

Being Part of a Church

Lesson 1: What is a Church?

Notes for the leader: This is the first in a series of lessons about "Being Part of a Church." Everyone involved in prison ministry understands that the most important thing a Christian inmate can do when he gets out is to get involved with a solid Christian fellowship in his community. What should he be looking for? This lesson focuses on basic concepts of what a church is and on the first characteristic to look for: whether they preach the Gospel.

Introduction

The most important thing a Christian inmate can do when he gets out is to become part of an effective Christian fellowship in his community. We have all known men (or women) who were able to follow Jesus faithfully while in prison, but just couldn't stay straight on the outside. And we have all asked ourselves "Why?" The answer often turns out to be that they tried to be "lone ranger" Christians. They weren't willing to submit themselves to the discipline and accountability – and support -- that a local church is supposed to provide.

In this series of lessons, we'll study what the Bible says a good church should be like. We'll focus on practical principles for finding a good church -- a church where they

- teach sound doctrine, based on the Bible, God's Word,
- demonstrate God's love, both inside their own fellowship and by reaching out to others, and
- work together as a unified body, with each member using the spiritual gifts that God has given him or her for the good of the body.

Paul wrote several letters to churches in various cities and towns. These letters tell us a lot about what early churches were like – both the problems they were facing and what the apostles were teaching the churches about what to do. Turn to the first chapter of First Corinthians.

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth, which is a city in the northern part of Greece. Corinth was a city where Paul had preached a few years before. He was writing to the leaders and members of a church that he had started.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ –their Lord and ours:

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

There are some important words here we need to understand. First, what is "the **church**"? The Greek word used for church is "**ekklesia**." "Ekklesia" originally was used to mean a town meeting where people were **called together** to make a decision. Later, the word came to mean the congregation of God's people who had been **called together** to worship God and to serve

Him and each other. We still use the word “ecclesiastical” to refer to church leadership. The Spanish word for church is “*iglesia*,” which is closer to the Greek word than the English word “church.”

Another important pair of words is “**sanctified**,” which means “made holy,” and “**holy**,” which means “set apart” for a religious purpose. The picture here is that God has **called his people together** and **set us apart to carry out His purposes** in our lives, in our communities, and in the world.

The city of Corinth, where this church was located, was a very corrupt city with a terrible reputation. It was a “sin city,” famous all over the Greek and Roman world. In Corinth was the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with 1000 “priestesses” who were really prostitutes. Most of the members of the church at Corinth had come from very immoral backgrounds. But now they had become followers of Jesus Christ, and they had been cleansed from their sins.

One of the things that Paul was very concerned about was that the Corinthian believers were getting into disputes with each other and taking these disputes into the corrupt courts of Corinth, rather than trying to resolve them within their own fellowship. Paul writes to them:

1 Corinthians 6:1-6

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?

Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!

Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!

I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

But instead, one brother goes to law against another —and this in front of unbelievers!.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

There are some other important words in these passages. First, notice that in verse 2, Paul refers to the Corinthian believers as “**saints**.” We find this term again and again in his letters. He didn’t use the word to refer to a few people who were especially holy – he used it to refer to **ordinary believers** within the church. The word “**saints**” means “**holy ones**” – all of us who have been **called together** by God, **given spiritual gifts**, and **called to use these gifts** to serve others in our churches and communities. (More about this in later lessons in this series.)

The word “**justified**” means to be “**declared righteous**” in the eyes of God. What a tremendous gift! *Romans 3:10* says “*There is no one righteous, not even one*” – based on what we have done. But **God** has “*saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but*

because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:5-6.)

And He has called us together as a church, to build His Kingdom, to support one another in love, and to bring the good news of salvation to other people, so they can be part of the Kingdom.

The main focus of this lesson is to identify the first thing to look for in finding a good church to belong to. Paul gives us a good summary in 1 Corinthians – make sure that the church is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.*

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostle, and last of all he appeared to me also.

Notes for the leader: Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. What is "the church"? (1 Corinthians 1:2)

The people in the community who are following Jesus ... those who have been **called out** and **called together** to carry out God's purposes in that community.

