

## What If there were No Church?

1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Tim. 3:14-15; Eph. 4:11-13

Ryan Harmon, Global Outreach Pastor

What if there were no church? Can you even begin to imagine your life without the church? Take a look in your bulletin. Some of you may have thought it was a misprint, but what if that were the reality? Happenings? Nothing! Missionaries working around the world? None! Ways to serve? Nothing! No church! Can you even begin to imagine that? How would our world...how would our city...how would our life look different if the church were absent?

Now the truth is for us living in Lincoln, Nebraska, in our context, that's a really hard thing to even consider, isn't it? Now of course I'm not saying that our city is perfect; it's far from it. The church has work to do in this city. But the truth is that for those of us that drive up and down 70<sup>th</sup> or 84<sup>th</sup> Street, we see church after church after church. It's hard to imagine it being any other way isn't it? It's hard to imagine the church not existing, and that's a good thing. That's a good thing because the church is the hope of the world. It's the hope of the world because it's through the church that God intends to carry forth the message of King Jesus and His kingdom throughout the world. The church is the hope of the world, and yet most of the world lives without the church. Most of the world lives the reality that we can barely imagine.

This weekend and next weekend the Global Outreach Team has the privilege of sharing with you a little bit of what God is doing around the world. Next week we are going to focus more on what is actually happening—what some of our missionaries are up to and what are our opportunities? But today I want to focus on this idea of the church. Why exactly is the church so important, and what does it mean for those that are living in a place where there is no church?

So to do that we are going to reflect on three images that are present in Paul's writings—three images that he uses to describe the church. We're going to jump around a little bit throughout his letters, but we're going to begin in 1 Corinthians. So if you have your Bibles, you can turn there with me: 1 Corinthians, Chapter 3. As we begin, it's important to remember this: When we talk about the church, we are not talking about a building; we are talking about a people. We are talking about me and about you; we're talking about us. We are the church. We call this building a church because it is the place where this local body gathers; that's why we call this a church. But if we start showing movies here every night or quit showing up here and worshipping God, we'd probably start to call it a movie theater and not a church. This place is a church because it is the place that we—the church—come together and lift up the name of God in worship. So the church is a people. I want to start with this idea from Paul. This might be a new one for you, but the church is the **temple of God**. That's our first idea. Read with me in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 3, Verse 16: So of course Paul is talking here to the church—to the people in Corinth—and he says to them in this one verse:

**Do you... (the church, Corinthians) do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (\*NASB, 1 Corinthians 3:16)**

So the church, he says, is **the temple of God**, the very Spirit of God dwelling in you—in you people, in you, the church. So I want to spend a few moments thinking about that together. I don't know if you've ever thought much about temples. What's the purpose of a temple? Of course in

our world temples aren't real common, right? We don't see them very often. But there are places in the world where they are very common. And of course in the ancient world they were really a common thing as well. I'm sure that all of you are aware that in our work globally, we do a lot of work in South Asia, and particularly in India. In India it's a Hindu culture, and you are going to see temples everywhere. I've had the privilege to visit a few times, and as you drive down the street, there's just temple after temple after temple, and you've got to ask, "Why is that?" The reason is, of course, in the Hindu worldview you've got access to all of the various gods, right? So they've got all these temples so the people can get access to the gods, and we're saddened by that because we know that's not true. We reject everything about the Hindu worldview.

But what's interesting when we just think about the idea of temple—even looking at the idea of God's temple in the Old Testament—there are some similarities. In the Old Testament God made His presence known in particular ways, in particular places. So we think about the tabernacle in the wilderness and Moses would go in and he would interface with God. Then later on we think about the temple and the temple was the place where God manifested witness to His Spirit in a unique and particular way. The temple represented the place where God was in the midst of His people. And so when we think about God's temple, we need to consider this: the temple is the place where God could be witnessed in a particular way, in a unique way. Now we know that our God is greater, right? He's the Creator of the entire universe. Four walls cannot hold Him. We know that but yet we also see God doing this special thing. We see Him coming and dwelling in His temple in the Old Testament in a unique and particular way. And the thing we've got to keep in mind is the temple in the Old Testament wasn't important because it was a nice building; it was important because it was God's presence—and God's presence matters doesn't it?

