Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

In an article I once read, the author said, “If church isn’t necessary, let’s quit. Let’s cancel our services, put the pulpit away, close the hymnbooks, empty the baptismal font, leave the bread and wine in the pantry, lock the doors, and send everyone on their merry way. If church isn’t absolutely necessary, let’s quit.”

Now, he wrote the article not because he really wants us to quit the church but because he wants us to see that the church is *necessary*!

But is it really *necessary*? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ seem to think so, given the vows they have made today, but there are plenty of people who are OK with the idea of church, you know, its part of our cultural heritage and it provides people with a sense of community, a nice venue for marriages and funerals, and foodbanks for the poor, etc, but *necessary*? Isn’t that a bit extreme?

So we want to take the occasion of these public professions of faith as an opportunity to see what the Bible says about the church. And what we will see is that the church is not something humans invented; it is a gift of God and it stands at the centre of His plans for human history. And we will also see that while the church is all God’s people everywhere, it come to expression in local congregations like ours. And as we see these things together, may the Lord use these truthes to expand our love for and commitment to the church of Christ and the Christ of the church.

The letter to the Ephesians is a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a congregation/s in the city of Ephesus. But because it is in the Bible, this letter is also the Word of God for *us* today; *we* are being instructed in these verses. And **the instruction here reveals** **the Necessity of the Church**.

Now I assume that you have all used a camera? So you know that different camera settings allow you to get different images. Well, that is kind of what we see as we consider these verses in their context – three images – a panorama, a close-up, and a wide-angle.

