

# **Celebrating Fifty Years**

## **Week 1: Celebrating YHWH's Grace at Grace, Part 1**

### **Matthew 16:13-18**

**Dr. Matt Cassidy --- October 20, 2019**

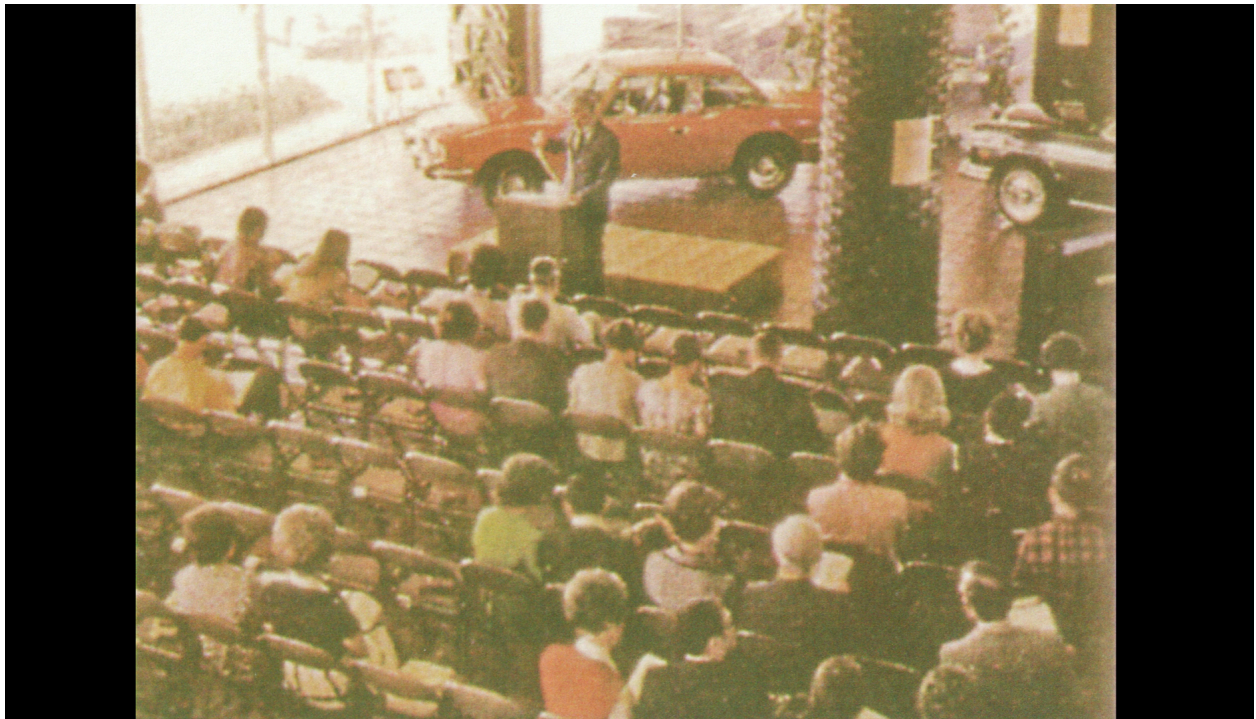
#### **Welcome to Church (video)**

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCd4cDC7cdU>

Welcome to church! Welcome to the revolution! Welcome to Grace Covenant Church. And Happy Birthday, Grace Covenant Church, where every believer's a minister. We're celebrating that this week. This is quite a Sunday for us. This week and next week we're going to celebrate fifty years of God's grace and mercy using this church to bring God's grace and mercy to the people around Austin and around the world. This is an amazing story that we have to share and to celebrate. I hope you guys are in that kind of mood.

I'm going to tell you our history since so many people don't know it. It all started in the fall of 1968. There were eighteen people meeting at Joe McIlhaney's house --- Dr. Joe McIlhaney. And they were studying the Book of Galatians together. They wanted a deeper sense of community and fellowship and they had a hunger to know the Word of God and to know God in a deeper way. They heard about a man named Dick Flaten who had applied for a job at First Evangelical Free Church and had been rejected for that because he was too young. They thought, "Well, let's bring him in and see if he can help us understand the Book of Galatians. They asked him to give a quick summary of the book. He was attending Dallas Seminary at the time. And the response was, "Wow." They asked Dick to come back the next spring and do a study of Romans chapters 6 through 8 and when he did, there were around thirty-five to forty people attending that Bible study. And towards the end of that study they said, "What if we built a church around expositional preaching and the value that every believer is a minister?" And Dick and Ann Flaten said, "We'd be interested in that. We could do that. Do you want to do that together?" And they did.

