

Good morning. Welcome to Fellowship Dallas. My name is Randy Thompson and I am one of the pastors here. I'm so glad you're able to worship with us this morning. Today, we're beginning a new series that we're calling *Life Together*. Over the next couple of months, we are going to investigate what it means to be a church. We are also going to practice something together, as a church.

If you've been here the last few Sundays, then you know that tomorrow, we are kicking off the Life Together Bible Reading Plan. In just the last two Sundays, we have distributed almost 1200 copies of the New Testament. Together, as a church, we are going to read through the entire New Testament in just eight weeks. So, in less than two months, if we all stay on schedule, we will have read through the entire New Testament together as a church. If you haven't picked up a copy of the reading plan, you can do so after the service. I'll talk more about that later.

As I mentioned, we are going to spend the next several Sundays talking about what it means to be a church. And, if you didn't know, 2015 was a big year for churches. There are several news stories that you may or may not have heard about some new churches here in the United States.

For example, you may have heard of the church begun by the HBO comedian John Oliver, *Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption*. John began his church to mock televangelists who take advantage of federal tax codes in order to use the money people send in and spend it on things like huge mansions, personal jets and yachts for themselves. Mr. Oliver's church ended up closing its doors after a month and donating their offerings to *Doctors Without Borders*.

There was another church in Indiana that just got off the ground last year. You may have heard *The First Church of Cannabis* launched in Indianapolis this past March. They decided to focus their worship on marijuana, even though smoking pot is still illegal in Indiana. They're currently suing, saying that laws against marijuana go against their freedom of religion.

Meanwhile, another church in Panama City Beach, Florida had their non-profit tax exemption taken away because instead of using their building for worship services, they were using it as a nightclub and calling the mandatory cover charge an offering. I don't have a picture for that one. At least, not one that's suitable for Sunday mornings.

Obviously, each of these churches ring hollow as we review their descriptions. There's something about them that makes them seem not just irreverent, but illegitimate. But these interesting examples of what people have called church bring up the question of what *is* a church, exactly?

Whenever we think of the word church, any number of things could pop into our head. Is a church a building? Yes. Is a church a group of people? Yes. Is it a worship service? Yes. A system of beliefs? Yes. Is the Church a group of believers all over the world? Yes. What about a small group of believers who meet in one location? Yes.

Not only do we struggle to come up with a common definition of what it means to be a church, many of us wonder what exactly the purpose of the church is. Why does it exist? Who are we, as a church, supposed to be? What are we, as a church, supposed to do? And as we look at ourselves, as members of the church, we are confronted with the question of what a Christian's role is within the church, as an individual.

There are a lot of questions here. And all of them are important. There are so many questions, we won't be able to address all of them in just one day. This is why our series will continue for the next two months, leading right up to Easter. Over the next several weeks, we'll talk about what it means to be a church and what we are called to do, both as a group and as individuals.

Let's put aside, for the next few weeks, what our culture calls a church. When we talk about church during this series, we won't be talking about buildings or events such as worship services. It's okay to call this building a church and it's okay if you woke up this morning and said, "I'm going to go to church." But we won't be using those definitions. And today, I won't be talking about the Universal Church – Christians all over the world. Today, I want to define what a *local* church. What makes up a local church, whether it's Fellowship Dallas, Watermark, Park Cities Baptist or any other local church you might walk into on a Sunday morning?

During this series, we want to talk about the people of God. And in order to talk about the people of God, we need context. *Context*. Context is everything. In order for us to understand what it means to be a church, we need to understand our context. And, as Christians, our context is the Triune God, God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit.

If you are going through the New Testament with us, then tomorrow you'll read about Jesus' baptism in the first part of Luke's gospel. Jesus' baptism is one of the few times in scripture where we see each member of the Trinity represented at the same time. We read about Jesus' baptism in the third chapter of Luke. Let's read verses 21-22: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.""

