

## What is Church?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Preached: 6/14/20 – Germantown; Series on the Church

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*Isaiah 26:3 –*

*People with their minds set on you,  
you keep completely whole,  
Steady on their feet,  
because they keep at it and don't quit.*

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

**Message:** What is Church?

A few weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, I referred to an article by Thom Ranier, entitled ***Your Church is Now a Blank Slate***. Ranier challenges Churches as they come out of the time of Pandemic and Quarantine to look at themselves and consider that they have a blank slate. Churches have an opportunity to draw a new picture of themselves for the future. Most Churches have not gathered for Sunday services for about 3 months. They suspended services in order to protect their members and slow down the spread of the Covid 19 virus. But in some states the numbers of those who are coming down with the disease or are being hospitalized have been declining. States have allowed and encouraged places of Worship to resume their services. Many Churches and Church members may be thinking only about just picking up where they left off. But is that a good idea? Maybe God has given us this moment to step back and do some self-examination, and reflection.

- ***Just what are we here for?***
- ***What is our purpose?***
- ***Is what we have been doing working?***

It may be that if we are honest we will realize that much of what we do is just because it is part of our tradition. This is what we have always done. **Sunday morning Worship. Sunday School. Gathering for a Mid-week gathering or Bible Study.** It may be that what we did was effective in earlier generations, but those practices are not necessarily accomplishing our mission any longer. So I want us to think about what we are here for as a Church, and if what we are doing is moving us in the right direction of fulfilling that mission. We have the chance for a “Do Over”.

I think a good place to start is to look at the vocabulary we use. The title of my sermon today is **What is Church?** That may sound like an odd way of saying it. You might want to stick the definite article into the title. But I just want us to think about the word **Church** itself. The word Church is used in some different ways. Sometimes we use the word Church to refer to a building. We call this building The Church or A Church. I wish we would find a different word to refer to the building. Some groups refer to the building as **The Meeting House, or Meeting Place. Bethel.** Using the word Church to refer to the building contributes to the misunderstanding of the word. But I'm willing to let that one slide. But I have more serious concerns when we use the word Church in a different way – to refer to what we do here on Sunday mornings. **Are we having Church this week? How was Church today?** I think using the word Church in that way really confuses the meaning of the Church. When we use the word in that way, we assume that the Church only exists when we are gathered with a group of people in a special place, singing a few songs, praying together, and listening to a sermon. Those are all good things, but is that Church? During the time of quarantine, many Churches chose to suspend their Sunday morning gatherings due to the Covid 19 virus. But the Church was not closed. That's what many politicians and some government leaders thought. But it wasn't true. Churches continued to exist. I've heard it said that God used the time of the Pandemic to Deploy the Church into the world. Many Churches had the opportunity to serve their communities in other ways than offering a Sunday morning gathering. Church is more than what we do here on Sunday mornings.

So since we have this opportunity to paint a new picture of who we are, what we are and what our purpose is, it would be helpful to take a look at what the Bible teaches us about the Church. When we understand what the Bible teaches us about the Church we have the opportunity to decide to stop doing some things we have

been doing, that are not working. We have the opportunity to add some things to what we are doing. We have the opportunity to completely change our appearance. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon the earliest believers, the Apostles had a blank slate. They were Jewish. In the Jewish religion, there were certain practices and customs that good Jewish people observed. But the disciples understood that they were part of something new. They didn't have to follow the traditions, practices and customs that they were used to following as Jews. As the Church develops in the book of Acts we see a lot more emphasis on preaching – telling people about Jesus. They were committed to living out the teachings of Jesus. There is more emphasis on being in community. They didn't just gather together once a week for a time of teaching and then go their separate ways for the rest of the week. They stayed connected and cared for each other. They responded to needs. They distributed food to those who were poor. Their lives began to look a whole lot different than what they had been before they met Jesus.

I think this first chapter of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians provides us with some helpful information that helps us understand what the Church became. As we engage in some self-examination as followers of Jesus, and as communities of faith, we will see how our lives and our Churches measure up to what the Church should look like. We will look at this chapter over the next several weeks to grow in our understanding of the Church, and what the ministry of the Church should look like. Our study today is actually going to be limited primarily to the first verse.

The letter is addressed to the ***Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***; The word that is translated "Church" literally means an **Assembly**. The word was applied to many public gatherings in the Roman world – both secular or religious gatherings. So the first thing that we learn about **Church** is that it refers to a **group of people**. It does not refer to a building or to specific activity that a group of people engaged in. When we say something like: ***Are we having Church this Sunday?*** That is not a correct use of the term. Paul specifies that Church is not a secular gathering. It is not a group of people who form a club, or who gather for fun. ***He specifies that the Church is related to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ.*** So Church is a gathering of people who have a **spiritual identity**. Further down in the passage (vs. 4) Paul identifies these people who make up this assembly are "***Brothers and sisters loved by God, that He has chosen.***" The assembly that is called the Church exists because of the work and activity of God Himself. Let us not miss the significance of these expressions. The people who make up this "Assembly" are people who are **Loved by God**, and who know they have been **Chosen by God**. As we think about our "spiritual identity" it is important to remember these two phrases. As a follower of Jesus you are no longer just an "Ordinary" person. You must understand that God has loved you and has come to this world in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem you, to buy you back from sin and make you His own. He has brought you into a personal, loving relationship with Himself. You must understand that God has worked to bring you into that relationship. He chose you!

One more thing to note about the word that is translated Church. The Greek word is **ekklesia**. It is derived from two words – EK means from or out of. KLESIA comes a word that means Called. So **the Church is made up of people who have come out of previous relationships or life situation who now have a special relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.** As we continue our study here in this chapter in upcoming weeks, we will understand what the life of a "Called Out" community looks like.

Now let's think about what that means. There are two applications. If you are someone who identifies yourself as belonging to a Church you need to understand that if you are serious about being a part of a Church, you are a part of something Spiritual. Your relationship with the Church is not for status, or social standing. Your relationship with the Church is not just for fun or fellowship with friends. Being a part of a Church means that you are a part of a community of people who are connected to God, and you are a part what God is doing in the world. You have been brought out from living a life without a connection to God to a life connected to God.

A second application of this first point is this: There are people who like to say they are "spiritual" or they want to have a relationship with God and even make a faith commitment to Jesus, but they don't want anything to do with the Church! "The Church is just a bunch of hypocrites." "The Church is too demanding of my time and priorities." I'll do my own thing. BUT it seems to me that a proper understand of what Paul is teaching here suggest that that is not possible. If you want to be connected to God and have faith in Jesus, you are drawn into a community of other people who are also connected to God.

As a follower of Jesus then you have been made a part of a special community of people an assembly of people, a sacred community, a loved community, a chosen community.

Prayer