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Sermon: 6/28/2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“OUR HOPE, OUR JOY, OUR CROWN”
First Thessalonians 2:14-3:10

? Who needs the Church? The voices that say “Not me!” are getting louder. I don’t mean atheists or pagans or Muslims. I am talking about professing Christians.

Cultural Christians who used to attend because it was “the thing to do” are dropping out *en masse*.

Consumer Christians who have participated primarily for selfish reasons are moving on to greener pastures.

Legacy Christians who were raised in the Church but have never lived into their inheritance are, increasingly, drifting away.

Wounded Christians who have been burned by the Church are running to the nearest exit, and they are less likely than ever to seek out a new congregation.

Disillusioned Christians who condemn the Church as theologically compromised, morally bankrupt, or spiritually dead are quitting in record numbers.

There’ve always been Lone Rangers who have said, ‘*I worship God better in my boat,*’ or ‘*I read the Bible just fine without help,*’ or ‘*My TV preacher is enough for me.*’ I heard those kinds of statements forty years ago.

What’s new is the *magnitude* of the phenomenon. The number of believers who have nothing to do with the gathered Church is substantial. The movement even has a name: *Churchless Christianity*.

? You and I haven’t given up on the Church, not yet. Still, “Who needs it?” is a question worth asking.

? Why not forego Sunday school and group Bible study and work through Scripture individually?

? Why not retire the local pastor and tune in to a really excellent media preacher?

? Why not chuck organized worship entirely and commune with God alone or in family groups?

? Why not dismantle permanent structures and work with like-minded people as the need arises?

? Why not put the institutional Church out of its misery – and ours! – and find fellowship at Starbucks?

{II Co 11:25-27, TNIV / NLT} Such thoughts might have crossed Paul’s mind. His service to the Church cost him dearly in blood, sweat, and tears:

Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from flooded rivers and from bandits....I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

{II Co 11:23-25, TNIV / NLT} Paul’s missionary efforts made him a target for Jews and pagans alike. **“I have... been in prison...frequently, flogged... severely, been exposed to death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.”**

{II Co 11:5, 26} Paul faced intense opposition from wanna-be **“super-apostles”** in Church. In their effort to undermine him they ridiculed his physical appearance, knowledge, wisdom, and preaching. Things got so ugly Paul was actually **“in danger from false believers.”**

{II Co 11:28-29} Not to mention that he carried a heavy burden of responsibility for the congregations under his spiritual care. **“Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”**

Certainly, there was more to his life than deprivation, rejection, torture and heartache. Even so, suffering was seldom far away. Hardship was a recurrent, evidently *unavoidable* element of his Church experience.

If ever anyone had valid reasons for giving up on institutional Christianity, it was Paul. If ever anyone had incentive to say “I don’t need the Church,” it was Paul.

■ I invite us to keep this in mind as we turn to First Thessalonians 2:19-20: **“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”**

The Church in Thessalónika was a bright spot for Paul, Silas and Timothy. This congregation was more pleasant to deal with than its counterparts in Corinth and Galatia.

■ That said, they were far from perfect: The whole group was vulnerable to being **“unsettled”** by their **“trials”** (First Thessalonians 3:3), and their **“faith”** was **“lacking”** in some respects (3:10).

● A few individuals were **“idle and disruptive.”** Some were **“disheartened,”** at least temporarily. Others were chronically **“weak”** (5:14).

■ Their frailty and need added to the **“pressure”** Paul faced **“daily.”** For a time he was (3:5) **“afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted [them] and that [his] labors might have been in vain.”**

{II Th 3:6} Even worse, in Second Thessalonians we learn that some obstinate members stubbornly refused to **“live according to [the apostolic] teaching,”** some lazy ones persisted in idleness, and some unruly ones kept disrupting the Fellowship – all in direct defiance of Paul’s detailed instructions in this letter. And they were one of the healthier, easier congregations!

? Surely, Paul asked himself, *who needs this?* Surely, he was tempted to wash his hands of the whole project.

■ Yet he declares, with resounding conviction: **“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus...? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy”!**

You are our ελπίς [elpís], **“our hope,”** our confident expectation.

You are our χαρά [chará], **“our joy,”** our delight.

{I Co 3:12} You are our στεφανοσ [stéphanos], **“the crown in which we will glory.”** When at the End Lord Jesus tests the quality of our work, to show

whether it is **“wood, hay, [and] straw”** or **“gold, silver [and] costly stones,”** you will be revealed as our treasure.

You – small, unimpressive, modestly funded, powerless though your congregation is – are **“our hope”!**

You – for whose sake we have been hated, slandered, endangered, and forced to flee – are **“our joy”!**

You –over whom we lose sleep because you are vulnerable, because your **“faith”** is **“lacking,”** and frankly because some of you are irritatingly uncooperative – you are **“the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus”!**

{I Co 1:26-28} **“Not many of you [are] wise”** or **“influential”** or **“of [high] birth.”** To the contrary, **“by human standards”** you are a gathering of the **“foolish,”** the **“weak,”** and the **“lowly.”** Yet **“you are”** **“indeed”** **“our glory and joy”!**

? Who needs the Church? Paul does!

★ Who needs the Church? We do, and for the same reasons. Consider these points.

① {Heb 4:12; II Ti 3:16} First, although the text was not written *to* us, in God’s foresight and goodness it was written *for* us. Scripture is not an inert collection of dead words; it is **“alive and active.”** Even now the Holy Spirit is activating its power to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us **“in righteousness.”**

② {Php 4:1} Second, Paul also described the Christ Followers in the city of Philippi as his **“joy and crown.”** He wrote that epistle roughly ten years after First Thessalonians. Hence, **“our hope, our joy, [our] crown”**

is not limited to believers in one time and place. It expresses a larger reality.

③ {I Co 12:21; Eph 2:19} Third, Scripture insists on the mutual interdependence of the Church. We are a body of many parts, no one of which can say to the others, **“I don’t need you!”** We are **“members of [God’s] household,”** bound together by the presence and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

④ {I Co 12:26} Fourth, my condition, now and in eternity, depends to a degree on your condition, and vice versa. **“If one part”** of the body **“suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part”** is exalted with it.

■ Paul nails it in 3:8: **“Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”** His language is colorful, but not merely figurative; the strong, vibrant faith of the congregation in Thessalónika actually enabled the souls of Paul, Silas, and Timothy to thrive, to be more fully alive.

{I Th 1:3} This is my own testimony. **“Your work produced by faith”** provokes my faith-generated works. **“Your labor prompted by love”** multiplies my love-prompted labor. **“Your endurance inspired by hope in”** Messiah Jesus reinforces my hope-inspired endurance.

Of course, I need a congregation in order to function as a pastor. What is less obvious, but profoundly and equally true, is that apart from the gathered body I will be inhibited in fulfilling the more basic call to follow Jesus.

Cut off from his body I am like a severed organ.
Separated from his household, I am like a child lost in the wilderness.

I need the Church: not in theory, but in fact; not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete organism; not in general, but in specific. So unless the Lord leads me elsewhere (and I have no inkling that he is!) that means that I need you.

You also need me. And you need the rest of your sisters and brothers whom the Spirit has gathered together in this congregation.

Let's go back to where we started. Leaving one congregation for another is sometimes the right thing to do. Leaving God's gathered people never is.

Believers who say "I don't need the Church" are dead wrong. They deprive themselves and us of truer hope, deeper joy, and greater glory than they know.

★ Who needs the Church? I do. You do. Everyone does.

■ Hear again the word of the Lord: **"What is our hope, our joy...the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy!"**