In these verses we see Jesus, God the Son, having been baptized. We hear the words of the God the Father, exclaiming His love for the Son. And we see God the Spirit, descending on Jesus in the bodily form of a dove. Each member of the Trinity is present to mark the occasion. It is this Triune God, precisely three persons in one essence, who serves as the context for the church.

Different Christians look to different members of the Trinity when it comes to defining church. According to Edmund Clowney, there are some categories that pop up. For example, if you speak to someone who is theologically reformed, like Presbyterians, they might describe the church as the people of God, focusing on God the Father. Other denominations might define church as the body of Christ, focusing on God the Son. Some

other churches, such as Pentecostal churches might define church as the fellowship of the Spirit, focusing on the third member of the Trinity.

If we're not careful, we can get so preoccupied with a single understanding of the church, that we lose focus of the context. Perhaps, instead of focusing on one aspect of God, we ought to focus on the fullness of God, that is *the Trinity*. The church isn't just one of these descriptions; it is all of them. As soon as we begin to over-emphasize one person of the Trinity, at the expense of the others, we begin to mangle and warp our understanding of who God is. We lose context and our definition of church begins to weaken. So let's talk more clearly about what a church *is*. Today, we're going to build a definition of the *Local Church* based on the Trinity and what that definition means for us, as individuals.

Church most literally means *assembly*, but it's more than just a gathering of people. If it is your opinion that we gathered here today out of our own doing, then -yes- we are an assembly and that is all we are. But I believe different. I believe that every single person in this room - every. single. one. of. you. - is here because God *brought you here*. And we are here today to stand before God, demonstrate our love to Him and reflect that love to one another. In other words, we are here to worship. And if it's God who assembled us here and once assembled we worship Him, then we are no longer an assembly, we are a *church*.

In Scripture, we see the word "assembly" first used referencing God's people at Mount Sinai when God gathers the Israelites together at the culmination of the Exodus redemption. When God establishes a covenant with the Israelites, He makes them His people. In Leviticus 26:12, God says, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall by my people." So we see God interact with His people as an expression of the Mosaic Covenant, the Old Covenant.

But there's a problem. After Israel sins and falls away, centuries later, they suffer the consequences for not being obedient to His Laws. Even so, all hope is not lost because God establishes a New Covenant with His people. We see the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 and this is important, because we live within this covenant today. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

So we see that God establishes a New Covenant with His people. In this New Covenant, the Law isn't something external, but internal. And in the New Covenant, we won't know God as somebody who is "out there" but as somebody who can indwell His people. And in this New Covenant, everyone is level before God, regardless of social status or nationality.

We see God talking about His New Covenant people in the New Testament, too. In 1 Peter 2:9-10, the disciple writes, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." So as we define what church is, our definition must include the truth that we are a *New Covenant People of God*. A Church is a New Covenant People of God.

But we are more than that. For the past three weeks, we have been speaking about what it means to be full of grace and full of truth. Gary repeated in the last month something very important to remember. Gary said, "We will not be a church centered around grace or a church centered around truth, but a church that focuses solely on Jesus Christ, since He, Himself, is the embodiment of grace and truth." We are a church who is centered on Christ.

And this is as it should be. It is through Christ that we are brought near to God. Let's read Ephesians 2:13-22: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

How is it that those who used to be far away from God have been brought near to Him? By the blood of Christ. There was a dividing wall that Christ eliminated. He is our peace. It is only because of Christ that we have access to God the Father. It is through His death that the veil was torn. We used to be strangers, we used to be aliens, but now we are fellow citizens. And the Church is built up on one person and one person alone: Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Him.

Jesus is the primary thing that every Christian in the world has in common. Regardless of the color of your skin, your social status or what's in your bank account. Regardless of your country of origin, if you are a Christian, and you meet another Christian, you have something in common. Not only do you have something in common, you have the most important thing in common. Your relationship with Christ. You can have community with someone you've never met before because of Christ. You've experienced forgiveness. You've been given hope. You have experienced His love.

