

CHAPTER 1

The Church Is the Bride of Jesus Christ

I HAPPEN, BY THE grace of God, to be married to a wonderful wife named Jackie.

God has graced our lives with an amazing union that is a gift from him. We have unity in our religious beliefs, child-training philosophies, love of beautiful creations, frugality, and many other things. Our lives are united and entwined in countless ways. And we practice loving each other, not just with romance, but by doing good things for each other. Love is the superglue that holds us together.

So, you might understand how I would react if someone said to me, “Fr. Charles, I love you. I think you’re great. But you’ve got a real witch for a wife. She’s nothing but trouble, and I can’t stand to be around her. She’s the stupidest, ugliest, most unpleasant person I know, as well as being a hypocrite. I’m happy to talk with you on the phone or text you, but I’ll never enter into your house as long as she’s there.”

Love me, love my wife.

Now in this human analogy, there may actually be times where one spouse is pleasant and nice to hang out with, and the other one is an absolute train wreck.

But this is not the case with God and his Bride, the Church.

LOVE ME, LOVE MY WIFE

For while God is perfect and we all know the Church is not, Jesus Christ has a special relationship with his Bride. This special relationship is what this book is all about and why you need to be an active member of a local church.

But first, a little theology.

Did you know that God has taken a Bride?!

It's true. The story of God and man, which is the story of the Bible, is a love story. It's a story about how God created man to spend the rest of his life in close communion with him. Sadly, as we know, man has divorced himself from God by his sins: this divorce is the source of the hells on earth that we create for ourselves.

We were created for the deepest fellowship with God. In fact, the Bible begins and ends with a wedding!

In the beginning (Genesis 1), the first wedding is that of God and man. But there's also a human marriage at the beginning of the Bible: the marriage of Adam and Eve. When God created Adam, he said of Adam: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." And so, God created Eve for Adam.

Moses, the divinely inspired author of Genesis, says: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

In other words, from the beginning, God created men and women to come together and become one flesh. Two people become one person, or relationship, in marriage. A husband and his wife are no longer to live for themselves but for the other: they do this through self-giving love.

Maleness and femaleness in general, and a husband and wife in particular, picture who God is for us. Who is God? He is three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—but one God.

For this reason, it is men and women together, and especially husbands and wives, who picture God for us. God has imprinted his very nature on our bodies!

St. Paul explains the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church in terms of a marriage. In Ephesians 5, Paul writes about how the husband is the head of the wife in the same way that Jesus

is the head of the Church. Women are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to love their wives. Husbands and wives are to love each other as they love their own bodies.

But it turns out that Paul is talking about more than husbands and wives. He says he's talking about Christ and the Church! In verses 31–32 he says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

I told you that the Bible also ends with a marriage, which we find in Revelation 21:1–3, where St. John refers to the Church as the New Jerusalem. He says:

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.”

This is where eternal life is going: to a marriage between Jesus Christ and his Bride, the Church.

John also refers to this as the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). Jesus Christ and his wife, the Church, are one.

Therefore, *how you treat the Church is how you are treating Jesus.*

You really can't say “I love God,” whom you haven't seen, if you don't love Jesus' Bride, whom you have seen.

It's a good idea to know what Jesus Christ thinks about the Church. Jesus loves his Church. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:25–29:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,

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that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.

Do you see how much Jesus loves his Wife, the Church? He loves her so much that he died for her and continues to give his life for her. Everything he does is to glorify, nourish, and love her.

Jesus sees the Church, his Bride and Body, as he sees himself.

We also know how Jesus feels about his Bride, the Church, from the life of Paul, back when he was Saul. I'm sure you remember the story of how Saul was on the road to Damascus to hunt down Christians and either throw them into prison or have them put to death. On his way, Jesus dramatically comes to him, knocking him down to his feet. Here's how St. Luke describes what happens next:

Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"

Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:4-5)

Did you catch what Jesus said to Saul, when Saul asked him who he was? He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Now how could Saul be persecuting Jesus when Jesus was safely seated at the right hand of the Father, ever since Acts 2? Because Saul was persecuting the Church, which is both the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ.

Jesus is saying in essence to Saul, "Hurt my wife, and you hurt me. Persecute my wife, and you're persecuting me. Whatever you do to the Church, you're doing to me."

Jesus has so closely identified himself with the Church that he says to all of us, and not just Saul: "*How you treat the Church is how you are treating me.*"

JESUS IS NOT A POLYGAMIST

Jesus Christ is not a polygamist!

But this is sometimes, without meaning to, how we think about his relationship with us. Many Christians believe that their relationship with Jesus is primarily an *individual* one. In other words, it's a direct, immediate relationship with Jesus, without any other men or women involved.

Although God does, indeed, relate to each of us individually, this relationship takes place in the context of the larger relationship between Christ and his Bride, the Church.

There are two and a half billion Christians in the world today. Does this mean that Jesus has two and a half billion brides? God forbid! That would make Jesus the ultimate polygamist.