One of the original members of Grace at the original Bible study was a gentleman named Phil Mockford, and he had developed a survey of the Bible going through the covenants of the Bible, the covenants between God and man.” It starts with Adam and he did this fourteen- to sixteen-week series and they called it “Walk Thru the Bible.” They sold that name to Walk Thru the Bible later on. But some of the guys in the original, early group would go and teach this survey of the Bible in living rooms and sometimes they would fill cafeteriums in elementary schools around the city, because people wanted to know the big picture of God. It starts with the covenant with Adam and ends with the grace covenant. And that’s how we got our name --- Grace Covenant Church --- because of that Bible survey.



On September 14, 1969, Grace Covenant Church started to meet officially in the Mercedes-Benz dealership. Mercedes-Benz of Austin --- that’s the name of it now. It was called Continental Cars at the time. They would push cars out of the showroom and they would have a Bible study there and teach a church time. The children’s ministry, the nursery, was some of the sales guys’ offices, if you can imagine --- *I’m going to need to talk to the manager. It smells like a diaper in here.*

Well, it wasn't long before the college kids at the University of Texas found out about this church that meets in the showroom of a Mercedes-Benz dealership. And so, they started showing up and some days there were more college students than there were adults attending. And the church continued to grow. They bought houses all around that showroom and used that for Sunday School classes and the children's ministry as well. For eight and a half years Grace Covenant Church met at that dealership. It was a great time.

And then in April of 1978 they purchased this land out in the country, and now it's the center of Austin. When they sold the land for the parking lot so that Echelon could build their facilities on that, and I think the building that's further down, we kept the parking rights. They paid for the parking but we get to park there. We moved to the present location to expand the ministry of Grace Covenant Church to all of Austin and all the world, because missions was always a high value at Grace Covenant Church. We have given millions upon millions of dollars to missions and missionaries around the world. We currently have eighty-four missionaries around the world serving in various capacities. Eighteen of those eighty-four missionaries have served for more than forty years – long-term missions. Forty-five of the eighty-two came from this church. They were in our youth ministry or our college ministry or our adult ministry in some context. We've lost some of our greatest leaders, our elders, to mission events. Grace Covenant Church became a launchpad for ministries. That's how we lost one of our elders to Mission Possible, a fabulous ministry to the people in Austin that are either homeless or without a job or in a situation that needs specialty help. And Tim Pinson rose to that challenge and started Mission Possible over twenty-five years ago.

We had a Christian school here on campus for over twenty-five years. Did any of you guys or gals go to a thing called Community Bible Study in Austin? Grace Covenant Church started that ... kind of. Dick and Ann Flaten started that. After Dick left the pulpit he started Community Bible Study. It's been going on ever since 1987.

We've started churches around this city. We started Westlake Bible Church that became Austin Ridge. We started Hill Country Bible Church. We started a church in Round Rock, one in Georgetown, and one in Boerne, because Grace Covenant Church wanted to teach the world about the love of God and the power of forgiveness.

It was the Church to whom Jesus said "Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you unspeakable peace. I will give you joy. I will give you a passion, a

purpose in life that's worth living for. I will give you a hope that you would die for." That happens in the Church. The Church is Jesus' idea. This is Jesus' idea. This is His legacy. The Church is Jesus' family. He says that we get to belong to the Church, his brothers and sisters. The Church is God's presence on earth today. The Church is the place --- where else would you go? The Church is the place where you can go and learn about the majesty and mystery of the triune God. The Church is the place that spreads the word and teaches people about the value of human life, because every human life is made in the image of God Almighty. It is a place where we convince people that they can have forgiveness. It is the place of restoration of honor --- where that is restored. It is the hope that we have for justice; that there is a final end, and the end includes a wedding between the church and Jesus Christ the groom.

## **The Church**

Today I want to tell you about the Church and I want to tell you about this church and how this church has played a part in the big Church. The Church starts with the first conversation where it's ever mentioned. Jesus takes His disciples --- it's towards the end of His ministry, it's somewhat of an exam for them --- and He says, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

And the disciples respond, "Some say you're John the Baptist and others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

And then He said, "Yeah, but you guys --- who do you guys say that I am?" And Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This is Matthew chapter 16.

