

## What is church?

1 John 1:1–5

**1 John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. <sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Sometimes we need to pause and take stock of our lives. We need to get back to basics. Last month a former student and now pastor in Ohio sent me thoughts for the New Year, 2022. They aren't grand resolutions. But they are thoughtful proposals. Here they are:

1. I want to renew my commitment to read Scripture before I do any work in the day.
2. I want to renew my worship of God alone. This means that I am deleting certain apps on my phone that appear during the year and enable my materialistic habits, and, in fact, deleting any excessive apps that draw my face to my phone more than to my wife and kids!
3. I want to continue saying 'no' to things. I am very ambitious, and I love new opportunities. I want to say 'no' to more than I say 'yes' for the sake of my family, my ministry, and primarily because God didn't create me to be busy, but to work.
4. I will go to sleep and wake up with the first lines of the Lord's prayer on my lips as a reminder about who will be glorified today and who holds today in His hands: "Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."
5. And finally, I will continue to take the opportunity to wear some comfy slippers around the house, and make sure that most days in freezing weather I

attempt to wear a cozy wool sweater — knit, chunky, cable knit, and American made if I can!

Basics are great and so important. Now is anything more basic than church? Scripture calls the church the bride of Christ and the pillar and foundation of the truth. Christ said, I will build my church. What could be more foundational? What could be more important?

Our 1 John reading tells us some things about the church. It tells us this:

*"Church" is a people called together by a saving message about God (v. 5) revealed through the Word of Life (vv. 1–3) resulting in a fellowship (v. 3) marked by joy (v. 4).*

In other words, the opening of 1 John, written by the Apostle John probably as a pastoral letter composed at Ephesus where he served late in life--these opening words answer three critical questions.

**1. What is "church"?** V. 5 addresses this:

1 Jn 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Based on this verse, we see that "church" is a people called together by a saving message about God. Let's break that down. To be more specific:

A. "Church" is God-centered. People tend to be self-centered. Now a survival instinct is natural and healthy. And we need to steward the life God has given us. Your health matters. Your body matters. Your morale matters. You are important in God's eyes.

But you exist because God created you. Ps 139:13 is true of us all: "You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb." Parents have children, and doctors deliver them, but "children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb [is] a reward" from God, Ps. 127:3 says.

Church is a people who put God at the center. He calls us together by a saving message about the one who formed us and gave us the breath of life. And what is that message?

B. "God is light" summarizes every true church's message. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

Lots of establishments have neon signs. You drive by and you see on that cafe door in bright lights: "Open." Or you see "Lotto" at the QuikTrip. Or you see "Miller Lite." The neon sign invites you in for what's on offer.

The church offers the light of God. Jesus said something painfully true: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3). There is darkness in our hearts. We screw up in our lives. We know guilt and sorrow and pain. We love darkness, Jesus said.

But there is a light. It comes from God. "Church" is a people called together by the message that God is light. Darkness need not define us.

John's Gospel says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). That can also be translated "the darkness has not comprehended it." Both are true. The world outside the church has not overcome, has not defeated, God and his light. Nor does it comprehend that light. Again John's Gospel explains, about Jesus the Son of God: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (1:10–11).

Despite the world's indifference to the light and sometimes hostility toward the light, it is there. It is here among God's people, not because we are light but because we have God as our heavenly Father, and he disperses his light over us and around us and within us and out from us into the world.

"God is light," 1 Jn 1:5 says, "and in him is no darkness at all." That light is so powerful that it cleanses our hearts through faith in Christ who died for our sins. It brings us peace. It generates joy. It produces love for God who gives such light.

It produces love for others rather than the darkness of dismissal, suspicion, contempt, or apathy.

Do you know that light? Do you have that light? I've heard children sing, "This little light of mine I'm going to let it shine." At an early age they knew the light and it showed. How did they get it?

That leads to our second question.

## ***2. How is the church created?***

The short answer is that God sent his light into the world in the person of his Son. An old hymn put it this way: "The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin. The light of the world is Jesus. Like sunshine at noonday his glory shone. The light of the world is Jesus."

The first verses of 1 John describe this world-changing burst of light:

1 John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you . . .

The church is created as Jesus is proclaimed, as people hear, and as they take that saving message to heart and it unites them with Jesus. We become children of God, part of the family of God our Father, through opening up to the message of Jesus' death for us and victory over death. John's Gospel puts it this way: "to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn 1:12).

So the church is created by the message about Jesus. What's so special, so powerful, about that message? Three things:

A. The message reports what really happened. Look at all the pointers to real-time personal experience. John mentions what he and others heard, what they saw

with their eyes, what they gazed upon and touched with their hands. A lot of people seem to think the Bible is made up, like Harry Potter books or Aesop's Fables. No way!

One day John was with his brother James and the man we know as Simon Peter. The three of them took a hike with Jesus and ended up on the top of a very high hill, you could even say a mountain.

