

Holy Trinity Brompton



The Alpha Course

Talk 14 What about the Church?

Duration: 42 Minutes

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Key:

P – **Personal Story / Testimony** that Nicky Gumbel tells in the classic Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker's personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

S – Is a **Story** that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Q – **Quotes** are key to the talk to emphasise a point and to enable guests to engage and relate to a point made. There is now a way that people can seek permission to omit or replace quotes used in the original talks. A quote should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources.

Key quotes will need approval to change (these will be identified by a comment in the left column). Please email publications@alpha.org with your request.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

Green boxes identify key Bible passages used in the talk.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that may be removed or altered for contextualisation often supported by instructional notes in the margins.

NOTE: Key elements of this script are: personal stories, humour and reference to media / popular culture to draw the guests in to engage with the talk. Parts of the talk may need to be contextualised for other contexts or cultures but make sure you maintain the key elements of humour and personal testimony. Notice how quotes, and stories are used throughout to add emphasis to the main points of the talk (theology and testimony).

NOTE: This talk may have a lot of examples that may seem specific a particular church or to British church culture. You may carefully adapt the talk to refer to examples of church in your own context. Or you may use the given examples and reword the way you lead in to the examples.

If you are interested in church small groups or 'Pastorates', please refer to the Pastorates booklet published by Alpha international. More information can be

found on htb.org.uk or the booklet may be purchased through alphashop.org or the Alpha International Publications Catalogue.

<p>Q</p> <p>You may use this quote or replace it if Mick Jagger is not well known in your context.</p>	<p>The veteran rock-star Mick Jagger, I think, spoke for many when he said this: `Jesus Christ was fantastic, but I do not like the church. The church does more harm than good.'</p>
	<p>So is it possible to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, and not go to church?' And anyway, what does `<u>going</u> to church' mean? What is church?</p>
<p>P</p> <p>Try to draw on your own experience here, which you can refer to throughout this section.</p>	<p>Before I was a Christian, I didn't like the church. When I heard the word `church', my heart sank. The first thing that I thought of when I heard the word `church' was church services. And I always found church services so dull, boring.</p>
<p>Q</p>	<p>I had sympathy with something that Abraham Lincoln once said. He said this: <i>`If all the people who fell asleep in church on Sunday morning were laid out end to end, they would be a great deal more comfortable.'</i></p>
<p>P</p> <p>Q</p> <p>Delete this if the joke is not applicable to your context.</p>	<p>The other thing I thought of when I heard the word `church' is I thought of kind of people who went <u>into</u> the church—that was their job. I thought of people like priests and vicars and ministers.</p> <p>There was an advert in the church press recently which said this: <i>`Are you aged 45 and getting nowhere? Why not consider the Christian ministry?'</i></p>

P

You may use, replace or delete this example.

And then the other thing I thought of, I suppose, when I heard the word `church' was kind of something that you were born into, it was a kind of denomination that you were born into. So if you were born in England, then that makes you Church of England.

My mother, before she became a Christian, I remember her filling out a form which said: *Religion:* and she put *None*—brackets—(*Church of England*).

And then the other association I had with it, I suppose, was church buildings.

Now, all these things are the trappings, if you like, but they're not the essence of what the church is about. It's a bit like if you say, `Well, what is marriage?' and you said, `Well, marriage is a ring. It's a marriage certificate. It's a wedding service. It's the marriage laws.' Now, marriage may involve all of those things, but that's not the essence. At the heart of marriage is something far more profound. And at the heart of the church is something amazing, something wonderful, something beautiful.

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And over the years since I've been a Christian, I've come not just to like the church; I love the church! And in the New Testament there are hundreds of images and metaphors which describe the church, and I want to pick tonight on five which explain why I love the church so much.

Talk point 1

THE ALPHA COURSE

1. THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The first reason is because the church is people. It's the people of God.

Would you like to turn to 1 Peter, chapter 2, verse 9.

1 Peter 2:9

Peter writes this: **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God...**

The Christian faith involves, of course, first of all a vertical relationship—our relationship with God. But it also involves a horizontal relationship—with other people. And we're part of a community which began with God's call to Abraham. And the people of Israel prefigured the church. So the universal church consists of all those, right the way across the world, all the way back in time, who profess or have professed the name of Christ.

