

# Starting Out - “What is Church?” Acts 2:36-47 Ecclesiology

Acts 2:36 ¶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Acts 2:37 ¶ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Acts 2:40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”

Acts 2:41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

Acts 2:43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

Acts 2:44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

Acts 2:45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and **distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.**

Acts 2:46 And day by day, **attending the temple together and breaking bread** in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

Acts 2:47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

## Series in Context

11/4 Starting Out - “What is Church?” Acts 2:36-47 Ecclesiology

18/4 Reaching Out - “What can I offer?” Acts 3:1-10 Evangelism

25/4 Speaking Out - “How can I Respond?” Acts 3:11-26 Repentance

2/5 Speaking Up - “What should I say?” Acts 4: 5-22 Responsibility

9/5 Watching Out - “How can I serve?” Acts 4:24-37 Provision

On too long church sermons: "The mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure." - Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh

We are starting our new series in Acts today, exploring the role of the church and our places within that Reaching Out, Speaking Out, Speaking Up and Watching Out. Today we are "Starting Out" looking at the church, the study of which theologians refer to as ecclesiology, but don't worry too much about that.

## What is the church?

We get multiple different pictures of what the church is throughout the new testament. The bible talks about the church as "a household (for which eating together is a key activity), a temple, a kingdom, a school, a priesthood. It [talks about the church being] worldwide and local, one but diverse, selected but outreaching, inclusive but holy."<sup>1</sup>

Today we are first going to position our understanding of church within the broader narrative of scripture. Then we will look at the four ways the bible uses the word church, before finally focusing most of our attention on the four practices of a church that Luke sets out for us right at the beginning of Acts in chapter 2, verse 42.

## Church Contextually

Although the OT focused on God's relationship with specific individuals it was always within the context of the People of God. "You will be my people and I will be your God."

The church is the natural next step of Israel. The promises foretold in the OT have now been fulfilled/are being fulfilled in Christ.

As NT Wright puts it in his book Surprised by Hope:

"... the resurrection... is for Luke.. the fulfilment of the ancient scriptural promises on the one hand, and the beginning of God's worldwide mission on the other."<sup>2</sup>

It's why we see no distinction between Israel and the Christians in the early part of Acts.

- Christians go to the temple (Acts 3:1-10)
- Paul preaches in the synagogues everywhere he travelled (e.g. Acts 13:14-48).

The point here is important, and it is one of continuity. The church is not something completely new that emerged in the NT.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, Biblical Theology, 361.

<sup>2</sup> NT Wright, Surprised by Hope, p.250

The resurrection is the point where Israel, the people of God, starts to become the church. Church is the natural progression of God's plan since the beginning of time. When we see the word church used in the new testament, what does it refer to?

## Church Specifically

There are four meanings or uses of the word church that we find in our study of the bible:

### Invisible Church

All christian throughout all of time "invisible church". Ephesians 5:25 NRSV: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the **church [all christians, across all time]** and gave himself up for her,". "The invisible church is the church as God sees it."<sup>3</sup>

### Universal Church

All those christians on earth at this point in time. 1 Corinthians 4:17: "For this reason I sent[a] you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every **church [all churches, on the earth]**."

### The Local church

Those visibly gathered in a local setting for worship and ministry. Rom. 16:5: "Greet also the **church [local church]** in their [Priscilla and Aquila's] house."

### The church within the church

Church is a space where believers and those exploring the claims of christianity can gather together. The Bible is clear that we can't know the state of anyone else's heart. The parable of the weeds, Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43. The church within the church is referring to those who believe within that local church context.

The church is the continuation of God's plan and in the bible the word church can refer to one of four different meanings. What makes a church a church?

## Practices of the Church

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted** themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

Acts 2:44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

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<sup>3</sup> Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem, p.855

Devoted/steadfast

4342 /proskartereō means, "to continue to do something with intense effort, despite difficulty.

- Apostles Teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of Bread
- Prayer

Alongside these four areas I have four questions for you to reflect on.

## Apostles Teaching

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...**

A church should teach what the apostles taught. Our role as a church is to teach the apostles teaching which is now captured within the bible. Our role as members of the church is the listen, learn, reflect and apply the teachings of God's word to our everyday lives. We should desire to grow in our understanding of God through the teaching of his word.

Your role as the congregation is to hold anyone who stands at the front to account for what they are saying. Does this reflect the teaching of the apostles?

The sermon is not a time just to listen, but to be actively seeking God's truth. I can promise you two things: 1) I won't always get it right, 2) you won't always agree with me (that's okay). However, I do seek to be faithful to the text and to point you towards Christ.

In a culture that encourages us to define our own truth, our own picture of what is right and wrong, the christianity we acknowledge our inability to do exactly that, and our need for God.

*Q1: Are you earnestly seeking to grow in your knowledge of God?*

Am I growing? If not, what needs to change? As you grow, you'll discover questions, have doubts and maybe even raise concerns. Excellent!

St Paul's is a church that takes theological enquiry seriously. Our journeys of exploration and enquiry are not meant to be done alone. Which brings us onto point 2:

## Fellowship

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted themselves to...** the **fellowship**...

The concept of a communal life is difficult to grasp at the moment in the situation we find ourselves in. Brothers and sisters it may be hard, it may have to look different, but an important mark of a church in the communal life we have together.

The word translated as fellowship, *Koinonia* is a Greek word, which means communion, joint, participation, a collection, a contribution. It's a word that means an intimate sharing of one's self with another. Are we able to be open and honest with each other? To share when we are struggling? To celebrate and commiserate together?

