



A twelve-part teaching series
by Rev. Robert Griffith

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'Being the Church' – Part 1

'Finding God in Exile'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

There is nothing good about the global pandemic we are facing as I begin this new teaching series. It has brought pain, death and economic hardship to almost every country in the world. The reaction from some Governments may one day prove to have been extreme, but to deny the threat of the Covid-19 virus is to deny reality. God has not brought this disaster upon us and nor was God taken by surprise. He is doing what God always does in times of trouble - He is bringing good from bad, hope from despair and purpose from tragedy. Every cloud has a silver lining when we trust in God and there has been a silver lining to this massive cloud for the Church.

Before this pandemic the global reach of the Christian Church and our presence on the internet was moderate, but hundreds and thousands of congregations had little or no online ministry and only engaged with the people who walked in the door of their Church building each week. In less than six months, we have now seen an explosion of Christian content online and the gospel of Jesus Christ is reaching millions more people than it was before.

Many Churches have been forced to take their worship and teaching services online and in so doing they have opened their doors to the whole world. Many congregations have reported that they are now connecting with a lot more people each week online than they ever did in person before. Whilst we lack the fullness of the Church experience because of a lack of face-to-face fellowship, we have nevertheless 'enlarged our tents' in ways which may (and probably should) challenge how we 'do Church' in a post-pandemic world.

This whole experience has forced many Church leaders to face a really important question: **What does it mean to truly be the Church?** That is the question I would like us to explore and wrestle with in this teaching series. Of course the best place to start in that exploration is way back at the beginning. In Acts chapter 2 we have a snapshot of the birth and infancy of the Church which Jesus promised to build. Here we see what the Christian Church looked like before we messed it up. This is how the followers of Christ lived and ministered before the Roman Emperor Constantine dragged us away from our daily worship, our home group meetings, fellowship meals and daily times in prayer, and shoved us into pagan halls where we held events and gatherings. Over just a few decades, the entire concept of the Church was changed.

That was a couple of hundred years after Christ walked the earth and that was the point in our history where the spiritual, God-ordained, intrinsic, relational concept of 'being the Church' was replaced by a secular, extrinsic, activity-based concept of 'going to Church.' What began so clearly as a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week lifestyle flowing from a personal relationship with a living, present God through His Spirit, sadly became a series of events and then a place we 'go to' once a week or maybe more if we are really committed. Of course all that changed in March 2020 when we were told to stop 'going to Church' and most of our buildings have been closed and empty ever since.

Many have grieved the loss of those gatherings in our Church buildings and that's understandable because a lot of very special things have happened in those places and I hope we can return and worship without restrictions again soon. However, I also hope we don't return before this 'exile' has done its work in our hearts and before God reminds us what it really means to *be the Church*.

When the Israelites finally returned to Jerusalem after their exile, they were not the same people. They had been forced to find God in exile - outside their temple - something they never dreamed of before. I pray that God's people today across the world will have also found God in exile outside our buildings at this difficult but important time. So let's ask the question together over the coming weeks: What does it mean to truly be the Church?

Now when the resurrected Christ spoke to His disciples just before leaving this earthly kingdom, He told them to wait. Wait for what? For the promised Holy Spirit. In essence Jesus was saying, *"I have called you, equipped you, taught you and led you these past few years as a man. However, if my kingdom purpose is to be fulfilled across the whole world, I can no longer lead you in this way. I promised I would be with you always - to the ends of the earth - and I will. But that can no longer be in the flesh, it must be in and through the Holy Spirit."*

So on the day we call Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ was released in the hearts of hundreds and then thousands of people and the Church as we know it (or should know it) was born. The final verses of Acts chapter 2 show us what this new spirit-led, relational Christian community looked like. That snapshot of the Church is found in Acts 2:42-47.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Now I have read those words thousands of times and, after all these years, the hair still stands up on the back of my neck! I don't know why. Perhaps it's simply because when I see who we once were, I have renewed hope that we could be that community again today. But I must confess that as I get older and my years in ministry grow in number, that sense of hope can sometimes find itself under attack as bewilderment and despair rise up around me. I'm a 'glass-half-full' kind of person, I am not discouraged easily, but I also have to face the facts. I have to accept that this amazing portrait of what 'being the Church' really looks like has been in our face in the book of Acts for 2,000 years and yet the majority of people who identify as active Christians are still just 'going to Church' and wondering why there are less and less people when they get there or why the ones who are there don't behave or live or worship like those who have been powerfully, gloriously and permanently set free by the living, reigning, present Christ in their hearts and in their midst.

It says in Acts 2 that in this Church which Jesus was building, *"everyone was filled with awe ..."* It was a miracle of God. Previously antagonistic, hostile people were brought together in love by the power of the gospel. The sense of anticipation and awe at the movement of God's Spirit among the people was palpable. It was profound. It was tangible. God was manifesting His presence, His power and His Kingdom purposes right in their midst; in their homes; around their dinner tables; on the streets; in the marketplace. They could see the vision and the mission of Christ exploding before their eyes. In fact, they were part of it - every single day. *That's* what 'being the Church' really looks like!

In Proverbs 29:18 we read a simple, yet profound truth, *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."* The word 'vision' has been given all kinds of meanings in the modern world and most of them have nothing to do with this verse. But when the NIV Bible was written, the translators tried to be more accurate to the original meaning of the text and this verse became, *"Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint."*

What the King James Version translated 'vision', the NIV translates 'revelation.' You see, vision can (and most often does) come from us. But revelation comes from God. Now this is not just an issue about how a verse is translated. This verse, when properly understood, becomes an explanation for nearly all of the Church's highs and lows over our entire history. When the day by day revelation of God is not continually being sought, discerned and applied, then we 'cast off restraint.' We go our own way - tragically thinking it's God's way because we opened our 'vision' meeting in prayer! When Eugene Petersen wrote *The Message*, a contemporary translation of the Bible, he unpacked this verse even more and made it abundantly clear what Proverbs 29:18 really means for us today:

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what He reveals, they are most blessed."

If the early Church had persevered in 'attending to what God was revealing', then they would have said "*No thanks,*" to Constantine in 313AD when he signed the Edict of Milan and declared that Christianity was now the official religion of Rome. They should have seen through this 'victory' and realized that everything was about the change - and not for the better. They should have remained a loose movement of persecuted pilgrims who worshipped, fellowshipped and ate together in each others' homes, devoted themselves to prayer and New Testament teaching as they continued to infiltrate every area of society - seven days a week.

If the Church was attending to what God was revealing it would not have allowed Rome to dictate how it behaved and operated and the legalism and corruption which eventually strangled the Church would not have emerged so there would have been no need for the Reformation over a thousand years later. In fact, I believe you can trace every stumble, every error, every backward step, every loss to the enemy of truth back to the Church failing to see what God was doing. Worse still – not looking for God at work in the first place!

Now it's clear that the people mentioned in Acts 2 saw what God was doing and so they didn't stumble for a very long time! They attended to what God was revealing and they were blessed beyond measure. I encourage you to read though the book of Acts in one sitting when you have time and something will be very clear to you: God was running the show! What they preached; when they preached; to whom they preached; who they healed and who they didn't heal; what towns they went to and how long they stayed. Everything was under the day by day direction of God through His Holy Spirit and the more they attended to what God was doing and revealing to them, the more they grew and God's kingdom exploded across the world.

So fast forward more than 2,000 years and in so many areas of the Church we are stumbling over ourselves and not seeing what God is doing or hearing what God is saying. But even in that statement there is hope – great hope. In spite of our actions or inaction, God is still speaking, for those who have ears to hear. God is still revealing to those who have eyes to see. God is still active and moving among us and fulfilling His purposes. God has never left us – no matter how wrong we get it or how often we do it our way and not His way – He never goes away and He never stops speaking. We just stop listening. Sadly, some of us never even started and have no expectation whatsoever of God speaking to us.

For many years now I have encouraged people to ask two questions every morning as their feet hit the floor and they begin each new day. "*What are You doing, Lord?*" and "*How can I be part of it today?*" That's what I've been trying to do my entire ministry and I believe it reminds us who we are and Whose we are. I believe the more we ask those questions and learn to discern the voice of God as He answers us – the more we will see the huge difference between 'going to Church' and truly 'being the Church.'

It is my prayer that the Spirit of God will lead us all to the point where we stop going to Church! Yes, you heard me correctly. I want you to stop 'going to Church.' The term itself is grammatical nonsense and theological heresy. We don't 'go to' Church. We are the Church and we need to learn once more how to truly 'be' the Church. There are thousands of signs in front of Church buildings across the world during this pandemic which read, "*Our building is closed, but our Church is open!*" Saying that is easy. Living that is the challenge we all face.

