

Called To Love A Blemished Church

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[0 : 0 0] I wish to say to you this evening that Susan and I knew it would be a great experience for us to be in Edinburgh for a weekend and I sort of thought it would be a great experience to be at the conference that we were at on Friday and Saturday and indeed it was but I have to say that for me the the greatest highlight of the weekend was being here with you in this church community and you just have no idea how how being here this morning and then again being with you this evening has poured medicine of comfort into Susan's heart and into my heart so I thank you very much you know I have to say I love the church and and when I say that it reminds me of of a time in my life when when I was asked by a man why I love the church the man actually who asked me that question was a former minister who had been burnt so badly by his congregation that he stepped out of the ministry and somehow he heard about our church in Toronto Canada came with his wife and many children into that church community even though it meant driving an hour and a half to get there every Sunday because he felt that that is where he could find healing and comfort after being brutalized and traumatized by the church community what he didn't know is that I was being traumatized and brutalized by my church community at that time in fact the most difficult years of my life go back to about 1999 and then into 2000 and 2000 and one where two elders in our church in Toronto came to the conclusion that I was the worst thing for the church that my constant emphasis on we need to multiply we need to start new church communities in this city was actually going to ruin our particular local church and so they started a campaign that was a campaign of lies and betrayal these were two men who had been some of my closest friends for a while they they started this campaign in order to try to get me out of the church and then when they realized that the other five elders were actually siding with me and and opposing them and their efforts then they went after the entire session of elders and tried to get rid of all of us and just made life for us so miserable and especially for me for my wife and for our four daughters that there was a time where I was really asking myself if

I even wanted to live and I ended up at the Christian psychiatrist and I ended up on antidepressants and I was I had gone very very low I was virtually non-functional as a minister in my own congregation I needed all the help I could get just to get through one day at a time and so one day I was sitting in my office it was actually after a Sunday morning worship service that I had barely gotten through again and I was sitting in my office with this man who had been burnt so badly by his church community and he just wanted to know a little bit more about what was going on in my life and what was going on in the life of our church and I began to just vomit all over him the details of of the garbage that had been happening in our church and why 35 people who had been convinced by these two elders along with these two elders and their families had left the church and when I finished giving him blow by blow by blow of what had happened this ex-pastor looked at me and said so tell me something why are you still in this church I've never forgotten that question I've also never forgotten my answer that question why are you still in this church this church with all of its flaws this church where people get brutalized and traumatized this church where the opposite happens of what Christ actually intended to be happening in the church why are we still here and asking that question having this morning focused on why do we love the gospel and this evening focusing on the question why would we want to love the church brings me to this passage in Ephesians 5 25 where it says Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her why would Christ want to give himself up for the church in Toronto that brought me virtually to the point of feeling suicidal why would Christ want to give up his life for a church that had so brutalized my friend that he stepped out of the ministry why would Christ want to give up his life for the church when in fact many of us know the church and have experienced the church as not a very happy place to be at certain times and the interesting thing that I find about this statement that Paul makes about

Christ as the head of the church being willing verse 25 in Ephesians 5 to love the church and give himself up for her is that previously in Paul's writings he has spoken of Christ loving to the point of being willing to give himself up on the cross but it's always for something or someone for example Galatians 1 4 he gave himself up for our sins or Ephesians 5 verse 2 he gave himself up for us or Galatians 2 20 he loved me and gave himself up for me but only here do I find that Christ out of love has given himself up for this institution this this thing that people have so much trouble with throughout history the church why would Christ give himself up for the church and when I think of that question and ponder it I think of the first argument that I have heard from many people as to why they would never darken the doors of a church because the assumption is is it not that that the church really should be and and and actually was designed to be an experience of authentic people in other words people whose lives are consistent with their confession of faith and so the argument goes I'll never go to church I'll never be part of the church because it's just a group of hypocrites and I'm guessing that many of us here this evening have heard someone say that and perhaps you've said it and somebody dragged you along the ceiling anyway the thing that I so much appreciate about this argument that I've heard many times from people who have a negative idea of the church and would not like to be part of a church that the church is just a group or a gathering of hypocrites is that it's actually a true argument and so the first thing that I say as soon as I hear that on the lips of someone is well yes you're right in fact when I think about it and I have I suddenly realize that the greatest hypocrite there ever was at least in in my thinking you may think of someone else but in my thinking the greatest hypocrite there ever was Judas Judas who confessed for three years to have faith in Christ who for three years followed Christ was one of the twelve disciples and then ends up betraying Jesus and handing him over for some silly money that actually this dastardly hypocrite was chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve and I asked myself Jesus what were you thinking when you chose your twelve disciples as the foundation upon which you would build your church why did you choose this utter hypocrite and when I read on in the Scriptures particularly when I come to the book of Acts I read statements like it was in the four ordained plan of God that Judas should betray the Christ and I realized now that the reason why Jesus chose this one this huge hypocrite as one of the twelve is because somehow in the mystery of God and in his decree this hypocrite fit in to the plan of salvation he was necessary in God's plan in order to get Christ to the cross and when I realized that God is so intricately involved in the way he chooses people to a particular purpose even hypocrites in order that Christ may be exalted and glorified in the end I realized that perhaps there are hypocrites in the church because God wants them there for some reason I don't know but he knows somehow every hypocrite fits in to the plan of God and what he wants to accomplish in this world and when I think about that and I think that someone like Judas became a hypocrite in the church of Jesus the more I think about that the more I realize that I'm actually glad because if Jesus was willing to choose someone like Judas to be one of his disciples even though he was such an utter hypocrite then there's room for me in the church as well because when it comes to hypocrisy who is a greater hypocrite when I'm really honest with myself or as we learned to say this morning to think of myself as in and of myself being more sinful than ever dared to believe when I realized that actually in my own heart is not only the hypocrisy of a Judas how often have I handed Jesus over to others for them to mouth off about him and how bad he is and to basically crucify him in front of my own ears but in me is also the hypocrisy of Peter how often have I denied Jesus how often have I put on that I'm really not a Christian I'm not one of them so don't ask me any hard questions how many times has the hypocrisy of King David and his adultery been in my heart when I lost it after someone and when I realized that actually in my heart is the hypocrisy of all of the greatest sinners I can count in the Scriptures I realized that I'm the greatest hypocrite of all not Judas and now I'm just glad that Jesus loves and uses hypocrites because it means that there must be room for me in the church and when the person says you know what the church is just a group of hypocrites the first thing I think of nowadays is that's right and thank God

