

Future Grace

Matthew 16:13-18

Dr. Matt Cassidy---- April 21, 2024

Well, good morning, Grace ... Grace Covenant Church, Grace 360, whatever you want to call this place. Apparently, we have several different names. But I'm saying greetings to all of those names, because this is a historic Sunday here at Grace Covenant Church. It's kind of like our birthday—our second birthday—our born-again birthday, as the members here at Grace are going to vote on changing our bylaws and our statement of beliefs. We've been working on this for a very long time, and it hasn't been done since 1978—a long time—thirty, forty, or fifty years. And we're starting over now.

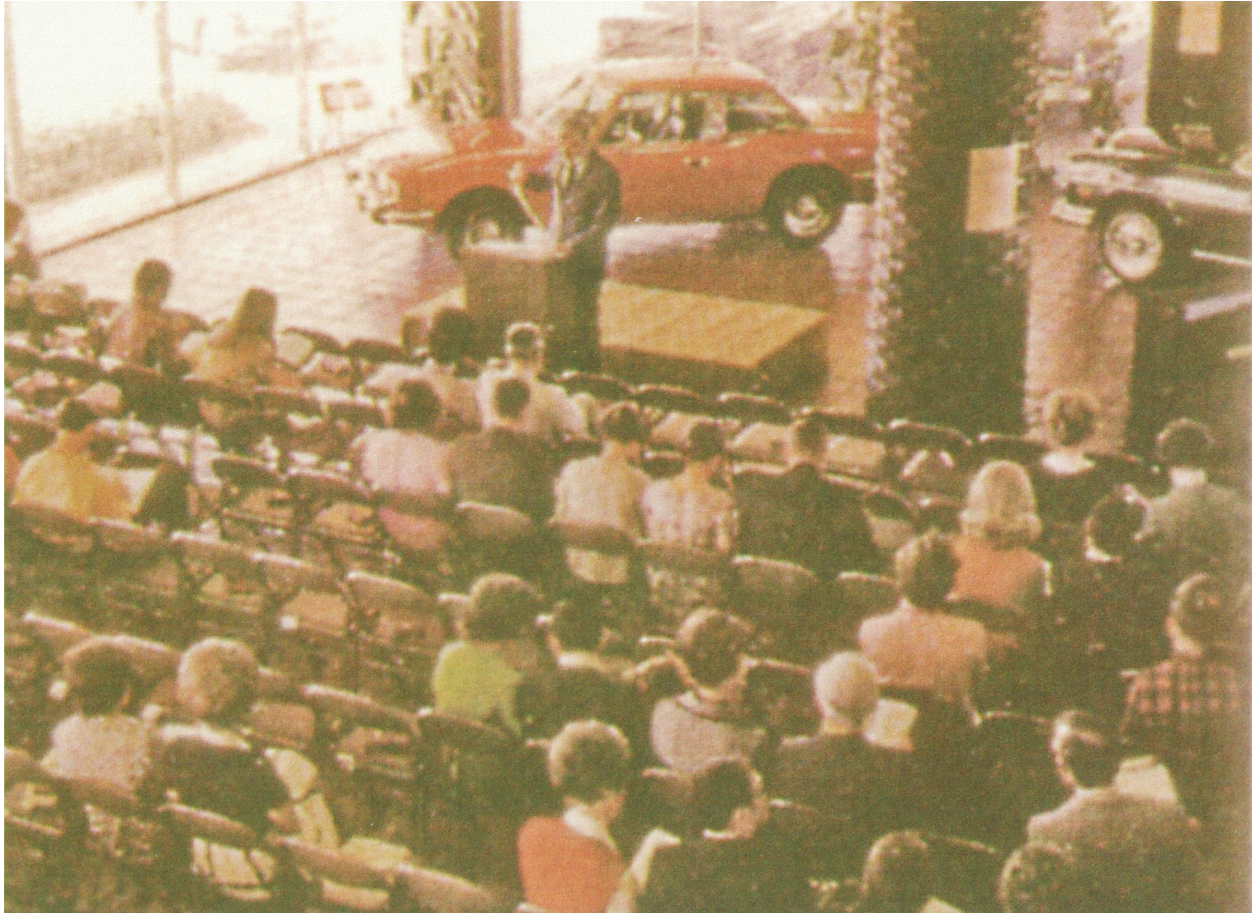
We're going to have communion together as well today. And if you're watching from home, you can get your elements, whatever that means in your household, so that you can join us in that communal event.