So as we begin this teaching journey together today whilst still in this Covid-19 exile, I want to make a bold promise to you: If you truly open your mind and heart and actually engage with this teaching - by that I don't mean just gloss over it and take it in at a cerebral level, but actually engage personally with what is being shared as though it is a word from God directly to you - if you do that, regardless of your age, your experience, your gifts or your talents, I can guarantee that you will be transformed by God into the person He has called you to be. Then, as we all do that, the Church which Jesus promised to build will be seen in all her glory as we let go of the Church we have been struggling to build in Jesus' name.

Trust me when I say that you will be amazed at what God can achieve through you and the believers around you when you decide you want to stop just going to Church and **start being the Church!** But we need to work with God here and go looking for His hand at work and listen for His voice to us. These sermons need to be studied and prayed through - not just read once and discarded. I would strongly suggest when you have made your way to the end of this series that you go back and work through the sermons again one by one, in prayer, asking God to reveal His word to you today. Download the PDF's and print them off and grab your pen and highlighter and go to work! If you choose to spend that time and let God really drive His truths home in your heart, then I can guarantee that 'being the Church' will not be a chore or an expectation or a religious activity - it will be a spontaneous reality as the life of Christ explodes within you.

Then, before we know it, the book of Acts will no longer be a dusty historical account of where this all began, it will once again be a commentary on where we are now, and who we are becoming as we give the Church back to God and watch Him do today and tomorrow, what He did back then. That is my only agenda. That is the reason I preach - to lead people to the God Who still speaks, still heals, still transforms lives and whole communities. Everything I do, say, preach and pray is directed towards that end. I truly believe God is always ready to redeem what we've lost and give us the only thing we ever truly needed: Jesus - the living, present, Lord of the Church and the One Who promised to build His Church, right here, right now, if we let go the reigns and trust Him.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to us today.

'Being the Church' – Part 2

'It's all Greek to me!'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our first sermon I encouraged you to stop 'going to Church' and start 'being the Church' and I explained what I meant by that. Of course I was not suggesting we stop gathering together. In fact, the more we understand what *being the Church* really means, then the more important our gatherings will become. What needs to change is our perspective and our understanding of where these gatherings belong in the much larger picture of the Church. Some have suggested that it needed a global pandemic and the forced closure of all our Church buildings for an extended period of time before we started to seriously explore what being the Church really means. Perhaps that is true.

Of course, **the Church is not where we go or what we do - the Church is who we are.** We will never change the world by 'going to Church' but we can certainly change the world by 'being the Church.' In fact, that is our calling, our purpose and the reason the Church exists. As we saw in the last sermon, in the closing verses of Acts chapter 2 we have a snapshot of what the Church first looked like and we will be looking more closely at those verses in this series because they are foundational.

However, I want us to understand something even more foundational first. If we want to embrace what 'being the Church' really means then we have to understand what the Church is – or is supposed to be and what the Church is not. There is a lot to learn about the Church, but sadly, there are some things we need to unlearn as well.

So where do we go to discover the truth about the true Church – the Church which Jesus established and has been building all these years? The Bible? Of course that's where we go – and rightly so. However, on this issue, that presents us with a significant problem and what I am about to share with you is really important. What is the oldest English Bible Translation we have in the modern era? The King James Translation. Do you know when it was written? It was written over a seven year period and was completed in 1611. Then for over 350 years this was the Bible used by the English speaking world and still today there are millions of Christians who use this translation.

Now we need to understand that the Church had changed a lot before this translation was even published. As I've mentioned before, the Church we read about in the book of Acts changed dramatically less than 300 years after it was formed. In February 313AD, Christianity was declared the official religion of Rome and Emperor Constantine signed the infamous Edict of Milan. At that point everything changed.

Within a few short years the followers of Jesus were no longer meeting in homes and spreading the gospel through an integrated network of relationships and house Churches. They were now part of a State-sanctioned institution and the entire ministry of the Kingdom of God soon centred around gatherings in buildings each Sunday and that's the way it stayed.

So when a group of men (there were no women) sat around a table 1,500 years later debating the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek text as they translated the Scriptures into English, the Church was already very different and they had centuries of tradition flowing through their veins and programming their minds. That partially explains what I am about to tell you. You see, before we examine what we think the Bible says about the Church we need to understand something which, for some of us may be confronting, but it's really important. The term 'Church' is not actually in the original Greek text.

When the translators of the King James Bible inserted the term 'church' in many places, they were in error. They broke some basic rules of translation and inadvertently **they allowed their experience and understanding of what the Church had become, to influence their description of how the Church really was in the beginning and should still be today.** The consequences of their actions have been very significant. They ended up presenting an alternative picture to what God originally had in mind for the Body of Christ.

Before I go any further, I want to say that I'm not anti-anything and nor am I starting any revolutions or talking about conspiracy theories or undermining the authority of Scriptures. Quite the opposite, in fact. Critically analyzing translations is really important if we want to be true to the original authors and hearers of the Scriptures. I'm sure that all of us want to see the Church of Jesus Christ fulfill the kingdom purposes of God and to see every disciple of Christ reach their potential and be part of the mission of Christ on earth. There is no higher calling. But clearly, that is not happening right now. Look around. Read the news. Examine the world in which we now live. You don't need to be a scholar or a theologian to work that out. The followers of Jesus, whom we call the Church, don't seem to be making much of a dent in the rapid secularization of society and the spread of evil. So something needs to change. Something that is wrong needs to be made right. Something that is missing needs to be found. Something that is holding us back needs to be removed.

The first thing that needs to change is our understanding of the word 'church' in the Bible. The King James translation uses the word 'church' 112 times, having translated the Greek word *ecclesia* to mean *church*. But let's look at the actual word Church in our language. The word comes from the Old English and German word pronounced *kirche*. In Scotland and Northern England it was *kirk* and it meant what we think of as Church. In the earlier Greek it was pronounced *ku-ri-a-kos* or *ku-ri-a-kon*. This is a word that doesn't even remotely resemble the Greek word *ecclesia* which has been translated Church in almost all places. Now the meaning of *ku-ri-a-kos* is understood by its root, *ku-ri-os*, which means *lord*. Therefore, *kuriakos* (i.e., 'church') means '*pertaining to a lord.*' It refers to something that pertains to, or belongs to, a lord.

So the word Church would have been an acceptable translation for the Greek word *kuriakos*. But the translators inserted the word 'Church' in the English versions, even though they were not translating the Greek word *kuriakos*. The word they were supposed to be translating was *ecclesia*. Now even the most liberal translator today would never regard *Church* as an acceptable translation for the Greek word *ecclesia*. This is an entirely different word with an entirely different meaning than *kuriakos*.

The Greek word *kuriakos* actually only appears in the New Testament twice. It can be found first of all in 1 Corinthians 11:20 where it refers to 'the Lord's supper,' and once again in Revelation 1:10 where it speaks of 'the Lord's day.' In both of those cases, it is translated *the Lord's* - not *Church*. Even though the word does not appear again in the New Testament the word *Church* as it has come to be known in the English language has replaced *ecclesia*.

Does any of this really make a difference? Yes it does - if we want our understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ to be what Matthew, Luke, Peter, John and Paul envisioned when they each referred to what we think of as 'Church.' So, today we are going to look at the correct meaning of the word, *ecclesia*. This Greek word is found in the New Testament approximately 115 times, and that's just in this one grammatical form. It appears also in other forms. There are three exceptions in the King James translation where it is properly translated. They are found in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. Here the translators used the word *assembly* instead of *Church*. But the Greek word is exactly the same as the other 112 entries where *Church* was used. In Acts 19, *ecclesia* is a town council, a civil body of people gathering together in Ephesus.

So you can see that *Church* wouldn't work there as they had nothing to do with gathering as a body of believers in Christ. And yet still 112 other times the translators used the word *Church* when translating *ecclesia*. That should never have happened. The Greek word *ecclesia* is correctly defined as 'the called-out (ones)' The term 'ecc' in Greek means 'out' and 'kaleo' means 'call.' So what did the writers of the New Testament mean when they used the word *ecclesia* to describe the followers of Jesus? Well we already know that many Christian words we use today already existed before Christ and were just given a new meaning when the Church was born. For example the Greek word *euaggelion* is translated *gospel* and simply meant a proclamation. But the New Testament writers used that word to talk specifically about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So when they chose the word *ecclesia* to describe this new community which came into being on the Day of Pentecost, what did they mean? They obviously meant a community of believers in Christ summoned by God and called out (by Him) from among the Jewish and Roman peoples to come together into a separate community under His Lordship. It meant an autonomous body of believers under the Kingship of Jesus Christ. They would bow to no other king but Jesus. They would obey the rules of the nation so long as they did not conflict with their obedience to their King. They would serve no one but the Lord. That's why these same believers often ran into trouble with rulers, whether it be the Sanhedrin or later kings and rulers. They were arrested, crucified and martyred because they served only King Jesus and not Caesar. This would have been seen as a declaration of war or treason. Such is the way of the 'called out ones' - such is the true Church. Those who came to the Lord had to understand that they were making a serious choice. But they valued an eternity with the Lord over whatever it would cost them in this life.

