I do a bit of reading between school and ministry and I frequently get asked to recommend books to people on various subjects, whether it's commentary on the Bible, a particular Christian issue, devotionals for quiet time, or the like. And usually I'm more than glad to recommend a book; however, there are a few books I've read that I wouldn't recommend for various reasons. Then there's a completely different category of books that are those I've read that I hope I never have to recommend. One of these is a small 100 page book that was written by the U.S. Department of Justice available free in print or for download, and you'll understand why as soon as I tell you the title. It's called "What to do when Your Child is Missing."

The book outlines key points for parents of missing children to hang on to in the process of searching for their child; things like "you're not alone", "Hope is essential", "Trust your feelings and share them with law enforcement officials", "Distribute pictures", "Keep your focus", and "Exercise caution". The final exhortation in the book is this; "Never stop searching." As an example, the book relays the stories of two children missing at four and six who were identified and reunited with parents well into their late teens and early twenties. The parents of Jacob Wetterling have been looking for him since 1989. They still post messages for him saying, "We love you, we are still looking for you and we will never, ever quit." Parents spare no expense or resource in the passionate attempt to reclaim their children, and God is no exception to this. God has lost children, children who have gone the wrong direction, lost their bearings, lost their understanding and purpose of this life and their vision of life to come. I want us to see the Story we've been following in Scripture all this year as God's three-phase search and rescue strategy to find his lost children and bring them back. The first phase was the nation of Israel, where God establishes a nation to show the world who He is, what His character looks like, and to call people back to Himself. The second phase is Christ Jesus. Jesus declared during His ministry, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus becomes the path for lost children to be brought back home to their Father. His death on the cross and His resurrection remove the obstacles of sin and death that stand between us and reconciled relationship with Him. Today in the Story, God introduces the third and final phase of his search and rescue plan; the church, and the church is unlike anything that has come before it, and is able to do something completely unique.

BREAKOUT QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU THINK OF THE WORD "CHURCH"? WHAT IMAGES OR IDEAS COME TO MIND?

This week we are also starting a series of 3 sermons that is going to be focused on the idea of covenant membership in the Shelbourne Street church of Christ. As most of you know, a membership charter document was finalized last month after congregational review, but many were wondering what the shape of taking our existing church through the orientation of membership identity and process would look like. After prayer and thought, the elders believe that here, in the sermon time, is going to be the best way for us to take the most people through that orientation and offer the invitation for us to covenant together. But in order for us to get a handle on the question "what is covenant membership in a local church body?" we have to start with a bigger question; "what is the
church?” There are many definitions in our minds and culture, and church has meant many different things in history, but if we go back to the roots of the church in Acts 2, we start with a unique community that is brought into being by an intentional act of the Spirit of God. It is a community that is formed around a singular idea; that through the Spirit's work in the salvation relationship present in each person of the church, the world around them would be exposed to the source of that salvation; the saving power of Christ Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to draw humanity back into relationship with God the Father.

All this is wrapped up in the word used to describe the church in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and the narrative of the New Testament; the word Ecclesia. When Jesus first reveals His Divine Nature in response to Peter's confession in Matthew 16:18, he says that the foundation of His identity as Messiah will be the building ground for a new institution of salvation for the whole world. Now there are a couple of images of institution in Jesus' time for religious work already; the temple and the synagogue. The temple is the seat of formalized worship, it's where sacrifices are offered to make people right with God, if only temporarily. Then there's the synagogue, a fixture of a time when the temple was destroyed, and it is a place of encouragement and education, a place where people learned what the Torah, the instruction of God was, and were encouraged in their identity as God's nation. But if you notice, Jesus doesn't say in Matthew "upon this foundation I will build my "hieros", my temple," and he doesn't say "I will build my synagogue". hieros meant a place of ritual sacrifice; synagogue means simply "a gathering together." Jesus instead chooses a Greek and Roman institution, but one with certain Jewish slant that his disciples were familiar with; "On this foundation I will build my ecclesia," which means "those who are called forth". Here's why this is such an important understanding to those who heard this word then, and what the idea of church should mean to us now.

Originally, the ecclesia was an assembly of Greek background. It was all the voting members of a city state in Ancient Greece, who would be called together at regular intervals, or in times of crisis, to make decisions on the direction of the city. It was considered to be the ultimate power in a city-state, even if it was a monarchy or oligarchy; it was the movement of the people to make the ideal rule a reality. Later, the Romans would take this idea and bring it under the authority of the Emperor; it was a fixture of Roman government well into the fourth century under Diocletian, but they changed the idea a bit; the ecclesia became the people who were called forth to hear the declaration of the will of the Emperor, or provincially, the will of the one acting as his representative, and then to go forth and enact that proclamation in their communities. This idea was particularly geared toward bringing the rule of Rome into areas where the rule of Rome was contested or was foreign by using loyal representatives to enact change as opposed to military might.

