

The Beauty and Glory of Christ's Bride

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Edited by
Joel R. Beeke



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With heartfelt appreciation for

Drs. Arthur and Sonja Miskin

faithful and caring friends,
in word and deed and prayer,
lovers of Christ and mentors in self-denial.

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Preface

The church of Jesus Christ is an amazing entity, a study in paradoxes. She is a lovely bride in her wedding gown waiting for her Groom. At the same time, she is a soldier in battle fatigues and body armor fighting for her life and for the glory of her King with the weapons of truth and mercy. She is a hospital for sinners full of the uncleanness and infirmities of the spiritually sick. Yet she is also the palace of the saints, the holy temple of God. The church is an earthly organization with all the mundanities and conflicts of a human institution, and she is a heavenly organism united by the Spirit as the very body of the risen Lord Jesus. In her, both the death of Christ and the life of Christ are put on display. It is no surprise that the world views the church “with a scornful wonder,” as Samuel Stone wrote.

The most important truth about the church is not how people see her, but that Christ loved her and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25). His eternal love and effective sacrifice define her identity and determine her future holiness and glory (Eph. 5:26–27). He has taken her as His own flesh and blood, and He cherishes her more than we cherish our own bodies (Eph. 5:28–32).

We love the church because Christ loves her. In fact, it is impossible to love God and not love His people (1 John 4:20–5:1). As our Lord said, love for the disciples of Jesus Christ is itself the badge of a true disciple (John 13:34–35). Therefore, it was a delight to gather with several hundred people at the 2014 Puritan Reformed Conference and meditate together on the theme of the beauty and glory of Christ’s bride. This book consists of the addresses given at that conference by the faculty of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and our guest speaker Conrad Mbewe from Kabwata Baptist Church, Zambia. It is our prayer that reading it will bless you as much as hearing the spoken word blessed us.

In the first part of the book, we focus on our love for the church and its spiritual loveliness. Pastor Mbewe opens the book with a stirring challenge to be *devoted to the church* the way that believers were after Pentecost (Acts 2). Jerry Bilkes reminds us of the *spiritual essence of the church*, that is, its communion with God through Christ (Heb. 10:19–25). Michael Barrett shows how practical the book of Leviticus is with a call to *holiness* as the health of the church. David Murray exalts Jesus Christ as the barrier breaker and bridge builder and unveils the beauty of Christ’s church in her *unity and diversity* in gender, age, gifting, and ethnicity.

The second part of the book examines what it means to participate in the life of the church. I draw five principles on faithful *church membership* from Ephesians 4:10–16 and show what each one means for our personal, public, and practical lives in union with Christ. Dr. Barrett sketches a biblical portrait of faithful *preaching and shepherding* as powerful means by which the Lord Jesus builds up His church. Next, I present the Puritan vision for *worship* as adoration driven by the gospel and regulated by Scripture.

Dr. Bilkes continues this theme of participating in the life of the church by helping us to see the beauty of the church’s *sacraments* as signs and seals of Christ’s love for His bride. Dr. Murray discusses the reasons why *church discipline* is necessary and beneficial to the church and presents several principles to guide us in practicing this difficult but salutary means for the cure of souls. Dr. VanDoodewaard closes this section with a biblical exposition of the church’s *mission* and a touching challenge to personally work to reach our neighbors with the gospel of Christ.

Finally, the last two chapters of the book speak to the church’s sorrows and hope. Dr. VanDoodewaard opens up Christ’s teaching on persecution in John 15:18–27 and informs us about persecution around the world today. Finally, Pastor Mbewe enables us to look ahead to the glorious union of Christ’s church with her Bridegroom (Revelation 21). Our great hope and longing is to see Jesus Christ and to be with Him forever. Only then will we fully know the love of Christ for the church, when he presents her to Himself as “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle,” but made perfectly beautiful by His redeeming love (Eph. 5:27). Only then will the church be able to take off her armor and walk in peace with her blessed Savior.

If you are able to join us in Grand Rapids for future conferences, please consider doing so. You may find information about the Puritan Reformed Conference at <https://prts.edu/prts-annual-conference/>.

I would like to thank Linda den Hollander for her able typesetting, Annette Gysen and Gary den Hollander for their assistance in editing, and my dear wife Mary and family for their patience with me as I work on book projects, striving, as Luther said, to “throw the inkpot at the devil” so that Satan’s kingdom may be wounded and God’s kingdom may be built up. May God greatly bless these messages to your soul so that you fall more deeply in love with the church as the bride of Christ.