So Paul and Silas were not 'Church planters' as so many have called them. These men were Kingdom builders! They were not advocating that people find a place to be separate and not influence anyone around them, meeting for a few hours on the weekend, singing a few songs, hearing a sermon and then going home. These men were dethroning Caesar and the whole Roman governmental structure with its Empire class structure. Paul and others taught the principles of a theocracy where God alone ruled as benevolent but holy Sovereign and of family values and the standards of justice and equality, all of which God gave to Israel through Moses. This was a direct attack on the very foundation of Rome. This was now the work of the Almighty one-and-only God whom they would obey at all costs, even unto death, as their hearts responded to the call to become citizens of Christ's eternal Kingdom and join themselves to the *ecclesia* or community of believers who were 'called out' of the political and cultural status quo to serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

So you can see that the idea of the Church as a group of people meeting in a specific location (or building) as believers doesn't even come close to what the writers of the New Testament were thinking or living! Neither did it have anything to do with denominations of one group believing this but not that, which meant keeping their distance from their fellow believers based on those differences. It would have been heresy to even consider such divisions when the true Church was born. They were one in Christ - there was no other reality. If divisions arose, they sorted them out with firm, Godly leadership under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ sent the believers into the world just as His Father had sent Him. Therefore, it would not be surprising that He told His disciples "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you." (John 15:18). Now you can see why that would be so. Jesus came against the ungodly leadership that was functioning in the temple - men who had their own political agendas and power to protect. When you consider that the early believers for well over 200 years met in homes and were free in their associations with one another, we can see that to have their identity so connected with what takes place in a specific building where most 'Church business' takes place today, would enormously hinder their interaction with and identity within the community around them.

As you already know, the buildings that were instituted by the State and set up by Constantine in 325 A.D. changed everything. Not that buildings are bad. They provide a place for meeting, just as homes do. The buildings themselves are not the real issue, then or now. The problem is the whole idea of 'attending Church' with its rather predictable agenda as part of a non-interactive audience. That is what sucked the life out of the Body of Christ. Such a concept of Church cannot even be compared to the vital, alive, spontaneous, overflowing, passionate commitment to God and each other in the fellowship of 'the called out ones' who know they have been summoned by God to come out of the prevailing society into His Kingdom. History records that time and again they valued this calling more than their own lives.

So I ask you: do you think God might want to make some changes in the Church we see today before Christ returns? Is it possible that the mission of Christ cannot be fulfilled until we stop going to Church and start being the Church?

Now before you shout 'amen' to quickly, be warned, this is not going to be easy. The real Church I have just described isn't something we can simply say, "OK, let's be like that." It will take an internal work of the Holy Spirit, just as it did for the early believers. Our job is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, love each other with the love of Christ, and be available for God to speak to us, move in us and build that true Church, against which the gates of hell will not prevail. That may mean a complete re-think on our part concerning who we are and what being the Church really means for us.

Brothers and sisters, we live in exciting times. God is on the move. His Spirit is stirring in so many congregations across the world, both large and small, young and old. He is re-introducing His children to their roots. What I have been preaching for many years now is part of the wider matrix of what God is doing elsewhere also. Have we messed up? Yes, we have. Have we gotten it wrong more than we've gotten it right? Of course we have. Have we missed the essence of the New Testament view of the Church by not translating the original text well or not reading it with the Holy Spirit by our side? Most definitely. Can God fix all that and still fulfill His plan and purpose in us and through us? Absolutely!

When Jesus told His disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said that "*the Spirit will guide you into all truth.*" (John 16:13). That is exactly what the Holy Spirit will do, if we let Him. It doesn't matter how many times we get it wrong, we only have to get it right once and God can and will do immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine. That is His promise!

Friends I want to assure you that 'being the Church' is not complicated. It's not a mountain we can't climb or a river we can't cross. We have exhausted ourselves over many centuries now trying to grow the Church and build an institution – neither of which God ever called us to do! Let me stress that again: **We have exhausted ourselves over many centuries now trying to grow the Church and build an institution – neither of which God ever called us to do!**

God called us to BE. More specifically, God called us to be His. The rest is His job. Jesus Christ will build His Church, it was never our job. Jesus will advance His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven – we cannot do that. Our job is to make choices which are consistent with what the Church really is mean to be and let God do the rest.

Evangelism is not a task we are given to do – evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church. It is God Who adds to our number daily those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). Our job is to witness to the reality of Christ in us and then disciple those whom God awakens and draws into His eternal Kingdom.

In this teaching series I will not be giving you a list of things to do in order to be the Church. In fact, we may well discover a list of things we need to stop doing or stop believing! Because one of the greatest enemies to 'being' is 'doing' and our western culture has conditioned us from birth to do, do, do, do! God wants to change that, and if we let Him, then we will at last see the Church as it was meant to be. Until next time, I encourage you to meditate upon this simple, yet profound verse every day this coming week:

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what He reveals, they are most blessed." (Proverbs 29:18)

'Being the Church' – Part 3 *'The Church is not an Institution'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Several years ago I read a quote from Pope Francis from one of his sermons at the Vatican. I am sure there would be many things the Pope and I would disagree on, however, this one statement is not one of them. He was preaching about the Church and he made this simple statement: *"The Church is a love story, not an institution."* That quote caught my attention not only because it's a beautiful and accurate description, but because it came from the leader of the most institutionalized part of the Christian Church. However, it's a quote that sits well with Pope Francis who has been pushing against the confines, rules and practices of that institution throughout his whole life.

Of course, even though we speak of the 'institutional Church,' we need to remember that this is not the language of Scripture and it's a concept which would have been totally foreign, if not abhorrent, to those first Christians all those years ago. The early Church and the New Testament both focus on the relationships which lie at the heart of this community of faith we call the Church.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul talks about the Church as the 'Body of Christ', the 'Household of God' and the 'Family of God.' Peter refers to the Church as the 'Flock of God' and the 'People of God' and in Revelation, John says the Church is the 'Bride of Christ.' In Scripture, the Church is always depicted in terms of relationships. Relationships lie at the heart of the Church. These relationships are based on love, because God is love. So the Church is the 2,000 year old ongoing love story between God and His redeemed. In fact, the Church only succeeds to the extent that we respond in love to the love of God in Christ.

So let me ask you a personal question. Do you love Jesus? More importantly, do you know how much you are loved by Jesus? As a Christian are you caught up in this amazing love story? Our 'husband,' our 'bridegroom' sacrificed everything for us but do we live in the light of that love every day? Pardon me if this sounds like mushy nonsense, but it actually speaks to the very essence of being the Church. Can you remember one of the last conversations Jesus had with His close friend Peter? It was after Jesus had risen from the dead and He was on the beach one morning and He asked Peter a question. In fact He asked him three times in a row – just to make sure Peter understood. Jesus asked Peter, *"Do you love me?"* I find this fascinating. Here's Peter, upon whose confession Jesus said earlier He was going to build His Church. This is one of Jesus' last encounters with Peter before leaving forever in the flesh. I imagine Jesus could have asked Peter lots of questions at this vital moment. Questions like, *"Are you ready to lead these people? Do you remember what I taught you about making disciples? Do you know how to deal with those who come against you? ..."* I could think of a hundred important questions for a moment like this. But the only thing which Jesus thought was important to ask Peter before leaving him was a question about their relationship and He asked it three times: *"Peter, do you love me?"*

Our love relationship with Christ lies at the very heart of our identity as His followers, His disciples and the Church which bears His name. Everything begins and ends right here as we look Jesus in the eye and respond when He asks us, *"Do you love me?"* The Church is a not a gathering of people in a particular place or under a particular banner. It is most certainly not a group of people who subscribe to a particular doctrine – that's religion and God hates religion. That's what the Scribes and Pharisees had established when Jesus arrived and He blew all that out of the water entirely with His radical message of love and grace.