And today I'm going to talk a little bit about the future of Grace. The leadership has been working for about two years on the future of Grace and what that looks like as a church. But since it's our birthday, let me take you down memory lane. For those of you who don't know our history, once upon a time in the fall of 1968 about eighteen people gathered at Dr. Joe McIlhaney's house to study the Book of Galatians together. They were just hungry to learn the details of what the Bible says and for connection and fellowship with one another.

Just a few months later in the spring of 1969, the people gathered and said, "Let's start a church. Let's start a church that focuses on teaching the details of the Bible in an authoritative way."

One of the founding members was Phil Mockford, and he had a written a transcript, a study, of the covenants between God and man in the Bible. And that study, that survey, was called Walk Thru the Bible. And men and women at Grace would teach this to friends and neighbors either in living rooms, or sometimes in rented elementary school cafeteriums. They were having people learn about God and His big story in the covenants. And when you study the covenants—as you go through as they're being detailed—the last covenant is called the grace covenant. So, when they said, *Let's start a church*, they named it the Grace Covenant Church.

The first official meeting location for the general population was at a car dealership, Continental Cars, a Mercedes-Benz dealership. They'd move the cars off the showroom floor. Here's what it looked like. And they would have their teaching time together. It was known as "The Continental Chapel" to some people.



And then in April of 1978, it moved way out in the country where a couple of men used to hunt doves—right here on this corner. We were “out there.” And now it’s the home of many ministries and it is the center of Austin.

Grace has been involved in missions enthusiastically from that first year. We have over eighty missionaries around the world, and over half of those are home grown and have enjoyed growing up in this church. But we’ve given millions and millions of dollars to missionaries and mission organizations.

We’ve also been part of starting some city impact ministries like the original Crisis Pregnancy Center, which is called The Source now. It was started by a couple of ladies who were in leadership here at Grace Covenant Church. Mission Possible is a ministry in east Austin to

serve the disadvantaged. The Community Bible Study is a pretty big Bible study here in town. That was started by the founding senior pastor and his wife, Dick and Anne Flaten. We almost split the church and divided it in half when we started what is known now as Austin Ridge Bible Church south of the river. There was no bridge on Highway 360, so that was necessary at the time.

That's a little bit of our history. I want to tell you more about our future in a minute. Today, here's the theme. I want to talk and teach about the beauty and the uniqueness of the Church: the beauty and the uniqueness of the Church in general, and then I want us to look at the beauty and the uniqueness of this church in specific. It's the doctrine of ecclesiology. Oh, how I love this doctrine.

So, here's the napkin talk. This is the first time the Church is going to be mentioned in Bible history. This is Jesus writing it out, right in front of everyone. It takes place north of the Sea of Galilee in a place called Caesarea Philippi. And this place is a creepy, cultic worship center. It gives you the chills just being there. And Jesus' ministry with these men has been going on for almost a complete three years now, so He gives them this test in this context. He says, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

So, some of the men responded, "Well, some say John the Baptist. Others say you're Elijah. Still others say you might be Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

So, then Jesus says, "Yeah, but who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "Oh, You're the Messiah. You're the Son of the living God."

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. ¹⁸ 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 here it comes. "And then Jesus answered him and said, 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven has. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.'"

That verse 18, one scholar said, is the single-most talked about sentence in the single-most talked about paragraph in the Gospel of Matthew. “I tell you, Peter, upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

But when He said the words “my church”—“I will build my church”—the disciples quite possibly thought, *What does that mean? How do you spell “church”? Are You making up words, Jesus?*

This is the first time for this word. It’s a new word for a new creation. Because Jesus is now introducing for the first time an all-inclusive community like has never happened before. Truth and love, and love and truth ... all-inclusive ... every ethnic group, every language, every nation, every socioeconomic status ... people who have nothing in common will be under the umbrella of this mystical thing called the church. And the reason is because they do have one thing in common, and that’s everything. It is salvation through grace in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection.

