

# The Wedding Planner

by Robbie Sagers

*Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19:6-9, ESV)*

In news that sent shockwaves throughout our celebrity-obsessed world, country music stars Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood recently became engaged to be married. Garth, best known for producing such hits as "The Thunder Rolls" and "Friends in Low Places," dropped to one knee with ring in hand to give to Trisha, best known for being romantically linked to Garth, in front of 7,000 screaming fans at the Legends in Bronze awards earlier this month. Stunned and attempting to hold back tears of joy, Yearwood said "yes" as the adoring crowd hooted and hollered in approval.

So there is a wedding to plan. And if Garth's performances in his country music concerts are any indication, the Brooks-Yearwood wedding ceremony promises to be quite a show. An invitation to this extravaganza should prove hard to come by.

The Scriptures tell us about another wedding that is being planned. From before the foundations of the earth God has been building toward a wedding ceremony of the eschatological type – the wedding between Christ and His Bride, the church. All those who have been saved in Christ are invited to be seated around the banquet table with the Lamb, enjoying the greatest of feasts.

So if what the Bible says will come to pass is going to come to pass (and it will), and God really is preparing a wedding between Christ and the church, the question must be asked: what exactly *is* the church? Strictly speaking, in the New Testament "the Greek word *ekklesia* refers to any assembly, local bodies of believers, or the universal body of all believers."<sup>1</sup> The church is both universal and local. The church is not a religious institution, it is not a physical location or a building, and it is certainly not antagonistic toward genuine faith and belief in Christ. Rather, the church is made up of those who have been bought "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (I Pet. 1:19; cf. Acts 20:28).

The church was born at the breathing out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39). In this way the church is the fruit of Christ's crucifixion, and each local church body is a little Kingdom outpost doing battle "against the cosmic powers over this present age" (Eph. 5:12). The church is never equated with the kingdom in Scripture; however, by its very nature Scripture suggests that it is an initial manifestation of the coming kingdom.

Throughout the New Testament, the church is given several different titles, among them the "new man" (Eph. 2:14-15), God's "household" (Heb. 3:6; I Pet. 4:17), and "a pillar and buttress of truth" (I

Tim. 3:15).<sup>2</sup> One of Paul's favorite designations for the church is the body of Christ, of which Jesus is the head (Eph. 5:22-33). But what exactly does it mean for the church to be the body of Christ? By way of analogy, when Garth Brooks proposed to Trisha Yearwood the words that came from his mouth were certainly *not* these: "Trisha, I love you, it's just... it's just that it's your *body* that I can't stand." In fact, no husband or boyfriend in his right mind would ever utter these words to his wife or girlfriend, and vice versa. And there is a reason for that: who we are is inextricably linked to our bodies, our metaphysical makeup. Our bodies are part of who we are.

In this same way, it is utter absurdity for someone to say, "I love Jesus; it's just... it's just that it's His *body* that I can't stand." And yet, those who profess no love for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ are communicating that, and there is a word for people who truly believe such things: lost.

Because Christ is the head of His body, the church (Col. 1:18), Jesus is able to say to Paul in Paul's miraculous conversion experience on the Damascus road: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4, emphasis added). Jesus is identifying himself with His bride, the church, whom Saul is persecuting.

Of the 115 times that *ekklesia* appears in the New Testament, at least 92 of those occurrences are in reference to a local body of believers, the local church. Every book of the New Testament is written for the instruction and edification of the church; even those letters written to individuals, like I and II Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, were immediately circulated amongst local bodies of believers. According to the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000):

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In addition to the local church, *ekklesia* may also refer to the church universal (Eph. 1:22, 3:10-21, 5:22-33), which refers to all Christians, without respect to locality or time. The church universal will not be complete until after the second coming of Christ, when there will be an assembly of the redeemed in one place (Heb. 12:22-24). As the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) states, "The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation." Because the church universal will not become a reality until after the second coming of Christ, the greatest emphasis in the New Testament is placed upon the idea of the local church congregation, for the local church is the visible operation of the church universal in a given time and place.