I love the Church Jesus is building from the depths of my being, but I have no affection whatsoever for the institution mankind has tried so hard to build. I genuinely love the Church; the community of God's people; the 'called out' ones who love Jesus and are committed to His ongoing mission on earth. I love the men, women, and young people with whom I have been able to share my life, worship and serve alongside in the name of Jesus.

For decades now we've heard the adage, "*the church isn't the building, it's the people.*" The current global pandemic and the closure of all Church buildings has thrust that statement in our face in an unprecedented way. Now we get to decide if we really believe it. Most of us recognize that the bricks and mortar structure isn't the church, but somehow we haven't had the same epiphany about the intangible structures, programs, regulations and activities of that institution. Whether we know it or not, in most peoples' imaginations the Church remains a collection of programs, committees, policies, teams, ministries, initiatives, budgets and events. Most people speak of 'the Church' the same way they speak of 'the government' - it's an organization with a hierarchy of leaders managing a structured program of activities.

I see this dichotomy most clearly when it comes to volunteer service. As Church leaders we often feel compelled to draw more people into the institution's programs to serve. Pastors and leaders scan the membership directory and mark possible recruits who are not presently 'serving the Church.' But where did we find such a concept? It most certainly was not in the New Testament – upon which we claim to base our entire lives and ministry. **We have never been called to serve the Church.** Even the now common labels we use for people such as the 'churched' or the 'unchurched' testifies to the centrality of the institution in our minds and in our mission. The whole 'Church growth' movement we experienced in the last couple decades of the twentieth century cemented this institutional mindset. When attendance at a Church gathering or activity is large we say, "*the church is growing,*" when attendance is low we say, "*the church is failing.*" But is that accurate? Is the real Church, the Body of Christ, the 'called out' ones who love Jesus, really growing or failing, or are we simply observing the rise or fall of a man-made institution? Can we even tell the difference anymore?

I know of some large churches with a really poor level of theological and relational maturity. All they really have is an attractive, successful program – not a healthy Church. I know of some pretty small and insignificant churches whose members have really grown in their faith and their understanding of the priority of relationships and the centrality of the Holy Spirit in all their activities and they are committed to the mission of Christ. Those people are far closer to the heart of the Church which Jesus promised to build and yet, they may be seen as small, insignificant or a failure in the eyes of those who focus on the institution.

I am not anti-institution. I believe structure is necessary. Some structure is good and some structure may even be God-ordained. We see evidence of a loose structure from the very foundation of the Church in Acts. But these structures always existed to serve the mission of Christ and they were always flexible and able to move and grow and adapt as the Holy Spirit led the people of God on a daily basis. **Our structures must always serve the mission of Christ and be subject to the Holy Spirit.** Today, it can often seem like God's people exist to serve the structures in the fulfillment of the mission of the institution which, more often than not, is simply to become a bigger institution!

Now I believe the ranks of those who love the Church but not the institution are growing. There's an increasing dissatisfaction among more mature believers toward the institution. I don't believe they're rejecting the Church like some people say they are. Studies show that these believers continue to grow spiritually by serving God and others and by developing meaningful relationships. In other words, they are growing by engaging with the real Church – which consists of people, not programs, relationships not religion. *That* is the Church which Jesus is building.

I am certainly not advocating the dismantling of the institution and nor am I advocating anyone should leave the institution. Sadly, that's a choice thousands of sincere Christians are making every day across the world – but that's the easy way out and I sincerely believe that is not what God is calling us to do. I pray that those people will reconsider and take the hard road and return to us so they can be part of the new day which is dawning for the Church.

It has taken me many years to work through this and it has been a real struggle at times. It even required me to step out of pastoral ministry completely for six years with no real commitment to return. I called it a sabbatical, but it could just as easily have been a permanent departure from the institution I had been part of for most of my life. Before I returned, I really needed God to make it clear to me that the institution we wrongly call 'Church' is not beyond reform. I needed to know it is not beyond hope. I needed God to call me back into those structures, back into that institution in order to be a change-agent as the entire Church as we know it is renewed, reborn and re-commissioned to fulfill the Kingdom purposes of God.

God made it clear to me that I can be a part of the institution we call 'church' and still faithfully pour my life into the real Church – which is God's called out people. In fact, the Lord made it very clear that it is simply not possible to change any system from the outside. Just as Jesus could not redeem and re-create humanity without becoming part of us, so too we cannot reform and re-create the Church by standing on the sideline yelling at the players on the field, hoping the outcome of the game will be different. The only way the game will change is by getting back on the field and staying there to show your teammates a better way and the real purpose of them being there.

Brothers and sisters, if we truly want to stop 'going to church' and start 'being the Church' then we need to accept that the majority of what we have experienced as 'church' throughout our lives is man-made and part of an organization, an institution we have built and it did not come from God or the New Testament! But somewhere, buried under all those structures, programs, regulations, activities and buildings is the Church which Jesus promised to build and God has called me to devote my life to finding that true Church and re-connecting God's people to its heart, which is the mission of Christ. To do that we need to get back the New Testament – and once again '*... devote ourselves to the Apostles teaching, to fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer ..*' (Acts 2:42) and re-capture the vision and the purpose of the Church Jesus birthed and promised to build.

What is the purpose of that Church? Why are we all still here? We are here to advance the Kingdom of God, by His grace and for His glory. What is the Kingdom of God? It is the rule and reign of Jesus Christ - as it has always been in heaven, so shall it increasingly be on earth. **The Church does not have a mission – Jesus Christ has a mission and that mission has a Church.** The mission of Christ is the only mission the Church has ever had. That's why Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples and teach them everything He has taught us. What did Jesus teach about more than anything else? The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Then He told His disciples to pray and believe that this Kingdom of heaven would increasingly come to earth: "*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...*"

It's all about the Kingdom of heaven breaking into the kingdom of this world. It has never been about 'converts' or 'members' of an organization. Our primary mission is not to grow an organization and call it Church. We are not called to recruit volunteers to a worthy cause. We are not called to be the social conscience of society. We are not called to be a refugee advocacy group, an environmental watchdog or campaigners for social action, justice and equality. As wonderful as those pursuits may be, none of them are the mission of Christ and yet that is where a growing number of Christians spend most of their time in the name of the Church. The mission of Christ is to make disciples and teach them everything Jesus has taught us.

What is a disciple? A disciple is someone who has met Jesus, has been overwhelmed by His love and grace, has fallen in love with Him, received His salvation, embraced His mission, and committed their earthly lives to its fulfilment in and through their own lives and their own circle of influence. How is that possible? By His grace, which He has lavished upon us in the life, death, resurrection and empowering presence of Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit. To what end do we do all this? The glory of God. The more we help Jesus usher in the kingdom of heaven right here and now, the more God is lifted up and glorified. The more God is glorified, the more He empowers the mission of Christ to reconcile His lost children to their heavenly Father.

So where do all those other noble causes fit into this purpose of the Church? Will we not still care about the marginalized and oppressed? Will we not still be concerned about our environment and about justice for all people? Of course we will – but none of that is the primary purpose of the Church. The mission of Christ is to advance the kingdom of heaven by introducing people to Jesus and making them His disciples. All manner of fruit will then flow out of the fulfilment of that mission – more fruit than we could ever imagine. All those social concerns and issues will be impacted as the fruit of the Gospel impacts our world around us. But the fruit is not the tree! Social action and advocacy must flow out of the gospel and the life of Christ in our midst - they should never replace the gospel. When they do, we are no longer part of the Church which Jesus is building – we are part of something else.

We must get back to the core purpose of the Church which is to join Jesus in His mission. We need to get back to the place where it's all about Jesus and His Kingdom rule and reign; where it's all about the gospel – the good news of Who Jesus is and what He has done and promised to do; where it's all about bringing heaven to earth which is what Jesus did when He was here and what He has commissioned us to continue doing.

That is why I will talk about the presence of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit all the time. That is why I will always be pointing you and anyone else who wants to listen, away from me, away from the institution of the church and towards God, Who is present and alive and real and active in our midst every day. What does all that look like? Well, strap yourselves in because that is the ride we will be taking together in this teaching series as we discover afresh, or perhaps for the first time, what *being the Church* really means. May God continue to open our minds and our hearts and give us the courage to truly be the Church of Jesus Christ in a needy world.

'Being the Church' – Part 4

'The Church is the Hope of the World'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

When it's functioning properly, the Church of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. It's the only force on the planet which is capable of healing broken lives, pointing people to God and fulfilling the deepest longings of our souls. It's in the Church that the rejected find acceptance, sinners receive forgiveness and the lonely experience love. It's in the Church that we discover and encounter God and live out our true life-purpose. This is worship.