Jesus has one and only one Bride: the Church. Each individual Christian is but one member of this beautiful and holy Bride of Jesus.

Most humans throughout history thought of personality in terms of *corporate personality*. This is true not only for the ancient, medieval, and Reformed world but also for most of the world today.

The Persons of the Trinity are Persons *in relation* to each other. This is most obviously true in terms of the Father and the Son, who are not separate people in the sense with which we often speak of ourselves.

We see this corporate personality in the way that each of us is defined by our *tribe*. When Adam fell, for example, the whole human race fell with him. Why? Because even hundreds of generations later, we're all related to Adam. When Jesus took on a perfect human nature and lived a perfect human life, how is that we can be made holy and perfect in him? Because of corporate personality.

This means that Christians are in, or are a part of, Jesus Christ.

This idea of corporate personality will be made clearer in chapter 2 when we discuss the Church as the Body of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 2

The Church Is the Body of Christ

GOD CALLS THE CHURCH not only the Bride of Christ but also the *Body* of Christ.

It's not hard to see why. Remember when we were talking about Adam and Eve how God said that he had made them "one flesh." When a husband and wife marry, they become one flesh, a union sealed and symbolized by sexual union. The husband's body no longer belongs only to him but also to his wife, and the wife's body belongs to her husband and not just to her.

And so, the Church, as the Bride of Jesus Christ, is also the Body of Jesus Christ. The New Testament often speaks of the Church as being *in* Christ and *united* to him. Just as a man and his wife become one thing or person, so do Jesus and his Bride.

This makes sense, since, in Jesus, God and man are made one, or "married."

BODIES AND MEMBERS

The Church as the Body of Jesus Christ is St. Paul's favorite image for expressing the truth of who we are as the Church. Let's look at one important passage where Paul teaches that the Church is the Body of Christ: 1 Corinthians 12. The whole chapter is about how the entire Church is the Body of Christ, but one of the most

important verses in the chapter is verse 27, where Paul says: “Now you [plural] are the body of Christ, and members individually.”

Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 12 is that each of the members in the Body of Christ is incomplete without all of the other members of the Body. There is only one Body of Christ, not many. Therefore, since the Corinthian Christians are all members of the one Body of Christ, they should live in love and build the Body up, and not use their gifts for selfish gain.

Consider your own body for a moment. What would happen if each part of your body thought it had an independent connection to you? Your brain would be over here, your eyes over there, your ears somewhere different, and everything else all over the place, dismembered from one another.

If this happened to your body, all of the members would die. Each member only has an identity in terms of the larger, greater body, and each member only has life when connected to the body.

Jesus Christ has a Body, of which each individual Christian is to be a member. If you are living as a Christian without being part of the local church, you are like a body part trying to live without being part of the body. In bodies, this leads quickly to death. In the lives of Christians, it leads to spiritual death, but more slowly.

Maybe a simple diagram will help.

Many Christians believe that the relationship between Jesus, the Church, and the individual believer looks like this:

Christ-Christian-Church

In this view, Jesus has a personal and individual relationship with each Christian believer, apart from the Church. The Church is at the end of this relationship and is seen as optional. Since each believer has his own relationship directly with Jesus, he doesn’t need the Church. Now he may want it as a devotional aid, something to help him in his personal walk with God, but he doesn’t need it.

But the way God portrays the relationship is actually like this:

Christ-Church-Christian

Jesus has established a close, personal union with his Bride and his Body, the Church. Individual Christians are members of

Christ only when they are also members of the Church. Remember: members can only live in relation to the whole body.

When Paul calls the Church the Body of Jesus Christ, he really means it. The Church is his physical, bodily presence on earth.

WHAT IF THE CHURCH WEREN'T THE BODY OF CHRIST

This is really important. Think of what it would mean if the Church were not the Body of Christ. Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday and ascended into heaven forty days later, and then was never seen again, and will not be until the Second Coming.

Doesn't that seem *wrong*?

Wouldn't it be a little anticlimactic if Jesus spent thirty-three years on earth, only three in his public ministry, and then left the earth and was never seen again until the Second Coming? God must have thought that man and even human bodies are really important things for him to take them into himself like he did.

What would Christianity or the world look like if every Christian thought and acted as if he didn't need the Church?

Imagine that all of the following things would be gone forever in a Christianity without the Church.

1. the Lord's Supper
2. corporate worship
3. sermons
4. authoritative teaching of the truth (which would lead to heresy)
5. authoritative teaching on morality
6. churches to help the poor or visit the needy
7. pastors to counsel people or give them spiritual advice
8. discipline or accountability

How effective in glorifying God, establishing his Kingdom, converting unbelievers, ministering to those in need, learning more about

God, and receiving godly guidance and wisdom would Christians be if *none* of them belonged to a local church?

Without any churches, individual Christians would eventually look just like the unbelievers who surround them. Almost all of their “tribes” would be secular, and very few of them, if any, would do much to lead us closer to God.

The Church is the Body of Jesus Christ: it is his eyes and ears, his hands and feet, his voice and his heart. Without the Church, how would men see and know God?