A few years ago I was able to visit Israel with my friend, Nick. He was on our team in Madrid and we were able to go there and as we stood outside the Temple Mount, it was really a profound experience. You know to stand outside this wall—the Western Wall—that is connected to the original temple that Jesus would have been able to go to back in His day—an incredible thing to see. Some of you may have experienced it. While we were there a guy came up to us. He was probably a scammer, but he was like, "Hey, I can take you back into this special section," and we said, "Sure, we're tourists; we'll pay you too much to do that." So there was an area on the Western Wall where the Jewish community had burrowed this tunnel along the wall so they'd have more access to it. And so this guy took us back in and we worked our way to a particular point in the wall where a lot of people were gathering. They were huddled together and I was kind of asking what that was about when I saw a plaque on the wall and the plaque basically read—I don't remember exactly what it said—but it said: "This is basically in alignment with where the Holy of Holies would have been in the original temple." The Holy of Holies, of course, is where God's Spirit dwelled. People were crouched around that spot and they were praying to these bricks on the wall because that was connected to where God's Spirit once dwelt in a special way. And of course we thought that's so sad because we know—we know that with the death and the resurrection of Christ, the veil tore in two and the presence of God became available to all people. It's not contained to one little space. But what's the point? Why are they so zealous to crouch near this spot? Well the reason is because people long for God's presence. They want to get close to His presence. Let's go back to verse 16: Paul says this to you, to me and to the Corinthians: **Church, do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?**

The church is **the temple of God**. The church—you and me—we are the place that God is witnessing to His presence in the world in a unique and a particular way. That certainly means that we have a job, doesn't it? We have a job in this city to stand forth as representatives of God's presence and witness to the world about the presence of God in our community. We have a job to

do! If you removed every Christian from Lincoln, do you think there would be an impact? And the answer is, “Of course! Of course there would be an impact.” Take away the church, you take away the temple of God. You take away the way that God is choosing to witness His presence in the clearest way. I think that would leave an impact.

So maybe a question of application for us is, “How might it change the way I enter my workplace, my neighborhood, the way I interact with my friends?” And if I think about this thought, I think God wants to witness His presence to the world through me, through a member of His church. I am His temple and in some way He wants to make His presence known through me. How might that change the way we go about our lives?

But it’s a global weekend, so I want to draw our attention away from Lincoln for just a moment. You see God desires that all people would come to the knowledge of Him and the truth. The stark reality is that there are places around the world where there is zero Christian presence in the world. Zero! There’s no church; there’s no temple of God. There’s no clear witness to His presence and I just want to say, “That’s not okay!” As we sit here and we are so blessed to gather week in and week out and be surrounded by God’s people, we want to thank God for that and we’re going to do that this morning. We’re going to praise God for that. But we also need to be aware that there are places around the world where people do not have that opportunity. There’s no church; there’s not even access to Christians.

Here’s a startling fact: In Buddhist countries, in Buddhist populations, 86% of Buddhists do not know a single Christian. Can you believe that? 86% don’t know a single Christian! They don’t know one person that can witness to them about the presence of God. So let’s make that number a little more tangible. Bangkok, Thailand is a big city—8.3 million people! That’s the population of (I looked it up) Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Wyoming combined—a lot of people. If that number is right—86%—that means 7.1 million people in Bangkok alone do not know a single Christian. They couldn’t name one! They have no access to the clearest way that God wants to make His presence known in the world. And we just say this morning, “That’s not okay, church; we’re not okay with that. We long for people to know our God. So the first question I want to ask this morning is, “What can we do about it as a church? What can we do?” The church is the hope of the world because the church carries the message of King Jesus and His kingdom into the world. The church is **the temple of God**; it’s the place where God uniquely bears witness to His presence, makes His presence known.

