the invisible-visible distinction. *“It's okay that I'm not part of the visible church. I'm still part of the invisible church.”* But Timothy Tennent explains how this is a complete reversal of Luther's categories. *“This is a new understanding of what might be called the “invisible church”. When Luther introduced the distinction of the “invisible” and “visible” church it was for the purpose of acknowledging that there were unregenerate, unbelievers who did not truly belong to Christ but who had become empirically united with the visible church on earth. [The churchless Christian] is arguing the reverse situation. Namely, that there are those who truly belong to Christ and thus are members of the Invisible Church in heaven, but who have not united with any empirical, visible church on earth.”<sup>16</sup>*

**In other words, Luther was concerned with explaining how unbelievers could exist inside the visible church. But the churchless Christian is misapplying the concept and using it to create a novel concept: a believer who is not united to a visible church.** But that never crossed Luther's mind. Kevin DeYoung talks about this in *Why We Love the Church*. He writes, *“Instead of using the invisible-visible distinction as a way to avoid church commitment, church-leavers would see the distinction as an impetus for patience with the church.”<sup>17</sup> So instead of using the concept of an invisible church as an excuse to ignore the visible one, the distinction should teach us to be patient with the visible church and hopeful for its future.*

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<sup>15</sup> Tennent, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Tennent, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Why We Love the Church*, 163.

## Conclusion

This is where the biblical metaphor of the Church as a Bride offers clarification. I want to close our time with a word of application that comes from understanding the implications of the Church being a Bride. **The background for this metaphor comes from the OT description of God's covenant with Israel as a marriage vow.** This explains why the OT prophets frequently describe Israel's idolatry in terms of adultery. This imagery of Israel as an unfaithful wife who has abandoned her Husband (God) is applied in Jeremiah 2-3, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea 1-3.

**Now the NT writers borrowed this imagery used for Israel and applied it to the Church.** In Ephesians 5:22-33, the Apostle Paul uses this marriage metaphor to describe the Church as a Bride that God is cleansing and adorning for himself to marry. The idea is that the Church on earth is a Bride, awaiting a future day when the Groom will return and a wedding feast will commence.

The Apostle John picks up on this in the book of Revelation. In **Revelation 19:6-9**, John hears a mighty voice proclaiming that "*the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.*" The Bride is the Church and she is clothed with "*fine linen, bright and pure*", which represents "*the righteous deeds of the saints.*" And in chapter 21 John sees a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the new Jerusalem – the redeemed people of God – comes down "*out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*" So in the book of Revelation, we get a glimpse of that future Wedding when the Church will be fully ready, bright and pure, righteous and adorned, without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish, prepared for her Husband.

BUT until that day comes, the Bride is simply not ready. There are still some glaring blemishes she has yet to address, a number of spots and lots of wrinkles. So what we see now is the visible church without a beautiful dress, without her hair done, and without her makeup. **So we need to make another distinction between the Bride in Preparation and the Bride in Glory.** The visible local church is the Bride in her state of preparation. The invisible church is the Bride in all her glory.

In 2 Corinthians 11:1-3, Paul speaks of the Bride in Preparation. **[READ 11:1-3]** The church in Corinth is the Bride in Preparation, and Paul considers himself to be the Father of the Bride, who will one day give away his daughter to be married to her Groom. **His goal is to present to Jesus a pure virgin, a pure Church.** But since the visible church is in the state of preparation, there is always the danger of straying and being deceived by the devil and false gospels. On this side of heaven, the glory of this bride is largely hidden from our sights.

DeYoung writes that when we look at the visible local church, "*we see a church with a little 'already' and a lot of 'not yet'*". But because we understand that the visible church is full of redeemed sinners (and even some who are unredeemed yet still around), we should not be surprised to find problems and problem people in it. **Instead we should be hopeful for the visible church, knowing that her glory, which is largely hidden now, will one day fully shine purely and brightly.**