

If this is your first visit to Liberty Grace, or if you've been away, then you should know that we're in the middle of a challenging and important series on sexuality and the church. With Darryl we have taken a look at what the culture says about sex, relationships, gender, and marriage, and then held that message up against what the Bible has to say. This week I want to do something different. I want to press pause, take a step back, and look at what it means to be church, biblically defined. You see, I believe that part of the confusion over sexuality in the church has to do *in part* with a failure to understand what the church consists of. I argue that much of our failure to live out the Christian life both as individuals and also as a corporate body stem from ignorance. If we are to be the church, we need to clearly perceive what Christ has accomplished in his death, resurrection, and ascension, and the lifestyle he has called us to embody. If we have a superficial or inadequate vision of the church, how can one be expected to live into the fullness of what God has intended for us?

Consider this illustration. Let's imagine you're from part of the world where there are no cars or airplanes. Imagine with me that such a place still exists today. You meet someone who introduces you to the automobile for the first time. You watch your friend drive and gather a basic sense of what this is about. Cars take you places. Cars have wheels. Cars drive on roads, cars drive fast etc. Now imagine that after learning about cars, your friend takes you to an airport for the first time. Remember, you haven't seen an airplane before. If you didn't know better, you'd think that airplanes are just larger, oddly shaped cars. Why? Because airplanes have wheels. Airplanes stay on the tarmac. Airplanes carry passengers. This morning, I want to argue that our vision of the church is truncated. We often think of the church like an airplane, mistaking it for an oddly-shaped car. That's often our problem. We have been introduced to an aircraft carrier, but we have not stopped to consider that this vehicle *flies*. I've offered this illustration to make an analogy. In this series, we're talking about sexuality, and we're asking the most difficult questions.

But what if part of our problem and confusion about everything we have discussed until now—singleness, dating, LGBTQ+ issues, marriage and sex—is more basic? What if, when it comes to Jesus and the church, we've made a category error. Our picture of the church is inadequate, leading to confusion. In other words, we cannot expect to fly if we're driving the airplane like a car. No, what we need first is a picture of the airplane in the sky. When it comes to human sexuality and the church, part of our difficulty is that we've got the wrong picture. We aren't seeing the church clearly with a view to God's perspective, as the way things really are, and that's part of the reason for our failure to launch, so to speak.

I want to begin by looking at the reading from Ephesians 5. In this passage, Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to make loving sacrifices for their wives. But Paul does not simply pull this exhortation from thin air; rather, his idea of what marriage in the church ought to look like is grounded in a deeper reality. The women submit to their own husbands *as to the Lord*. Christ is the head of the church and also its saviour. In this way, Paul is asking wives to respect their husbands with the same gratefulness and joyful submission they would show to Christ himself. Husbands, we are told, should love their wives in the way that Christ has loved the church. In other words, husbands are to love their wives with humility, putting his wife above himself in every way. Then we're told that, *in the same way*, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. Husbands should do this because no one hates his own body, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ cherishes the church as his own body.

You see, for Paul, the Christian marriage relationship between one man and one woman ought to be patterned after the very life of Christ Jesus himself. Moreover, Christian marriage is not simply modelled after Jesus' own sacrificial lifestyle as something to imitate. No, Paul is making an ever greater claim here. Look at verse 30. Paul says, this is how husbands ought to love their wives, "because we are members of his body." Christians are members of the body of Christ. Paul is trying to tell us that the way we ought to conduct ourselves in this world—and what every Christian marriage should look like—takes a certain shape. A Jesusy shape. Christian marriages ought to resemble Jesus. In both directions, not just the women, but the men also sacrificially laying down their lives. Now this is the essential point: the only way this is possible, says Paul, is because we are members of the body of Christ.

