

Title: What exactly is the church?  
Text: Hebrews 10.19-25/Ephesians 5.22-33  
Theme: same as title  
Series: Reset, Refocus and Renew (a series on the church) Fall 2020  
Prop Stmtnt: The church is a local gathering of identifiable Christians and is hugely important to God.

Pray

The Green Bay Packers football team finished the 1958 season 1-10-1. We know the feeling. However, at the end of that season, the Green Bay Packers hired a new coach named Vince Lombardi. As a child I watched a movie about this moment in the life of Vince Lombardi when he takes control of the team. In the dramatic re-enactment, the dejected team is sitting in the locker room, when the bespectacled coach in his trench coat and hat, stands before them and says, "*Gentlemen, this is a football.*" His point was, we are going to start with the basics, the fundamentals, the essentials of this game and not take anything for granted and not assume that we already know this.

That, I believe is essential for our church and for our lives. I think we need to stop and take a humble assessment of who we are and what we are about. The Lord has been very kind to our church. Some of that kindness is seen in our partnership with missionaries and the fruit of that in some hard places. Some of that kindness is also seen in some relationships that were DOA, but that now have an aroma of grace. At the same time, we are in a difficult season. We have had an unusual number of people in the church, and related to members of our church, die. We have some marriages in our church that have come apart. We have some people who have felt isolated and disconnected and have left. Of course, we live with this virus that we are still getting accustomed to, a very strange economy, regular weather events and a political setting that is bizarre. In our state, we're not always sure what is actually a law. Then there is all of the stuff going on in your life. Some people are very fearful. Some are seething. Some are frustrated...

And here we are. What can we do about this and what should we do about this? We are sitting every other pew, some in the gym, some outside and some watching from home. It's not how it should be, certainly. But, while these present circumstances are what we have to deal with, we have to deal with them, and not allow them to deal with us. Covid and masks are an inconvenience, but they do not define us and own us. Jesus does. The gospel does. But, how do we not allow present circumstances distort our view of who we are, what we have in Christ and what we have together as a body? There are always things that challenge our view of what is of ultimate value. It starts with going back to the basics. This morning I am beginning a 12-week series entitled: reset, refocus and renew. Let's not take anything for granted and not assume that that we already know this, but let's look at our lives and our church humbly and ask ourselves hard questions. This series on the church is my version of, "*this is a football.*" But, there is way more at stake than a game, a season or a franchise. This matters forever.

I am going to read the text twice. I am going to read it how we tend to hear it and then read it how we ought to hear it. Read Text:

But, the Bible does not begin with the book of Ephesians. The church is now the focal point of God's plan on this earth because it is the culmination of what God has been doing up until this point. So, quickly, let's review. What has God been doing up until Acts 2 when he birthed the church? In the beginning God's work of creation was not done with one person. It wasn't until he had made Eve that he said it was now very good. Of course, girls like to say, that he took a look at Adam and said, "I can do better." That is kind of funny, but not really the point. The point is, he made a people and he made a people (man and woman, husband and wife) who can make more people and are explicitly commanded to do so. Then over 1,000 years later, came the flood and God rescued several families. Then in Genesis 12, God called Abram to be the father of a nation (a people) through whom God would display his glory because God's plan has always been to display his glory through a people, that is a corporate body. Israel was comprised of 12 tribes and upwards of 2 million people who were bound together by the law that informed and directed how they were to live with one another. Not some of the terms of endearment that God used of Israel (his people under the Old Covenant); his son (Exodus 4.22); his spouse (Ezekiel 16.6-14); the apple of his eye (Deut 32.10); his vine (Isaiah 5.1-7 and Nahum 2.2) and his flock (Ezekiel 34.4). Many of these we recognize because later on, this is what God calls us. What made the garden of Eden so incredible? God was there!! God was there with Adam and Eve. What made Israel unique? God lived in their midst in the tabernacle? Israel was an assembly of the people of God and they were the people of God because God chose them, named them, lived with them and ordered their lives.

Obviously there are similarities between the OT people of God (Israel) and the church, but there are some clear distinctions. Israel was a nation. The church is international. Israel was an ethnicity; the church is to go to all ethnicities. The OT law was written on stone, the New Testament "law" is engraved on our hearts. But what is foundational to understanding what a church is, is the very word that God uses in his word for us. It is the word, church. (ekkllesia)

This is hugely important. God created the church. God defines the church. We do not define the church. We do not have the freedom to make the church what is culturally convenient or personally strategic. We cannot improve on God. So, let's humbly submit ourselves to this. The church is what God says it is and therefore should operate the way God says it should.

## 1. **The church is the gathering of God's people.**

### A. **It means gathering.**

The NT word that is translated "church" is a word that refers to assemblies or gatherings. This word (ekkllesia) appears 114 times in the NT.

Matthew –	3x
Acts –	20x
Paul's epistles -	66x
Hebrews –	1x
James –	1x
3 John -	3x
Revelation –	20x

Luke uses the word 3 times in the book of Acts to describe a gathering of people for a riot and he was not describing a member's meeting, thank goodness. In those cases it was not describing God's people and therefore in those instances the word was translated as assembly, not church. One other time in Acts and one time in Hebrews the word is used historically to describe the assembly of God's people in the OT. But, other than those 5 examples, the word is used 109 times to describe the gathering of Christians as the church. It means gathering, but not just any gathering.