—Joel R. Beeke

**LOOKING AT THE
LOVELINESS OF
CHRIST'S BRIDE**



Our Devotion to Christ's Bride



Conrad Mbewe

The beauty and glory of Christ's bride is a great theme. One of the greatest proofs of a person's conversion is his or her practical appreciation of the church of Jesus Christ in an ongoing way, because only the Holy Spirit can show him or her the preciousness of the church. The church is the apple of God's eye and the hope of the world. He bought it with His own blood—He who is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Creator of the entire universe, and yet in the midst of this He has set His affections upon the people that comprise the church. Therefore, it must be a great privilege and honor to serve God in and through the church.

In thinking about the church as the bride of Christ, can there be a better place to start than at its inception in the New Testament on the day of Pentecost? In Acts 2, we see the church on honeymoon, as it were, before it was tried and tested by various doctrinal heresies and moral issues. Luke tells us:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:41–47)

These words refer to what took place at the end of the sermon that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. The Lord Jesus had been with His disciples for about three years. He had recently ascended to heaven, leaving His disciples behind. Prior to His departure, He had left His disciples with precious promises that they were to cling to for dear life's sake. One of those promises was that they would receive the Holy Spirit, who would empower them for service. They were waiting in an upper room for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. That promise was fulfilled on this day. The Holy Spirit came down in a most conspicuous way. A number of them spoke in various languages that they had never learned. So those who were gathered in Jerusalem rushed to see what was going on. Peter preached a sermon that brought about three thousand people to repentance and faith. That is where the text quoted above starts from.

The number of people who were converted was significant. Remember that in the whole of Jesus' ministry, only about five hundred individuals had become His disciples. But at Pentecost, as a result of one sermon, three thousand were cut to the heart and came to salvation. Peter's message was very clear. The people were to acknowledge their rebellion against God. They needed to come to God trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross. A few days earlier, they had been mocking Jesus. Now they were to cry to God for mercy based on that same death. That was precisely what they did that day. That was truly extraordinary.

What do we learn from our first encounter with the New Testament church? What stares us in the face here is the devotion of the believers. They were devoted to the church. We also notice a number of wonderful results that followed that devotion. It is reminiscent of the Lord's assessment of Israel's initial attitude toward Him, as expressed in Jeremiah 2:2-3a: "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD." At a time when Israel was in a terribly backslidden state, God was reminding them of their honeymoon period with Him. They had been so in love with Him that they gladly followed Him in the desert. It had been a most wonderful start, though it soon had degenerated into a period of rebellion. In the same way, those early days of the New Testament church were glorious.

Let us look closely at this text of Scripture and see what we can learn from it about our devotion to Christ's bride.

The Addition

The church of Jesus Christ ought to be filled with those who have responded to the gospel and who sincerely commit themselves to its inner life. As I stated above, at the birth of the New Testament church, the world was challenged through the preaching of Peter to come to Christ in genuine repentance and faith. Those who refused to do so had no internal right to be party to the body that had begun there. Peter's message was that anyone who stayed outside would remain an enemy of God. Thus, he pleaded urgently with his hearers to be saved from their corrupt generation. Only those who responded appropriately were initiated through baptism into this body. This was after the pattern set in Matthew 28:19–20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

That is where devotion to the bride of Christ truly begins. It is when you, as a new convert, are initiated by faith into the body of Christ. By grace, you must freely take that step of being identified with the Lord Jesus Christ, refusing to be a secret disciple. You must be very convinced that this is your line of duty, even if it means that you pay the price of your very blood. You must be convinced that being devoted to Christ necessitates being devoted to the body of Christ. This is what we find throughout the pages of the book of Acts. The preachers demanded a verdict from the crowds despite the enmity of the Jewish nation and the Gentile world. Those who responded to their message had to come out of the woodwork as individuals even if they were to be killed for doing that. There was no room for secret disciples. There was nothing like loving Jesus but having nothing to do with His church. This is what Augustine meant when he said, "He cannot have God for his Father who refuses to have the church for his mother."

In the New Testament, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, tax collectors and sinners, male and female, famous and unknown, powerful and vulnerable, and young and old,

all came into this one body—the church. As they heard the gospel, they repented of their sins and put their trust in Christ. They were then added to the church through a public profession of their faith. Henceforth, they were marked men and women.

The Commitment

What is even more important was the resulting change in those who were thus initiated into this body. Luke informs us that those who repented and were baptized committed themselves to the stated meetings of the localized entity called the church. Luke says, “They continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). What were these activities?