I'm in the church where hypocrites are given a chance to actually get rid more and more of the hypocrisy in their lives and get more and more real by being conformed to the one who is the reality of all that we've been destined for and all that we've been designed to become namely Jesus Christ and so I'm learning to love the church as a group of hypocrites I know that I know that many people want to love the church as a helpful and healing community and so goes the second argument why people will oftentimes not want to go to church or having been in the church want to get out of the church and that is the argument the church has deeply wounded me and there are many who have

been deeply wounded by their experience in the church and I'm guessing that there are some who are not here this evening because they can point back to some kind of experience or some person in this church community who has deeply hurt them and I'm guessing that there are some here this evening who are perhaps even thinking about getting out of this church community because you have been deeply wounded by someone in this church community and you just wonder how long you can handle being wounded and so when people say to me the church has deeply wounded me that's why I need to get out of the church or that's why I got out of the church the first thing that I have to say is yes you're right the church is a community in which people really get hurt if you want to know more details just look at my life I've been deeply hurt by the church and every morning when I take antidepressants I remind myself how deeply hurt I've been by the church you know one of my favorite heroes of the faith outside of Scripture is a German there aren't many Germans I have to say who I would consider heroes of the faith but this one definitely ranks way up there and his name is Dietrich

[17 : 35] Bonhoeffer Dietrich Bonhoeffer who gave up his life willingly because what he stood for was a church that would not cave into the demands of national socialism and he called for the confessing church in Germany to be a church that would go on heralding the gospel and being open to as he said a church for others being open to all others including those whom the political party would want to consider to be less than human Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a significant work called life together at least that's the title in its English translation and Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote some things about the church as a community that when I read these several years ago these lines several years ago I thought to myself now why didn't I understand the church the way Dietrich did back then why didn't I understand the church sooner in this way here's what here's what Bonhoeffer has to say about the church as the perfect and flawless community where everybody can be happy with the others and the way they're being treated by the others Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes one who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood he is looking for some extraordinary social experience experience which he has not found elsewhere he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood just at this point Christian brotherhood is threatened most often at the very start by the greatest danger of all the danger of being poisoned at its root the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship of confounding the natural desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood innumerable innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish of a dream the serious Christian set down for the first time in a Christian community is likely to bring with them a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it but God's grace speedily shatters such dreams just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others with Christians in general and if we are fortunate with ourselves by sheer grace God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world he does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream only that fellowship which which faces such disillusionment with all its unhappy and ugly aspects begins to be what it should be in God's sight begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it the sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both a community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community sooner or later it will collapse the man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God by others and by himself he enters the community of Christians with his demands

sets upon sets up his own law and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly he stands adamant a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren he acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community as if his dream binds men together when things do not go his way he calls the effort a failure so he becomes first an accuser of his brethren then an accuser of God and finally the despairing accuser of himself I don't know if you caught everything that Bonhoeffer was trying to communicate there but in essence what he is saying is ladies and gentlemen brothers and sisters we need the sinful imperfect and hurtful Christian community now now you say wait a second I thought the church was supposed to be perfect and holy and and and pure but you might notice that in these verses where it says that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he didn't give himself up for her when she was pure and blameless and holy but he gave himself up for her