And we become a member of the church not by birth, but by new birth. Jesus spoke about being born of water and the Spirit. Jesus baptised and he commanded his disciples to baptise. And becoming a Christian involves three things. First of all, something we do: repentance and faith. Secondly, something God does: he gives us the Holy Spirit. And thirdly, something the church does: baptism.

Baptism's a kind of visible mark of what it means to be a member of the church. It's a visible sign of what it means to be a Christian. It signifies—the water signifies washing, cleansing from sin. Water also in the New Testament signifies the Holy Spirit—Jesus talked about 'rivers of living water' coming out from us. **By this**, John tells us, **he meant the Holy Spirit**. And it's a picture of all the blessings God brings through his Spirit.

But thirdly it signifies dying and rising with Christ. So, St. Paul puts it like this in Romans 6: he said, **All of you have been baptised into Christ Jesus**. So, imagine this piece of paper is you and this Bible is Jesus. What Paul is saying in Romans 6, he says: **All of you were baptised into Christ Jesus**. When you became a Christian, in a kind of mystical way you became part of Christ. You are now 'in Christ'. And therefore whatever happened to Jesus happened, in this kind of mystical way, to you.

So, Paul says, **all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death...** That means that when Jesus died on the cross, you died in him. We were buried with him through baptism. He says this symbol of going down into the water in baptism is a symbol of the fact that you were buried—when Jesus was buried, because you're in him, you were buried with Christ: **...in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too may live a new life.** So when Jesus rose from the dead, you rose in him. And coming up out of the water of baptism symbolises the Resurrection, starting a completely new life.

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You may use this story or remove it.

One time I was walking across Clapham Common, and I heard somebody shout, 'Nick!' And I looked up, and there was this guy on the balcony, and he said, 'Are you Nicky Gumbel?' So I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Alpha course?' So I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Wait there!' So I stood there and he came down and he said, 'Hello, my name's Dave.' He said, 'I did Alpha in prison.' He said, 'I was serving 15 years for armed robbery. Do you want to come inside?' So I said, 'I'd love to, but let's just chat out here, shall we!' And we talked and I got to know him, and I got to know him reasonably well, and one time I bumped into him, and I said, 'Dave, what are you up to?' He said, 'I'm just off to be baptised.' And I said to him, 'Think of this, Dave. As you go down into the water of baptism, all your old life is gone—that's what the picture is. Your life has gone. And as you come up out of the water, that pictures the fact that a completely new life has begun.'

The universal church is vast. Do you know, there are two billion Christians in the world today, 2,000 million—about a third of the world's population. And tens of thousands of people become Christians every single day.

You may reword this slightly according to your

Now, we live in Western Europe, and in Western Europe the church has

context and according to where your course is based.

been in decline for fifty, eighty years. And so it's easy to think—I used to think—I remember before I was a Christian, I thought: 'Look, the number of Christians, the number of churchgoers declining all the time—surely in a few years' time it will have died out completely.' But I had a totally blinkered, narrow view of the world: because when you look globally it's a totally different picture. The church is growing faster than ever.

The church in Africa just over 100 years ago, 1900, there were 10 million Christians in Africa. 100 years later there were 360 million Christians in Africa. Look at what's happening in South America, in China, in the East—all over the world. America, you know, the church is still very strong: about 7 percent of our population in the UK goes to church on Sunday; in America it's about 50 percent of the population. It's Western Europe where the church is in decline, but in many parts of the world the church is growing rapidly.

In some parts of the church it's persecuted. In fact, in more than 60 countries in the world, I read, Christians are harassed, abused, arrested, tortured or executed specifically because of their faith. 200 million Christians throughout the world live in daily fear of secret police, vigilantes or state repression and discrimination. Yet the church in those parts of the world, according to all accounts, seems to be, again, very strong.

You may personalise this

The universal church has local expressions. This would be one local expression of the universal church. And Paul, wherever he went, he planted churches: churches we read about in the New Testament in Asia, churches in Galatia. And these local churches themselves break down into smaller gatherings. And for practical purposes you could say that there are three different sizes.

First size is a small group, like the small groups you've been on at this Alpha course. Usually that's a group of about twelve. Jesus had a group of about twelve people he met with. **And one of the things that I find so amazing about the small groups and I love being in a small**

or amend it according to your church community context.

You may adapt the text in red according to your church community context.

group is that in the small group it's amazing how quickly people begin to drop their barriers and people start to talk openly about things that are real. There's this kind of authenticity—what's really going on in their lives.