- **The apostles’ doctrine:** This refers to the teaching sessions of the apostles, where they taught the church the whole counsel of God. Through these sessions, the new believers were enabled to read the Old Testament with New Testament spectacles and thus were made to appreciate that Christianity was not novel. Rather, it was the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament taught. This realization resulted in the believers exhibiting a common life.
- **Fellowship:** This refers to the inner life that believers enjoyed, an inner life with which those who gathered with them could identify. It was the communion that resulted from the common life that they had in Christ. It gave them a common purpose and devotion, and resulted in their sharing a lot of their goods.
- **Breaking of bread:** This refers to the meal—later called the Lord’s Supper—that was introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ prior to His crucifixion (John 13). It had a lot in common with the Passover and grew out of it. It pointed to the suffering of the Savior for the sins of His people. Sharing in this meal reminded them of the price paid for their salvation.
- **Prayers:** This refers to the times the early church spent to call upon the Lord so that He would watch over them and use them in carrying out His Great Commission in the midst of the hostility that they suffered from both Jews and Gentiles.

They were very aware of the fact that their mandate could be undertaken only with God's power.

It was impossible to do these activities without being physically present among the people of God. Look at each facet that the early believers were devoted to and you will notice that they had to be present among their fellow believers in order to show these commitments. In those days, you could not download sermons from the Internet. You had to be physically present when the apostles were teaching. The fellowship (Greek: *koinonia*) demanded coming into face-to-face times of communion with other believers. The breaking of bread was done as part of a special meal shared with fellow believers. The same can be said of the prayers. These were not individual prayers offered at home, but were part of the stated meeting for prayer by the whole church. Believers got together in homes and cried to the Lord Jesus Christ to show His might on behalf of His people. So the believers of the early church regularly attended the teaching sessions of the apostles, intertwined their lives in fellowship with one another, shared in the Lord's Supper, and met together to pray.

Sadly, that is an aspect of church life that we have lost. Today, we have churches that boast of thousands of members, yet their meetings are empty—especially their prayer meetings. Such a “sleeping giant” wakes up only when summoned by those who want to throw out the pastor. That is wrong. Why should we speak of being committed to Christ when we are not there when the church gathers to hear the preaching of God's Word, meets for the breaking of bread, spends time together in fellowship, and congregates to pray to King Jesus? If we are to be truly devoted to Christ, then the empty prayer meetings must come to an end. We must not leave the church's prayer meetings to elderly grandmothers while the rest of God's people chase after their own petty agendas. Matthew Henry once said, “Those whom God leads, he leads to his holy hill, and to his tabernacles; those therefore who pretend to be led by the Spirit and yet turn their backs upon instituted ordinances, certainly deceive themselves.”

The world will never become conducive for outward, visible commitment to the church's stated meetings. In the early church, it was largely persecution that stood against such outward commitment. Yet the early church braved this storm, as can be seen in the book of Acts. In our day, consumerism is one of our greatest obstacles.

We are inundated with advertisements that allure us to spend our money on things that do not satisfy—boat cruises, holiday resorts, sporting events, Black Fridays, “specials” on all kinds of clothes and gadgets, the latest movies from Hollywood, and so on. These consume our time and attention until there is nothing left for the church’s meetings.

It needs to be said here that being committed to the church’s stated meetings is not legalism. It can be, but that is not necessarily the case. It is legalism if we are committed only because of pressure from the outside or simply because that is what the leaders of the church say we must do. However, it is not legalism if we want to be there primarily because we love Christ by loving His bride. That was what was happening to the church in Acts 2. They were in love with the Savior. Their love for Him flowed into love for His church. They wanted to hear about Jesus through the preaching of the apostles. They wanted to meet with other believers. They wanted to remember Jesus’ death upon the cross through the breaking of bread. They wanted to pray together and see Jesus’ power at work in their own day. That was not legalism. It was the outflow and overflow of their love for Christ and His bride.

The Results on the Outside

When Christians devote themselves to Christ’s bride in this way, their devotion empowers the church’s witness to the world and enhances care within the body. This is the result that is mentioned here: “And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:43–45). The people were filled with fear because they had never seen anything like this in Israel and did not quite know what to think about it, especially as they also witnessed the miracles being done by the apostles. These believers were their acquaintances. Thus, seeing their transformed lives made them sit up and realize that something extraordinary was happening.