Let’s turn to the second image. You can flip over in your Bibles to 1 Timothy, Chapter 3. Now this is one of the most impactful passages that I had as I considered whether or not I should go to Madrid on a church-planting team. This image really, boy, it really convicted me, and I remember thinking, “It’s not okay that this doesn’t exist in parts of the world.” Let’s look at this. This is 1 Timothy 3, verses 14 and 15. Paul, of course is speaking to his young apprentice, his young protégé, Timothy, who is pastoring a church in Ephesus and he says this to him:

**I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I *write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.** (\*NASB, 1 Tim. 3:14-15)

So the second image we want to think about a little bit this morning is the idea that the church is the **household of God**—the family of God. Let’s unpack that a little bit. This term *household* is one that’s really common in the New Testament. It’s used a hundred times and the reason it’s so

common is because the household was really important in the Roman world. The family was more than the nuclear family that we think about—2 parents and 2 ½ kids, something like that. It was immediate family; it was extended family—grandparents, aunts and uncles. If a family had wealth it might even extend beyond that to the workers or the servants or slaves that were part of that family. So it was sometimes upwards of 20, 25, 30 people in this community called the *household*. Why was it important? Well there were some utilitarian reasons. One of the reasons was in a world that was full of poverty, there was great benefit to pooling resources together, right? In some ways it was like *social security*. This is why the Roman Empire liked it, right? When parents or grandparents are getting old and they can't work any longer, the kids would provide—and some of you might be thinking we should reinstate this idea. (*laughter*)

That was one reason. There was safety in numbers. In a dangerous world, right, when a household, a family, a community could come together, there's a safety that comes with that. So there were certainly some utilitarian reasons that the household was so important. But there are other reasons as well that are less focused on utility. In the Roman world, the household was the place where you gained your primary identity. It was the community that you belonged to and there was great connectivity—great connection, great commitment that came with it. It was the place where you figured out who you were and you had a sense of belonging in the world. The household was a community of belonging that conferred on its members fellowship, rootedness and identity. And boy, we all need that don't we? We all need that!

I have a young family. My kids are 7, 3, and 1 and one thing that you become really aware of when you become a parent for the first time is: "Man, these kids are really dependent, right? They need me for everything. They can't do anything on their own, you know." I don't know what age they start to but it hasn't happened yet. "Give me water." "Change my diaper," right? Do all these things that they need; they're dependent little creatures—and all of us come in the world that way, don't we. But you know what's sad? What's sad is that we ever start to think that we outgrow that. The dependency and the need that community provides is never something that we grow out of. We all have the need that a family provides—the sense of fellowship, this rootedness and identity. We never grow out of that.

So what does it mean when Paul says the church is **the household of God**? Well, it means that the church is the community; it's the sufficient community of care that exists in the world where a broken world can experience hope. There are all sorts of gatherings in our world, right? We gather for all number of reasons. We have football parties—those aren't that happy recently. We have bowling leagues, essential oil parties (*laughter*); they are one of the greatest. But there's only one community in the world where God the Father stands as the Father over His family, the Father over His household, the Father of His children—His unique gathering of people. Our membership in **the household of God** confers on this fellowship, doesn't it? We're working on it all the time. Robin and Bill were talking about it, right? In our sections we're working on this idea of fellowship and belonging. "Section 2, shout out my people." (*laughter*) It confers on us its rootedness in the truth. We hold up the truth in our culture. In this church we stand for what is true. We cheer it on; we stand for it. It confers on us an identity. We're supposed to be a people that are rooted and are identified in the triune God that is a loving community. We're supposed to be a prayerful community of love. That's what we ought to be in the world. We're a family, a community relying on one another, and my question is, "Does the world need this?" And the answer of course is, "Absolutely...absolutely the world needs this!"

But the stark fact, again, is that most of the world has zero access to this. The number is that 3.15 billion—billion with a 'b'—people live in a place where not only is there no church, there's hardly

any missionary activity. There's no one bringing the message of good news, and we have to ask, "What must their life be like? What would life be like without a sense of belonging, without a sense of identity, without a community that is sufficient for the troubles of life?" And I think all of us can probably say, "I know what that was like because I lived that before God brought me into His family."

