

You don't have to be here. At least, there is no pressure for you to get up on a Sunday morning and show up at church. There is no financial pressure, no political pressure, no social pressure for you to be here. And that hasn't always been the case.

The story is told of the famous business guru, Peter Drucker. He left Australia and moved to the US, I believe in the mid-1900s. He went to his local bank to get a loan. And the banker asked for his church membership information. And Drucker responded, "What difference does that make?" The banker responded, "I don't trust anyone who isn't a member of a church. Why would it be any different for you?" There used to be financial pressure, even financial advantages to being an active member of a church.

The same with politics. I remember watching a documentary on the campaign of President John F. Kennedy. And one of the biggest concerns for his campaign was his church affiliation. He was a Catholic. And the US was used to having presidents from Protestant churches. There used to be political pressure, even political advantages to being an active member of a church.

The same with relationships. The church used to be the center of social engagement. If you wanted to be well connected in the community and establish friendships you had to be a member of a church. The church was where your community was. The church was where you came together with your family and friends. There was social pressure, even social advantages to being an active member of a church.

But the world has changed. Today, if you decided to be an active member of a church, there could actually be more financial, political, and social risk, instead of reward. If you are an active church-goer some companies might pass you by. They might see your way of life as a risk to their business.

I know of at least one politician that left her Bible-believing church because it was too risky for her campaign.

And now, if you are a member of a church, you might miss out on quite a bit of community engagement. Your kids might miss out on some sports opportunities. You might miss out on an important community event.

So if going to church has so much risk and there seems to be very little reward, why go to church at all? That's a good question. And there are many who have come to believe that being a member of a church is just not worth it.

A few months ago I went to a conference where a leader in our church body gave us some startling news. Victory of the Lamb is connected with a larger network of churches called the WELS. This church leader showed us some startling statistics. He said that in the mid-1990s our church body had about 400,000 members. But since then about 8,000 people a year have been leaving our church. He said that even the most conservative projections show that our church body, the WELS, might not exist in 2065. And it's not only our network of churches. Church denominations all over a country are emptying out. So what about us? Do we have to follow this trajectory? Do we have to shrink and die as well?

I don't think so. But if we are going to keep moving forward, we have to CHANGE our view of the church. This sermon series is called CHANGED. And the first thing we need to change is our view of the church. And to do that we need to answer a fundamental question:

What is the Church?

And to answer that question we will look at Acts 2, the day of Pentecost. Before I read Acts 2, let me explain a little about the book of Acts and Pentecost. The Bible is not just one book. It is a library of 66 books. There are four books that describe the life of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then, Luke wrote a second volume called Acts of the Apostles. This book describes what happened after Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven, how the Christian movement reach to the ends of the earth.

That movement started on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish harvest festival. It was one of three festivals that God wanted the Jews to come back to Jerusalem to celebrate. So on this day, Jews from every nation would have been in Jerusalem to celebrate their harvest festival.

Now I'll read from Acts 2 so that we can answer our question, "What is the Church"?

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be **tongues of fire** that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to **speak in other tongues** as the Spirit enabled them.

This is 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. 10 days after his ascension. And his followers are meeting in a room. Something very strange happens, flames or "tongues" of fire come into the room, separate and rest on them. This is a strange event. If that were to happen right now in a few of you, I would be running to grab the fire extinguisher and spraying you down. Why did this happen? What does this mean? What is God trying to teach us with this visual?

Then Jesus' followers start to speak in other languages. Again, what's up with that? This seemed strange to the people who saw it. In fact, the people who gathered around Jesus' followers wondered if they were drunk. Can you blame them?

Now for many years, I basically skipped over these strange details, especially the flames of fire. I just didn't know what to do with it. But more recently, I've come to see that when you find a strange event in the Bible, it's not by accident. You need to keep reading the Bible to find out it's meaning.

So let's do that. Let's go back in Israel's history and see where fire shows up and see if we can begin to understand this strange event.

If you would read the 2nd book of the Bible, you learn about God's great mission to rescue Israel from Egyptian slavery. It begins by Moses leading God's people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to Mount Sinai. Moses goes up on this mountain and God gives him blue prints for a church called a Tabernacle. This is not easy reading. But it is important.

God tells Moses to build this church, this Tabernacle. And after it is built, guess what? There is this fire that comes down and rests on the Tabernacle. God was making a clear statement. If you want to be with me, if you want to get to know me, you need to go to this church, this Tabernacle. This is where my presences is revealed.

So that's what God's people did. They kept this Tabernacle in the center of their camp as they moved through the wilderness. This is where the people could meet with God.

Then about 500 years later, the Israelites are in the land of Palestine. The third king of Israel, Solomon, builds a church, just like Moses' Tabernacle. But this time it's not just a tent, it's a temple. In fact, if you go to Jerusalem today, you can walk on the foundation of Solomon's Temple.

Solomon builds this Temple and when he is finished, guess what? The fire of God comes and rests on the Temple. And God was saying once again, "If you want to meet with me, you need to come to this church, this Temple." This is where God would meet with his people and connect with them.

So that's what God's people would do. Even after they had been exiled to other nations, they did their best to come back to Jerusalem to worship God and to meet with him because his fire had given them a clear message. This is where you go to meet with God.

