

# A CHURCH FOR THE NEW AGE

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“We have met the enemy, and he is us.” This line, coined by cartoonist Walt Kelly, first appeared on a poster he created for the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. It expressed the realization that we all share some responsibility for the mess we are in.

Blaming “big corporations” will always be popular, but, most of the time, they’re just giving us what we “demand” as consumers, at a cost we are willing to pay, and abiding by laws created by politicians we elected.

That holds true ecologically, but also socially, economically, and, yes, even spiritually. You need not search far to find any number of articles, blogs, and books decrying the perceived impotence, ineffectiveness, irrelevance, and decline of the Church, together with all the reasons so many young people have abandoned her.

I am a man of peace, but if I heard you ranting like that about what you perceived as the flaws of my wife, I would be thinking seriously about making you feel some pain.

Don’t pretend to love me, but disrespect my wife. Don’t pretend to love Jesus, but diss His Bride, the Church. He loves the Church (with all her flaws). He died for her (with all her sins). You can’t love Jesus but hate the Church.

Frankly, I, too, have a love affair with the Church. I have spent two-thirds of my life in her arms, nurturing an affection for her and a growing dream of her beauty. So much so, that my own wife has occasionally named her as my mistress.

Forty-three years—I can safely say this is more than a fling.

Has the Church been ineffective? Ask anyone—and I mean *anyone*—who has met the Savior and discovered forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life through an outreach of the Church, and the answer will be a resounding “NO!”

Who could that “anyone” be? Any one of 37 million Argentinians. Or 175 million Brazilians. Or 22 million Canadians. Or 67 million Chinese. Or 90 million Filipinos. Or 42 million French. Or 52 million Germans. Or 32 million Indians. Or 53 million Italians. Or 108 million Mexicans. Or 100 million Russians. Or 250 million Americans. Or 466 million Africans. Any one of nearly 2.25 billion people on the planet!

Is the Church’s existence at risk? Ask Jesus, who knew something of the furious array of opposition against it, and who said, “*I will build my Church and the authority of Hell will not overpower it.*” (Matthew 16:18)

The Church's challenges are not new. She has been irrelevant before. She has been abusive. She has been wrong. She has been short-sighted. She has been manipulative. She has been worldly. Yet, she has been sustained and preserved by the grace and good pleasure of Jesus Christ all these years. Her existence doesn't depend on her temporal success, or relevance, or hipness, or statistics. She belongs to Christ.

Are we broken? To be sure. Can we improve? Without question. And the One who sustains us also refines us.

Where are the people who cheer for the Church? Who love her in spite of her flaws? Who nurture and support her when she is ill? Who believe the best is yet to come?

Where are the people who recognize that their faithfulness to the Church actually mirrors their faithfulness to Jesus Christ? Where are the people who not only love the sexy Church, but also the struggling Church?

Will this be the generation that champions the Church? The generation that stops complaining and starts changing—our hearts, our churches, and our culture?

Our frustration isn't wrong; it's normal. But identifying the problems doesn't solve them. Complaining about the problems only exacerbates them.

To solve them, we must renew our faith in Jesus, and pray for the Church. Pray for its leaders. Pray for its people. Pray for its systems. Pray for revival—in you, in us, in them.

We must pray. And we must stay. Stay connected. Stay involved. Stay hopeful. Stay close.

Even on her worst days, the Church shines. And as the days grow darker, the Church will shine brighter. Our *best* days are ahead of us. Keep the faith!

Let us be a Church for the New Age.

Many have proposed a new age that is post-Christian—beyond Christianity, beyond organized religion. That's not the "new age" I am thinking of.

I see a new age of Christianity. A new day of fervent faithfulness to Jesus Christ. A new wave of compassionate outreach. A season of refining that reveals the pure gold that is *the Church that Jesus is building*.

## **A New Frame**

The Church was unknown before Jesus came. He paved the way for it, by His own death and resurrection. Without the shedding of blood, there could be no forgiveness. And without forgiveness, there would be no Church.

David planned the Temple in Jerusalem and provided for it, but it was for his son, Solomon, to actually construct it. Similarly, Jesus framed the Church, providing its foundation, but it was his apostles who defined the Church—by their analogies and their practices.

As I dream about a Church for the New Age, I think of several of those New Testament analogies. Consider them briefly with me.