I got to experience a little bit of it when I was living in Madrid. Madrid was an incredible city! I loved the city; I loved the people. They are people created in the image of God, but they are living apart from God because the church has lost its voice in that community. And when the church has lost its voice, people start to turn to whatever they can in order to gain meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment—things that we know will never satisfy. So as I lived in Madrid, I started to think they are orphans; they are orphans and they are turning to all these things that will not bring wholeness, that will not bring satisfaction because they are living apart from God. That's what happens when the church starts to crumble in a community, starts to lose its voice in the community. The church is **the household of God**. The church is the only life-giving, totally sufficient community to which men and women can belong. The church is the only community in the world that has God as its founder and primary sustainer, and yet most of the world lives outside that community. They have no place to belong. So my second question is: "Church, what can we do about it?"

The last image I want to focus on for a few minutes this morning is one that we're all very familiar with; we talk about it all the time. It's really common in Paul's letters and throughout the New Testament, and it's this idea that the church is **the body of Christ**. Turn with me if you will to Ephesians 4, Verse 11. I'm just going to read these three verses for you—11-13.

**And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.** (\*NASB, Eph. 4:11-13)

So there are a lot of things that we can talk about in terms of the implications of this idea that we are **the body of Christ**. I'm going to focus just on two of them this morning in our remaining time. The first is certainly that Paul is making it very clear we have a role to play in this body—each one of us. God has gifted all of us in certain ways, and the reason He did this is so that we could build up this body. Now I think that's an interesting thought, because I used to think, "Boy, the reason the church exists, and spiritual gifts and that kind of thing is so that we can go out and minister in the world." But Paul is saying, "No, we need to build this body up. We need to help it function effectively." So have you figured out what your role is in this community, in this church, in this body? You see Lincoln Berean is a great church. I'm so thankful for it. But what Paul is saying is that we aren't mature yet; we're coming along, right? We're in process, and we need everyone playing their part so that the body can function effectively. But that leads to a second question: "Why is it so important that the body function effectively?"

I want to argue that it relates back to the first two things we talked about. It's critical that the body function effectively and grow in maturity, because if the body is **the temple of God**, we want to accurately represent God's presence in the world, right? We want to look like God our Father. If the body is functioning effectively, we can do that. The building up the body is critical because, if the body is **the household of God**, we want our community to look and resemble and take on the character of the loving God that is our Father, right? And so we want our body to grow. We want the body to grow into mature manhood. That's what Paul's saying that's so critical, and that's why

each one of us needs to ask God, “God, how would You have me be engaged in this body? How would You help me, how would You have me help this body become what You long for it to be?”

But I want to look at the second thing I think this idea of the body kind of conveys to us. I just want to ask this general question: “What are bodies for? Why do you have a body?” We all know that you are not your body; you have a body. Some of us don’t like our bodies, right? Some of us are going to the gym and we’re trying to work on our bodies. But our bodies are what God has given us in the world to interact with it, right? Our bodies are the way that God has us engage in the world, engage in His creation, do work. Our bodies are essentially these little power packs that God has given us to interact with one another, to interact with creation, to accomplish good, to bring about flourishing. And so what’s the implication for the church?

Well, I think it’s clear that **the body of Christ** is the way that God has chosen to manifest Himself in the world physically; it’s the way that He is choosing to work in the world. Now we all know that God has every means available, right? God can do it however He wants. God can show up in dreams. He can make trees talk. He can do all these kinds of things. But what does His Word say? His Word says that He wants to use His body; He intends to work through His church. I’m sometimes kind of a cerebral person, you know, and I start to ask, “Well, yeah, but couldn’t God do it other ways? Couldn’t He....?” And the answer is, “Of course, sure. Sure He can do it however He wanted.” But He has chosen and revealed to do it through His church—you and me, we the church are tasked with carrying forth the work that God is doing in the world. We are the ones that are commissioned with carrying forth the work and the ministry of Jesus to the uttermost parts of the earth, as He said. He has chosen to use us!