It's in the Church that we receive teaching, training and mentoring for how we can be the people that God has called us to be as we embrace the mission of Christ. This is discipleship.

When the Church of Jesus Christ is functioning properly, each member is using his or her God-given gifts, talents and abilities to serve one another and the world around them. This is ministry.

There's also a deep and supernatural sense of community within the Church of Jesus Christ, that fulfils our longing for friendship and intimacy with others. This is fellowship.

When the Church is functioning properly, the lost - those who are yet to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ - receive the opportunity to embrace Christ as their Saviour and come within the folds of the Church and experience everything I just mentioned. This is evangelism.

Let me say it again: when it's functioning properly, the Church which Jesus Christ birthed and promised to build, truly is the hope of the world.

So, over the next several sermons we are going to spend some time talking about the type of Church that God wants us to be – not the kind of Church we 'attend' or 'align ourselves with' but the kind of Church we truly are in our essence. It's not enough that we come to a building on Sundays; it's not enough that we sing songs, take communion, give our offerings, sit through the sermon; it's not enough that we come to a gathering we call the Church, if we fail to truly be the Church.

So as we continue this series we will be looking at Acts 2:41-47 as we examine the characteristics of the Church which Jesus birthed and promised to build. The Holy Spirit had come upon Peter and the other apostles and they preached the gospel of Christ in Jerusalem with great success. Many people believed the gospel, embraced the salvation offered in Christ, and the Church was born. Let's see once again what that looked like:

"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:41–47)

This Church had five main characteristics which are really important and so we will spend some quality time looking at them over the coming weeks. Today, I just want to give you an overview.

1. The Church grows warmer through fellowship.

That's what the church we read about was doing.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship." (v.42)

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."
(vv. 44-46)

They were devoted to fellowship. They were sharing their lives with each other. They were becoming a family. We live in a world where families are fragmenting and disintegrating. We know that divorce is an ever-present reality. But its not just divorce that causes families to splinter. We live in a mobile society. Kids grow up and move away. People move in and move out of neighbourhoods and homes because of job transfers and new opportunities. While some of you have lived in the same place for most of your lives, there are many other people around you today who did not grow up this area. Many of our families are far away, and we may find ourselves somewhat displaced and lonely.

We live in a world where 'family' is no longer a constant for many people; no longer something we can count on. All around us there are people who feel disconnected, who long for closeness with other people, but they don't know where to find it. They try the bowling club, the golf club and various community groups but something is still missing.

Do you remember watching *The Waltons* on TV many years ago? Do you remember how everyone lived together - grandma, grandpa: Zeb and Esther Walton; mum and dad: John and Olivia Walton; and seven children: John-boy, Jason, Mary-Ellen, Erin, Benjamin, Jim-Bob and little Elizabeth. This was a true family and we got to see them in action each week from 1971-1981. That show tapped into a need in every single one of us. Every member of that family was able to rely upon every other member of the family. Why was that? Because they were a true family and many of us wish our families were a little more like the Waltons. We long for a simpler time when families stuck together and took care of one another. Some of us may have families like that, but many don't today.

That's why when God created the Church, He created it to be a family where real fellowship and community is experienced, where the members can count on one another for support, love and encouragement. That's why God wants us to be a Church that grows warmer through fellowship. So I am hoping we will take some steps over the next year or so to increase the level of fellowship in our Church and to make sure that we are functioning the way God wants the Church to function. I want to encourage you all to embrace those opportunities as the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into the heart of God and His purpose for His family as Church the grows warmer through fellowship.

2. The Church grows deeper through discipleship

'Discipleship' is a word that basically means, 'learning to follow Jesus.' That is what the Church that we read about in Acts 2 was doing.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." (42)

These Christians wanted to grow in their new relationship with God in Christ and mature in their Christian walk. They wanted to learn about Jesus so they could become like Jesus. So they were devoted to what those who had been with Jesus were teaching them.

Devoted is a word that means ‘committed to’ or ‘dedicated to.’ These first Christians were committed to learning what it means to follow Jesus. God wants the Church to be like that. He wants the Church to be filled with men, women and young people who genuinely want to follow Jesus and embrace His mission more each day. God wants people who are excited to learn about Jesus and grow in their understanding of His mission and His purpose for us, in us and through us. Is that you? Are you still excited to learn about Jesus after all these years? How committed are you to sit at His feet and hang off His every word? How devoted are you to the Apostles teaching, which for us is the New Testament? As we continue our journey through this teaching series, it is my prayer that we will re-commit to being the type of Church that really seeks to learn how to follow Jesus so we might grow deeper through discipleship.

3. The Church grows stronger through Worship

That’s what the Church in Acts 2 was doing. Verse 42 talks about how they were devoting themselves to “*the breaking of bread*” which partly refers to celebrating Communion together, “*and to prayer.*” And then verse 47 talks about how they were “*praising God.*” These words are worship language. These people were taking time out to worship God.

God has created all of us with a desire to worship Him and when we fail to worship God, there is something missing in our lives and we lose our perspective on life – a perspective which always should place God above everything else we experience. When we lose that perspective, worldly pleasures and worldly values take over. That’s why we are surrounded by people in our world who have money, have health, have fancy lifestyles, but are still searching for something to fill an emptiness inside them which will only ever be filled by them reaching out to the God Who is reaching out to them. There is a God-shaped vacuum inside every human being which can only ever be filled by God.

Have you ever noticed how great you feel when you have truly worshiped God? Worship is something we give to God – it’s us praising God for Who He is and for all His goodness to us - yet, worship is also something that ministers to us; worship is something that reminds us Who God is and boosts our faith and trust in Him to get us through another day and use us in some way to further His Kingdom. Worship, though, is more than singing songs on Sunday, and in coming days we will discuss all that worship entails, and why it’s so central in the lives of those who truly know what it is to be the Church. Only then will we grow stronger through worship.

4. The Church grows broader through Ministry

Some people have the idea that the reason a Congregation appoints a Pastor is so that they can ‘do the work of the Church.’ I hope you don’t have that misconception. The truth is, every member is a ‘minister of the gospel’ in the Church. God has given every Christian gifts to use for Him. The only way the Church can function as it should is if every disciple of Jesus is using those gifts to advance the Kingdom of God and build up the Body of Christ. That’s what the Church in Acts 2 was doing. The Apostles certainly played a key role in leading the way and good leadership is very important. However all the people were letting God use each of them to minister to each other and that’s how they created such a strong community of faith. That’s really what ministry in the Church entails: using the gifts God has given us to meet the needs of others and to be a blessing to God as we advance His Kingdom on earth.

Now the problem in many Church communities is that ‘ministry’ and ‘service’ have been defined too narrowly. Teaching Sunday School is defined as service; leading singing is service; serving communion is service; but if you can’t do one of these ‘up-front’ things, in many churches you feel like you must not have any gifts to use to serve.

However, the Bible says that every Christian has been given gifts, talents and abilities by God to use for Him and the Bible lists a wide range of such gifts, talents and abilities beyond those highlighted in most Churches.

As we'll see when we talk about this in the weeks ahead, the Bible's list of gifts is not exhaustive – these are just examples of the many gifts God bestows on the Church and the Bible says that the Church is only truly functioning as God desires when every member is using their gifts to glorify God. Now, part of my job as a Pastor and leader is to help you discover the gifts God has given the Church through you. Your job as a disciple of Christ is to put your gifts into action, thereby helping the Church become all that God wants it to be. That is how the Church grows broader through Ministry.

5. The Church grows larger through Evangelism

Now when the people of God are devoting themselves to the Apostles teaching and making that sincere commitment to fellowship, discipleship, ministry and worship, there is a natural outflow from that and we call it evangelism. This is just a big word which means reaching people with the gospel of Christ and having them respond. Now I have always believed that **evangelism is not something we do**. It's not a task as much as it is an outcome. True evangelism is the fruit of everything else we do. **True evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church.** Acts 2:47 shows us this truth more clearly than any other verse in the New Testament. After giving us an overview of what the early Christians were doing day by day, we then see the fruit of that when it says:

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Acts 2 does not provide a magic bullet or a failsafe formula for being the Church, but it does provide us with a very clear picture of what was important to our brothers and sisters all those years ago when this wonderful community we call the Church was born. We also know from Church history that this new Church continued to grow at a phenomenal rate and impacted the world around it in immeasurable ways for well over two hundred years! That's almost as long as the modern nation of Australia has existed. Can you even imagine what this nation would be like if the Christian Church in Australia continued grow at the rate the early Church grew – for 200 hundred years? Can you imagine what our society would be like today? Well that's what Jesus intended from the beginning! That's why we are all still here.