## **The Body of Christ**

The body of Christ was first the skin that He wore, the body that He surrendered to the cruel whips and nails of those who crucified Him. That body was slain for us, as a ransom for our sins. We will remember this in particular next Sunday as we share the bread of the Lord's Supper.

But after Jesus rose from the dead, He breathed on His disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." From that moment, those who followed Him began to be indwelt by the Spirit of God. And when Jesus ascended back to Heaven to receive His Kingship, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church, to empower her to represent Jesus on the earth. The Church became the earthly Body of Christ—His hands, His feet, His voice.

*"[The church leaders'] responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ." (Ephesians 4:12)*

This analogy—the Body of Christ—suggests how the Church for the New Age relates to the world around us.

I ask myself, "Why did the Holy Spirit prompt Paul to use the analogy of a body to describe the Church?" Because it makes us "human." God took upon Himself a body—a human body. He became one of us. He lived among us. He participated with us.

So, for the Church to be "human" means to be simply who we are (no pretense), to be social (not isolated), and to share our lives together (inter-connected). To be that Church for the New Age—the Body of Christ—means we must develop these characteristics:

- Vulnerable. We are vulnerable, by nature. We must be willing to admit that and display that. If we don't, people will perceive us as arrogant (at best) or delusional (at worst). Transparency wins trust.
- Approachable. We must be accepting, without judgment. We are to evaluate people "after the spirit," not after their external appearance or manner. We may need to look past their appearance in order to know their heart.
- Compassionate. We must be loving, with discernment. Jesus said, "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down by my own choice." We are to lay down our lives for one another... wisely, appropriately, not foolishly.
- Integrated. We must be multi-ethnic, and multi-generational, welcoming and celebrating people from all ethnic backgrounds, including children, youth, young adults, families, and seniors. One family under God.
- Reproductive. That's how God wired human bodies: to "replenish and fill the earth." So, the Church, too, must practice reproducing its faith in others, and carrying the Good News "to the ends of the earth." Missions cannot be an afterthought; it is our mandate.

## **The Bride of Christ**

Jesus is in love with the Church. A Grand Reunion is in the works: the marriage supper of the Lamb. Think what that communicates about Christ's love for us—for you. The Church is not His means to another end. This is not a passing fling. He fully intends to receive you to Himself and give Himself to you for eternity. He has *married* Himself to the human race.

*"I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ. But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent."* (2 Corinthians 11:2-3)

This analogy—the Bride of Christ—signifies how the Church for the New Age relates to Jesus Christ.

I ask myself, "Why did the Holy Spirit prompt Paul to use the analogy of a bride to describe the Church?" Because it suggests the closest of relationships, and that's what God wants.

To be that Church for the New Age—the Bride of Christ—means we must display these traits:

- Beautiful. Is a woman ever more beautiful than on her wedding day? Usually, much thought and care have gone into her preparations for that day. And when she enters that doorway at the end of the aisle, she will likely take away the breath of those who have known her! The Holy Spirit is preparing the Church right now for our wedding day, beautifying us with His gifts of grace.

- Desirable. A bride is desired by her groom. She has been chosen above all others to be with him for the rest of their lives. Their vows affirm that: “forsaking all others.” She is his heart’s delight. Is Christ your heart’s delight? If desire for his bride brings a man home every night, then desire for Christ should bring us back to Him every day, and especially every Sunday.
- Intimate. There can be no closer relationship than marriage. Children grow apart from their parents over the years, but spouses grow closer. There can be no more familiar relationship than the face-to-face romance of a bride and groom. But it takes time and personal investment. Are you giving what it takes to be intimate with the Savior?
- Committed. Marriage is the covenant of a lifetime. Through thick and thin, sorrow and joy, sickness and health, a bride and groom remain committed. Why? Because they made a promise, they gave their word, and they protect that promise. Many Christians are casual about their relationship with Jesus Christ. But the Church for the New Age is not. They are intentional.
- Supportive. A wife is the strength of her husband. Her love gives him boldness in life. Her wisdom gives him understanding. Her faithfulness gives Him good success. The Church is God’s chosen agent in the world, His representative, His ambassador—sent to do His will, not her own.
- Reproductive. Did I mention “reproductive”? Yes, the bride also represents that. Children are the extension of their love, and also its expansion. The Church for the New Age is designed to reproduce, to make disciples for Jesus Christ “to the ends of the earth.”

## **The Temple of Christ**

The people of Jesus’ day required 46 years to build (rebuild) the Temple in Jerusalem. Temple-building is a lengthy process. Although Jesus Christ speeds up the process (“Tear it down, and in three days I will raise it up again.”), we still need time—a lifetime.

