

STUDY GUIDE

Monday, September 5 – Read Galatians 1:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3, 1 Peter 2:9-10. Often today, people use the word “church” to refer to a building or set of buildings, or even more abstractly, a legal entity like a denomination. But in the New Testament, “church” (Greek *ekklēsia*) meant “people gathered.” Tri-County Church in Pennsylvania gave all their members T-shirts. On the front, they said, “I don’t go to church.” On the back were the words, “I AM the church.” One pastor reminds the church, “When the building burns down, and the preacher leaves town, what you have left is the church.” What has helped you understand that, although you may “go to” the theater or a ball game, “church” is something you are, not somewhere you go? What altered ways of thinking or acting can make that understanding of church a reality for you? Moses received this message for Israel: “You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Peter 2:9-10 applied the same language to all of Christ’s followers. God’s church is not a set of policies or properties; it’s people (including you) who love and follow God. Are you up for the privilege and challenge of being “the church,” of representing God each day?

Tuesday, September 6 – Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, Ephesians 5:25-33. The Apostles’ Creed, like Paul, spoke of the church as “holy.” Sadly, for too many people, the word “holy” conjures images of stuffy, boring hypocrites. But Paul’s Greek words “express the idea that Christians ‘belong’ to God and are therefore set apart to serve God’s purposes alone....it is the idea of belonging to God, not that of sinlessness, that is important here” (Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians). Paul called the members of the Corinthian church “Those who have been made holy to God in Christ Jesus” (verse 2). The rest of the letter showed clearly that these people still had lots of room to grow spiritually. How clearly do you sense that as you choose to follow Christ, you are “holy,” part of God’s family, even when you still have room to grow? We usually read Ephesians 5:25-33 as just instruction about marriage. But verse 32 shows that Paul was equally eager to use a really good marriage to show how Jesus cared about and cherished the church. Scholar William Barclay wrote, “Christ loved the Church, not that the Church might do things for him, but that he might do things for the Church.” How does Christ’s self-giving love help to define (or redefine) what it means to be “holy”?

Wednesday, September 7 – Read 2 Corinthians 11:22-28, Romans 16:3-4, 16. Some “super-apostles” (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:5) in Corinth claimed that they were a cut above the weak and unimpressive (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:10-12) apostle Paul. But after listing the many trials and challenges he’d faced, he listed as his greatest challenge his daily concern “about all the churches.” The Greek *katholikos*, reflected in the Apostles’ Creed, meant “universal.” Each local congregation, large or small, was part of “all the churches,” of the one church that loved and served God. In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, who shared a trade with him (cf. Acts 18:3) and became dear friends and co-workers. In Romans 16:3-4, Paul wrote that they had “risked their own necks” for his life. But that went beyond personal help—he said “all the churches of the Gentiles” thanked God for them. In what ways do you find your concern and interest extending beyond your own congregation to “all the churches” who love and serve God?

Thursday, September 8— Read John 13:34-35, 15:9-12. John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, visited a "band" (i.e. small group) of coal miners. He wrote in his journal, "No person ever misses his band or class; they have no jar of any kind among them but with one heart and one mind ‘provoke one another to love and to good works.’" This group of plain working people, Wesley said, could be “a pattern” for all Methodists. Wesley took his cue from Jesus, who saw “the church” as people defined by love. Love, he said, was how others could recognize his disciples. A non-religious friend you invite to join your small group says, “I don’t know. Churches make so many claims. How do I know you and your group are on the right track?” What do you say? What does it take for you to live into Jesus' way of answering that question: “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other”? John 15:9 started with ten transforming words from Jesus: "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." Just as the moon reflects the sun’s light, our love for others is a reflection of God’s love for us. How does God's love for you motivate you to love more and more? In what practical ways do you live out your loving commitment to God and others? When and how do you commit time and energy to those you love?

Friday, September 9 – Read Acts 4:32-37, 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, 26-27. Acts 4 reported that the early Christians shared assets. This was not out of a secular socialist ideology, but was an expression of shared love and caring. 1 Corinthians 12 was the first place where the Bible talked at length about the church as “the body of Christ.” Paul’s image was evocative—if you’ve ever had a cut finger, an aching tooth or a bad back, you know that in our physical body it’s a fact that “if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it” (verse 26). Paul said that is how it is—how it needs to be—in the body of Christ. Acts says these Christians were “one in heart and mind.” But as we read more of their story, we realize that those words do not mean they always agreed! What do you think Luke was trying to convey through the phrase? How much spiritual power could be set loose if, at Covenant and beyond, Christians again became of “one heart”? How might we work with God toward that end? “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it,” Paul wrote. In living as “parts of each other,” which do you find easier—to suffer with someone else who is suffering, or to celebrate when someone else gets the glory? What inner fears or messages make the other part harder for you? How can you open yourself to God’s power to make both parts of Paul’s picture a reality in your life?