Now, all of a sudden, enemies are family. Enemies like the enslaved versus the free are now brothers and sisters. Jew versus Gentile: brothers and sisters. It’s a community famous for forgiving one another, for bringing the knowledge of God to all of mankind, for bringing justice to the oppressed. There is nothing like this. There’s a new word because there were no old words. So, He brings in “church” to describe a group of people who would defy the Emperor Nero, and at the same time, pray for him. There’s not much like this; there’s nothing like this church.

Verse 18—it was Jesus’ idea. It was His legacy. The Church is Jesus’ family. It is the presence of God on planet Earth. It’s called the Church. It’s a mystery. It’s powerful, beautiful.

Let me give you three truths that we can see just from this simple sentence that we need to know and understand, and also submit to.

1. To Whom Does the Church Belong?

The first one is: who does the Church belong to? (These are not trick questions. They’re pretty simple.) Who does the Church belong to? Jesus says, “I will build my church.” The Church belongs to Jesus. It’s about Him. Jesus didn’t say, *Okay, go build some churches. You know what, you could make them in your image. Put your personality all over it. Peter, you could do the church for deniers. And Thomas, how about you start a church for doubters?* It’s

the Church. It's about Jesus. He owns it—"my church." And that's why the purpose of the Church is to love Jesus and to know more about Jesus and to follow Jesus.

And here, specifically at Grace, we're here to guide others and to become like Jesus in all of life, because it's all about Him. The Church belongs to Jesus, and in light of that, everyone is welcome. Everyone is welcome, just like in the ministry of Jesus. One of the signature characteristics of Jesus in His ministry is that He has no biases or prejudices. Everyone was welcome.

I mean, if you think of the contrast ... I just made a list. There are Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans. That means everyone. There are unclean, beggars, slaves. There were those from upper income levels, there were rich tax collectors and Roman soldiers. There were prostitutes and the demon-possessed. Everyone is welcome.

Jesus turns an insult into a compliment in this idea that everyone was welcome. Someone says to Jesus, about Him, "This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them." It's supposed to be an insult. *Hey, wait a minute ... oh, you know what? You're right. Okay, I do welcome sinners and I do eat with them ... yeah.* He puts His chest out and says, *That's the ministry of Jesus. That's the ministry of the Church.*

The last conversation Jesus has in the Book of Luke is comical, even, that Jesus is talking on the cross right before He dies, and He's not addressing at the very end maybe a couple of the last faithful followers, or even His family. He's talking to the man on the cross next to Him, that is admittedly dying of his capital punishment, deservedly so. He says, "I deserve to die this way." And he's looking up at Jesus, and he says, "Hey, Jesus, will you remember me?"

Jesus says, "You're mine. You're in."

I want to do whatever He did—talk to (maybe) murderers. Everybody's welcome.

So, here at Grace, if you love Jesus, you're going to fit right in here. If you come here because you've been drug here against your will by someone who loves Jesus, you're going to fit right in.

And more often now these days, it seems like people are brought here and they don't even know how they got here. You feel like God is calling you and you end up in our driveway, in our worship center, and it's because God is calling you here. We're seeing more and more of that, and also having dreams about knowing God. You're going to fit right in.

In summary, the Church belongs to Jesus, and everybody's welcome.

2. Who Is Going to Build Jesus' Church?

The second question that is easily answered in this sentence is: Who is going to build Jesus' church? Who's going to build Jesus' church?

Well, Jesus said, "And I will build my church." Jesus is going to build His church. He's the one who strengthens and fortifies it. He mixes the mortar. He stacks the stones. It's His church. He makes it strong.

He does that, in spite of us. If you look at a church and you see the underbelly (we all have ugly underbellies) ... The reason Jesus is building the Church is because if He doesn't, we'll ruin it. Jesus has saved us from ourselves on this location too many times to count. When I look at the side of our building and it says "Grace"—and I know it's easy to apply that to our personal lives—I see it sometimes as the way He has worked in this church. It is by God's grace that we're still in existence.

When I think of the song (and we'll sing it later) "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," sure, that can apply towards God's faithfulness to me. But I got to tell you, the Church collectively, we could all sing that too—"Great Is Thy Faithfulness." *You, God, are building this church.*

I want to show you behind the curtain a couple of things (in light of the Church universally, but also locally—it belongs to Him and He strengthens it and He builds it) how we make decisions at Grace Covenant Church—knowing that it's His church and He strengthens it.