*In other words, you husbands and wives, you ought to love each other in this way because of who you are and who you belong to. **It's in your identity to love like this.*** Paul then quotes from Genesis 2:24 to make his point: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Just as the basic design of marriage is woven into the fabric of the human species and all human culture at the beginning of the world, whereby one man and one woman come together to form a “one flesh” union, Paul says that the reality of Christian marriage is a reflection of *another* primal union. **Christian marriage mysteriously refers to the one-flesh union of Christ and the Church.**

The other day I heard the Oxford scientist and historian Alister McGrath give a talk on Albert Einstein. McGrath spoke of Einstein’s belief in God—albeit not a personal God—but a God who is creator, sustainer, and who provides coherence between the spheres of morality and science. One of the reasons Einstein believed in God, according to McGrath, is that there is no other way to bridge the gulf between the question of what is and what ought to be. It is impossible to move from the realm of scientism that deals only with the reality of how things are made and function in the world, to the second order question of how we ought to live in this world. How ought we to regard our neighbour? I think this is what Paul is doing in Ephesians 5. Paul is giving us the answer by way of inference. If you are a Christian, then you belong to the body of Christ. This is a description of the material reality of the church. The church is the physical body of Jesus Christ in the world. He then moves from this fundamental reality to the question of what ought to be. Because we belong to the body of Christ, then this is how we ought to live (like Jesus in this world!).

The question that naturally arises, then, is *what does it mean to be a member of the body of Christ?* I have to apologize in advance because I realize that my sermon is becoming increasingly cerebral. While this subject might seem like an intellectual abstraction, I believe the practicality of the subject will become increasingly clear. In fact, it is mistaken to consider the world of the Bible an abstraction. The truth is, the world of the Bible is clearest expression of fundamental reality. The Bible is the true World and world history that give shape to all things. As the psalmist writes, “in your light, we see light.”

So when I ask the question, what is the church? We can't simply look to Liberty Grace or Notre Dame for answers. Rather, we have to understand our space in this world—Liberty Grace—in light of what the Scriptures have to say.

So let's take another look at Ephesians. Point number 1: What you'll notice is that **Christ is never spoken of as existing separate from the Church.** In fact, according to Ephesians, Christ and the Church are inseparable. Verse 23 says that Christ is the head of the Church, which is his body. Verse 24 says the church is subject to Christ. What can this mean except that Christians are in an organic unity with the person of Jesus himself. Humanly speaking, the body is an extension of the head. You cannot separate the two. If you lose the head, you kill the body. If you lose the body, you kill the head. If you damage the body, by extension, the head is affected. If the head is bruised, so is the body. There is only one life shared across the human person, and that life animates both the head and the body. All this to say, the church does not merely believe in Jesus; *the Church embodies Jesus.* As Christ says in John 14:20, "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." But what does this have to do with sexuality?

Last Sunday, Darryl preached from 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul rebukes those among the Corinthian church who employed the services of a prostitute. Listen to what Paul says, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication!" (vv.15-18a) For Paul, the matter of fornication or sex outside of marriage is immensely consequential. We see that for Paul, to physically enter a prostitute in the sex act is tantamount to uniting Christ himself with the prostitute. Let me be clear. The problem does not lie with the prostitute here. The problem lies with the believer who fails to recognize the significance of what church membership actually means. *To the church*, Paul says, **your bodies are literally members of Christ.** To belong to the church is to be united in spirit with the Lord. Therefore we cannot abuse our holy standing in Christ by uniting our members with those outside the church. The sexual intimacy of marriage is analogous to the unity between Christ and his people, as per Genesis 2. Therefore to belong to the church is to be made one flesh with Jesus Christ. Are you getting the picture? (*Emphasize*)

Sexual intimacy in the legal confine of marriage is a picture of Christ and the church. Sexual immorality obliterates that picture, vandalizing the portrait of Christ and his Church. Imagine taking the original Mona Lisa painting, and then tossing a red bucket of paint at it. That is what immorality does.

But there is a second illustration to be had. Paul continues: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” Again, Paul is driving home the same message. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. But that image of God in man has been defaced through sin, leading to its total destruction in death. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus renews the image of God in man. Indeed, Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and if you are “in Christ” then you are a new creation, a new imager. When Paul says that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul is speaking to the reality of the Holy Spirit of Christ dwelling within believers. We are God-bearers, images of Christ in the world, *carrying the presence of Christ within us*. Jesus says that we are salt and light, the light of the world. How then can we take this image of Christ and of His Spirit given us as a gift, and deface it through sin? Especially sexual sin and everything it represents? The answer is that **we cannot**.