Many people read these verses and think that it was the miracles of the apostles that brought the dread upon the people. Yet the order in verses 42 and 43 seems to point to a different conclusion. The fear that came upon the people was because of the transformation of the

believers' lives on the day of Pentecost and the believers' commitment to the stated meetings of the church. Look again at the order in verses 42 and 43: "(1) And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. (2) And fear came upon every soul: (3) and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles." Surely the order clearly suggests that it was primarily the changed lives that caused this dread, not the many wonders and signs that were done by the apostles.

Is this not what we have lost by our worldly and syncretistic lifestyles? By trying to be as worldly as we possibly can be so that there is no stepping-stone between the church and the world, we have lost our impact upon the world. By letting the self-centered and self-serving culture around us permeate the church, we make ourselves no different from the world. We give the impression to people who visit us that we are just a club. Whether we go to church or not depends on what exciting activities we have there. This is usually so because of our competing priorities. We say, "If our son has no sports activities or we have no other obligations, then we will go to church." That is so sad. We certainly do not show devotion to the bride of Christ if it looks like any other club in the community. And the community does not sense that something extraordinary is happening among us.

Rather, it must be the other way around. Those who come into our midst should notice that the Johns and Marys who were once their coworkers in iniquity have been changed and are worshiping the living God in the church of Christ. That should make them ask, "What is happening here that I am missing out on?" And as they hear about God and sin, they should realize the demands of God upon them. They will have no excuse because of the transformed lives they are seeing. And when they hear about salvation in Jesus Christ, they should, by the working of the Holy Spirit, come under deep conviction and seek Him who gives eternal life. Oh, that we may see more of this in our day!

The Results on the Inside

Part of the church's amazing witness to the world was the love that believers had for one another. This love caused them to be together frequently and to make their possessions available for other believers' use. They even went as far as selling some of their possessions

in order to meet the needs of those who were lacking. Luke writes, "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:44–45).

This reads like a page from a fairy-tale book. How can this be? It is because of the Holy Spirit's work in forming the body of Christ. When we are converted, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into one body, and so we experience a real bonding to and affection for one another. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, the apostle Paul writes: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

The apostle Paul likens the universal church to the human body. The church is one body across the globe, just as the human body is one from head to toe. It is one Holy Spirit who unites us to the one body of Christ. It does not matter what our backgrounds and our current circumstances might be—we are members of one body and are filled by one Spirit. As a result of this, we sense oneness with other believers in the mystical union that the Spirit of God works out. We are more than club members. We are family. We are brother and sister with one another in a very real way. This is more glorious than the comradeship of communism. We really mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. It was this reality that resulted in believers giving what belonged to them to bless others, so that together they had all things in common.

Your experience of church before you are converted is like going to the post office. I am not sure how it is with you, but when I go to the post office, I do not really expect to relate to anyone except the people I go with and the person across the counter. Whenever I have been there and someone has called out my name, I have been surprised. This is not the place where I expect to relate to people on a first-name basis. All I want is to transact my business and get out. The post office is not a place for fraternizing. It is certainly not a place where I want to know the other people and even meet their needs.

That is like your experience of church before your conversion. You are interested only in those you already know and the preacher whose preaching you love. You are not interested in strangers or in

widening your sphere of acquaintances. You are certainly not interested in entering into their lives and sharing their joys and sorrows. That is reserved for your family back home.

But when you are converted, all of that changes. Suddenly, you are interested in the people in the next pew. They mean so much to you. You want to introduce yourself to them. You want to know them and their situations. You want to share your life with them. You are moved by their needs and want to do something for them. That is precisely how it was in the New Testament. This is what amazed the world. We need more of this today.

Their Daily Lives

When Christians devote themselves to Christ's bride in this way, their communal life goes beyond the Lord's Day in their fellowship with one another. Are we seeing this today in our busy lives? Luke's description here again sounds like something out of a fairy-tale book: "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people" (Acts 2:46–47a). You read this and wish you could speak like this about your church. This is the bride of Christ as God intended her to be. That is how things were at the beginning. We must aim for this. Our responsibility is to do something to see this becoming true in our churches.

Church life in the New Testament was a daily affair. That was because most of it was comprised of spontaneous fellowship. It was not done to satisfy the calls of tyrannical leaders who wanted to see church members in the pews every day. The Christians loved one another and wanted to be together. They met in the temple and in their homes. You could not miss the spiritual warmth as they sang the praises of God and encouraged one another in their most holy faith. Even the people around them were so blessed by what they saw and heard that they were favorably disposed toward them.