### **Matthew 16:17-18**

**And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.**

And Jesus responds in verse 17. "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'" And look at

this sentence. “And I tell you, you are Peter” – a synonym for “rock” --- “and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

That sentence, one scholar said, is the most discussed sentence in the most discussed paragraph in the four gospels --- right there. “And I tell you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

And the disciples at that time must have been thinking, *What? Church? Ecclesia? How do you even spell that?* This is a new word. This word has never been seen in this language in any literature --- not just the Bible, but any literature. Jesus is inventing it here. They’re thinking, *What is this thing, this church thing that you’re talking about?*

And no other religious leader has promoted something like that. *I’m going to start this new thing.* Moses never said, *I’m going to start this, I’m going to build my synagogue.* The Buddha didn’t say, *I’m going to build the temple.* Mohammed never said, *I’m going to build my mosque.* It is completely different.

Jesus says, *I’m going to build a community. I’m going to build a group, and it’s all-inclusive. It’s for the purpose of love and truth. And we’re not going to just tolerate --- we are going to embrace all things that are beautiful in the eyes of God. Every gender, every country, every nation, every ethnicity, every culture, every socioeconomic status --- that is the church. Everybody’s invited to this and we’re going to make family out of enemies, like Jews and Greeks, like slaves.* Jesus is going to say that because the power of the Spirit will be coming later to this church, we’re going to do things that no other institution can do. We’re going to give people the power to overcome. We’re not going to enrich ourselves; we’re going to sacrifice ourselves and our resources for the enrichment of other people. We’re going to bring the power of God’s love into every culture in every corner of the world. We’re going to bring justice to those who are oppressed; we’re going to bring honor to those who are ashamed.

The early church had the courage to defy Nero while they prayed for Nero. There hasn’t been anything like the Church. There never will be.

And if you can imagine what it must have been like back then, that Jesus --- you know, we’re in a start-up culture. Picture this --- the start-up of Jesus, 2,000 years ago, the original Shark Tank. And He shows up and He says, *Look ...* Because it’s not like this has been around. No one had even thought of something like this. And Jesus shows up and He says, *Okay, here’s the thing.* I mean, He’s a penniless carpenter, right? *Here’s my idea --- now just listen to me,*

*okay? You're going to love this. I'm going to start a movement that's going to last thousands and thousands of years. And it's going to launch more hospitals and research universities and more relief organizations. It's going to invent orphanages. And it's going to inspire more art and its applications than any other event in the history of humanity. It will invade every country, every culture. There will be billions of followers in thousands of years from now.*

*Okay, what's Your plan?*

*I'm going to love like no one has ever loved. And I'm going to live the life that you were designed to live. And I'm going to heal and I'm going to teach and I'm going to die. But I'll be raised again. I will conquer death.* And there it is. There's the power of the Church. The one who conquers death says, "Have you met my bride?"

How big is this church project? How important is it to Jesus? Oh, Jesus is all in on this. There isn't a plan B. Jesus is putting all His eggs in this one church basket and says, *This is how the Spirit will revolutionize and change the world --- the Church.* If you could possibly imagine what those disciples were thinking when Jesus might have gone into what His explanation of the Church is, their souls must have then exploded. And the idea of going back to a fish industry or collecting taxes or accumulating wealth or just security or so that it looks good --- some of those things could be means, but they could never be an end --- not after this conversation. Not after the proposal that Jesus is rolling out. It's the Church. Everything is about the Church. The Church is a unique thing in this lifetime. It is both the means and an end. It's an end in this life to serve her; it is a means to glorify God.

### **Who Does the Church Belong to?**

Three things I want you to look at --- I think they're profound. We just go over them if we're not careful. They are three truths that we can learn and live our lives around. Look at this sentence, verse 18: "Upon this church I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." That sentence --- according to that sentence --- who does the Church belong to? Jesus says, "I'm going to build MY church." Jesus doesn't say, "I'm going to build some churches, Peter's going to have a church for the deniers and Thomas is going to have a church for the doubters and Mary's going to have a church for type A, compulsive workers" --- no. Doesn't have that. It's Jesus' church. And we love Him and we learn about Him and we serve

Jesus and we point people to Jesus. Our goal and purpose is to become like Jesus in all of life. That's the way it is. That's the way the Church is.

At Grace it is a good thing. We've never been known as, *Oh, is that Dick Flaten's church? Oh, that's Max Anders' church? Oh, is that Jim Rose's church? Is it that other guy's church, Matt whatever?* Nah. It's always been Grace --- well, it was Grace Covenant for a while and then it was Grace360 --- that's our address, it's not our name. And then it's Grace. After we built this building, people said, "Did you change the name of the church to Grace?" Truth be told, "covenant" is an eight-letter word. And we put the sign on two sides. We saved \$15,000 at least by just calling it Grace. And now all the churches have nicknames and have kept it short, so we kind of led that --- for financial reasons. So, we're still technically Grace Covenant Church, but we just go by Grace. It's cheaper.