The reason why sexual sin is so terribly egregious is that it violates the very sacred heart of the Christian’s union with Christ. It does not matter if one is married or single, if you are *in Christ* then you are married to the LORD. Married Christians are called to signify the grace of Christ in their marriage union and in their families. That is why even young children of married Christians are called “holy to the Lord.” On the other hand, single Christians are to offer their chastity to the Lord for the purpose of undivided service. Single Christians remind the rest of us that earthly marriages are only temporary. Yet for both the married and the unmarried, the Apostle Paul singles out sexual immorality as one of the most harmful possible behaviours. Look at verse 18. He says, “All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.” For one, sexual immorality is harmful because of the psychological, personal and relational breakdown that accrues over time when the body is used and abused for purposes other than what God has intended.

As Pastor Darryl mentioned in previous weeks, the effect of sexual immorality is an overall net damage on society. Therefore even secular governments have an interest in preserving and protecting the traditional institution of marriage. This is why an increasing number of US states are declaring the pornography epidemic to be a public health crisis. As threatening as immorality might be for the world, if you consider the larger context of 1 Corinthians chapter 6, you'll notice that the sin of sexual immorality is **especially dangerous for *Christian bodies***. Look at verse 9: we are told that immoral Christians *will not inherit the Kingdom of God*. If you've read this passage before you might think it refers to those *outside* the church. But Paul is not addressing the world, he is addressing believers. Listen to what Paul is speaking to the church:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Church, biblical symbols are never merely symbolic. God takes the marital image of Christ and his church very seriously. What we need to understand from this passage is, if we as Christians continue to abuse the institution of holy matrimony by sexual immorality, not only do we sin against our bodies: **we risk putting ourselves outside of the kingdom itself**.

I was not planning to go in this direction, but it's clear that to be faithful to the Word of God, the honest question needs to be asked: am I living in sexual immorality? In the light of God's grace, am I unwilling to let go of *besetting* sin? You see, according to the Scriptures it is entirely possible for a Christian to live an otherwise good and praiseworthy Christian life, but if sexual immorality is personal theme, then one can only expect to face God's ultimate rejection. Please, listen carefully to what I am saying. If you are struggling with sexual sin, you are welcome here. In fact, you belong here. We are all sexual sinners, and when we encounter God in the church, we cannot help but being exposed for the sinful creatures that we are. Believe me, the older I grow in Christianity, the more I realize how sinful I am, and how deeply broken the human condition really is. In Church we discover that God is holy, but we also discover how woefully unholy we have become. So please understand that it would be unsurprising for me to learn that as a church we are actively struggling with issues of sexual immorality.

In fact, I somewhat expect it. The thing is, if Liberty Grace is going to be a church defined by faithfulness to the teachings of the bible, we need to be more than just accommodating. Yes, the church is for sinful people like you and me. But we also need to hold out the hope of a new life in Christ Jesus for everyone who would receive the gospel. With the Apostle Paul, we have to affirm the inconvenient truth that some behaviours, including sexual sin, are irreconcilable with the Christian life. When we say “Yes” to Jesus, we must necessarily say “No” to sin and no to Satan’s work among us. But just how do we do that?