Our one-day-a-week (and that for an hour or two) affair needs to be uprooted and consigned where it really belongs—to clubs! The church is not a club, and when we treat it as one, we betray our own spiritual decay. The church is the family of God on earth. You do not relate to your family for only one day a week because

there is friendship and filial affection in the family. You want to be with your brothers and sisters. Your church is a spiritual family that ought to be enjoying the favor of its heavenly Father, as it did in the New Testament.

Their Daily Blessings

The evidences of this favor include ongoing conversions of the elect, not only on the Lord's Day but on other days of the week as well, because the church as a body is sending forth the aroma of life through the gospel. Luke writes at the very end of our text, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (v. 47b). Notice that it was the Lord adding to the church. The growth was not a fruit of gimmicks, as is often the case in today's church. Many churches use all kinds of nonspiritual and even unspiritual tactics to bring in the crowds. As someone has rightly pointed out, "Whatever you use to bring people into the church is what you will have to use to keep them inside the church." In the case of the church at its commencement, it was the Lord who added to the church, so it was the Lord who was going to keep the people in the church.

Notice also that the Lord was causing this numerical growth to take place daily. This growth was not only a result of the preaching of the apostles on the Lord's Day. It was happening daily! This must have been a fruit of what was happening every day. Although evangelistic programs are important and often bear saving fruit under God's blessing, it is important to notice the silence about such programs in this text. The people were seeing the love that the Christians had for one another and realizing that something authentic and extraordinary was happening among the people of God. That realization caused them to seek the Lord for themselves.

If we are going to see our local churches bursting at the seams with authentic Christianity, we need to go beyond evangelistic programs. We need to examine ourselves to see whether we are experiencing something of the Spirit-inspired inner life that we have seen in this passage of Scripture. It is the Holy Spirit who produces true devotion to Christ's bride, which in turn causes the world to take note and come to us seeking our Savior. We ought to be crying to God in prayer for such evidence. Let us not be satisfied with mere seasonal evangelistic campaigns. Even businesses can do that,

especially over festive seasons. They pack their shops with shoppers during such seasons. The church must be more than that. We must cry to God so that He Himself adds to the church daily those whom He is saving through the Spirit's blessing on the church's inner life.

Conclusion

I said at the beginning that this institution—the bride of Christ—is the apple of God's eye and the hope of the world. Its commencement here was the dawning of a new day. Against the backdrop of a spiritually corrupt and rotten Israel, prophet after prophet saw this new era from a distance and rejoiced in what they saw. They saw a body of God's people without any national boundaries from east and west, Jew and Gentile locking arms and going forward with the great King of kings and Messiah going before them. They longed for the day when that vision would be turned to sight.

Granted, the church will never be perfect until the Lord returns. Every church has its share of hypocrites, and every church member has numerous flaws and faults. In fact, as someone once said, "If you ever find a perfect church, do not join it, because if you do, you will make it imperfect." So the issue here is not that we should look for a perfect church, but that we should work toward one. We should examine our devotion to the church and see whether it approximates to the devotion that we see among the disciples in the book of Acts. Since it probably does not, we should work day by day to get as near to it as is humanly possible.

The church is dying in the Western world. Church buildings are being turned into museums. And where it is growing by leaps and bounds, in the "Majority World," it is a mile wide but only an inch deep. Neither situation is right. Be assured that any compromise on the Spirit and the truth is surely going to lead to spiritual death in the not-too-distant future. In Acts 2, we see both a multiplying church and one that is steadfast in the apostles' teaching. That is how Christ's bride was meant to be. We must not accept anything less.

The church today needs to get back to emphasizing the foundational place of the gospel. That is the source of life. Only when people respond to the cross of Christ and build their lives on it will we see a people saturated with spiritual life. After all, the church is the body of Christ. He must be all in all. Once the focus shifts to anything else,

that is the beginning of the end. Just as the gospel preached by Peter gave birth to this vitality, so also our gospel preaching must bring back true vitality.

We had better fulfill the great aspirations of those ancient seers through our devotion to this bride. Let us not shortchange them by turning this glorious institution into something as corrupt and rotten as Israel was. Let us repent of our indifference to her fortunes today. Let us resolve to drink in the biblical view of her glories, which we shall see in the pages of this book. Let us use our gifts and play our role until the bride shines like the sun in its full noonday strength. Yes, if a better day is to dawn for the bride of Christ, we must be devoted to her with all our ransomed powers.