

## The Meaning of the Church

### **Introduction:**

Last week, we started a new series of sermons answering the question, “What does it mean to be the Church?” This is such an important question that I’ve decided that everybody in our church needs to hear these messages. You see, we have different age groups in our church—young and old, babies and pensioners. Far too often, age divides us. We also have different languages in our church—English and Mandarin, Tagalog, Farsi, Bangladeshi, Cantonese and Arabic. Too often, language divides us. We also have different cultures and cultural expectations in our church. Too often, these things can divide us.

That’s why Aisen and I have been preparing these messages together. As these messages will point out, we are all one in Jesus Christ—Jesus Christ has made us one. And that’s why Aisen and I will be presenting these messages through all three of our congregations. We don’t want anyone to miss out. For these messages are meant to lay the groundwork for our future life together as a church. These messages are designed to declare the vision of unity that we, as your pastors, have for this church.

Of course, we have three different congregations, each with uniquely different needs. Our unity in Christ does **not** mean that we will have to give up our uniqueness. The older people in our church must be honoured! The babies must also be honoured. The youth must be honoured. The various languages and cultures must be honoured. That’s because **unity** in Christ is not the same as **conformity**. We don’t need to all speak English to be united. We don’t all need to be young to be united. Rather, **Jesus makes us one by helping us to better appreciate each other’s differences!** This is the miracle of Christianity—Jesus makes us one in our diversity! And that’s what these sermons are all about—that’s why we **all** need to hear them.

And so, for the next five weeks (not including the weekend we’re away at church camp), Aisen and I will rotate through the three congregations. The message Aisen preached last week here, in the English congregation, is now being preached in the Mandarin congregation. The message I preached to the Mandarin congregation last week is the one I am preaching to you today. On Easter Sunday, when we are all together in a Combined Service, Aisen and I will team-

preach the sermon together. It will be another visible demonstration of our unity in diversity.

Of course, this is only for the next five weeks. After this, Aisen will be full-time preaching in the Mandarin congregation and I will be here (until I go to the USA). Perhaps in July or August we will do another important sermon series together again! **Let's pray.**

### **"The Bride of Christ"**

Passages: Song of Songs 4:8-10  
John 3:22-36

Today, we're going to talk about being engaged. Specifically, I want to talk about one particular couple who has been engaged for quite a long while. On average, most couples are engaged for about 1 to 2 years. But, the couple that we're going to talk about today breaks all the rules of normal engagements. You see, this couple has been engaged for several thousand years so far... and there's still no sign that the marriage will take place any time soon!

Now, who am I talking about? Who is this mystery couple? As you may have gathered, I am not talking about a human couple. I'm talking about the on-going engagement of **the Lord Jesus Christ and His bride, the church.**

In 5 different places in both the Old and New Testaments, God's people are referred to as His "**Bride**". Generally speaking, a "**bride**" is a woman who is preparing to be married. She's an engaged woman. Once she's married, we no longer call her a "**bride**"; from the wedding day, she is called a "wife". In the same way, when the Bible talks about the church as a "**bride**", it is saying, in effect, that she is still waiting/preparing to be "married"! She is, even at this present time, looking to the future day when she will finally enter into the heavenly and eternal bridal chamber with her husband, Jesus!

Now, before we go any further in talking about this couple, let me ask you a question: When do you suppose the engagement of this couple (God and the church) began? Believe it or not, the Bible gives us a hint that the engagement began in the early days of creation! At that time, there were only two people on the face of the whole earth, Adam and Eve. Through the vows of covenant, God promised to be faithful to them and to lead them into a life of unimaginable love and unity.

Adam and Eve, along with all of their offspring, were called to become God's chosen **bride**! They were called to be His church!

Why did God do this? Why did He choose to be linked in such an intimate way with human beings? One word is sufficient enough a reason: **LOVE**! He loved His creatures! He longed to be 'one' with them, as a bridegroom longs to be one with his bride.

Take a moment to think what this means! Think about all the different people in every generation beginning with Adam and Eve who now make up God's bride. People like Noah's family, or the family of Abraham and Sarah. The bride is made up of Moses and Joshua, Ruth and Deborah, King David and King Solomon as well as the Queen of Sheba. We could go right through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. But if you take them all together, you see one continuing stream of faithful people; people of successive generations and from a variety of places and ethnic backgrounds... all of them, on a journey of trusting God as their heavenly lover. If you can imagine that, you have a picture of "**the bride**"!

And this is what God says to them all—Listen to **Song of Songs 4:8–10**

<sup>8</sup>Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amana, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions' dens and the mountain haunts of the leopards.

<sup>9</sup> You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.<sup>10</sup> How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!

God is the one who is speaking here. He is the bridegroom and He is speaking to His bride, the church! He is telling her just how beautiful she is to Him!

**Now, where does Jesus fit into the picture?** As the Scriptures tell us, when Jesus came to earth He came as "the image of the invisible God." It says that He came as "the fullness of God in human form". It says that Jesus is "Emmanuel", God with us...God in the flesh. Jesus left the glory of heaven to become a man. More than that, **He came to earth to be our bridegroom** ...the One who would personally woo the entire whole human race into an engagement of marriage with God.