In your bibles please turn back to Ephesians 5. We are told in verses 26-27 that Christ gave his life for the church “that he might make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.” (*NRSV*) **This is my second point. Jesus makes the church holy through baptism.**

This verse really captures the heart of the gospel. We proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah and Son of God, died on the cross as sin offering to make atonement by his blood. God sent Jesus to the cross to die there for the express purpose of taking away the sins of the world, so that we who believe might not face the wrath of God, but have everlasting life. While Jesus died, resurrected and rose to the heavens for to make purification for the sins of the whole world, only those who are incorporated into his body through baptism are spoken of as holy and without blemish. Verse 26 speaks of this *being made holy* or sanctification with reference to the “cleansing ... with the washing of water by the word.” In other words, the church exists on the other side of the cleansing waters of baptism. What’s ironic is that even though our culture is highly materialistic, Evangelicals often downplay the material importance of baptism, preferring to speak of baptism as a mere metaphor, an optional one at that. Please hear me out. There are various acceptable views of Baptism out there. Depending on your denomination, you might believe differently about the particulars, like whether you need to be fully immersed or whether it’s fine to be merely sprinkled. Wherever you land, I think it’s a mistake to speak of baptism as *merely symbolic* because the Scriptures simply do not permit such loose, reductionistic language. We should not be afraid of the crude and unrefined witness of Scripture, lest we empty the New Testament images of their power.

I believe we need to look at baptism as the beginning of our life in Christ. 1 Peter 3:21 says that “**baptism now saves us** not by the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand.” (NIV) New testament baptism is always accompanied by the baptismal candidate’s profession of faith in the gospel. But baptism is not something we do to be saved in addition to our faith. Nor is it a mere metaphor. Rather, baptism is something that is done to us by Christ through the hands of the church. Baptism is *water and the mighty Word of God*. It is impossible to baptize yourself. Baptism is something we *receive in faith* as a gift, believing that through our baptism we are united with the resurrected Jesus Christ himself. As Paul says in Galatians, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (3:27 NIV) Paul is painting a picture here. To be baptized is to be cleansed from the impurity of sin and to be wrapped in the glory of God. In John 3:5, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” Baptism is nothing less than holy incorporation into the household of faith, and therefore one cannot truly understand the church or *join the church* without getting wet. While there is much more that I could say, at minimum we need to grasp that the church is a holy people because the church is a baptized people.

The third point is from Ephesians 5, and this is an indirect point: **The Church is an eschatological people**. Eschatology is a technical word that refers to last things **or** end times. So you could say that the church is a *latter* day people. We see this in verse 27, where **Jesus presents the church to himself as his spotless bride**. Although Paul does not use the language of *bride* here, that much is implied by the marriage metaphor, which Paul uses elsewhere. Consider what he says in 2 Corinthians 11:2 “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.” This is why the church has always prized virginity as valuable for its own sake. Ideally, in marriage one *virginal* man and one *virginal* women become one flesh *in the generative act, the consummation of their marriage vow*. *In the same way, Jesus and his church will become one flesh in the future wedding of the lamb*. This is the day in the not so far off future when the one-flesh-union between Christ and his church will be complete. Listen to how the Apostle John describes his vision of the climax of human history:

“I heard what seemed to be the voices of a huge crowd, like the sound of many waters or the great roar of thunder, answering, “Alleluia! The Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice and give glory to God, because the marriage of the Lamb has come. His bride has made herself ready, and she has been given dazzling white linen to wear, for her linen is made of the righteous deeds of the saints. The angel said, ‘Write this, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.”’

The wedding of the Lamb is that great day when the church, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband, is given to him in the fullness of marital intimacy. In our baptism, we have been washed clean from the stain of original sin and death. Baptism is the fragrant nuptial bath. This is why the early church sometimes baptized in nude, and why early Christian early art depicts nudity in baptism. Baptism is the bath you take before the wedding. After the bride is ritually cleansed, she is clothed with wedding garments. This is what it means for the Christian to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It was only in the 16th century English reformation when the Anglican Church stopped providing white robes at baptism. What a powerful image! Still today, if you visit an Ethiopian Orthodox church, you will see the congregation wearing white robes over top of their regular clothing. The Church is robed in Christ’s righteousness. After this message, we will celebrate holy communion, the breaking of bread. We speak of Holy Communion as a feast because it prefigures the ultimate wedding feast. Communion is a foretaste of the ultimate wedding banquet. **Church, this is what it all boils down to. We must gather who we are.** We are the bride, promised to Christ, who is the Lamb of God. For the rest of our lives on this side of heaven, we are being prepared for the wedding. Every Sunday that we meet is a wedding rehearsal. Think about it. Isn’t it remarkable that the bible opens with the creation of man and women in the image and likeness of God, the first marriage, and the bible ends with a vision of the church—the new image of God—as the bride of the Lamb? Isn’t it remarkable that Jesus’s public ministry—his first miracle—was performed at the wedding in Cana, where he turned water into wine? You see, marriage is spiritually significant. In fact, there’s a whole book in the Old Testament called the Song of Solomon *or* the Song of Songs that speaks to the romance of marriage, and thus to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