People talk about their issues, their doubts, their fears, their failures. And often in the world relationships can be quite superficial, but in a small group, even though we've only known each other for quite a short time, there's a depth of friendship that develops. And we can ask one another to pray for each other, we can encourage each other, support each other in difficult times. There's this confidentiality, there's respect for one another; where we listen and learn, we eat together, we learn together, pray together. And I would encourage you to keep on meeting in a small group. This is not the end; this is the beginning.

But what we found is we need more than just a small group. We need a slightly larger group, which some would call a 'congregation'. We call it in this church a 'pastorate': because it's quite a large church, we break down into smaller congregations, which we call 'pastorates', which is about 25 or 30 people. There you can get to know a wider group of people. There you can develop gifts.

I love being involved in a pastorate because it's so amazing to see people develop—worship leaders, people who've never before led worship. They've developed that gift in a pastorate. People who've never given a talk before—they give a talk for the first time in the pastorate. And the friendships that developed were amazing. And again, just as in, if I look back at the small groups that we've been involved in on Alpha, many of those people are such close friends still, from maybe fifteen years ago. And the same with the pastorate, this level of friendship.

And then there's the bigger gathering: Sundays. For this church that's a large gathering. For other churches it's occasions when they get together as a whole group of churches. And that's amazing. It's different. There you get a sense of worship, awe—hundreds of people worshipping God together.

	<p>Sometimes we may be the only Christian in our office, in our factory, in our family. We come to a gathering and we think, ‘Ah, I’m <u>not</u> the only one.’ There’s a sense of confidence, excitement, joy, to be with the people of God. That’s why I love the church: it’s people.</p>
<p>Q</p>	<p>You know, Bill Hybels, the American pastor, he says that ‘the local church is the hope for the world’. There’s nothing like the local church when it’s working well.</p>
<p>Talk point 2</p>	<p>THE ALPHA COURSE</p> <p>2. THE FAMILY OF GOD</p>
	<p>The second reason I love the church is because it’s a family—it’s the family of God. Would you like to turn to 1 John, chapter 5, verse 1. St. John writes this:</p>
<p>John 5:1</p>	<p>Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.</p>
	<p>So what St. John says is when you come into a relationship with God, you come into a family. Because there are other people who are in that same relationship with God—they’re sons and daughters of God: that means they’re your brothers and sisters.</p> <p>So, you can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family. So take a look around you—I don’t see much movement at all! You’re very British —you’re all sort of sitting there like this! Take a look around you, because this is your family! Have a look. Have a look at your brothers and your sisters—or, if you’re not a Christian yet, your <u>potential</u> brothers</p>

and sisters! I don't know whether that encourages you to become a Christian or puts you off forever!

Brothers and sisters can squabble, they can fall out, they can not see each other, but they remain brothers and sisters. Nothing can end that relationship. And as you know, the history of the church has been a sad one because it's been a story of disunity.

As you look back in the history of the church there've been four major sort of breaks. In the fourth and fifth century the lesser Eastern churches separated. In the eleventh century you had the break between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. At the time of the Reformation you had the split between Catholics and Protestants. In the nineteenth century you had the start of denominations—there were no denominations until the nineteenth century. But by 1900 there were 2,000 denominations; by 1980 there were 20,000 denominations; and by the year 2000 there were 34,000 denominations.

And the church has divided on just about every conceivable issue—in fact, on every *inconceivable* issue as well.

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You may use this as a funny story you heard about, or you may replace with your own example as a way of making a comical statement about the way different church denominations have seemed to be divided, rather than united, in the history of the church.

I once was... We were in San Francisco and we went to the Golden Gate Bridge—an amazing sight and amazing views from there. And I heard about a man who was standing in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, admiring the view, when another tourist walked up alongside him to do the same. And he said:

I heard him say quietly as he took in the beauty of the view: 'What an awesome God!' I turned to him and I said, 'Oh, are you a Christian?' He said, 'Yes, I am a Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we shook hands.

I said, 'Are you a liberal or a fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we smiled and nodded to each other. I said, 'Are you a covenant or dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we slapped one another on the back.

I said, 'Are you an early Acts, mid Acts, or late Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a mid Acts dispensational

fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we agreed to exchange Christmas cards each year.