Now as this idea was morphing from a democratic Greek to a more imperial Roman thought, Jewish scholars were faced with translating the Law and the Prophets for all the Jews scattered around the Empire who now mostly spoke Greek instead of Hebrew, and as they were looking at how to describe the gatherings of Israel at Mt Sinai, they settled on this word, Ecclesia, because the image is almost identical. As the ultimate authority, God calls Israel forth from Egypt into the Wilderness to the foot of the mountain and makes His proclamation of covenant to them, and then they are called to go forth and make it a reality in their world.
So when Jesus uses this word in the context of establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, He's using a very familiar word to the disciples, but one that isn't focused on a place or an event; it's focused on the missional identity of a people. Jesus says that His proclamation as the Way, Truth and Life, as the path to the Father's reconciliation, is going to be the foundation for a community of loyal representatives that are called forth to make that proclamation a reality in their world by how they display the salvation of the King in their lives. And this is exactly what we see the Spirit doing in Acts 2. Sometimes I think we wonder about the jump from these 3000 people on Pentecost committing themselves as disciples of Jesus and the formation of the church, but the move is very intentional and very mission driven.

The reason why we exist as a church is universal; Jesus bestows a mission at the end of the Gospels that we are to go into our world and make disciples of Jesus as we go. But like any kingdom is broken down into specific communities, so is the kingdom of heaven. Why we do what we do is universal; Jesus gave it to everyone. What we do and how we do it are more specific questions, and these are given to us as local churches to be directed by the Spirit to achieve in various ways. In Acts 2 we see both this universal and specific aspect of membership; The Spirit moves in 3000 people to be baptized as a response to the Gospel, and through that they are added by Christ to the Universal church. This is a universal, not man-driven membership of salvation. But then as we heard in our reading this morning, in response to the identity bestowed on them through that salvation, and the mission that defines that identity, they then commit themselves to the Spirit-driven formation of intentional community (both a larger one in the Temple courts and the more localized house gatherings). This community does lots of things in regard to worshipping God, growing their sensitivity to the Spirit's direction, growing their maturity as disciples, etc., but those are never the reason for the ecclesia; the ecclesia, in a universal or local sense, always exists to enact the mission of the Gospel; that we are called forth to go into our lives with the Gospel and make disciples as we go. Yet to each local congregation is given the task of going forth with the proclamation of God and partnering with the Spirit to draw out the specific vision, mission and aim of that congregation in fulfilling the mission.

The single reason we have spent the last year as a congregation talking about and creating this covenant membership is because we want to be as effective as possible in fulfilling the particular vision, mission and aim that God has for us. We believe that this covenant membership is an implement that exists to help us envision and act out these things more effectively to the glory of God. And this has been a congregational effort from the beginning. If you remember, we began this conversation in a series of interviews with about 35 of us back in the summer of 2013. Out of that grew a burden in the hearts of the leadership that we should explore this further, but not as a directive handed down by the leadership, but as an invitation to the congregation to define what covenanting membership in this congregation would look like. So we explored membership further together this past February with about 85 of us during our Town Hall Meeting on Membership, and then we came back to it again and had conversations about membership, vision and mission together during our all church retreat in April, and had about 120 of us in that conversation together. All that information was collected and reflected in the charter document we put out for review by the whole congregation in June, and was revised throughout the summer in response to feedback before it became the final document that is out in the foyer and on the website now. So this isn't a directive being handed down to us; it's not my vision, or the elders vision, it has been and continues to be the vision of the spirit working through all of us to invite us further into the mission and identity of the
ecclesia - those who are called forth into Victoria, BC to enact the Gospel in our lives.

In two weeks time, we are going to make that invitation official and invite all of us to covenant together in congregational membership. The declaration document is out in the foyer right now for you to look at so you know exactly what it says. Also, we have two other important documents for you to see; the final membership charter, so you know what it says, and the elder's covenant, so you know what the leadership has been covenanted with the congregation. Before we ask anyone to partake in this invitation, we want us all to know what the shape of that covenant is and what it looks like, how we are investing in one another. In the next two weeks, we're going to be exploring that covenant together, and I look forward to what God brings out of our hearts as we go there together.

One of the most captivating things for me about the first description of God's ecclesia is the way the mission of God unites so many different people. Like us, they come from a wide range of nationalities, backgrounds and cultures. They have different skills, gifts and understandings, but the picture in Acts 2 shows a particular kind of unity. You see, there are no singular pronouns in the description of the church; no one invested in the ecclesia stands apart from it. Instead, the church is not a collection of saved individuals congregating in a time or place; it is a community united in living in the presence and direction of the Spirit of God. That I think may be one of the things the world is waiting for the most; to see a community that is truly driven by the spirit of unity and the bond of peace that is only found in the transforming power of God.

For so many of us, I fear we have come to believe that times or places are sacred in Christianity; that this building is the "church", that this time we meet on Sunday is "church". God makes it clear that in the kingdom of God, times and places aren't sacred, people are sacred. And God isn't interested in making another temple or synagogue of us; He's interested in creating a people who are called forth together into our world, to be mobile temples of almighty God, living houses of His presence that can go wherever, whenever together. This is the membership we are called to, and that I'd like us to pray into right now.

PRAYER