This book is so full of erotic imagery and allusion that I would not recommend its reading to young children. Recently more popular interpretations of this Hebrew poetic literature have turned the Song into a guide for dating, or some kind of ancient sex manual. But the truth is that ancient Israel was more religiously conservative than Saudi Arabia is today. I really don't believe this book would have made it into the Bible if it was not a picture of Christ and his Church. Even still, the whole bible speak to God, even verses that on the surface do not plainly refer to God. The whole of Scripture reveals Christ. We're not going to dive too deeply into this — I just want to give you a sense of God's love life here.

This is what Christ says to his bride:

How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of an artist's hands. Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies. Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses. How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.

Now listen to how the church responds:

May the wine go straight to my beloved, flowing gently over lips and teeth. I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom— there I will give you my love. The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my beloved.

Church, my question is, are we like this bride? Can we say with confidence, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”? Do we have a sense that God’s desire is for us? Do you have a sense that there is more to the church than what meets the eye? For lack of better words, the church is more wonderful than all the magic Walt Disney can imagine. According to Greek Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, “The Church is the centre of the universe, the sphere in which its destinies are determined.... It increases and is compounded in history, bringing the elect into its bosom and uniting them to God. The world grows old and falls into decay, while the Church is constantly rejuvenated and renewed by the Holy Spirit who is the source of its life... The Church, then is the sphere within which union with God takes place in this present life, the union which will be consummated in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead. All the conditions which are necessary that we may attain to union with God are given in the church.”¹

Let me repeat that. *The Church is the centre of the the universe... All the conditions which are necessary that we may attain to union with God are given in the church.*

Some of you may ask, is this not a hyper elevated view of the church? Some of us are accustomed to thinking of the church as a mere unspiritual institution. On this line of reasoning, the institutional church is religious, but individual, private spirituality is taken as superior. The problem with this attitude is that it fails to register that **apart from the church, there is no salvation**. Salvation is a corporate reality. Sure, we are individuals, but we as individuals are saved *into* Christ’s body, and therefore Church membership is not optional. You are either a *member* of Christ’s one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, *an apostate* from the one, holy, catholic and apostle church, or you’re outside the church, without God and without hope in this world. Now, I am not trying to be offend the outsiders in the room. We want more of you in our gathering. My point is this: while we have a choice about *which expression of the Christian church* we want to identify with, one cannot be a Christian without belonging to the church. **In order to be saved**, one has to be joined to Christ’s body. The church is the realm where Jesus Christ personally ministers to his people in the word and in his sacraments, which are the means of grace. Thus we believe that Christ really is present here. God is with us. The apostle Peter says that to be a Christian is to participate in the divine nature.

¹ Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, 178-179.

In Matthew 28, Jesus's last words to the apostles are: Go and make disciples of all nations—now pay attention, this is what the original greek says—baptizing them **into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**. *To be baptized is to be inserted into the Trinity, into the very life of God*. It is precisely because the Christian life is a divine life that we need to discuss our sexuality. Our sexuality is never peripheral. It's essential. The church is the centre of God's universe. God is a king held captive by the beauty of his princess bride. The king's desire is for her. God does not just love the church. He needs the church. He cannot live without her, so Jesus *dies for the church*. Our individual sexuality matters inside *and* outside of marriage because this is what God looks forward to when he thinks about us. The whole universe exists so that God in the person of Jesus Christ can one day have his bride.

Let's pray: Father, we thank you for **inviting us to the wedding supper of the lamb ...**
Amen.