I said, 'Are you an Acts 9 or 13 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm an Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we hugged one another right there on the bridge. I said, 'Are you a pre-Trib or post-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we agreed to exchange our kids for the summer. I said, 'Are you a twelve-in or twelve-out pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a twelve-in pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'You heretic!' and I pushed him off the bridge.

So that's been the history of the church. But we live in a very exciting time, actually, when these kind of denominational barriers are coming down. And disunity is a scandal. Of course, outside the church, people look in and they say, 'Look, if you guys can't even agree amongst yourselves what you believe in, why should I be interested?' But Jesus prayed—just before he died, Jesus prayed that we should **be one so that the world would believe.**

And Paul says: **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit**—of course, not at the expense of truth. St. Augustine prayed that in the really essential things of the faith, the things that are at the core of our belief, there would be unity. In the things that are more peripheral, the non-essentials, there be freedom—people can believe different things—that's fine; and in everything, love.

Q

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, who is the preacher to the Papal Household, amazing man, I heard him talk once—it was back in 1991 and I never forgot his talk, and he's become a friend since. But what he said was: 'What unites us as Christians right across the denominations

is infinitely greater than what divides us.’

You may use or adapt the text in red to make it personal to you as a speaker.

And to me it's been one of the most astonishing things in the last years as we've watched Alpha grow around the world and being run by all the different parts—being run by Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches and Pentecostal and every variety of Protestant churches; Baptist, Salvation Army. It's been so amazing to meet with people from all those different parts of the church and to be so enriched by learning from them.

And what the New Testament talks about is a word, a Greek word: *koinōnia* [κοινωνία], which means ‘fellowship’. It's a kind of intimate relationship that we're meant to have with God and also with one another. And it cuts across race, colour, education, background—every other cultural barrier. And it leads to a level of friendship which I had never experienced outside the context of the church.

Q

And we need each other. John Wesley said ‘the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion’.

There are two things you can't do alone: you can't get married alone, and you can't be a Christian alone! So the writer of Hebrews said: **Let's not give up the habit of meeting together, as some have done.** Because if we don't meet together—this is my experience of watching people who have professed faith in Jesus Christ: unless they meet with other Christians, they find it almost impossible to survive as a Christian.

S KEY ILLUSTRATION

I heard about one young man who was really struggling. He had come to faith in Christ, but he just found himself drifting away, drifting in doubts and difficulties and losing his faith. And he went to see a wise older man, who lived in a cottage, and there was a fire, a coal fire. And as they were discussing—this young man told this older man about

	<p>what was going on in his life—the older man didn't say anything. But he just went to the fire and he took a red-hot coal, with tongs, out of the fire, and he put it on the hearth. And as the young man talked, he just allowed that coal to go from red-hot to black, dark.</p> <p>And then he got the tongs again and he put the coal back in the fire, and within a few minutes the coal was red-hot again. He didn't need to say anything. The young man left knowing <u>exactly</u> why his faith had gone dull.</p>	
<p>Talk point 3</p>	<p>THE ALPHA COURSE</p>	<p>3. THE BODY OF CHRIST</p>
	<p>That's the second reason I love the church: it's a family, it's the family of God. Third reason I love the church is the church is the way in which people see Jesus today. It's the body of Christ.</p>	
<p>1 Corinthians 12:27</p>	<p>Would you like to turn to 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 27. St. Paul says this: Now <u>you</u> are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.</p>	
<p>Q</p>	<p>As John Calvin, the great reformer, sixteenth century reformer, put it: 'He calls the church "Christ".' Bishop Lesslie Newbigin said this: he said, 'Jesus Christ never wrote a book; what he did was leave behind a community: the church.'</p>	
	<p>And what St. Paul is saying here is: '<u>You</u> are the church, and you are Christ to the world.' So each of you represents Jesus wherever you go—in your family, in your place of work, in your neighbourhood, in your leisure activities. You're Christ.</p>	
<p>You may delete the text in red in introducing this story.</p>	<p>The American pastor John Wimber told us many years ago—John Wimber's no longer alive, but he told us this story and I've never</p>	

S

forgotten it.

He told us this story about how he was standing in church one time and a man came up to him and told him how he'd been contacted by somebody in great need. And he talked about his frustration in trying to get help for this needy person.