So why does the church matter? Well, the church matters because the church is the way that God works in the world. In some ways I think we need to repent of this idea that God can do it however He wants, and we need to embrace the task that He’s called us to be the way that He works. He wants us to take up the mantle, to be engaged in our world and understand that He is using us to bring about flourishing, us to move the kingdom forward. And of course we can look around Lincoln and we can see that happening, right? It’s always such an incredibly, meaningful privilege to see ministries pop up, to see people working, people starting things in order to bring about flourishing in our city. Even more than that, it’s incredible to hear stories of all of you in your workplace saying, “I believe that God has placed me there for a reason. I believe that He is calling me to be more engaged and to be sending forth His message, bringing His message of good news right where I am.” And I just want to say we have got to keep doing it. Hey, we’ve got to keep at it. We want to come together; we want to applaud that. We want to say, “God, You are great! We want to make Your name known in this city.”

But I have to ask also, “What do we do about places like Thailand? What do we do about places like Spain? Places like Iran? Places where there is no church and therefore there is no physical manifestation of the work of God being carried forth?” Most of the world has zero interaction, zero connectivity to God’s chosen means of working in the world. And so we say it again, “That’s not okay.” I hope it resonates within your heart that we say, “That’s not okay with me.”

And so the third question I want to ask you—I think you know it: “What are we going to do about it? How can we get active in being a solution to that problem?” You...me...we—we are members of **the body of Christ**; we are members of the church of God. We are **the temple of God**; we are **the household of God**. That means we are the place; we are the people through whom God wants to make His presence known in the world. We are the people through whom God wants to foster and stir up a loving community that is adequate for a world that is broken and hurting and lost. We

are the people—the community—through whom He wants to engage and work in the world of extending the boundaries of His kingdom, bringing about good.

So I want to challenge you today as we close. I want to challenge you to think about what that means for you as a member of the church of God. What does it mean for you to be engaged in that work, to be representing His presence, carrying forth His work, fostering His community? Let's think about that together. Let's talk about that in our communities, in our small groups, in our families, among our friends. Let's talk about ways that we can be active in that work right here in Lincoln. But let's also think bigger. Imagine your life without the people who came in and shared the good news of the gospel to you. Imagine your life without a community, a loving community to embrace you. Imagine your life without someone taking up the task of carrying forth the Word of God to you. Imagine what that would be like. You see, we are all beneficiaries of the work of the church, right? We're all beneficiaries of God's chosen way of bringing forth His message in the world. But the question is, "What about the people living without the church, without the hope?" Right, what about them—thousands and thousands of villages and cities around the world where there is no church? If we had a map, it would be red. There would be no activity, no church present. Billions and billions of people that just don't know who God is; they don't know that He is calling them to be His children. They are living in a churchless world, a gospel-deprived world, and we don't want to let that question just go away, right? We want to linger on that.

I want to ask you; I want to challenge you to think about that this week. I promise next week we're going to get to some solutions. As we like to say in this church sometimes, "We're going to talk more about that...next week." We're going to get to solutions but before we do, I want to challenge you to pray and ask God: How would You, God...what would You have me do? I'm here in Lincoln and probably not going to go. That's okay. But how would You have me engage because it's not okay with me that there are places where Your church does not exist. It's not okay with me that there are people that do not know who You are—and I want to be engaged in that work. As we close, let's thank our Father for the fact that we can join together in this gathering and we can lift up His name. But let's also ask Him, right? Let's also come and say to Him, "Lord, it's not okay with me. Help me to know how to move forward, how to be involved in the work that You are doing." Let's pray:

*Our Father, we thank You for Your church. We thank You for this community. We thank You for this church. We thank You for what You are doing in our lives through this church, God, and we pray that You will help this church look more and more like You and that it would have an impact on our city. So we thank You for that. We want to praise Your name for just the glorious thing that is Your church, Your community of people. But we also want to say to You it's not okay with us that there are places in the world where Your name is not lifted up, and, God, we want to be active in being a part of the solution. We know that ultimately the work is Yours, but we are so thankful You ask us to be engaged in this. So, God, I pray that by Your Spirit, You will lead us to some clear and tangible ways that we can be involved. For the sake of Your name, for the sake of Your glory, we pray, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,  
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.  
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
Copyright 2017 – Ryan Harmon. All rights reserved.