1. The first image, the **panorama**, gives us the **historical overview** of the Church. And we see this in vv7-9 and the verses that lead up to our text.
   1. In v7, Paul explains that he was made a minister by God, and in v8, that his special task was to “*preach to the Gentiles*.” And Gentile simply means not Jewish. The OT is largely about the Jewish people but Paul was to preach to Gentiles – people of other nations. And he was to “*bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages*.” So he is telling us that God had a plan that was a hidden mystery for millennia, which is what the word “ages” has in view. But now that plan was known and it was Paul’s job to tell people what the plan was. So what was this plan?
      1. Well, we have seen in the last couple of weeks that God’s ‘before the world existed’ plan was always to present some of humankind, as a love gift, to the Son, at the end of time. **Revelation 5** is a vision of heaven and we are told that there are people there “*from every tribe and language and people and nation*.” And how this would come about is the story of human history; it is what the Bible is all about.
      2. But what Paul is telling us here is that this was a hidden mystery for ages. And here is why: The Bible begins with creation and then the Fall and God’s promise to Adam and Eve that a child of Eve would defeat Satan and redeem all God’s people. But He didn’t spell out *when* this would happen or *how* this would happen. So around 2000 years pass by and then came what we read earlier in **Genesis 12** – God’s promise to Abraham that through him *all the families (or nations) of earth* would be blessed. But for the 2000 years after Abraham, God worked in a saving way, almost exclusively, just with Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people. And this is the story of the OT; God’s dealings with Israel. Paul speaks about this back in **ch. 2:12** where he says that the Gentiles were “*separated from Christ, alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*.” So for the 2000 years of world history prior to the coming of Jesus, pretty much your only hope of salvation was to be Jewish!
      3. So for 2000 years leading up to the promise to Abraham and for around 2000 years after it was not known who this child of Eve would be and how God would defeat Satan and how He would bless “*all the families of earth through [Abraham]*.”
      4. But you see, now Jesus had come! That’s what Paul is saying. And He was a human being, so He was a child of Eve. Ah ha! And He was Jewish, so He was a descendant of Abraham. Ah ha! And His death and resurrection revealed that He was also the Son of God. Ah ha! And Jesus told us that He came to give His life as a ransom for many. Ah ha! So now how God would bless all the nations of earth was known! It was through the preaching of Jesus and the cross that Jew and Gentile would come together in the church of Christ. Ah ha!
      5. Paul speaks about this in 3:4-6: “*This mystery was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to His holy Apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*.” And that phrase, “*members of the same body*” is about the church – the gathering of people from every tribe and language and people and nation on earth.
      6. And that is exactly what we see here today. \_\_\_\_\_\_ comes from China. There she was part of an underground, persecuted congregation. And \_\_\_\_\_\_ is a Kiwi with Dutch and South African genes who has grown up as a baptized member of this congregation. And we have Filipinos and Taiwanese and Malaysian and Niuean and Singaporean and I don’t know what else, who are all members of the church of Jesus Christ. God has joined Winnie and Kate with us and with the Apostle Paul and the Ephesian believers and believers in the 1st century and the 6th century and the 13th century and all around the world today in the church of Jesus Christ.
   2. So is the church necessary? It sure is! It is not a human invention. It is not just one human community thing among many. It is not one of many places where people can worship whatever they call their god. No. The church of Jesus Christ *alone* is where God is gathering and preparing those He will one day present to Jesus in heaven! And we will say more about the church as local congregations in a moment, but that is why we celebrate what Winnie and Kate have done today; it is right that they publicly join a local congregation, because, by *God’s design*, the church is necessary.
2. But we need to say a bit more about local congregations so the second image here is the **close-up** image of the **local activity** of the Church.
   1. You’ve already heard me share this well known saying a few times before: To live above with saints we love will be a thing of glory. To live below with saints we know? Well, that’s another story! It is nice to think about the church in heaven and the church around the world, but the Bible calls us to the hard work of local congregations – living in close fellowship with sinful human beings, just like us, which isn’t always a bed of roses.
      1. Now, there is plenty we could say about the biblical case for local church membership but today I will just point you to **the first verse of this letter**. This letter was addressed to “*the* *saints who are in Ephesus*.” Paul didn’t write this letter to some unknowable, invisible, worldwide entity; he wrote it to the baptized ones in Ephesus, which is what the word “saints” has in view. And it is the same with all of the letters to congregations in the NT; these were definable and recognizable congregations.
   2. But there are other aspects of the local congregation on display here also.
      1. In v7 Paul explains that he was made a minister. And if you look over at ch. 4:11, Paul talks about Christ giving “*apostles and prophets and evangelists and shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry*,” and in v14, so that they are “*not carried about by every wind of doctrine* (or false teaching).”
         1. So the Lord provides congregations with **officers** – men with official duties. And we don’t have time to explore this thoroughly now but those officers today are the elders (which include ruling elders and ministers) and the deacons.
            1. In **Titus 1**, Titus was told to appoint elders in every town. So as a new congregation was established, it was to have its own elders (and deacons).
            2. In **1 Peter 5** Peter says that the elders are to shepherd those *in their charge*. So the elders have to shepherd the members of *their congregation*.
            3. The point is that we are not saved to be individual, independent, unattached believers; we are saved to be attached to a *local* congregation with its elders and deacons.
         2. And if you look at v8, you can see that they key work of the church officers is to preach or to support the preaching of “*the unsearchable riches of Christ*.”
            1. One commentator said that Christian teaching is the proclamation of the *saving* riches, the *sanctifying* riches, the *relational* riches, the *practical* riches, the *devotional* riches, and the *eternal* riches of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ needs to be the centre of the teaching ministry of the church.
            2. So there are many things that a church may do (optional) but the one thing that is mandatory; the reason it exists, is to preach and teach Christ!
         3. Now, because of books and the internet, we have access today to 1000s of preachers all around the world who preach the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. But drop down to vv**17-19** where Paul prays for all believers “*that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*.” So Paul wants believers to grow in the knowledge of and experience of the unsearchable riches of Christ. **But notice the four small words in the middle of v18 – “*with all the saints***.” And remember that Paul addressed this letter to “*the saints in Ephesus*.” How would the Ephesian believers grow in the knowledge of and experience of Christ best? With the brothers and sisters of their congregation. And this is not to say that we cannot benefit from listening to online sermons or other preachers, but by God’s design, we grow in our knowledge of and our experience of the love of Christ *best* in our local congregation, even when life is hard there.
            1. So making this as concrete as possible, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, all the members of ARC, until you die or move somewhere else, by God’s design, you will grow best in the love of Christ through Minister \_\_\_\_ and Elders \_\_\_\_\_\_ and Deacons \_\_\_\_, and as you fully participate in your home group and your youth group and your cadets and GEMS and in fellowship with other members and prayer meetings and AGMs, etc.
            2. Maybe this illustration will help: Most Antarctic animals migrate during the cold Winter. But not **the penguin**. For four months, without food and in bitter cold, the male penguin guards the egg. How? Well, the egg is warm because it is on top of Dad’s feet and under his belly. But how does Dad keep warm with the cold wind? By not standing by himself! He huddles together in the ‘congregation’ of penguins. And each of them takes a turn on the outside where the cold is fiercest, but then moves back inside the group to stay warm. And this illustrates how necessary the local congregation is in terms of nurturing the gospel and guarding against error. When the winter of false teaching or temptation blows in we need to be in close fellowship with others. We grow best *in community.* We grow best when we know others and they know us, warts and all, and we are accountable to each other and to our elders.
            3. God’s design for growth in Christ is local congregations. Participate fully! Pray for each other.
3. And that brings us to the third and last image of the church here, which is the **wide-angle view** of the **heavenly purpose** of the Church. And here we are talking about v10: “*So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*.”
   1. The rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are the angels. And just a couple of Sundays I preached to you about the angels. And one of the verses we looked at was **1 Peter 1:12** where we see that the good angels long to look down at the story of salvation that we have in the Bible. You see, salvation and grace and forgiveness are foreign concepts to the angels – they just do as God commands them to do. The hidden and mysterious plan of God to save some fallen humans, through faith in Jesus, who will be presented to Him on Judgment Day, is a mystery to the angels. But through the church, God is revealing His plan of salvation to the angels.
      1. One commentator explains this with the image of a cosmic play. God is the Author and Director. The theater is history and the world is the stage and the actors are the church. The audience is the angels. We have a Bible where we learn about God’s plan of salvation; they have the church – us.
      2. So when Jesus died on the cross, the angels wept. But when Jesus rose from the dead, the angels rejoiced! And then as 3000 people were added to the church on the Day of Pentecost, the angels rejoiced, and as the church was established in Ephesus, the angels rejoiced, and as \_\_\_ become full members of this congregation today, and, God willing, \_\_\_\_\_ and hopefully others in the weeks to come, there will be *more* rejoicing in heaven. It is mind-blowing to think about, isn’t it!

So congregation, we are not going to cancel our services, put the pulpit away, close the hymnbooks, empty the baptismal font, leave the bread and wine in the pantry, lock the doors, and send everyone on their merry way. The church *is* necessary!

So come to worship services and catechism classes and homegroups, put your hands up when names are needed for elder or deacon or teacher or cake baker, and pray, regularly, for Kate and Winnie and every member of this congregation and the church around the world.

And may the Lord bring other men & women and boys & girls to the church of Christ in local congregations like ours. And all God’s people said, Amen!