*“We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord.”* (Ephesians 2:21)

This analogy—the Temple of Christ—describes the character and life of the Church for the New Age.

I ask myself, “Why did the Holy Spirit prompt Paul to use the analogy of a temple to describe the Church?” Because it suggests the uniqueness of our role in magnifying the Lord.

To be that Church for the New Age—the Temple of Christ—means we must present these spiritual distinctives:

- Holy. The Temple in Jerusalem was uniquely set apart for the worship of God; thus, it was holy. Its materials were not holy. Its structure was not holy. But its use was. Therefore, to

use it for any other purpose than the honor and worship of God was sacrilege. Similarly, the Church for the New Age will be holy—set apart to the glory of God—by its mission and its works.

- **United.** The Temple brought together Jews from around the world, regardless of the color of their skin, or the language that they spoke, or their manner of dress. It was the centerpiece of their enduring unity of faith and culture. The Church for the New Age will also demonstrate such unity, where people of all stripes and flavors will worship and serve the Lord as one people.
- **Mercy-filled.** The Temple was the site of the Mercy Seat that crowned the Ark of the Covenant. It was the center of forgiveness for all of God's people. May the Church be the heart of mercy to which the people of God will stream. We each can (and must) find forgiveness directly from the hand of Jesus, but we will (or should) find the assurance of that forgiveness in the company of the Church.
- **Worship-filled.** The Temple was the center of worship. In fact, it was the only authorized place of corporate worship. King David took that role to new heights, when he established a choir of musicians and singers for round-the-clock thanksgiving and praise. The Church for the New Age will be similarly endowed to magnify Jesus—through their music, their art, their work, and their testimony—at the very center of all else that they do.

These Spirit-inspired analogies remind us that the Church for the New Age is called to perpetually look upward in holy worship, inward in holy devotion, and outward in holy service—focused on bringing glory and honor to Almighty God through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **A Final Consideration**

As a final consideration, I want to suggest that we agree to become that Church. And, that we agree not to put any obstacle in the way of those who are seeking to know God.

“Do no harm” is a fundamental principle of healthcare throughout the world. I suggest that we adapt that motto for the Church of the New Age: “Do Not Hinder.” While we are busy reaching out and bringing in, let us also be careful not to hinder those who come.

If we invite them to meet the God of mercy, we must not be the people of judgment. If we encourage them to draw near to the approachable Savior, we must not be the too busy or standoffish Church. Do not hinder.

Take the stones out of the road. We cannot make their way smooth, but we can make it clear and straight. Isaiah and John the Baptizer described themselves and their mission that way: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of (or, to) the Lord.’” We should do the same.

In view of that, I have been thinking about our church's motto: "Believe - Belong - Become." I believe very strongly in what those words express, but over the years since we adopted them, I have become increasingly uneasy about their order.

The order of those words—"Believe - Belong - Become"—suggests that a person must first believe as we do in order to belong (to be accepted). While I agree that this is in fact ultimately true, in the sense of belonging to the Family of God, the Church, I also think it may be a stumbling stone to those who are seeking God in hope of finding answers to their many questions and uncertainties.

If people imagine they must surrender all their doubts *first*, in order to feel a part of the group that meets as the Church, it could be a hurdle too high for them to try to clear. They may never even enter our doors. It could be off-putting, just when we want to remove unnecessary barriers.

In fact, it is not the way we operate. When a guest visits the church on a Sunday morning, we don't stop them at the door to inquire first if they believe our 16 Statements of Fundamental Truths. Instead, we say, "Come and see."

We actually invite them to find a sense of belonging first, while they gradually align their beliefs with ours.

So, I'm suggesting that we align our motto with our practice, which I believe is the appropriate one. Let us instead say, "Belong - Believe - Become."

We won't be casting a ballot about this today, but I hope you will prayerfully consider it, and share with me your thoughts about it.

Let us become a Church for the New Age. Are you ready for "NEW"?

A new you. A new us. A new day. A new way.

Every detailed has not been mapped out for us, but every provision already has been made! As we follow the Spirit's lead, we will find solid ground on which to walk, and our feet will not slip.

Over the next several weeks, we're going to explore the refining process the Lord wants to work in us, in order to make us into that Church.

When you think of refining—think BETTER, think BRIGHTER, think BECOMING.