### **B. It means the gathering of God's people.**

The church is not just any gathering, but the gathering of God's people. What makes us the church? It is not just that we gather, it is that we have been purchased by Jesus. Acts 20.28 says that Jesus obtained us with his own blood. Jesus is the founder of the church and the foundation of the church. He starts it and he grounds it. He owns it because he bought it and he leads it because he is the head. In Matthew 16.18 he calls the church, "my church." Adam named Eve because Eve was his bride. Christ, likewise names the church because we are his bride. Most of the time the word is used to refer to a specific, identifiable, defined group of people who lived in and gathered at specific places. This happens in Jerusalem, Antioch, Derbe, Lystra and Ephesus.

#### **2. What are the implications?**

Let's put this together, tease it out and apply it.

First of all, the church is not just any gathering, it is the gathering of God's people. It is the gathering of a specific, identifiable, defined group of people who were identified as the church in a specific place because they professed faith in Christ and proclaimed this by being baptized by immersion in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They were known and they were numbered. In 4 weeks, I plan to address this in more detail and I will argue from the text that it really is necessary to be a member of a local church and to live faithfully as a member. The NT has no category for people who profess faith in Christ who are not then baptized and members of a local church that gathers together for worship, instruction and fellowship by preaching the word, singing the word, praying the word, hearing the word, and reverberating the word. And we do not do people any favors by pretending otherwise. If you do not gather with and identify yourself as a member of a true church, there is no reason for someone to believe your claim of being a Christian. Why would I say that? Because a Christian is someone who has become a Christian by trusting in Christ alone because Christ alone paid for our sins. That means they have turned away from trusting in their self. They trust in Jesus and now, they follow Jesus. To follow Jesus is to do what he says, not what you say. He died for the church. He established the church as the greenhouse to raise his kids. The church is his people and most of the NT was written to churches because every Christian is expected to be part of one. Again, we must let Jesus tell us what the church is and what Christians look like. It is not up to us to redefine the church according to what suits us.

Secondly, we must prioritize the gathering which means gathering together at one time in one place. This is why we do not do multiple services or multiple sites. We gather at once. If we do

not gather, we are not a church. Now, I want to stop and address some obvious points. Under normal circumstances there are valid reasons why some cannot gather. My mom is a member of this church, but she cannot physically come. We understand that and to the degree that we can, we go to her (when we could) and care for her and others like her. Covid is a real and present danger and it is a real and present danger to those of you who have pre-existing conditions or who are in contact with people who have pre-existing conditions. So, we recognize that there are circumstances that preclude someone from being able to gather, or even gather as we want to. Some of you are in the gym and outside. You have gathered at the same time and as close as you can in the same place. It's a bit of a pain at the moment and we want this moment to be as brief as possible. This is not the norm and we must recognize that as soon as we are able to gather, that you should gather. But why? After all, this on-line thingy is kind of convenient. I can sleep in. I can drink my coffee. I can stay in my pajamas or even listen in while up north. That is not the case for many of you, and I do not want that to be the case for any of you.

What is the point of gathering? Yes, we need to hear the Word together, sing together, and pray together, so that! SO THAT, we can encourage one another. Our call to worship this morning was from Hebrews 10, where the author of Hebrews points out how the death of Christ creates the NT people of God who are to give careful thought to how we can stir up one another to love and good works. The antithesis of that is neglecting to meet together (as is the habit of some). And the author of Hebrews is saying, don't do that. Instead, gather in order to encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Colossians 3:16)

Hebrews 10:24-25. You cannot be encouraged like you need to be if you do not gather with the believers and you cannot encourage others if you do not gather with the believers. The Day of the Lord is drawing near. Christ is returning. He is coming back and he will take back that which belongs to him. I want you to rejoice on that day. Those of you who are struggling with persecution right now and feeling like giving up and giving in, I want you to think of that Day when Christ returns because on that day, your faithfulness on this day will be worth it. Those of you are struggling with sins of lust, and you are tired of the fight and you just want to give up and give in I want you to think of the Day when Christ returns because on that day, your faithfulness on this day will be worth it. Those of you who are struggling with where is God in your cancer and you are feeling weary and weighted and are tired of the fight because your body is worn out, I want you to think of the Day when Christ returns because on that day, your faithfulness on this day will be worth it. Those of you who are caring for a special needs child, or a parent or spouse who is facing end of life issues and you are tired of the fight, but see no relief in sight, I want you to think of the Day when Christ returns because on that day, your faithfulness on this day will be worth it. I want you to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. I want to remind you of the joy that awaits. But I cannot do that for every one of you like you can do that for one another and for me. If we are not gathering together and singing to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and praying for one another, encouraging one another, and admonishing one another, we will look way too much at this day instead of that Day.

But, I not only want to reset your definition and view of the church, I want to reset your view of what makes church good. If someone were to ask you, how was church today? How do you typically answer that? What are the markers that make it good, ok, or not so good? Think about

that right now. If someone said to you this morning before you leave, “so, how was church today?” What would you say and why?

My guess is that most of us are tempted to answer that question based on how much things happened that either made much of us, benefited us or agreed with and affirmed us. Let’s say, we sang your top 5 favorite songs, and you cried through each one. Let’s say that I preached a sermon in which, I seriously just knocked it out of the park, and did so in less than 35 minutes. Let’s even say that the temperature was good and that someone commented on how nice you look. And to top it off, your kids did not have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the service. Would you not be tempted to say, “hey church was pretty good today.” The worship was awesome.

Here is what I want you to take home and then bring back on steroids. Church is not good until you have encouraged someone else. You can encourage people indirectly by gathering, singing, smiling, greeting, and worshiping with your whole heart. But the church is a local group of people who are committed to Christ and to each other. You have a mission, if you are member of this church to encourage others and the question you need to ask yourself is, who have I encouraged to day and how? The Day is coming, we need to encourage one another and God has called us to gather together so that we will do that.