When we make decisions about where we are and where we're going to go, we don't consult the vision of a man or a couple of people. And that's a style. And neither do we look at trends and see what's going on in local churches around the country.

What we do in the leadership is that we try to have a moment in the presence of God where we ask the question, "What does Jesus want to do with this church? It's His." We do what He tells us to do. And we even use a personal pronoun—"her." What do You want to do with her, Lord?

So, if you're having a hard time grasping what that means, it's a little like parenting. I think biblical parenting is not this. I don't think it's biblical to have a son or daughter and say, *Here are my dreams for your life. I'm going to make this happen for you.*

I think biblical parenting is saying, *This child isn't even mine. This child is on loan and is a gift from God. I need to find out how God made this boy, this girl. And now I need to surrender to God's dream for him or her and do whatever I have to do to make God's dream come true.*

So, even in the context of parenting, I'm following God's will for that person's life—God's dream. So, when we look at churches and leadership, we look at churches around the city like various children of God. And God has a dream for each one of those children, uniquely made for a unique purpose. And when we go before the Lord in leadership here, we say, "God, what do You want her to become? What do You want us to do so that Grace would live a courageous life? How does she need to change to be strong and courageous?" That's one of the ways we make decisions here. It's based on what God would have us do for His church. We serve His dream.

Another one is just the acknowledgment that every believer is a minister. At Grace, we say regularly, "I'm just the pastor, but you're the ministers." Yeah, you're the ministers. And so, we're not looking for ways for the pastors to run out ahead of everybody, and hopefully, you guys can enjoy the view and watch and spectate. But rather, we look at the fact that we are all priests, and we are all constantly on call. And where's the collective? Where are the ministers being led by God's Spirit?

So, those two factors are significant in all our decision making. And because of that, I hope that we're all expecting great things, miraculous things, for Grace Covenant Church.

Here's the first application, and probably the "big idea" application for our time together today. I would like us all to be praying a great big prayer for this church, a prayer like Paul prayed for the Ephesian church. He prayed for all churches, but this is what he prayed for the Ephesian church. Let's pray this for Grace, everyone. Pray this way for your church.

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

It says, "Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever." And everyone said, "Amen."

He says, “Pray abundantly for Grace.” No, He doesn’t. He says, “Pray abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine”; that God would use us, that He might receive glory from Grace; that we would continue to introduce people to Jesus Christ and the salvation that comes from Him alone. We’re seeing people get baptized here, people and families who are dedicated and mentored through the seasons of life. We can learn how to share our faith with people who God has brought into our lives. We can all be involved in this collective “becoming like Christ in all of life.” That’s what we’re going to do. We’d love for everyone to be praying that kind of prayer for your church.

3. How Powerful Is Jesus’s Church Going To Be?

The Church belongs to Jesus. Jesus is the one who builds that church. And the last question that’s answered here is, How powerful is Jesus’ church going to be? Well, extremely powerful; overwhelming, probably beyond our ability to comprehend. The power of the Church: and He says, “And the gates of hell will not prevail against her.” And He’s standing in front of the gates to hell, and it represents everything that a human should fear: death and the underworld. And Jesus does not say it’s a nuanced thing; people misunderstand. He does not say that if the forces of hell are unleashed, the gates of the Church will hold strong. That’s an entirely defensive posture. And He doesn’t say anything about defense. He says that if the Church is unleashed—if the Church is on the march, then the gates of hell will collapse. The Church is on the offensive. It’s taking over occupied territory once owned by the gates of Hades. And the Church is on the march. And honestly, nationally or internationally, even locally, I think there’s a rumbling underneath, and the power of the local church and even the communal church is going to be seen.

The world has been altered by the Church on the march. You can’t describe human history since the birth of the Church without including the influence of the Church. It’s been marching against the gates of hell. The Church all but invented and launched hospitals all over the world. Research academies at universities all over the world, relief organizations ... the Church helped end slavery in the modern era. The Church has inspired more beauty and art and architecture than any other institution. Think about it—all of Europe and even Eastern Europe—the churches, the paintings, the statues—all to honor God.

Think of the power of the Church as it has overpowered empires that were dedicated to the destruction of this ragtag group of misfits called the Church. And yet, the Church buries its pallbearers and thrives. The Church is on every continent, has billions of followers around the world and in history, and the Church is on the march. And when the Church is on the march, the gates of hell will not prevail.