We don't need some new Church growth technique; we don't need a different way to be the Church in the 21st century – we just need to go back to our roots and discover how people like us managed to get it so right for so long! Whatever they were doing and not doing, however they were living out their faith, it was working - for centuries! So we really need to know why and we need to know why that stopped. Both discoveries will give us the key to truly being the Church again as Jesus always intended.

There are undoubtedly some cultural realities in the early Church which simply do not exist in our nation in 2020. However, the true message of Acts chapter 2 has nothing at all to do with culture. It is a timeless message, a life-changing, Church-defining, nation-transforming message and I really look forward to re-discovering that truth with you in the weeks ahead as we grow warmer through fellowship; grow deeper through discipleship; grow stronger through worship; grow broader through ministry and grow larger through evangelism. So strap yourself in – it will be quite a ride!

'Being the Church' – Part 5

'Worship God!'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Apostle John tells us in the book Revelation about a series of visions he was given. He saw into heaven's throne room, and witnessed the glory of God seated on His throne. He saw Jesus, appearing at times as a Lamb slain for God's people and at other times as a great Conqueror, waging war and riding upon a white horse followed by the armies of heaven. He saw strange images of beasts and dragons, bowls and trumpets, all signifying and symbolizing the colossal struggle taking place between the forces of God and the forces of Satan.

He saw the end of earth's history - when Satan is defeated and vanquished for all time and he witnessed the new heavens and earth where God's people will live in happiness forever. When John was shown this final scene of God's ultimate triumph and the joy of God's people he was so overcome by emotion that he fell down to worship the angel who had been showing him all these things. But the angel said,

"Don't do it! I am a fellow servant with you. Worship God!" (Revelation 22:9)

If we were to summarize the teaching of the Bible in just a few sentences, one of them would have to be this two-word sentence spoken by the angel to John: *Worship God!* The Bible presents God as the One Who is worthy of worship, and repeatedly calls us to give Him our worship and place Him at the centre of everything.

Today we continue with this series of teaching which attempts to define the type of Church God wants us to be. In the last sermon we saw that the Bible identifies five characteristics of the New Testament Church which God wants every church to possess: worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and evangelism. Today we're going to discuss what is involved in the first of these, worship.

In John 4:19-24 we read where Jesus was talking with a woman from Samaria, and the woman asked Jesus to settle an argument about where people should worship. Instead, Jesus talked about the type of worship that pleases God. Look at John 4:19-24 with me:

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem. Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

So let me share some truths about worship. First of all we must notice that Jesus says that it is not just a God that we are worshipping - it's our heavenly Father. 'Father' was the preferred name that Jesus used when talking about God. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount He said things such as, *"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16) and he told us that *"your Father knows what you need before you ask him."* (Matthew 6:8), and promised that *"your Father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him"* (Matthew 7:11). He taught us to pray by saying, *"Our Father who art in heaven"* (Matthew 6:9) and promised that, *"your heavenly Father will also forgive you."* (Matthew 6:14). There are many other examples, but these suffice to show that Jesus tended to call God 'Father' when He was speaking about Him.

Here, when speaking with this Samaritan woman, Jesus used this 'father' language to talk about God. *"A time is coming when you will worship THE FATHER neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... the true worshipers will worship THE FATHER in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers THE FATHER seeks."*

Now, at first glance this may not seem like such a big deal, especially to those of us who have been in the Church for a while, because we've grown so accustomed to hearing it. However, calling God 'Father' in Jesus' time was a really big deal. It was even somewhat scandalous because it implied a closeness and familiarity with God that the teachers of the law said was way beyond our ability to experience. They taught that we are temporal but God is eternal. We are weak but God is all-powerful. We are limited but God has no limits. So the very idea that we could have a close relationship with God as our Father was totally outrageous to them and yet here was Jesus teaching us to call God 'Father.' There is a lot of meaning packed into that word.

God is more to us than some all-powerful distant being. He is more than some eternal spirit. He is more than some all-knowing entity. He is more than the creator and king of the universe. If that was all we could say God was, there would still be plenty of reason to worship Him. He would still deserve our worship and we would still have reason to give it. But God is far more than that! Not only is He an all-powerful God who created us, He is our Father who loves us and cares for us. Not only is He an all-knowing entity who knows us totally, everything about us, even our thoughts, He is our Father who loves us anyway, in spite of what He knows about us. Not only is He the king of the universe, He is our Father who protects us, provides for us and fixes things when they break. And so the reality of who God is, changes our motivation for worship. It's not just that we worship a king because He requires us to, we worship our Father who loves us and cares for us. It's not just that we worship an all-powerful being who could force us to, we freely worship our Father who loves and protects us. It's not just a god we're worshipping – it is our Father, with all that word entails. When we reflect on that - on Who it is we are worshipping - it changes our view of worship from an activity that we may think we *have to do* because God desires it, to something we *get to do* because God loves us and we want to thank Him and honour Him and praise Him.

This leads us to another truth about worship: It's not the 'dressings of worship' that are important; it's the heart of the worshiper that really matters. The woman in our passage mentions a debate between the Jews and the Samaritans which had been going on for hundreds of years. That debate centred around the question of where was the proper place to worship God. The Jews said that the proper place for worship was the Temple in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans taught that God wanted to be worshiped on top of Mount Gerizim, a mountain of Samaria. They were both hung up on what we might call the 'dressings' of worship - the external, outward signs of worship that we tend to think must be present in order for worship to occur: things like church buildings and singing songs and preaching sermons and all those other up-front things we value.

Now, these things are good, don't get me wrong. But they aren't what makes worship, true worship. In fact, you can have all these things and still not have true worship. Conversely, you can have none of those things and still have true worship. The Jews and Samaritans were hung up on the externals of worship and Jesus said they both were wrong. He said, *"a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."* And Jesus was right. Within just a short period of time, Roman armies would put an end to the formal worship of God in both of those places. Jesus said that true worshipers would worship the Father *"in spirit and in truth."* This phrase means *"worshipping God in sincerity and honesty, led by the Spirit of God."* It is to humbly come before Him, drawn by His Spirit, and offer Him our praise and adoration for Who He is and all He has done; recognising our dependence upon Him for our salvation, for our life and for everything! It is the Spirit of God Himself Who draws us into this place of transparency and honesty before God.

We cannot worship God in spirit until our spirit has been overwhelmed or captured by His Spirit. That is where true worship comes from within us. God is not interested in lip-service worship, even if happens in a Church building and is offered in Jesus name. He doesn't want us to sing songs or pray prayers while our minds are on other things. He doesn't want us to take communion when our thoughts aren't centred on Jesus and the power and reality of His atoning death. God isn't interested in us sitting politely while a preacher preaches, when our mind is miles away and we are not engaging with the life-changing Word of God. By the same token, this means that you can worship God, even when you are not in a Church building. It means that you can worship God, even if your singing voice isn't all that great. It means that you can worship God, whether you are with other people or by yourself. Because our worship is not confined to a place. We can and we should worship God every day.

We can worship God anytime we pause to reflect on how wonderful He is and offer Him our praise. Every time we sing a song praising God and really mean it - whether in a Church building or in the shower or in the car - we are worshiping. Every time we thank God for how amazing He is to us, we are worshiping. Every time we read the Scriptures and draw near to Him with hearts open to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying, we are worshiping God because we are saying to Him that He is important enough to draw near to, listen to, seek wisdom from and follow every day of our lives.

Worship is not a Sunday morning activity only, any more than it was a Jerusalem Temple or Mount Gerizim activity only. Worship is about honouring God with our lives by praising Him for how good and wonderful He is. And worship should take place every day, because God is worthy of our worship every day! When we save worship for Sunday; when we make worship something that can only occur within the walls of a building - we are falling into the same trap which snared the Samaritans and the Jews. And Jesus says, *"Don't be like that! God is seeking you to worship Him in spirit and in truth."*

How timely is this reminder given that we have all be forced into exile from our 'temples' and meeting places. Like those Jews and Samaritans all those years ago, we need to also learn that God does not dwell in buildings made by man, no matter how consecrated they may be. God is not tied to an event, a meeting, or a worship 'service' at a designated time and place. God is ever-present and will receive our worship regardless of our location or what day of the week it might be. Worship is not tied to a building. Worship is not tied to an event. Rather, worship is tied to a thankful and sincere attitude of praise and thanksgiving that acknowledges God's greatness, majesty, grace, love, mercy and His central place in our lives. So when we see the early Church in action in Acts chapter 2, we see a people who worshiped God every day – who placed God and His mission at the centre of everything. Herein lies the most important reality concerning worship and if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this: **to truly worship God, we must place Him at the centre of everything, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

In John chapter 5 we read where Jesus said that He only did what He saw the Father doing and only spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak. What did that mean? Quite simply it meant that Jesus intentionally placed the Father at the centre of His life – everything was about His will, His glory, His purpose, His plan, His desires and His Kingdom.