2. Who are "the saints"? (*1 Corinthians 6:1-2*)

Everyone who trusts in Jesus and follows him. Saints are **not statues** in front of the building, they are **ordinary people who are following Jesus**.

3. What kind of people were members (and leaders) of the church in Corinth?

(*1 Corinthians 6:9-11*)

Many of these “**saints**” seem to have been “**sinners**.” Does this make sense?

How many “**saints**” are there in this room? [*Get a show of hands...*]

How many “**sinners**” do we have? [*Get a show of hands...*]

What does the Bible say? How many of us have sinned? “**All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God...**” (*Romans 3:23*). So all of us should raise our hands to confess that we are sinners. And everyone who trusts in Jesus and calls him “**Lord**” should raise our hands to declare that we are saints!

A good way to remember the difference between saints and sinners is that a **saint** is a **sinner** who’s been **saved**!

When you are looking for a church, remember that **every** church you find is going to be filled with sinners! You aren’t going to find a perfect church! In fact, if you find a church where the people **don’t** think they are sinners, you need to keep looking!

4. What did Paul consider the most important points of the gospel that he preached?

(*1 Corinthians 15:3-8*)

That Jesus died for our sins. That he was buried (he was really dead!). That he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures. That he appeared to many witnesses so that they would know that we had risen.

This is not just some “Bible story.” The gospel of Jesus Christ is based on **important historical facts**: God sent his son into a world lost in sin, in order to provide a way out. Jesus **showed** us God's love, and was willing to die for us, **even though we were still sinners**. In fact, he said that following him and trusting him is the **only** way we can get right with God. He said that **he** would provide a sacrifice for our sins, and that **only** by his doing this could our sins be forgiven. Now that's a pretty serious claim – and some people decided he was crazy. But, Paul says, God has **proved** that what Jesus said was **true** – by raising him from the dead – and that he provided evidence of this to more than 500 eyewitnesses, most of whom were still alive and spreading the gospel at the time Paul wrote these words. If you don’t believe it, Paul said, **go talk to the witnesses!**

Today, **we are the witnesses** to his resurrection and to the power and truth of the gospel. We proclaim it in our churches, we proclaim it in our homes, and we proclaim it on the streets of our communities. People will judge the truth of the gospel by what they see and hear when they watch us and listen to us. Let us be faithful and true witnesses, doing the things Jesus told us to do.

Jesus said, “**I will build my church, and the gates of hell itself will not overcome it!**” (*Matthew 16:18*). That’s the **power** of a church that belongs to Jesus – the kind of church **you need to be part of!**

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the “Take-Home Thoughts” handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

What is a Church? *(1 Corinthians)*

1. What is "the church"? *(1 Corinthians 1:2)*
2. Who are "the saints"? *(1 Corinthians 6:1-2)*
3. What kind of people were members (and leaders) of the church in Corinth? *(1 Cor 6:9-11)*
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Take-home Thoughts About ...

Being Part of a Church

The most important thing a Christian inmate can do when he gets out is to **become part of an effective Christian fellowship** in his community. God knows we aren't strong enough to live a Christian life by ourselves. He implants his Holy Spirit in us to guide us. And He expects each of us to become part of His church, so that we can support each other as we grow in Christ.

Jesus said that he had come to build his church so that **the gates of hell itself could not hold it back!** (*Matthew 16:18*) That's the **power** of a church that belongs to Jesus – the kind of church **you need to be part of!**

That's because **the church isn't a building, it's a group of followers of Jesus Christ.** The Bible says that **every believer is a "saint,"** which means someone who is **being made holy.** Being holy means **allowing yourself to be used by God for His purposes.**

When you look for a church in your community, **don't expect to find a group of perfect people.** All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God (*Romans 3:23*), even after we become follow followers of Christ. If you find a church where the people **don't** think they are sinners, you need to keep looking!

But **find a church that believes in and preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ.** In *1 Corinthians 15:3-6*, Paul listed what he said are the main points of the gospel: **Jesus died for our sins. He was buried. He was raised on the third day. He appeared to many witnesses** so that they would know that we was risen. If you don't hear that message, keep looking for a church that preaches it!

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