While God has gifted each member of the church for the purpose of edifying the entire body, the Bible clearly states that there are God-ordained roles and positions of leadership to be held within the local church. The officers of a New Testament church are pastors (synonymous with the Greek words for "overseers," "bishops," and "elders") and deacons (I Tim. 3:1-13). Scripture puts forth these roles to be fulfilled by men who are gifted by God to serve in such capacities and who are called out from the congregation to do so. The pastor, in particular, "is called to lead the congregation by teaching the truth of Scripture, by setting a godly example, and by shepherding the flock (Heb. 3:7)."<sup>3</sup> Peter also commissions the pastor to act in such a way:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock

of God that is under you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (I Pet. 5:1-4)

In a world that is saturated with idolatry (Rom. 1), the temptation to abuse the authority given the pastor by the local church is never far from him. However, it does not seem that submission to this temptation is as rampant as some believe. While the pastor is recognized as the shepherd of his particular flock, the ultimate decision-making of the church is given to the congregation under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture (I Cor. 5). And each member of the body is exhorted to use his/her gifts according to the grace given them, that the body may function properly (Rom. 12:4-8).

The passage from Ezekiel 34 has been used as justification to abolish established leadership roles within the church. That is not at all what this passage of Scripture is doing. Rather, it is a passage pointing to the coming of the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, who seeks and finds His own (Matt. 15:3-7). The shepherds of Israel have failed, but Christ alone will not fail in protecting those who are sheep in His flock (John 10:1-18). In addition, Ezekiel 34 affirms leadership roles in the church when it is viewed in light of John 21:15-19, when Jesus gives authority and leadership of the church to Peter and the rest of the apostles. Christ is head of the body, the church – he is the shepherd to His sheep. However, Ezekiel 34 (and the rest of the Bible) in absolutely no way nullifies leadership roles and distinctions within the church.

Therefore, the idea of a “church” as simply “a group of five or ten people who love the Lord, live geographically close together, spend a lot of time together and meet together – but not on a regular basis, who don’t have a particular leader except Christ, and who meet together to have very meaningful fellowship” has no Scriptural warrant or basis. While this “group” of friends can share in Christ-honoring worship and fellowship, it is not a New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ—because they are not in covenantal relationship with one another—and has no business claiming to be one.

Because the church is the body of Christ, church membership is only to be made up of regenerate believers, that is, only those who have confessed Jesus as Lord and who have evidenced faith in Christ (Heb. 10:19-25). All people are invited to attend worship services and the church is commanded to carry out the Great Commission to the ends of the earth; however, membership in the church is reserved for genuine believers. Church membership is a statement of commitment (both on behalf of the individual to the church body and the church body to the individual), accountability, and doctrinal fidelity. (For more on the importance of and rationale behind church membership, please see the article entitled “Church Membership” at [http://www.gracechurch.org/home/doclib.asp?ministry\\_id=1&dlyear=2004](http://www.gracechurch.org/home/doclib.asp?ministry_id=1&dlyear=2004).)

The church is to practice two ordinances: baptism (administered to those who have professed faith in Christ as both Savior and Lord – Acts 10:47-48) and the Lord’s Supper (administered to those who are of regenerate church membership). Baptism is an initiatory rite into the church as well as a testimony to one’s conversion, uniting the believer to Christ in both His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4), while those who partake in the Lord’s Supper remember and reflect on Christ’s death on their behalf and testify to their union with Him (I Cor. 11:23-34).

Churches are to cooperate with other churches for the work of the kingdom (Acts 15:1-35; II Cor. 8-

9; Phil. 1:15-18). Denominations exist as a show of unity, not of division, for a denomination is simply a collection of like-minded churches cooperating together for the cause of Christ. Even those non-denominational churches who partake in work with other non-denominational churches create non-denominational denominations.

So on their wedding day, camera bulbs will be flashing and video cameras will be rolling as Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood, and their wedding vows, will be the center of attention. It's a wedding that will certainly not fly low under the radar screen. But much more glorious will be the wedding feast to take place in the eschaton, when Christ, the Lamb, dines at the banquet table with all those who have been redeemed from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. Now that will be a wedding worth noting—and one to which all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are invited to attend.

Blessed indeed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

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<sup>1</sup>Russell D. Moore, "Church," in *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 295.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 297.

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