while she was not blameless pure and holy in order that someday she might be made by him holy cleansing her by the washing with water to make her a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish see imagine for a second that you would walk into a church community where everything was perfect where everything was exactly the way you think a church community should be and functions exactly the way a church community should always be functioning imagine you walk into a church community where nobody ever does anything wrong and where nobody ever says anything hurtful to you and where nobody ever crosses you or makes you angry or disappoints you no minister no elder no member nobody ever does anything or says anything that disappoints you imagine walking into that kind of a church community you know what would happen first of all you would have walked into heaven you would be dead so let's just understand that that kind of church community will exist but it's not there yet it's not holy pure and blameless yet but the other thing is this if you walked into that kind of a church community today you would walk into a church community that in its behavior would never challenge you to become like Christ you know why I say that because every time that somebody disappoints you or says something to you that's hurtful you are being put into the place of Christ you are being identified with Christ in that you are now being asked are you going to respond the way Christ responded are you going to react to this person or the situation the way you did in your old nature or are you going to respond out of the gospel and due to the righteousness of Christ to this person in this situation in a way that conforms you more and more to Christ so that every faulty situation in the church and every painful thing that is said or done to you actually becomes a moment that calls for your growth if you walked into a perfect church today there would be no challenge to you ever to have to grow there would be no challenge to you to ever have to respond like Christ did when his disciples betrayed him denied him went behind his back hurt him said things did things to him or to the will of the father that disappointed Jesus you understand what I'm saying we need the flawed church in order to grow and become more and more like our flawless Christ and so it's only in this hub of a sinful wounding disappointing community of sinners that we will be able to grow in grace to the point where we are helpful where we are a healing experience to others who come to us with their wounds and so when someone says well I don't want to be part of the church anymore that because it has deeply wounded me I say to them you know what it's your only chance it's your only chance to be more and more conformed to Christ you had better be in the church that wounds you you had better be in the church where sometimes we get on each other's nerves and under one another's skin because that's how we will grow because that's when we are identified with the sufferings of Christ I know that we expect the church and want the church to be a vibrant and dynamic community experience and so I can understand the argument number three that people use why they don't want to love the church or be part of it when they say the church is just a stuffy outdated elitist institution and there's truth to that there we can say that yes I mean that is really the testimony of the church throughout the ages is is is that it just does not in so many cases get the balance right between organization and organism because the church is both you see the church is organization and the church is organism its organism in the sense that it is the body of Christ it is the life of Christ it is the work of the temple of the Holy Spirit where he is working out the will of the father in the hearts of God sons and daughters it really is this this this organism where there's growth where where there is a ridding of of the sickness that we bring with us and and and a growth in health the church is as Richard Sibbs used to preach to his congregation in London a hospital for sinners and and so in this hospital there's movement there's there's there's all kinds of of God's stuff going on in our lives that's what makes us an organism and it's great it's beautiful it's wonderful but you know no organism grows without organization or at least no organism grows healthy without organization so you need the structures you need you need the parameters you need the biblical instructions for what elders should do and what deacons should do and and and and and all this organizational stuff and so what we need is is this balance between organization and organism we need enough organization in order to to keep the organism healthy and growing and we don't need any more organization than that or we're going to in fact stifle its growth and and and squeeze it to death and at the same time we can't have organization without organism or we're just going to have dead cold orthodoxy with with no life of Christ in this thing called institution whatsoever and over the over the centuries we're constantly trying to get it right this balance and we so often get it wrong but we keep trying and we we keep asking God for wisdom and we keep repenting when we've gotten it wrong and we we try the next time and and and and try to do it better and learn from our mistakes and and so when when I when I hear

someone say look the church is just a stuffy outdated elitist institution I am reminded of the fact that it was actually Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brother who was an atheist who said exactly that and he said it to Dietrich Bonhoeffer when Bonhoeffer was just 14 years old and had just heard in his heart the call of God to go into the pastoral ministry and and go study theology in order to prepare for it and so when his brother says to him what you want to go into the church the church is nothing but a stuffy outdated elitist institution the 14-year-old Bonhoeffer responded well then I guess we'll have to reform it and that's precisely what God has called us to do and from what I hear and understand about this church community in the middle of Edinburgh that's precisely what

God has called you to do and what so many of you have heard as the call of God and are heeding as the call of God to reform the church to become again that church community that is vital and dynamic where people can come in and experience the life of Christ in its fullness and and the power of the word and and and experience one another as a community in which we get hurt and through which we can grow and become more and more what Christ is and I love the church when it sees itself as needing to constantly be reforming so we get the balance right so when someone says to me the church is just a stuffy outdated elitist institution everything inside of me just wants to say to him and does say to that person you know what you're right let's reform it so I come back to the question that I was asked by this ex-pastor after all the hurt and disappointment I had gone through why are you still in this church and I suppose the answer lies actually in this statement that Paul makes of