The Church belongs to Jesus Christ, and if you look at the ministry and the life of Jesus Christ, everyone's welcome. Everybody is invited. If you look at the ministry of Jesus Christ, He is scandalized by the value that anybody can play. He gets in trouble for it. Because He's a religious leader and He's a Jewish rabbi, but yet He will love and embrace and talk to and touch anyone. Jesus goes to Gentiles and to Jews and to Samaritans. He goes to lepers, He goes to the unclean, He goes to beggars. He talks to and dines with prostitutes, tax collectors, slaves --- anyone that will listen. He's famous for this. He's criticized for this.

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with the truths and you show deference to no one." He welcomes sinners. People were thinking, *We've got to stop this guy. He welcomes sinners. He eats with them.* That's the ministry of Jesus Christ. That's the ministry of His church.

The last conversation Jesus has before He dies is not with His mother, not with saints, but to a man next to Him hanging on a cross that admits that He has earned the right to die this terrible death --- by his own admission. And he says to Jesus, "Will you remember me?"

And Jesus' last conversation with a human being is, "Yeah. I'll remember you. You're in. You're with me."

Everybody's welcome. That's His style. That's the style of the groom, that's the style of the bride. He welcomes everyone. And you're welcome here at Grace. It's always been that way. And if you've come here today because you love Jesus, then welcome. If you've come here because someone loves Jesus and they drag you here against your will, you're welcome. If

you're here because you prayed last night, "Dear God, help the Longhorns! Help them now!" --- that works, too. You're welcome.

And here's why. Because there's more going on here than you know. You're here today because God wants you here. He wants you to hear that you are welcome at church, at Grace, at any church, any real church. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ and you love Him, everyone's welcome in your life. There are no outsiders, there's no culture, there's no gender, there's no race that is out of bounds for your desire to love them and enjoy that person. At Grace --- actually, in the whole church --- but at Grace, every believer is a minister. And our eyes are constantly opened for opportunities to build a relationship. Because people --- there are so many people because of God's Spirit leading them --- I'm not sure exactly how that works, but God's Spirit is leading them --- they are one conversation, one spiritual conversation from surrendering their life to Jesus Christ. They're one person from knowing Christ. They're one relationship, they're prayer --- someone coming to them and saying, "Would you mind if I prayed with you or for you?" That's all it takes. And so, every believer is a minister and at Grace, everyone is someone to be ministered to.

God has used Grace Covenant Church through the years, by His grace, by His mercy, because He owns us and because we've had an attitude that everyone's welcome.

### **Who Is Going to Build Jesus' Church?**

The second point, if you'll look at the passage, this single sentence, it says, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Who does the building? Who's going to build Jesus' church? "I will build my church." Jesus is the one building it. I know, it's pretty easy to look at history or just look at the churches around and you kind of think, *Well, if He's building the church ... hmm.* There are not a lot of healthy churches. I know --- I've been in a church for a long time. You don't need to tell me. We're messed up. You have no idea how crazy this church is, and that's kind of the point. If Jesus wasn't building the church, this place would have died. I can tell you five times, and it's only because we don't have time, but five times when this church should have just died --- died quick and ugly, or sometimes we voted that we could die slowly and painfully and we would just age out. And the last guy would do his own funeral and turn the lights out on the way out. We voted on that. I should know --- I've been here thirty years. I know where the



skeletons are buried. I buried most of them. I've got a shovel in my office across the street and it's handy, okay?

But the point is --- look at us --- three generations strong with a great future. It's all evidence that Jesus is building this church, because if He weren't, oh, we'd have torn it up a long time ago. We tried. We really tried. And so, the application in this in a lot of ways is that you can't come into church --- this church or any church --- you can't come into it and say, "I've got an agenda. Here's what I think Grace ought to be doing and where she ought to be going." No, that's not how it works. You ask the groom what you could do to serve the bride. You've got to be very careful. You must be careful when you talk about His bride. And so, you listen to the groom speak to you. That's how you lead a church. And you say, "Okay. Now I'm either going to try and lead in that or I'm going to try and follow in that. And if I can't lead or follow, I'm going to stay out of the way. That's for sure." That's how church leadership looks.