One of the Apostle Paul's favourite expressions is "one another":<sup>4</sup> (*12 - fill in the blank/response?*)

Romans:

- **We are members of one another** (Rom 12:5, Eph. 4:25)
- **To live in harmony** with one another (Rom 12:16)

Thessalonians:

- We are to build up one another (1 Thess 5:11, Rom 14:19)
- To love one another (1 Thess 3:12, 4:9, 2 Thess 1:3, Rom 13:8)
- To pursue one another's good (1 Thess 5:15)

Ephesians:

- To bear with one another (Eph 4:2),
- To be compassionate and forgiving to one another (Eph 4:32, Col 3:13)
- To submit to one another (Eph 5:21)
- To be devoted to one another (Eph 5:21)

Corinthians, Galatians and Philipians

- To care for one another (1 Cor 12:25),
- To have high regard for one another (Phil 2:3)
- To bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)

Fellowship, community, one another-ness stands in stark contradiction to our western ideal of radical individualism. The individual is overemphasized in our culture. Individuals are important. In Christianity, however, we find a healthy balance of both the individual and the community.

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<sup>4</sup> Biblical Theology, John Goldingay, p.366

*Q2: Are you participating in the communal life of the church? Are you contributing towards, and receiving from it?*

It is still okay not to feel comfortable attending our larger gatherings. However, this does not mean you have to be isolated from all forms of fellowship. Instead, invest in other ways of connecting with your church family in this season. Whether that's 1-to-1 or in groups, on the phone, or in person. I joined the wonderful team yesterday that keeps our gardens looking so amazing. That is part of church right there.

If you don't know how you can contact Stephanie in the office, we will find a way that works for you.

## Breaking of Bread

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread...**

### **Story - Post-Christmas Down, bubbling:**

I remember feeling particularly down towards the end of January, early february. I'd gone from having other people living alongside me at Christmas to, zero in-person contact for over a month. God reminded me in that time of his words to Adam in Genesis "It is not good for... man to be alone." Shortly after that period of feeling rather low I bubbled up with Simon, Anna, Ben and James. I can't tell you how much that means to me. To gather together every week, to simply share a meal, to fellowship together.

Here we have the daily practice combining the sacred (Lord Supper) and the secular (simple act of eating) in the early church. Then, towards the end of Acts we see the practice of Holy Communion emerging and moving to become a weekly part of church gatherings.

I'm sure some of you have wondered why we stopped communion completely during the lockdown. Some churches have encouraged people to do communion at home, the Anglican church did not. From my perspective communion is never an individual act, but always a corporate act.

When we share in communion, we share in the **body** of Christ. "Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread".

We break bread as "an expression not only of the death of Christ for our sins, but also of the sharing of bread between those who have and those who have not."<sup>5</sup> The symbolism is not quite the same on our own, in our own homes.

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<sup>5</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 93.

That is why in normal circumstances we have the practice of communion by extension - to bring the bread to those in our church who cannot partake in person.

*Q3: Are you breaking bread with fellow Christians? As the long down eases, how am I being intentional, and staying safe?*

## Prayers

Acts 2:42 ¶ And they **devoted themselves to... the prayers.**

An integral part of church is corporate, as well as individual prayer.

Tim Keller writes: "Prayer is both conversation and encounter with God. . . . We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence."<sup>6</sup>

As a church we should be pursuing a deepening relationship with God the father where in this moment all that God has done, and all that God will do comes together. We acknowledge the role of God in our lives and His Spirit's ability to influence and change the world around us.

In a moment Anne is going to join me at the front, to lead us in prayer. I would like to ask you, those who are able, to stand with her. When we pray corporately, Anne isn't praying alone for us. She is leading our community, in prayer. Speaking on behalf of each of us.

Megan Hill says: "In praying together, we nurture our relationship with other Christians, uniting our hearts even as we unite our voices (Acts 4:24), together exalting our common Savior and together bearing one another's burdens."<sup>7</sup>

"We offer prayers for our own needs and the needs of the world. When we do this we join our prayers – thin and weak as they often are – with the great hymn of praise of the Church in both earth and heaven, in time and in eternity..."<sup>8</sup>

*Q4: Are you intentionally developing your relationship with God through prayer?*

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Keller, Prayer, (P.5)

<sup>7</sup> Megan Hill, Praying Together, P17

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/going-church>

## Conclusion

Why are these four elements so integral, so important to what constitutes church? Human beings are creatures of habit. Our actions shape us, form us, mould after what we value.

When we sit and listen to the word of God we are reminded that God is truth. We are countering the narrative of culture that our reality is defined by ourselves alone and instead receiving the truth from God in whose image we have been made.

*Q1: Are you earnestly seeking to grow in your knowledge of God?*

We participate in fellowship which reminds us of the needs of others, submerges us in the lives of those not like us. In the Church of England's 2020 vision statements it calls for us to better reflect the Universal Church, a church that is diverse, both in people and expressions. A church that is missional and orientated outwards towards others.

*Q2: Are you participating in the communal life of the church?*

We break bread together to remind us of the sacrifice that Christ made for us. The eucharist reminds us of our need for God, and how we are one body. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt. We look back to the past, and forward to all God has promised to bring about.

*Q3: Are you breaking bread with fellow Christians?*

We pray, we commune with God, we lament as a people in suffering, in mourning, and in praise. Continuously reminding ourselves of our need to partner with God in fulfilling the mission of His Church.

*Q4: Are you intentionally developing your relationship with God [through prayer]?*

Justin Welby in his book *Reimagining Britain*:

“The principal role of the churches is to be witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ. As such they are to seek to draw those who do not know the love of God... into confident experience of that love. They do that by their prayers, their speaking, and their own love expressed in action... Faith cannot be sealed off from daily life.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Justin Welby, *Reimagining Britain*, P.253-254