But then after Jesus' ascension, his followers were meeting in some type of room. And the fire of God, once again came down from heaven, but this time it didn't come down on a Tabernacle or a Temple, but it separated and rested on God's people.

God was doing a new thing. He was meeting with his people in a new way. Now if you want to meet with God, you don't need to go to a Tabernacle or a Temple or any other special building. God is saying if you want to meet with him, you just have to be around his people.

In other words, you are God's tabernacle. You are God's Temple. You are his Church. God wants to meet with is people through you.

So if you want to fill in the blank in your service folder and answer the question, "What is the Church?"

You could write:

1. We are the Church.

The Church is not a building or just some organization. The Church is the gathering of God's people. And when God's people gather together, he wants to meet with them there.

So we need to have a whole new way of thinking about the Church. The Church is not just somewhere I go. The Church is something I am. It is something I participate in. We are God's temple. It is through us that God reveals who he is to the world. He made that message clear when the fire of God came down, separated and rested on his people. In fact, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed only a few years after Jesus' ascension, never to be rebuilt again.

We are God's Church. We are his Temple. Let that sink in for a moment. Don't you feel immediately unworthy of that title? Temples and Churches are holy places. Places that are pure and amazing works of art. I don't feel like a holy and pure person. Do you? Just think about the conversations you had on the way to church. Is there strife in your family? What about all the secret ways you struggle? Addictions to pornography or food or alcohol?

And what about your past? Things you did decades ago that you just can't seem to shake? How could you and I possibly be God's Church, God's Temple?

But that's why we need to hear more about Jesus. One thing that made Jesus so controversial was that he went around acting like a walking Temple.

When the Jews were sick or had some disease that made them ceremonially unclean, they went to the Temple to be cleanse. But Jesus went up to those people, touched them and they were clean.

When the Jews had committed some type of sin, they usually went to the Temple, sacrificed an animal, and asked the priests to pray to God to forgive them. But Jesus went around forgiving robbers and prostitutes when they repented, even before they made it to the Temple.

Usually all animal sacrifices to cleanse people of sin was done at the Temple. But Jesus said that he was the true sacrificial lamb, the true temple. And he proved it when he died and rose again.

So here is how you become God's Temple. You let Jesus touch your life with his love and forgiveness.

You come to the Lord's Supper and you receive Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of sins in remembrance of what Jesus did on the cross for you. You come to Jesus, God's true Temple, and you let me cleanse you and make you holy and pure. Then you can begin to be his Church, his Temple.

But that leads to another important question. If the church is not this building, then why come here every Sunday morning? If we are the church, then I don't need to go to church, right?

You are not the only person who had that question. When the Jesus-believing Jews realized that the Church had changed, and that the Temple was no longer necessary, they seemed to stop gathering together. So, one of Jesus' followers wrote letter to them, we call it the letter to the Hebrews. And the writer said this:

Hebrews 10:24-25

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **encouraging one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

You don't have to come to this building to be part of the Church. You are always the Church whenever you gather together, wherever you are. But the Lord does want us to get into the habit of gathering together to encourage one another.

I like to use the illustration of charcoal. My father used to grill out with charcoal. And to get the charcoal hot he had a metal cylinder or silo. He would pack the charcoal in that metal cylinder and lite it on fire and the charcoal would heat up real fast. Then he would remove the cylinder and spread the charcoal out to heat up the whole grill.

That is what we are trying to do here at Victory of the Lamb. We meet once a week here as God's Church. We pack ourselves in real tight to encourage one another. It's a chance to look around and say, "Hey, you still believe in Jesus and worship him! Me too!" And we heat each other up as we enter into God's presence and receive his forgiveness and love.

Then we leave here, and we spread out and heat up the whole community. And by the end of the week we get all cooled down and we need to gather again and heat each other up.

That is our weekly routine. We are the church wherever we go. We are the church here in this building as we encourage one another. And we are supposed to be the church as we go out into the community. So don't just go to church.

2. Be the Church.

Jesus is calling us to be the Church wherever we go. But how do we do that? I want to give you one practical way to be the church. Think about the 5 things we do in this church service.

We read the Bible, pray, sing, give an offering, and serve one another. Some of those things you only do at church. And I want to challenge you to do them outside of church, in your everyday life.

3. Usually, I _____ only in worship. This week, I will _____ in the world.

So, write down one thing that you only do in church. For example, you could write, "Usually, I read the Bible, or pray, or give, or sing, or serve only in church. This week I will _____ read, pray, give, sing, or serve outside of worship.

I would encourage you to do this right away when you leave here so you don't forget. Read your Bible, pray with your spouse, buy someone's coffee, sing a worship song in your car, serve somewhere. Do something you normally only do in this worship service out in the world.

We must change the way we think about church, or like every other church in the US we are going to die. We can't just go to church. We are the Church. We need to be the Church wherever we go. In fact, that is what the world wants to see. They want to see if this message of Jesus and his good news is changing you. And when you and I start acting like God's temple everywhere we go, we will turn around and see a whole group of people following behind us, gathering with us here at Victory.

We don't just go to church. We are the Church. Now lets be the Church in our community.

Let's pray....