He said, 'The man needed a place to stay, food, support, till he gets on his feet and looks for a job.' He said, 'I'm really frustrated. I tried calling the church office, but no one could see me, and they couldn't help me. I finally ended up having to let him stay with me for the week. Don't you think the church should take care of people like this?' John Wimber said, 'I thought for a moment and said: "It looks like the church did."'

Because you're the church. Every time you feed the hungry, that's the church doing it. Every time you visit the sick or visit someone in prison, that's the church.

And Paul develops this analogy of the unity of the body of Christ, but also that unity does not involve uniformity. Look at this room—there's huge diversity within this room. Each person here is unique and beautifully made. And you have a unique contribution to make to the body of Christ.

So my encouragement to you would be to get involved. Don't just be a kind of consumer; be a contributor. Don't just be an attender at church; be a member!

And then there's a kind of mutual dependence. He says: The eye can't say to the hand, 'Oh, well, I don't need you!' So what he's saying is the church needs you. And you need everybody else—you need the church. And together, if everybody's playing their part, then there's something really beautiful, like an orchestra where everybody is performing.

And I think this is true globally as well. Rather than saying about other parts of the church, 'Oh, well, they're not us! We're Anglicans and they're whatever', so what's wrong with them; we can say, 'Ah, they're a

	<p>different part of this body around the world. I wonder what we could learn from them? I wonder how we could be enriched by their tradition?’</p>
	<p>That’s the third reason I love the church: it’s the body of Christ.</p>
<p>Talk point 4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">THE ALPHA COURSE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4. A HOLY TEMPLE</p>
	<p>Fourth reason I love the church: it’s where we experience the presence of God in a special way. The church is a holy temple.</p>
<p>S</p> <p>You may use this story or replace it with a story of your own.</p>	<p>I heard about a little boy called Tommy, who was a very naughty little boy. And his mother despaired of him, and she tried everything and eventually thought, ‘I know what I’ll do. I’ll take him down to see the vicar—that will sort him out!’ So she took young Tommy down to see the vicar. The vicar was quite an austere man. He had a great big leather desk, and he sat down Tommy opposite, and he thought, ‘Well, I’ll find out how much this little boy knows about God.’</p> <p>So he said, ‘Tommy, where is God?’ And the little boy began to look nervous, and so he said again: ‘Tommy, where is God?’ He looked even more nervous. So he said, ‘Tommy, where is God?’ By this time the boy was so terrified he got up and he ran, and he ran out of the vicar’s study, out of his house, and he ran all... The mother thought this was amazing. She thought, ‘This has done it! This has really sorted him out!’</p> <p>The little boy ran in through his front door, and he saw his father sitting there. He said, ‘Dad, Dad, they’ve lost God down at the church! And now they’re trying to blame me for <u>that</u>!’</p>
	<p>Where is God? What was the right answer?</p>
	<p>Would you like to turn to Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 19:</p>

Ephesians 2:19-22

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The New Testament answer is: God lives in you. That's where he is. The only building that the New Testament knows about or speaks about is a building made up of people. The only church building mentioned in the New Testament is one made of 'living stones'. And that's where God is, God's presence is. There's a longing for God in every human heart; whether people admit it or acknowledge or recognise it or not, there's a longing for God.

Q

St. Augustine said this, speaking to God: he says, *'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.'*

Q

So the presence of God. Professor Gordon Fee, says that *'the word "presence" is a delicious word.'* If you love someone, what you want more than anything else is that person's presence. Photos, great. Telephone call, fantastic. Letters, great. But what you really long for is their presence. And that's what Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden when they sinned: they lost that sense of the presence of God. And as you look at the people of Israel, what distinguished the people of Israel in the Old Testament was not the Law so much as the presence of God with them. And that's why the Temple meant so much to them. They didn't associate the Temple so much with sacrifices; they associated it with the presence of God. And when the people of God were in exile, what they missed more than anything was the presence of God, the Temple. And what happened on

the day of Pentecost was God's Spirit, God's presence, was poured out on all people.

The New Testament speaks of you individually: **You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit comes to live in you. But more often it speaks corporately, of a gathering of Christians: **You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.**

There's something amazing when we come together. And sometimes people walk into a gathering of Christians and they say, 'Wow, there's an amazing atmosphere here!' They can't quite put their finger on what it is, but they're experiencing the presence of God. Jesus said: **"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also."** That's another **reason I love** the church.

