

## It's a Beautiful Life: Living In, Living Out

### "Gathered"

Acts 2; Ephesians 1:15-23; 2:17-22

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*"Church: what is your reaction to the word? What has been your experience of the church? Was it important to your family and how did it inform and form your own spiritual journey?"*

*"So, when does a gathering become a church? Is it when we decide that our meetings will adopt a decidedly religious tone and we secure our 501C3 status? When do we become something more than just a bunch of people who happen to find themselves in one place at one time?"*

*"Are we actually the place of God's perceivable presence? Is the presence of God with us what distinguishes our lives or do they simply view us as people with a few different God-hobbies?"*

*"Can others find life in us? Are we making God accessible to others? Are we helping to remove barriers/obstacles and reconciling others to God?" (2 Corinthians 5)*

*"Are we interacting with others in ways which are welcoming? Are we helping to re-integrate people into the community for which they were designed?"*

*"Are others finding in us a place of love, healing and forgiveness?"*

*"Are we the place of intercession--- those who stand for God and the world at the place of its pain? Do we ever groan?" (Romans 8)*

*"What are some ways we might live into and embody such an understanding our reality as God's temple?"*

*"What is your response/reaction to the Leslie Newbigin quote at the end of the teaching? Does it reinforce or challenge your present understanding of church?"*

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**"Church"**. It's an evocative word. It calls out certain feelings and emotions in us. It's a *provocative* (negative) word. It usually 'pokes' something deeper in us that prompts a response. Many are "cynical" and "contentious". Many are "nostalgic". Many are indifferent.

We often get our ideas of church from our own past experiences and, increasingly, from our "inexperience". We deal with people, daily, who see no connection between church and their own "spiritual journey".

At times, people get their ideas of church from their own preferences and perceived needs. They take those needs and project them upon the church, but when the institution doesn't satisfy them, they seek out another gathering which might better "feed them".

I calculated that I have been alive for over **2800 Sundays**. Out of those, I have probably been in church for 2600. I have consumed mounds of communion wafers (a.k.a. packing peanuts), gallons of Welch's grape juice (some fermented, forbidden in our tradition), participated in thousands of toxin-laden "pot lucks" and have experienced any number of "Come to Jesus" moments which involved being ushered into a side-room of the church--- the "Hotel California", as I identified them--- because you could 'check out, but you could never \_\_\_\_\_'.

Church, for me, was never primarily about structures and programs and marketing strategies: that seemed to reduce us; make us "**less than**" we really were. Church was Johnny Cleghorn and Marla Culham and Verda Howard and Harold Wolfe. It wasn't some collective effort to marketed or commodified. It was people with whom we shared life. And, yes, frankly, at times, it was hard to discern if we were "united" or just "all tangled up". It was complicated. It was messy. It was beautiful.

The Bible reminds us, early and often, that the church is an all-too human institution: that there is no such thing as the "**golden era/age**" of the church.

Can you imagine how small the NT would be if we took out all the parts that dealt with our failure to get it? [take a spin through 1 Corinthians]

The word "**church**" appears over (100) times in the Scripture, but as a Greek translation of the word "ekklesia" (ek-klay-see'-ah)- "*a called-out gathering.*"

Sometimes it refers to citizens of a town called together for a public meeting; a "chance" gathering--- just a bunch of people who happen to find themselves in the same place at the same time; what we might identify as a 'mob scene'; a chaotic, unfocused crowd of people.

Interestingly, never does *ekklesia* refer to a building in which people gathered, for worship or for any other purpose. "**So, when does a gathering become a church?**"

### **Church is a "storied" gathering.**

God wanted to ensure that he "got on our calendar", so he provided for the people feasts and festivals which would intentionally gather them, remind them of their story and utilize them as a means of helping them to understand how the story continued to unfold.

It's like going to "homecoming". The Jews would get together and comment on each other's weight and the inordinate amount of hair loss that had been experienced by their friends. That's Pentecost!



**Acts 2: Pentecost.** It was an agricultural festival ("first-fruits" of the wheat harvest) but the Rabbis linked this festival to the giving of the Torah ("teaching"; "guide"; "law") on Mount Sinai some (50) days after they had left Egypt.

As the offerings were being presented (around 9:00 a.m., coinciding with the morning sacrifice), portions of the Bible would be read. According to tradition, those portions included **Exodus 19-20** (story of the display of God's presence at Sinai; Moses 'ascending' to receive the covenant from God) as well as **Ezekiel 1-2** (his vision of God and call to speak to the nations).

So, the disciples...

...are all gathered in *“one place”*, attending to and celebrating the presence of their God (in response to),

... experience some manifestation of *‘wind, fire and voices’* (Heb. for ‘thunder’ means ‘voices’),

... some 3,000 responded to the covenant and received life (whereas at Sinai, some 3,000 died due to their disobedience: Exodus 32:28).

... God takes his laws, and now, instead of writing them on stone tablets, he writes them *“on their hearts”*.

Ezekiel 36:24-28

*“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.”*

God’s desires, God’s dreams, God’s will for us are no longer simply imposed upon us from without, but are now compelling and empowering us from within. This has been God’s dream for us, all along.

**The point seems clear: those in whom the Spirit comes to live are God’s new temple; God’s intended place of dwelling--- the place where heaven and earth intersect.**

1 Corinthians 3:16 *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”*

**It means that whatever the people went to discover about God at the Temple, they should now find in us.**

**A gathering becomes a church when...**

... the lingering presence of Jesus (Holy Spirit) *“with”* and *“in”* us creates a space in our hearts where he can be at home, bringing us new inclinations and new urges to trust that his ways are right and good.

... people gather together for the express purpose of learning to love Jesus, to learn from Jesus and to live like Jesus so that God gets his rightful recognition (glory).

...it serves as the means by which God announces his restorative-mission to the entire created order; when our wholeness and unity as formerly broken and scattered people portrays to the world that the Gospel is true.

**The church is an imaginative and prophetic community which is immersed in the Story, empowered by the Spirit and devoted to embodying a Kingdom vision for life.**

The church is an intentional gathering of people with particular names, in particular places, in particular seasons of history, with particular struggles who determine to learn to function in a particular way: the Jesus way--- the way of love. They are distinguished most appropriately as the *“people of presence”*.

**“Church” is the robust and expansive word used to describe the entire gamut of relationships and interactions of a people who are identified by and centered in the Christ-story.**

None of us are capable of fully displaying the glory of God on our own. It takes a group of people (called out and called toward), functioning willingly and collectively, to express the glorious nature of who God is and what he is up to in the world.

We are the *“manifold wisdom of God”* (Ephesians 3:10) [‘manifold’- an intricately embroidered pattern in a tapestry]

Leslie Newbigin said...

*“... the only hermeneutic (method of interpretation) of the gospel is a congregation of men and women (boys and girls, I might add) who believe it and live by it. Jesus did not write a book, but formed a community.”*