And so, as we read in the Gospels, many people came to Him. In fact, they came in droves...people from all walks of life and from every language and nation. They came to Him to be healed and restored to their beautiful place as the Bride of the Living God. Thousands of men and women in Israel saw the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ. They could hear, in His message, the voice of the loving bridegroom.

This is exactly how John the Baptist understands who Jesus is! In John 3:29–30, he tells all his followers, **“The bride belongs to the bridegroom. I must decrease but He must increase!”** John wants everyone to turn to Jesus and find the fullness of God’s love.

Of course, not everyone would receive this heavenly bridegroom. Not everyone would accept His love. Instead, they mocked Him...they tortured and abused Him. In the end, they nailed Him to a cross. Nevertheless, after His death He rose again! And after His resurrection, Jesus went back to heaven. Why? What is He doing in heaven? He’s waiting? For what? Well, not only does the Bible say that He is waiting for all His enemies to be put under His feet, but it also says that **He is waiting for the day when His bride, the church, has finished her task of preparation.**

This idea of preparation comes from the Book of Revelation, chapter 19, verse 7. Speaking about the return of Christ to earth, the 24 elders and the 4 living creatures bow down before the throne of Christ and sing, **“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”** According to this verse, the final marriage between Jesus and His bride will come only when the bride has prepared herself for Him!

How do we, the church, the bride of Christ, make ourselves ready? There are 5 ways which I can see in the Scriptures, and I’ll give them to you quickly:

**First**, we need to make ourselves ready by allowing the Spirit of God to dress us. Every bride puts on a beautiful wedding dress for her wedding. As the bride of Christ, we must allow the Spirit of God to clothe us with the bridal garment of holiness and purity...so we will be ready for our King. Verse 8 of Revelation 19 tells us: **And it was given to her (the bride) to clothe herself in fine linen, bright {and} clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.”**

**Secondly**, as the bride of Christ, we need to make ourselves ready for Jesus by reading and re-reading His love letters. You see, Satan is very clever. He hates to see the love relationship between the church and Jesus, so he tries to destroy it by dividing it. “Divide and Conquer”. He tries to get us to believe that total surrender to Jesus is only for the fanatics. He tries to make us believe that it’s not “cool” to be devoted to Christ. Furthermore, Satan knows that if some individuals in the church begin to compromise their love for Christ, their attitude will gradually infect the rest of the church and lead it off course.

But if we continually read the love letters of Jesus found in the Scriptures, His **Word** will be our source of encouragement from the bridegroom. We will be reminded of how much he loves us and desires us. Reading Jesus’ Word is important in our preparation for the bridegroom.

**The third way** in which we, the bride, must prepare ourselves for the bridegroom, is through extravagant worship. I don’t know how often you have experienced this at our church, but extravagant worship happens when all God’s people enter into a worship experience which transcends human fabrication. Together, we are brought to a point of heightened emotional and spiritual sensitivity to the presence of the Lord. It is in these moments that we begin to lavishly anoint our Savior with our praises, somewhat like the way that Mary Magdalene lavishly anointed the feet of Jesus with a whole bottle of costly perfume. That was extravagant worship! And so should ours be too! It is what the bride of Christ should be doing as she prepares herself for the bridegroom’s return.

**The fourth way** we, the bride, must prepare for the bridegroom’s return, is through evangelism. Listen to some words taken from the last pages of the Bible, Revelation 22:17. **“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.**” According to this verse, who is offering an invitation to “come”? The Spirit and **the bride!** We are responsible to hold out the water of life to a thirsty world. We are responsible for evangelizing the nations...Only then will Christ come back for His bride!

**The fifth and final way** that the bride must prepare herself for the bridegroom is by loving each other. Let me say this as plain as

possible: The Bible says repeatedly that Christ loves the church, and that is why He gave His life for her. His love for His bride motivated Him to give His life a ransom for many. Now, tell me, if Christ loves His bride that much...how should we act towards her? Shouldn't we love the church too? Christ said, **"Love one another as I have loved you!"** In fact, Jesus said, **"By this shall all people know that you are my disciples...my bride, if you have love one for another."**

Our God has been in love with His church for a very long time...in fact, He's been engaged to her for thousands of years! But, we know, the engagement period won't go on forever. One day, it's going to give way to the great and glorious wedding day...the marriage feast of the Lamb. Jesus is coming back sooner or later to get His bride, the church. But will she have made herself perfectly ready? Will we, as one church, be walking in the garments of holiness, corporately surrendered to His Lordship, offering extravagant corporate worship, corporately devoted to evangelizing the lost, and loving each other in the church as Christ loved us?

Let's not give up doing so, for although the struggles may not be easy, the rewards will be eternal.

**We are the Bride of Christ!** And the beauty of the bride, in the glory of her diversity, is best described in the vision of Revelation 7. Indeed, I leave you to ponder this amazing vision and pray that we increasingly become more and more like her:

**Revelation 7:9-10** <sup>9</sup> After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb".

**Amen!**