Jesus is always building His church. If you look at church history, you can see that when all things are dark and hopeless, He's working on building His church. In some recesses, in some secret, unseen place like the basement of some warehouse in China, or in a living room of a doctor in Austin, He builds His church. He cares.

### **How Powerful is Jesus' Church Going to Be?**

The third thing in this passage --- "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail" --- how powerful is this church of Jesus going to be? I would say exceptionally powerful. "The gates of Hades shall not prevail" --- it's said right there at the gates of Caesarea Philippi, so it's the opening of the gates of hell --- they're standing in front of it. And it's a figure of speech if nothing else, saying that the most powerful enemy of mankind --- death, evil --- the Church will defeat that. Listen, He's not saying that if evil finally breaks through its gates and is unleashed the Church is going to be able to find a way to hide like in a game of dodgeball, in a corner somewhere. That's not what He says. He says, "No, no, no, the power of the church will be unleashed and it will be on the march. And the gates of hell's defensive strategy will not prevail as we huff and puff and blow the gates of hell down." That's what He's

saying. The Church is on the march. And if we serve with love and mercy and grace and compassion and humility, we can serve God's cause for the Church in these ways.

We've done that here at Grace. In 1973, when abortion became legal, women in this church, using their minds and their money --- one of them was Dr. McElhaney's wife --- started Austin LifeCare. Because they wanted to bring love and compassion and healing to very difficult pregnancy issues. They wanted to get on top of that early on, because they knew there was a spiritual war going on with this subject.

Listen, if you look at the history of mankind, whenever one group of people says to another group of people, because of their age --- whether they're too young, old, or they're the wrong color and race --- when one group of people says to another group of people, "You are not human and you have no voice" --- there is a demon in that. There has to be. When you treat an image-bearer in the image of Jesus Christ, in the image of God, and you treat them like they're less human, they don't come up with that on their own. And so, someone has to speak up for these people that can't speak up with themselves. And the Church does that. This church has done that historically like no other church ... like nothing I've ever seen.

I remember one of the first experiences I had here. In some respects --- it was within a year of coming here. It was October 7, 1990 --- I remember it pretty well. We were participating in something that was not just city-wide with other churches, but nationally, a national campaign for a very quiet, polite protest about whether or not we could have a conversation about the sanctity of human life. And so, our church got behind that and we showed up to this, and about four times the size of this church showed up. I don't know where it came from. It was a beautiful experience. We just wanted to give a voice to those who couldn't speak for themselves.

And I remember that day vividly because it was a long, hard day for us. In some respects, the youth ministry was the working branch for that. I had to get up early, I taught the youth Sunday school class, and then we were out and passing out the various signs. It was October 7 and I swear it was over 95 degrees. Melinda was having a hard time keeping up. She was nine months pregnant or so. And I had to schlep her all up and down Lamar Boulevard. And so, we held those signs for several hours and then when I got home, I was really tired, but Melinda was holding a Bible study for our junior high girls. While she was in the living room, I was required to stay quiet in our bedroom. Finally, later on I got to sleep that night and then she wakes me up at 2:00 in the morning. She says, "Honey, my water broke. It's time."

And I said, “Well, I know, but these things take a long time, so maybe we could just get out of here around 7:00.”

And then she said, “It’s time!!”

And then we were at the hospital when I came out of my adrenaline rush. That’s why I remember October 7, 1990. It was a very hard day for me. I’m going to forgive her.

In 1992, some sex education curriculum people came in that were kind of inflicted on Austin Independent School District, and they had just failed in New York City because the material was too filthy for New York City. And so, they thought, *Well, if it’s too bad for them, it’s probably going to be just right for Austin.* And it was vile. And the school district said, “Let’s set up a committee, a task force, to evaluate the plan.” And it wasn’t a strategic plan by anyone here at Grace Covenant Church, I assure you. It wasn’t like Max Anders said, “Release the crackin’s.” Nothing really happened from the pulpit. Here’s what happened. We have a church full of people who believe that every believer is a minister and they saw ministry for the preservation of innocence out there that needed an answer, and so they responded. Three of the people on that committee were from Grace and they’d never met each other. And one of those three was a guy named Dr. Joe McIlhaney. There he is again.