Talk point 5

**THE
ALPHA
COURSE**

5. THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Fifth **reason I love the** church is because Jesus loves the church! It's his bride—the church is the bride of Christ! Would you like to turn just over the page: Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 25. St. Paul says this:

Ephesians 5:25-27

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

And then he goes on to talk about the marriage relationship. But then in verse 32 he says this: **This is a profound mystery—but** —he says, 'It looked like I was talking about marriage; actually, he says—**but I'm talking about Christ and the church.**

Ephesians 5:32

This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

And this really sums up everything we've been looking at on the Alpha course: because at the heart of Christianity is love. The New Testament tries to use analogies of the closest possible relationship: parent/child. Here it says actually that perhaps the best analogy for this is the love between a husband and a wife: that intimate love. And that is the love that Jesus has for you.

Q

KEY QUOTE

St. Augustine said that *'God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.'*

And if you had been the only person in the world, Jesus would have died for you. That's how much he loves you. He laid down his life for the church.

I don't know about you, but I look at myself and I think I'm not as I really long to be. I long to be different. And Jesus died so that we could become the person that deep down we long to be. And the picture here is of being the bride of Christ.

P

You may use another example, which describes the same picture of the church as a bride, or you may quote Nicky's example here.

I love my job! I love being a vicar! It's an amazing job. But one of the things I love most is taking weddings. Those doors at the back are closed, and the bride arrives at 2:32—she wants to be late, but not too late! And the doors there are closed. And then I come and stand out here. And the bride is at the back; the pages, bridesmaids are all around her. The bridegroom's sitting here at the front. The bride has spent all day making herself look absolutely beautiful! The bridegroom's probably spent all day, but it doesn't look so obvious!

And we train the bridegrooms beforehand. We say: 'There are three options that you can have. You can either, as the doors open, you can turn round'—he's standing there and he can just turn round and welcome the bride as she comes down the aisle. 'Or you can stand to attention and wait until she's level. What you mustn't do is just kind of

	<p>look over your shoulder, because that looks very untidy, just kind of looking like that!' Nearly always they choose to turn round rather than stand to attention until she's level with them—I only had one army officer who decided he'd stand to attention! But the moment happens, and the music starts, the doors open, and the bride walks down the aisle. And at that moment I usually start crying, actually—even if I'm taking the wedding, sometimes I start crying! But it's such an amazing moment, because she walks down, a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.</p>
	<p>Revelation 21, verse 2:</p>
<p>Revelation 21:2</p>	<p>I saw the Holy City—this is a picture of the church—the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.</p>
	<p>So is it possible to be a Christian and not go to church? The answer is: we don't <u>go</u> to church—you <u>are</u> the church.</p>
<p>S KEY STORY</p>	<p>I think I've mentioned before: Jackie Pullinger runs a place in Hong Kong —she works particularly with heroin addicts and with prostitutes. And she told us once about a 72-year-old woman called Alfreda. And Alfreda had been a heroin addict for 60 years, and she'd been a prostitute for 60 years, or involved in the prostitution business for 60 years.</p> <p>But she was too old, obviously, to work, and she used to sit outside a brothel and just poke the sewers in this very run-down area with a stick to keep them moving freely. And she'd inject her back three times a day with heroin, because her legs and her arms, they'd been overused. She had no identity card, and as far as the Hong Kong government was concerned she didn't even exist.</p> <p>But a few years ago she gave her life to Christ, and she received forgiveness, and she began to change. And she went to live in one of</p>

Jackie's houses. And to begin with she was quite difficult, but then God started to heal her, and she saw that there were people who were worse off than her, and she began to try and help them. And she changed.

And then, Jackie told us, she met a man called Little Wa, who was aged 75, and they got married. And Jackie described her wedding as 'the wedding of the decade': because this former prostitute, heroin addict, walked down the aisle, in white, cleansed, forgiven, transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.

And that to me is a picture of the church. There's only one way into the church, and that's to say: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' And the moment we say that, God in his love says: 'You are part of my people. You're my family. You're my representative. You're my body on earth. You're a holy temple. My Spirit lives within you. You're my bride.'

May we pray.

PRAYER

Lord, we thank you for this amazing privilege of being part of the church of Jesus Christ. Thank you so much that you make us part of the people of God, that you accept us as your family, sons and daughters of God; that you allow us to be your body on earth so that people see Jesus through us. Thank you that you make your presence known, as we gather together, particularly. And thank you that you love us so much that you call us your bride. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

THE
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