[33 : 01] Christ in verse 25 that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her her she wasn't yet blameless she wasn't yet completely holy she wasn't yet stainless she wasn't yet unblemished and still he gave himself up for her why and why do we why do we go on day after day and give ourselves up for her instead of getting out after so many disappointments why and the answer lies in one word because she is the bride of Christ she is and Paul is is latching on here with to an Old Testament theme she is his wife you get it we are a bride he's our husband and he loves us so much in our flawed and and and and and and and blemished condition he loves us so much as that new song by the Jesus culture band says he never runs out he never runs out on us when I think of bride I think of my bride my bride 36 or was it 37 six years ago 36 years ago my bride from about this angle came through double doors and started down the aisle and when I saw my bride and I was standing up there as the bridegroom my hands were behind my back and I was waiting here come the bride maids come on let's go let's go let's go hurry up okay stand okay now the music gets louder more powerful and here she comes unfortunately still on the arm of her father but soon she'll be on mine and so here she comes and I'm standing there

I still remember even though it was 36 years ago and as she's walking down the aisle I dare not tell you in this holy sanctuary the thoughts that went through my mind if you had been able to sit up close to me you would have seen how I started to drool and here she comes and she's coming down the aisle and I'm thinking to myself self this girl belongs to you shortly and then it's all systems go she's yours and she's yours to enjoy that beauty that's your beauty she's going to be with you for the rest of your life and when you're married to her it's well anyway I hope she gets here soon here she comes I can't wait until the father says her mother and I and then sits down and I can stand beside her and I can't wait until the reception is over so we can get on with the honeymoon because I am so in love with this girl and this girl is so utterly beautiful in her bridal gown that I really can't wait to have her for the rest of my life that's what I was thinking as she's coming down the aisle and you know the amazing thing is that every day as the church of Jesus

Christ comes walking down the aisle into the presence of our bridegroom that's exactly what he thinks of us that's exactly what he thinks of every one of us who has so deeply wounded the other person in the church or of us who've been so deeply wounded by the others in the church that's what he thinks about us in our hypocritical lifestyles where we confess one day Jesus you are Lord of all in the next day we can't trust him for the smallest thing that's what he thinks about us when in fact we are getting it so wrong on on on the the bounce between organization and organism what he sees in us is his bride covered dressed in the bridal gown of his perfect righteousness as I emphasized this morning and so he just passionately loves us the way we are and he also loves us for what we will be because when he sees us in the bridal gown of our of his perfect righteousness he sees us in that position that we now have of standing before God the Father in the perfect righteousness of Christ and therefore all together lovely to God the Father while actually in reality we are still more sinful in and of ourselves than we ever dared to believe and as

Christ looks at his church every day he not only sees us as we are in position in that perfect righteousness before the Father's throne all together lovely but he also sees us as we will be at his second coming when we will be in practice completely conformed to the perfect righteousness that we now have in position when in fact through the church experience and rubbing shoulders with one another and the work of the Holy Spirit in us making us less and less what we were and more and more what Christ is we will finally and completely be all that we were meant to be and again he will rejoice over us before the Father that now that beautiful bride is finally all that she was meant to be why are you still in this church that was the question that he asked me it's the question I asked myself a lot of times and perhaps you ask yourself the question to the answer is simply this because we are the bride of Christ and right now there's a lot of messy stuff in our lives but he loves us because we are his bride and one of these days all that messy stuff will be gone and he'll love us just the same not because we are somehow suddenly what he was always hoping we would finally be when in fact he was disappointed for a long time but because we will finally be with him in glory as his bride forever more and until that day he will love us as his church and therefore as he has given himself up for us he who loved us we may also recognize that as we learn to love what Christ loves we love one another we love the brotherhood we love the community we love the bride with all her flaws with all her blemishes with all her unholiness we love the bride because she is the bride of Christ let's pray

Lord Jesus thank you that you have loved us thank you that even though we are hypocrites you have loved us thank you that even though we are deeply wounded and deeply wound others you love us thank you Lord that even though we just get it wrong so often when it comes to structures and organization Lord that you deeply love us thank you that you are willing to give up your life for us that you died for us on the cross and that you give up your life daily into us so that we in fact might by the power of your spirit become more and more of what you are and so I pray I pray for your church I pray for this church right here in Edinburgh for this particular community I pray that your blessing of harmony your blessing of healing and comfort to one another your blessing of truthfulness and grace your blessing of your presence your blessing of the power of the witness of the Holy Spirit through this church community to Edinburgh I pray that it would all radiate in and from this church community so that the city of Edinburgh might come to know that God is that God loves that God has sent his son so that God might draw us to himself into a beautiful relationship I pray your blessing upon this church community in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ amen