When Jesus did this He modelled true worship for us. True worship, at its best, looks just like that. When only doing what you see God doing and only speaking the words God gives you to speak becomes your daily priority, your goal, your purpose and your very life, then, and only then, will you truly understand and experience the fullness of worship. Then you will wake up every morning and immediately think of God first. You will thank Him for gifting you another new day.

Then you will immediately start asking two questions and you won't stop asking them until your head hits the pillow that night. *"What are You doing, Lord?"* and *"How can I be part of it?"*

When you open the Scriptures for your quiet time; when you switch on the news or read the morning paper; when you go for your morning walk around your neighbourhood: *"What are You doing, Lord? ... How can I be part of it?"* When you join with your brothers and sisters for worship, online and hopefully soon person, you will know that the only thing on your mind and in your heart will be discovering what God is doing in the midst of His gathered people, what He is saying to His disciples and how you can respond. That is all that matters and this is worship. I don't care if you think the sermons are too long or too short; the music too old or new, too fast or slow. None of that matters to God. The only thing that matters is your attitude and your desire to truly encounter God – to see what He is doing and hear what He is saying and be an active part of Christ's mission on earth.

If you leave this message or a worship service without encountering God and His kingdom and without hearing Him speak directly to you – you are the only one to blame – not God, not the musicians, song leaders or the preacher. You won't see if you're not looking; you won't hear if you're not listening; you won't be engaged if you're not prepared to change and grow and move out of your comfort zone.

For Jesus to say that He only did what He saw the Father doing and only spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak – it meant that His entire demeanour every moment of every day was one of looking and listening for the Father. It doesn't take a high IQ to work out that if you are not looking intently for something, you will most probably never find it and if you are not listening intentionally for someone you will most probably miss what they're saying! And yet I suggest there are millions of people across the world right now who claim to be disciples of Jesus and yet they fail to understand this most basic, defining reality of Jesus' entire life and ministry.

Every step Jesus took, every miracle He performed, every sermon He preached, every prayer He prayed, every decision He made - were all in response to what He first observed His Father doing and saying. This is worship! This is the Christian life! This is the most important lesson Jesus taught us. This is why He remained among us for three years as a man – so He could role-model how we are meant to live and worship.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:1-2)

When Paul says we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice and that this is true worship, he is not talking about our physical bodies – he is talking about our entire being. He is talking about us being totally surrendered and then totally transformed so that God is in the centre of everything. This is worship. This is Christianity. This is how the kingdom of heaven will advance on this earth as God's will unfolds before our eyes. And all that begins when you open your eyes in the morning and the first thing that comes to mind is, *"What are you doing Lord? How can I be part of it?"*

At first you may not have an answer. When we are so out of practice, it takes time to recognize the hand of God at work; it takes time to discern His voice above our own and all the other voices which seek to dominate His. But in time, you will see; in time, you will hear and you will become part of the mission of Christ to bring every man, woman and young person into the glory of the Kingdom of God. Then, you will know what true worship is. Then you will know why God allows us to continue living in this broken and needy world. Then you will know the first and most important component of truly being the Church.

'Being the Church' – Part 6

'In His Steps'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In the late 1800's a book was published by Charles Sheldon called *In His Steps*. The story begins with a preacher, hard at work on a sermon. His text is 1 Peter 2:21: "...*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*" The rest of the book then offers a very honest and powerful explanation of what following in Jesus' steps actually looks like. We are in the midst of a teaching series about being the Church and we have been examining the traits that God wants to be present in the Church which Jesus promised to build. In our last sermon we talked about how God wants us to be a Church that worships and we discussed what true worship entails. This week we shall see that God wants us to be a Church that learns from Jesus so that we can continue His mission on earth. In other words – we need to be a Church of disciples.

Speaking of those who would follow Him, Jesus said that *"everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher."* (Luke 6:40, NIV). The context in which Jesus said this makes it plain that He considered this the goal for His followers: to follow in His steps. That is Jesus' expectation of us: everyone who is fully trained will be like his/her teacher. I am sure this is what Jesus had in mind when he uttered the words we read in Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Now *"Take My yoke upon you"* was an expression that meant *"Become my disciple,"* or *"Become my follower and walk in my steps."* Our world says that you can't live that way. It's just not possible. Some in the Church even believe we cannot live that way – Jesus was the Son of God, only He could live that way. Now I could share with you how the world is wrong; that you should do what Jesus did because His way is right and you will be a better spouse, a better parent, a better child, a better employee, a better person and that Jesus called us to live this way. And I could also talk about how a life lived in devotion to God and His teaching is fun and exciting and fulfilling, and I could even argue today that the very best life you can have is one that is lived fully and completely for God's glory. But Jesus doesn't make any of those arguments or discuss any of those things. He just says that if we take His yoke upon ourselves, learn from Him and walk in His steps, He will give us rest.

This word *rest* is actually a promise of heaven. If we become His disciples, He will give us heaven - rest from the problems of life, rest from its pain, rest from sickness and sorrow, disease and death. He will give us Heaven. Now hopefully we know by now that when Jesus talks about heaven He is not just talking about our future hope after death. He is talking also about the here-and-now. Heaven on earth. Jesus is promising that if we will become His disciples and learn from Him and walk in His steps and fulfill His mission, we will increasingly experience the rest of heaven right now – the rest from life's weariness, the rest from life's burdens.

Let's face it: Life at times is hard. It seems like sometimes you are doing fine, and then the storm hits, the wind screams, the dam bursts, the raging torrents flood us. Sometimes it's marriage problems. Sometimes it's kid problems. Sometimes it's parent problems. Sometimes it's work problems. Sometimes it's health problems. All sorts of problems, difficulties, tragedies and trouble make up this experience we call life. Toss in a global pandemic on top of that and the worst recession since the Great Depression and things can be tough here. Life can often make us weary to the point of despair as we carry burdens that would crush the best of us.

So into that cold, hard reality Jesus speaks:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus promises us rest from our burdens if we'll be His disciples, because He is gentle and humble, and He gives us a kind of rest deep in our souls which the world cannot give; our loved ones cannot give. Only Jesus can give us this rest. This doesn't mean that Jesus frees His followers from ever having problems in this life. When Jesus promised rest, He did not mean that He would eliminate our problems, but rather that He will give us the strength to make it through our problems. He will give us the comfort and peace we need to face any tragedy; He will help us experience real joy in this life because we know Him. But He cannot give us this strength overnight or by some magical touch. Such strength comes through learning and growing in Christ, day by day, month by month, year by year. Jesus promises that if we will take His yoke upon ourselves and learn from Him, every day, every week, for all our lives – then and only then will we truly find rest in Him, in spite of our circumstances. Then and only then will we walk in His steps. He will give us a taste of heaven here and now and sustain us in the face of life's burdens and weariness.

You see, when we begin to learn from Jesus, when we begin to learn the words that He said and the things that He taught and did, we discover all these treasures that we didn't even know existed before. We find a peace that we never dreamed of, experience a hope brighter than any other and we receive guidance to help us figure life out. As we learn Christ's words and apply them in our lives, we discover what the Apostle Paul really meant when he said, *“It's no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me.”*

The whole reason Jesus remained among us and taught His disciples for three years is so they could pass that on to others. When it was time to go, Jesus then commissioned those men and women to go into the world and teach everyone what He taught them, always knowing that He would be with them at all times through His Holy Spirit.

This is what birthed the Church and this is why in that snapshot of the early Church we have in Acts 2:42-47 it says that the believers *“devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching.”* What was the Apostles teaching then? It was all that Jesus had taught them! What is the Apostles teaching today? To what should we be devoting ourselves now? For all intents and purposes, it is the New Testament. It's really that simple! Now this doesn't mean we discount the Old Testament. It is vitally important in connecting the Christian Church and our journey this side of the cross of Christ with the whole Jewish story and their journey as God's people down through history. The entire Bible is important - but the teaching of Jesus, which then became the teaching of the Apostles, which then became the New Testament – is what defines the very nature and purpose of the Church. It is what explains the New Covenant in Christ and the whole reason we are still here today. So it is this teaching that we should be devoting ourselves to and in so doing, we are sitting at the feet of Jesus once again as His followers, His disciples, His co-labourers in the ministry of the Kingdom and the gospel of God's amazing grace!