The Church is where the Holy Spirit shows off His power. The Church is the place where the Holy Spirit shows off His power. It's where miracles happen.

And for playful reasons here, I'd say magic happens. And I mean real magic, like when you change lead into gold. It changes the essence of something. It's not fiction anymore, it's real.

My experience—maybe some of you have been here for a while—people's lives are changed in essence. They come in here and they are selfish takers, and they become selfless givers. That can't happen without a miracle, without magic. We've seen couples' marriages come in here and they've already filed for divorce. They've injured and sinned against each other in disgusting ways. They get involved in our marriage mentoring ministry, they get involved in ReEngage or Collective Marriage Ministry, and now their marriages are restored, and some of them are leading as marriage mentors. That's magic.

If you've been here for a while, it's fun to see little boys and girls, some of them crawling, and watch them develop into young men and young women. And we graduate them from here strong and courageous, looking for opportunities to love the Lord and serve Him in any way.

It's the power of grace in people's lives, and it's shown off in the Church. Magic stories like the frog that becomes a prince. And the princess that kisses the frog to make that happen? It's the bride of Jesus Christ—that princess. It's the Church, His Church.

Matthew 16:18

**And I tell you that on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.**

And so, here it is, verse 18, the sentence that changed history. "And I tell you that on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." I can't help but think that when those disciples heard that, knowing almost nothing about what it meant, they were still thinking, *Oh, I'm in on that. I do not want to miss this opportunity.*

The Future of Grace Covenant Church

Let me tell you about the opportunities at Grace when we talk about future Grace. Some of the things we're considering have to do with changing some things around, especially last year, where some changes were modified and what's going to happen in our immediate area. There will be the largest influx of new people since we bought this land when it was a hunting lease. Let me show you what's going to happen. Picture the corner up here where The Container Store is. And then follow Hwy 183 down to Burnet Road. I think there's a Chili's there, right? Now go up Burnet Road and turn this thing into a triangle, just south of the Domain, by Home Depot. That triangle is now going to be called the new downtown. And so, not to confuse it when downtown, the slang for it is uptown Austin. They've changed the zoning and the height restrictions for this triangle to 420 feet. That's a forty-story building. That's about twice as tall as anything over at the Domain. It's going to be saturated with multifamily and multi-use. This is the new downtown coming to our neighborhood. There are going to be forty thousand—not new people—but living units, in the near future. So, if there are just two people living in each one, that's eighty thousand new residents in our little triangle. We're downtown Grace Covenant. Eighty thousand—if you're thinking—here's the quote: “the largest transit-oriented master-planned community in Austin.”

Now if you're wondering ... there's going to be so much traffic on all the streets, don't worry. The city hasn't even considered any of that because we're Austin, Texas. *[Laughter from congregation]* Oh, it will work its way out. Yeah. We're going to rent out our parking lot.

Here's the point: we're getting new neighbors. And the new neighbors are coming and they're looking for meaning, and they're looking for purpose and identity that transcends their own existence. And we'll be here. Every believer at Grace is a minister. And we're looking for opportunities to love and to tell the truth. We'll be the messengers, because every believer is a minister. And people don't have to live with that kind of loneliness that's soul-crushing. They don't have to live in fear because of the power of the Spirit that can live in them. They don't have to live in addictive behaviors. They can overcome that by the power of the Spirit.

And that's why we at Grace need to pray for the future Grace ... far more abundantly than what we could ever ask or imagine, and that God would be glorified in His church at Grace. We need to pray that way so that, collectively, we can find the mind of God and try to determine

where He wants us to go next. *What do You want to do with this church? What is she going to become now that she's a downtown church?* I wonder what that will be like.

Let me give you some final applications about being involved in the Church and being involved in this church. One, get connected. Don't be a chronic visitor, a serial drive-by. Get involved, get connected with each other, because it's in the relationships that you become like Christ. It's face-to-face, it's holding hands; that's how you become like Christ in all of life. Get connected.

The second is to serve. Serve the Church of Jesus Christ, His wife, His bride-to-be. Did you know that the Spirit of God gives us each at least one special, supernatural gift so that you can serve the Church? What is your gift and how are you using it to serve the Church? You can take the test online. Get involved in that way. But you need to understand that the Church needs everyone. We're all interconnected and we're interdependent on each other. Everyone needs to play his or her part.