I love this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of

time something else were to be added to our community; it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, for eternity.”  
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Not only is a church a New Covenant People of God, we are also a community centered on Christ. A Church is a community centered on Christ. A church is a community centered on Christ.

So we see who the Church is in relation to God the Father and who the Church is in relation to God the Son, so let us talk about God the Spirit. The Spirit was promised by Christ and that it would be better for us when He showed up. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” This shows us that the reality of the Spirit’s presence should instill confidence in us as believers. The Spirit was not only promised by God the Son, but also by God the Father. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, the prophet testifies for God, saying, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Now, since Star Wars came out just over a month ago, I feel compelled to say that the Spirit is not just some ethereal Force that we can draw from. He is a person, holy, perfect and righteous. Can we be filled with the Spirit? Yes. Does that give us access to the power of God? Yes. But that doesn’t mean that He can be controlled or manipulated. And even though He is omnipresent, He isn’t someone who is part of every living thing. For example, if you have a pest control guy come to your home, you’re not killing off 1000 parts of the Holy Spirit.

We see the Spirit make His presence known in Acts 2 on what is called the Day of Pentecost. On this day, Christ’s promise to His followers is fulfilled. In Jerusalem, the Spirit indwells all of Christ’s disciples, demonstrating His power and causing them all to testify to the power of Christ in the temple in different languages. It was so powerful that some people thought that the disciples had found some new wine. Acts 2:13 says, “But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.” It may have seemed like it, but the disciples weren’t drunk. Even so, this verse proves that there ain’t no party like a Holy Ghost party cause a Holy Ghost party don’t stop.

The Spirit was not just here for this one occasion, but Acts 2 was the beginning of something that continues today. What began in Jerusalem echoed out into the countryside, throughout all of Judaea, neighboring Samaria and throughout the world – the ends of the earth. This means that there is nowhere we can go where the Spirit is unable to lead us. We

follow the Spirit's leadership *because* He leads us to Christ! 1 Corinthians 12:3 tells us that no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Spirit.

The Church is, in essence, spiritual. It is not primarily physical. Do we have a physical building? Yes. Are we physical bodies who meet together in physical places? Yes. But it's not as if when someone joins this church at Fellowship Dallas, God then decides to bring them into His family. NO – when someone places their faith in Christ, it is then that they become a part of the universal Church. We take our cues from God, not the other way around. Because what bonds people in the church is spiritual.

So we can say, then that not only is a Church a New Covenant People of God. And not only is a Church a community centered on Christ. A Church is also led by the Spirit. A Church is led by the Spirit.

If we put these three components together, we arrive at this definition of the Church: ***A Church is a New Covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit.*** A Church is a New Covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit. We are a gathering of people who have a covenant with God the Father through our relationship with Jesus Christ, God the Son, led by God the Spirit in all that we believe, think, say and do. It is this Triune God who offers us the context for how we ought to live as a people of God.

In Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter got up to address everyone who was looking at them side-eyed to tell them what was going on. All of the onlookers were amazed. Some said the disciples were drunk, but Peter had a better explanation of what was happening. In verse 32-33, Peter cited the Father's Resurrection of Christ as the catalyst for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Peter says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing."

Again, we have another scriptural representation of the Trinity, here by Peter. We have the Father raising up the Son and the Spirit being sent, fulfilling the promise of the Son. The Spirit unleashes His power upon the followers of Jesus, igniting the Church. And it is important that we recognize the Church as a picture of the Trinity. We are not just a people of God. We are not just the body of Christ. We are not just a fellowship of the Spirit. All three persons of the Trinity are represented in us, here today. And this is important not just in how we see ourselves, but the truth that the Church is a picture of the Trinity has an impact for how we are to live, as a church.

As we look at the Trinity, we cannot separate the persons of the Trinity from their relationships. We know the first person of the Trinity as *Father*. We know the second person of the Trinity as *Son*. And the third as *Spirit*. We define the members of the trinity by their *relationship* to one another.

