

Community Church of Issaquah
October 30, 2022
Being the Church God Wants
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Have you ever considered how confusing the very word “church” is? If I were to ask each of you to write a short definition of that word, what would you write? Some would say “a building that houses believers,” some would say “the people who make up a congregation,” and perhaps some would say “all the people who believe in Jesus Christ.” Oddly, all of those are true.

Unless you have ever lived in the South some years ago, you would not be familiar with the unique way people engage in conversation when first meeting. Of course, the first question asked would be “What’s your name?” And more often than not, the second question would be, “Where do you go to church?” The answer to that query would usually be to identify a location or to specify a particular building. My response when asked that as a teenager was to proudly say, “Oh, I go to Parkway Baptist Church on Capitol Street.”

It's normal for all of us at some point in time to consider the church as a location, a building. If we were to say, “I’m going to church,” we would be on our way to a building or a facility. Growing up, nothing brought me more joy than going to church and being with my peers, or sitting in the balcony of the church and whispering or passing notes that were written on the morning bulleting, or hurrying to the

fellowship hall to participate in Wednesday Night Family Dinners, or playing in the church gymnasium. Every activity centered on the buildings, the facility.

Buildings do not fully define the church, however. Today's scripture passage tells about a small group of people in the Greek town of Thessalonica, a key city on the trade route from Italy. Located in the northern corner of the Aegean Sea, it was a vital part of the link between the Roman world and other parts of the Middle East. It's not hard to understand how the message of Christ had traveled that far into the unknown world and had found a band of believers. It was how the message of Jesus travelled from Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

This small group that Paul refers to as the "church of the Thessalonians" were somewhat unique. Here in the midst of a world that worshipped the 12 Greek gods and goddesses, we find a band of rebels who were saying that there is only one God and Jesus was God's chosen one. It's not hard to understand why these people were often ridiculed or persecuted or even killed for taking this stand against the long-established religion based on the tradition of a system of gods and goddesses who represented every aspect of their lives.

Thinking about the 12 Greek gods and goddesses, it is interesting to think solely about the number 12. Does this sound familiar? Jesus spoke in the temple at the age of 12. Jacob, Abraham's son with Sara had 12 princes or tribes from his heritage. Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar also had 12 princes from his heritage. Jesus chose

12 disciples. I could go on, but there are more than 187 references in the Bible to the number 12. The significance is the similarity of these Greek gods and the life and teachings of Christ. For us, it's more like this: 12 months in a year, 12 signs of the zodiac, and such.

From Zeus, the God of the Sky to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love to Dionysus, the God of Wine and the others who made up the 12, life in this part of the known world centered on this strong commitment to being observant followers. It was this uncompromising loyalty that led to the difficult life for anyone who did not conform and did not believe exactly as they did. To abandon one's dependence on the structure of religion was not acceptable in any way. Therefore, those who did move to a new faith in Christ were penalized. Some lost their families, some lost their profession and income, and some lost their lives.

How Paul became aware of this small group of believers is not known, nor is it known exactly what the message Timothy delivered to them was. Was it because they were getting tired of well-doing, was it because they were being harassed and persecuted, or was it they weren't sure they were doing the right thing. These are somewhat a mystery. What we do know is that Paul did indeed write two specific epistles or letters to this fellowship of believers. I personally love the way Paul begins the first of these letters with these words, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the

presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you.”

Those words of affirmation indicate that this was a most devoted and faithful “church.” We must keep in mind, however, that the church of Thessalonica was not a building. As was the custom at this time and even in the time of Christ, people met in homes. There were no temples or cathedrals or even small sanctuaries. That came much later for Christians. The Greeks, however, had temples to honor their deities, some of those still standing today. Over the centuries, Christians of many denominations have built incredible structures or churches, said to honor God.

In my travels, I’ve been awe struck at both the outside and the incredible inside of so many of these buildings. I often asked myself, “Why did they spend so much money doing this when they could have fed the poor or taken the homeless off the streets?” The time and money it must have taken to build Notre Dame or St. Peter’s, plus put all that art work there. Not to mention all the gold that is splashed all over the place. All of this so God would have a first class home? It’s always been hard for me to swallow. I once asked a guard at one cathedral this question: “Do you think Jesus would feel at home here?” He scowled and walked away without answering.

Our attachment to a facility, or our church home is both emotional and understandable. So many precious memories happen inside that structure, and it is those memories that made that our church home. When I came

to Seattle to become the pastor of a small congregation in the Ballard neighborhood, the building which had belonged to a German speaking congregation prior was in much need of some attention. The small number of members and I worked long and hard to “gussy” it up, and even paid off the mortgage in the first 5 years I was there. I have so many incredible memories of my eleven-year life there at Grace Gospel Chapel.

After I left that pastorate, the church faced some significant challenges and over the years, the congregation diminished to only a handful of members. Eventually, it became necessary to sell the building and close the church. Today, there are four condos that occupy the property where my church used to be. It is difficult for me to drive by that lot and not miss my history there. Like CCI, change happens and we must work hard to continue to do what we know to be God’s will and work. But that is the structure or the facility or the church building that is no longer where we gather to worship. That is not the end of the church.

The reality is that the church or the body of believers continues to be a very real part of our lives. I still maintain contact with many of my former parishioners even though I left that pastorate in 1996. They remain my church family though some have moved to other states, some have died, and some have found new church homes that fulfill their need for being a part of a faith family. We remain connected.

When I began dialogue with CCI about the possibility of being an interim minister, the one thing that impressed me

the most is how you all have continued your work as a church...not a building, but a people. This week the Music Ministry team sang to me as they have done to so many others. Your connection to Haiti and the work you have done there. Your adoption of a family at Christmas. Your continued support of the mission and ministries of the ABC. Your commitment to a continued Adult Forum of Bible Study. Your diligent work to do all the necessary work required for weekly worship services. These and so much more are what God wants a church to be. And whether it's inside a building or not, it is God's holy work in the world, and you all should be enormously proud of what you have done and are doing here at CCI.

Now what about this church in Thessalonica? Paul felt it necessary to write a second letter to them regarding some confusion that arose after Paul's first visit. He had later sent Timothy to minister to them and encourage them. The message Timothy left with them was misinterpreted, and the faithful little church there believed that what Timothy had told them was that the second coming of Christ was happening very soon. Paul's second letter to this group came quickly after the first and Paul was most anxious to clear things up. In doing so, he wanted this group of believers to know just how special they were in this new spiritual awakening period.

Let me repeat verses 11 and 12 of the first chapter of this second letter to the Thessalonians. It pretty well sums up how God viewed this little band of believers, and I would say, it pretty well sums up how God views CCI.

“We constantly pray for you that our God may count you worthy of his calling and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this is so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

CCI is a living example of being the church God wants. You are following the example of the faithful, like the church in Thessalonica. Let us all be committed to continuing what has been started and to finding new ways of reaching out into our world with, as Paul says, “every act prompted by your faith.” My strong belief is that the Lord has much more work for all of us to do so that the name of Christ will be glorified and we can make a difference in our world. There has never been a time when the world needs us more than now.

Let me close by thanking you for allowing me to be a part of your “church” and your ministry. It sure beats the heck out of being retired.

May God us all as we move ahead. Amen