On that unforgettable occasion, Jesus stopped to pray. As he was praying, his face changed. His clothing shone. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked to Jesus about his upcoming death in Jerusalem on the cross, not for his sins but for those of others.

As if all that weren't enough, a cloud sprang up and they heard the voice of God say, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him" (Lk 9:35 NASB). OK, let's listen to Peter's testimony about this (2 Pet 1):

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," 18 we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

The church is created by message about things that really happened.

Another reason that message is so compelling is:

B. The message is about and from the eternal God and his Son.

When 1 Jn 1 says, "That which was from the beginning," we rightly think of Gen 1, "In the beginning God created," and John 1, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God." The message is not just about some earthly event or historical narrative: it partakes of that "which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" (1 Jn 1:2).

Certain places have distinct scents. One of my favorite eating places on earth is The Reflections over on Deep Lake. It's a Polish restaurant. You walk in. If it's cold outside there is a rush of warm air. You smell food, good food: Pierogi. Golabki. Polish sausage. Pickle soup. Strong coffee to go with a rich dessert. The scent is a clue to the menu.

The message that creates the church has a distinct scent. It's the scent of truth. It's the scent of eternity. That's what's on the menu here. It's the scent of the dwelling place of God, immortal, invisible, whom no one has seen or can see, the Bible says, but who has come to this earth in Jesus Christ. We know him from the Bible. He comes to us by his Spirit. This is a powerful message for anyone who realizes they need to get right with this awesome, majestic, holy, and caring God.

The message is also powerful because of what it offers.

C. The message offers eternal life. John writes (1 Jn 1:1–2) "concerning the word of life" and underscores that "the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us."

Now we all have life if we are here worshipping today. We are metabolizing. We are probably hungry, thinking about lunch if this sermon ever ends. That is biological life. It is God's gift. We are grateful. But that life is limited in all kinds of ways.

This life is limited in quality--we are imperfect; we get sick; we sin; we disappoint others; we all fall short of God's glory and even our own goals. This life is limited in duration--unless the Lord returns we will all die. That's temporal life, life in this age and time.

John heard Jesus say (John 10:10), "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." That's eternal life. That's life knowing God's forgiveness through Jesus' death for our sins. That's life knowing peace with God. That's life of a different quality than we had before or could ever hope to have apart from faith in Christ.

Yes, the message that creates the church is very powerful and very desirable. In closing let us now ask:

**3. *What's it like to be part of the church?*** Words from our 1 John reading are revealing (1:3–4):

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

"Church" has many aspects and dimensions. But two stand out here: fellowship and joy.

A. "Fellowship" (*koinonia* in Greek) refers to the deep commonality that people share when their lives are devoted to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Most of us know human fellowship. It can be deep and sweet: the fellowship of family. The fellowship of a faithful marriage. The fellowship of high school friends. The fellowship of co-workers like maybe a carpentry crew or of soldiers like say Marine infantry. They're tight. They have each other's back. Fellowship is a common grace gift of God that all people can enjoy.

Church is about a fellowship with people along "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." It's a fellowship so thick that family fellowship is thin by comparison. In this fellowship we share the mission of taking Christ to others. We share the disciplines of worship like here this morning. We share the fellowship of prayer for one another. We share the fellowship of struggle against sin, the difficulties of lifelong faithfulness to our Savior, and the many sufferings that life deals us, just as it dealt Jesus.

Church looks like people whose lives are ordered by the priorities of their Lord and master Jesus Christ and not by their own selfish aims and ambitions. This binds us together in shared loyalties, service, friendship, sacrifice, and blessing from God. And never lose sight of our future fellowship in heaven!

B. The church is also a place of joy. We often feel it in the music. We may feel joy in the regular rhythm of the liturgy that is so beautifully laid out in the St. Mark

bulletin week by week. There is joy in seeing each other, joy in daily communion with God, joy in marriages and families because God is present and we can sing praises to him and pray to him, joy in having a purpose in life when so many people are despondent, depressed, angry, anxious, and fearful.

We live in a time none of us could have dreamed of two years ago, when we first started to hear about a place called Wuhan and a sickness discovered there. Today the world is a shaky, divided, intimidating place of divisions and disease, deprivations and desperation. Many in the US have turned to politics to vent their unease and rally against the enemy, which they view as the other political party.

May I remind you that heaven and earth will pass away. Kings and kingdoms, presidents and legislators, political parties and dictators, are like dust on a window sill compared to God and his eternal kingdom. One bit of breeze and poof it's gone.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is at hand. We enter that kingdom as God's allies and servants and worshipers when we enter the church. Do your blood pressure and soul a favor: spend less time with the news than you do in God's Word, in prayer, and in service to others in Jesus' Name.

Enter the fellowship and savor the joy with the saints through the ages, around the world, and around this sanctuary who are the church.

For we who believe in Jesus Christ are the church. And:

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

To him be the glory forever. Amen.