If you are a Christian, your Christianity is defined precisely by your *relationship* with God. No more and no less. If you are a Christian, it is because of your spiritual relationship with God. You are not a Christian because of what you do, although you may behave Christianly.

You are not a Christian because of what you believe, although you may believe Christianly. You are a Christian primarily because of your relationship with God. AND your relationship with God finds its expression in your relationship with others, most specifically your spiritual relationships with other believers.

A church is a new covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit. We are a new covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit. And we are not meant to live in spiritual isolation. We are created for spiritual community. Are we individuals? Yes. Do we each have our own nuanced perspective of God? Yes. But let me propose to you that if you are not living out your faith in relation to other believers, you are not living out your faith! Let me say that again positively. In order to live out your Christian faith, you must live it out in relationship to other believers. How you grow spiritually is determined by God's work through other believers. We find true life *from* other believers. We receive spiritual life from one another. At the same time, we are built to love and grow one another. We find true life *toward* other believers. We find life *from* other believers and we find life *toward* other believers. Read this quote from Christian theologian Miroslav Volf:

"Like the divine persons, so also [church members] cannot live in isolation from one another; Christians are constituted as independently believing persons through their relations to other Christians, and they manifest and affirm their own [church membership] in mutual giving and receiving. . . A Christian lives from and toward others." P. 206

When it comes to outsiders, how will they know that we are Christians? Jesus tells us *exactly* how people know we follow Christ. He tells His followers in John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus points to relationships as the purest expression of our faith. Our relationship with Him is best represented in our spiritual relationships with others.

In other words, we are called to do *Life Together*.

So, let me turn to those who are part of this church. If you're visiting us today, you're welcome to listen in, but let me ask those who call Fellowship Dallas home, "What are your relationships like here?" Because not only has God placed you in a biological family and in relationships with friends, He also has placed you in this church. He has planted you here. Are you growing? Do your conversations with your brothers and sisters here extend beyond business, the latest movie or sports, or do you ever get around to talking about something spiritual? About God. About who God is and what He is doing.

We are meant to live Life Together; in relationship with one another. And this makes sense when you think about the fact that each of us were made in God's image. Each of us is made in the image of God who has eternally existed in community as three persons and who will remain in community forevermore. So my encouragement to you is to find true spiritual community. ***Find true, spiritual community.*** We all must find true, spiritual community.

This is one of the primary reasons we are doing the Life Together Bible Reading Plan. We aren't just going through the New Testament to show off our reading skillz. The hope is that by reading through the New Testament, we would offer each one of you the opportunity to build community with one another. Not only are we hoping that you read through the Bible over the next eight weeks, we also hope that you would take the time – that you would make the sacrifice to meet some new people to talk about what you've read. In addition to offering a reading plan to you, we are also offering Life Together groups to help you find true, spiritual community. We think these groups might offer some of you who have yet to jump into community here at our church the opportunity to meet some new people.

Here's what we're asking. We're asking each of you to jump into a group for the next eight weeks. Nothing more. If you like the people you group with and want to keep going after that, then awesome. If the group you fall into isn't a community that suits you, we'll help go back to the drawing board. But we're asking all of you to take a chance on community. We are a New Covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit. And we hope that each one of you will find true, spiritual community here.

So, what do you need to do to participate?

1. Get a Bible – Concourse Table
  - a. Almost 1200 sold, so far
  - b. Buy one, if you haven't already on the concourse
2. Get on the Life Together: Daily Reading Group on The City
  - a. The City is our online community tool for Fellowship Dallas
  - b. In this specific group, you will find
    - i. Daily videos
    - ii. Audio Files
  - c. There are a few hundred pending invitations – look in your spam/inbox
    - i. *ACCEPT YOUR INVITATION!*
  - d. Questions/Concerns – City Help Desk
3. Get in a group – The City Desk
  - a. Why? Life Together
  - b. Already in a CG? Perfect
  - c. Not in one?
    - i. Start one!
      1. Invite your friends!
    - ii. Instructions in your Worship Guide
      1. If there are questions or you need help, City Help Desk