The expert witness on the opposing side ended up coming to Christ through one of the people that was a friend of Grace Covenant Church. We had students in our high school ministry testify at the event. We had our female youth staff person that was at the University of Texas testify. Our college ministry at that time was run by some volunteer families. And two of the guys were in law school at the University of Texas at the time. And if you don’t think there was a spiritual war going on during this discussion about the innocence of children --- when they gave some various involvements (and they were very convincing --- they’re articulate and intelligent and they were winning), the attorney for Planned Parenthood went to them and said, “We’re going to do everything we can to assure you never work in this town or in this state.” Everyone who was part of that endeavor paid a price in one way or another --- every boy, every girl, every man, every woman. And you ask them why in the world do you not just keep your head down and ride this out? And they would say this: “Because Jesus said, 2,000 years ago, ‘Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’ And so, we’re not afraid. We’re going to do this.”

When the disciples heard this they must have thought, *Oh, man. I want in. I want to be a part of this. I want to be part of something so big. This is the biggest thing that could happen on this planet --- to be part of the church.*

## Application

Now it's our turn, right? That was then, this is now. This is our moment. If you're exploring church and you're exploring this church, good, keep going. Do due diligence on that.

But if this is your church, you need to get involved. Connect with people. Find a way to connect in one of our communities --- those are our Sunday school classes --- maybe the Bible studies that go on midweek. Just get connected. Find yourself a small group. Don't be a chronic visitor, is the point. It's the Church. This is the local expression of the universal bride of Jesus Christ. Serve in some way. Why wouldn't you serve in the Church? Is there a greater essence on this planet that you could serve? No, there's not. You should serve the Church. Use the gifts that God's given you in the context of straightening the dress of the bride of Jesus Christ. Give.

See what it means that you cannot out-give God. Just try Him. Live by faith in such a way that you can live within your means, but not only that. I would say to go way past that and say, *Look, I'm going to give to Your bride. What are You going to do about it?* And see what happens. Just see what happens when you honor the bride of Jesus Christ with your resources. There's no better place to give. There's no better place to serve. There's no better place to connect.

Stop and think about this. What Jesus said at Caesarea Philippi in front of these twelve men and the other followers that were with them --- we're doing that today, right here. That's what we do here. This isn't a meeting. This isn't a Lions' Club. This is the Church. This is where we connect, this is where we serve, this is where we give, this is where we love. This is our time, this is our day. This is it.

My first experience with this church --- I heard about it when I was at the university, when I graduated. All the cool kids went to Grace. I was going to mass. And I was still hoping to be a priest at the time, and then when that didn't work out, I thought, *You know what? I'm just going to go to seminary anyway.* Because it was in a good season of life where there was no easier time to learn the Bible and how to read it effectively and try to understand it.

But while I was going to seminary, hoping to come back to law school and maybe practice real estate law, I was captivated by this doctrine of the church. I was impressed with it in such a way that I thought, *I've got to make a run at this. Before I officially commit to this other path in life, I need to see if this is for me. Maybe I could serve her vocationally, not just as a volunteer.*

And so, on my Spring Break of 1985, my senior year, I drove to Austin and I met with Dick Flaten and John Babcock, the executive pastor, at a Mexican restaurant down the street. I'm still digesting it. It was a huge meal. And we just talked about the possibility of me coming here and starting a church for Grace Covenant Church. And these two guys said, "Sure. We'll help you shake the bushes." I remember that phrase. "Sure, we'll help you shake the bushes. Why not?"

And then after the lunch meeting I drove down to Westlake and met with the pastor there, Sid Buzzel. And I said, "Hey, I think I might be interested in working in the church and I was wondering if you guys would be interested in starting a church." And he said, "Sure, why not? Why wouldn't we start another church in Austin, Texas? It's a lot harder than you think."

And I said, "Oh, okay." It was. And the reason I went to Grace Covenant Church and the reason I went to Westlake Bible Church is because I wanted to be part of a church that God was using with His grace and His mercy to show grace and mercy to all the people that it could touch, not just in Austin or Texas, but in the world.

Happy Birthday, Grace Covenant Church. Let's pray.

*God, we are so grateful for Your everlasting mercy upon this church and how, in spite of us, in spite of lack of understanding or wisdom, or in spite of pride, arrogance, you have allowed us to maintain a sense of Your power in the things that we have done. We are grateful.*

*Lord, I'd ask that You would continue to bless her. I'd ask that You would help us be part of --- either through leading or following or just getting out of the way --- everything you've ever dreamt, when you think of Grace Covenant Church in Austin, Texas.*

*Lord, let us serve her in a way that presents her to use as without spot or wrinkle, washed by the Word and presented to You as a gift. Thank You, Lord Jesus. Thank You for this wonderful experience that we get to be part of. Help us seize this moment. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