Connect, serve, and continue to give. Like I said last week, thank you again for the generous giving. It's regular generous giving that allows us to see the vision and the dreams of God come true for this, His church. And we can do things collectively when we're all giving together that we could never do individually.

Just as a summary, when you're part of a church, you're part of something so much bigger than any other institution or organism in all of creation. The sum is greater than the individual parts. Jesus is still building His church. It was His idea. He created it. He resources it. He causes it to go on these marches. And when you are connected, and when you're serving that church, and when you're giving generously to that church, you get to be part of something that is literally eternal is consequences.

And don't you think the King of Kings would remember if you did something for the glory of His bride? Don't you think Jesus is looking and seeing how you might be helping and serving His children? I'll bet He is. I'll bet He's seeing that, and I'll bet He remembers.

I don't have much of a memory, especially when it comes to people's names. I'm still trying to get those kids names who lived in my house. But let me tell you a story about what happens when you serve my family. It was twenty-five years ago. I was reminded of this because I went to the men's retreat, and twenty-five years ago or more I was the youth pastor here. And we were going on our winter retreat at Camp Buckner. I was there with all the youth, and

Melinda and our three young ones, who were six-, four-, and two-years old, were coming to the retreat late. So, she's driving at night out to Camp Buckner out in Burnet. And I know the corner, is the point. I can't forget this corner, because she got a flat tire in this giant land yacht called a Suburban, with those three kids in the car, at night, before cell phones. So, she's just there on the shoulder of Hwy 29 all by herself. And I don't know if she knows how to change a tire. It doesn't matter. She's not in the right weight class to change the tire on a Suburban. And so, she's just sitting there, wondering what to do in a dangerous location.

And then another person came who was from our church and saw her there and pulled over. And he was a big man, and he changed that tire. And I still remember. And I know his name, and I can't remember names. But I remember when somebody cared for my wife when she was afraid, and looked after my kids when they were in danger. And I can't get this out of my head. I still owe him a favor, a favor I can't repay.

Now don't you think for one minute that the memory of Jesus the Christ, the King of Kings, is a little better than my memory? You don't think He's going to remember what you do for His church when He greets you? You don't think He's going to reward you for the way you treated His bride and got involved with His cause to be part of something bigger and better than anything you could ever ask or imagine. Oh, I think He's going to reward you. He promised He would.

So, you'll never regret service to the Church. It always returns more than you give.

Until you get to see Jesus and He gets to thank you ... I don't do this much, but I want to talk to you as the senior pastor of this church and as one of the elders. My fellow ministers—every believer's a minister here—thank you for your service. Thank you so much for giving and for sometimes even sacrificing and caring for brothers and sisters and perfect strangers, maybe just saying hi to some on a row next to you. Thank you.

And for those elders, past, present, and the wives of the elders, thank you. It's a great service to serve as an elder of a church. There's only one thing in all the Bible that it says it's good to covet, and it's good to covet being an elder of the church. The Bible also says that you will receive a special crown for your leadership, because of the weight of the burden of serving as a shepherd amongst the flock.

For the pastors and the staff, thank you. It's not an easy job. And just being misunderstood alone is a difficult thing to live with. So, thank you. For the pastors and the

pastors' wives ... there it is. Sometimes it's so lonely. But you're not alone in this small community. Thanks. Sometimes serving the church means serving the family while your husband is off again. And God is watching. And the King is going to reward you and greet you as someone who has served His bride in a sacrificial way. Thank you.

Thank you for being part of a great church. It is a blessing to be here and now. And who knew that this church would someday be a downtown—uptown—Austin church, surrounded by one hundred thousand new people looking for a way to enjoy a relationship with the eternal God? Who knew? Oh, I think Jesus knew. And here we are.

Let's pray a prayer of thanksgiving that we get to live here and now in such a time as this and enjoy being part of a church like this.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful, oh so grateful, for how You've placed us here and now for this very moment; that we get to be a part of an eternal plan for Austin, Texas, and we're right in the heart of it. And Lord, I pray this prayer that Paul prayed, that You who has all the power, and You choose to work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine; Lord, I'd ask that You would do that, and that You'd be glorified in the Church, but that You'd be glorified in this church and in Christ Jesus, for all generations, forever and ever.

And all God's people said ... Amen.