Now we need to notice the language in Acts 2:42. It says, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...”* Luke uses the intense Greek word *proskartereo*, often translated as *“devoted to,”* to report on the strength of their commitment here. The word literally means *“to occupy oneself diligently with something”* or *“to persist in.”* So if being the Church is important to us, we will be occupying ourselves diligently with the Apostles teaching. We will be persistent in our devotion to hearing the voice of God through the teaching of His anointed, called leaders and teachers.

Now I'm not sure what you think about preaching, teaching and authority or how God speaks to His people today. I am not sure where you place people like me who devote their lives to being oracles of God and conduits of His life-changing Word. But you need to wrestle with this question if being the Church is important to you in any way. Even a cursory reading of the Bible will show us that God speaks to His people in a myriad of ways. He speaks through creation. He will speak through a talking donkey if He needs to! He will also use any human being to bear witness to His Word. However, the most common way God has spoken to His people is through a messenger - through the prophets and teachers whom He calls, equips and sends across the earth with His message. I have such a calling on my life and I take that calling very seriously.

I have also been doing this long enough to know that God can and does deliver His Word, His will and His empowering through this crazy thing the Apostle Paul called 'the foolishness of preaching.' He called it foolishness because most days, from our end, that is exactly how it feels. How on earth can I even dream of being the channel of God's voice to others? How can a fallen, sinful, imperfect person be used by God to speak life, hope and power into other human beings? Foolishness indeed!

However it only seems like foolishness because we have lost sight of this being God's preferred means of communicating to His people. The Scriptures we value so highly and upon which our faith is based, are nothing but a collection of the stories, teaching and preaching of fallible people like me whom God has raised up to speak His truth, write His truth and declare His Word at every point in history. But for that teaching to actually impact our hearts and lives or change the way we live and relate to each other and to God, we need to embrace it. We need to respect it. We need to believe it is God Who still chooses to speak this way. We need *proskartereo* – devotion to this teaching.

It doesn't matter how passionate or gifted the teacher is; it doesn't matter if the teacher is Jesus or the Apostles themselves. Those who are being taught must decide if they will devote themselves to that teaching and embrace it. If they don't, then the Word of God will continue to elude them and the power of His Kingdom will remain a future hope, not a present reality.

Now, as a preacher, I know of no greater joy than to see someone devoting themselves to this teaching and to then respond to God's Word through something I have said or written and to see their life totally transformed by His Word. I have letters and cards from people over many years who have shared how their entire lives were turned upside down and inside out because of teaching they received from God, through me. How was that possible? It wasn't because I am a brilliant preacher. It happened because those people knew what 'devoting themselves to the Apostles teaching' really meant. They took responsibility for their own spiritual life and growth. They persisted in digesting every morsel of truth from every sermon. They committed themselves to a home group every week so they could allow God to unpack that teaching even more in their own lives and in community. This is what 'devoting themselves to' actually looks like.

But it gets even better! Those same people became teachers in their own way. A few became Pastors – but most remained exactly where they were in their chosen vocation – they just became channels of God's Word, God's grace, God's wisdom and God's kingdom power. They became disciples who made disciples.

When we truly devote ourselves to the Apostles teaching, we truly become disciples of Jesus and everything in our life changes, and I mean everything! I know this from my own experience and the experience hundreds and hundreds of men, women and young people whom I have seen totally transformed before my eyes. People whose lives are never the same again and all they did was make a daily choice to deliberately, intentionally, persistently engage with the sermons and the teaching in their local Church. That's all they did. God did the rest.

I know that I've only been in this Church a short time but I can assure you that the teaching which I have given in this place over that time – all of which is now online and available to the world – is sufficient to trigger a renewal and revival in this Church which nobody dreamed possible. I don't say that because of the quality of those sermons or my oratory skills – I say that because it is true and because I have seen congregations set on fire by the Holy Spirit through such teaching. How? The only way possible – when the people of God once again believe that God has something important to say through His appointed and called messengers and we had better listen if we have the slightest desire to see His Kingdom come and His will done right here as it is in heaven!

Sadly, most of the words preached by God's messengers across this nation hit the floor dead before any of them have a chance to lodge in someone's heart. How do I know that? I know that because the Church is not in revival and this nation is not on its knees before God! I know that because our congregations are shrinking, our sermons are getting shorter, too much of our preaching is no longer Christ-centred and fewer and fewer people are really listening for God in the sermons.

Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples. He didn't say to make converts to our religious club. He said make disciples of Christ. And we see what a disciple is in Acts 2. They are the ones who devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, which was the teaching of Jesus. They chose to take His yoke upon them and learn from Him. They were devoted to this important learning process – not just at the beginning – but for their entire life! That's what a disciple does and that's what being the Church has to be all about or we are not the Church Jesus is building! We are nothing but a hollow religion with a dusty ancient book and some powerless rhetoric passed on from a dead, powerless teacher.

Listen, I beg you, in Jesus' name listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church today ... to this Church today ... to you today. God will not continue sending His servants to preach His Word to people who are not listening. God is patient. God is gracious. But God is also firmly committed to the mission of Jesus Christ to advance His Kingdom on earth and He will not waste His Word or His servants on people who don't want to change; don't want to grow; don't want to live and move and have their being in Christ as His disciples.

Jesus doesn't need friends. Jesus doesn't need PR people. Jesus doesn't need lip service. Jesus doesn't need our latest programs or innovations or trendy ministry ideas. Jesus just needs DISCIPLES. That is the only thing He has ever needed. That was His entire purpose in coming to earth. His birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection all pointed to one objective – making disciples who could join Him in fulfilling His mission to reconcile all of God's lost children to their heavenly Father.

Sadly, the Church of today seems to have many priorities. Our focus has been drawn towards all manner of good deeds and community programs and welfare initiatives and ministries which bless people. However, Jesus birthed a Church which had a singular focus and it never, ever strayed from that intentional focus. Jesus called and commissioned us to do exactly what He was called and commissioned to do: make disciples. But friends, we cannot make disciples until we learn how to be disciples ourselves. Then, and only then, will we understand what being the Church really means.

'Speak Lord, Your servants are listening.' Are we really?

'Being the Church' – Part 7

'Koinonia Fellowship'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In this teaching series we've been exploring what it looks like to really be the Church. This requires some study and serious reflection because the Church which we have experienced for many generations now is radically different to the Church which Jesus birthed so long ago. So if we truly want to know what being the Church means from Jesus' perspective, we have to look beyond the corrupted visible 'church' we have all inherited from our forebears and known all our lives. Now you might think 'corrupted' is too strong a word, but I actually wish I had a stronger word to describe how a dynamic, Spirit-led, Christ-centred, relational community could be transformed so radically into what is, more often than not, an event-based, task-centred, rule-governed religion. Or in other cases the Church has been reduced to a socio-political welfare agency with little or no reference to Christ or the gospel. You simply cannot look seriously at the early Church and the modern Church without scratching your head and wondering what on earth happened.

Let me give you a snapshot again of how it was when all of this began in this thing we call 'Church' - to which we all profess to belong. I just want you to imagine what this was like; how it worked; where it happened; how it felt; what impact it had on the people who were part of this miracle and the people watching on in the community. You've read and heard this passage many times, but please don't allow familiarity to rob you of the impact of what is actually happening to and through these people, our pioneers, our ancient brothers and sisters in Christ. As promised by Jesus, the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and things got very messy, very exciting and very real - and here is the result. Peter got up and told everybody what was really happening and how this was all part of God's plan and how this was exactly what Jesus came to create - a new community of faith - a new covenant of love and grace - and thousands of people said, "Yes, please! Count me in!" Then this new thing we call the Church, began to take shape as ...

"... They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

I've read that passage thousands of times and still, it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, as I anticipate what that must have been like and as I dream of the day it might be like that again - a day when religion is finally sent back to the hell it came from and the community of faith which Jesus died to establish re-emerges in our midst with Jesus and His mission right in the centre.

In the last sermon we talked about our devotion to the Apostles' teaching, which for us is the New Testament, and how important it was for us to connect with all that Jesus did and taught and then passed on to the Apostles. In this sermon I want us to begin exploring a much more challenging devotion - one which takes a lifetime to do really well - but one which so defined this new Christian community. I am talking about their devotion to fellowship.

The Greek word translated as fellowship is *koinonia* and Acts 2 is the first time we encounter this word in the New Testament. This word 'fellowship' has been used beyond the confines of the Church in our modern era - but it shouldn't have been.

This word is a Christian word because this fellowship is the unique fellowship we have together in Christ. This is far more than a casual association or a club membership or having your name on a roll.

***Koinonia* fellowship is God-ordained, Christ-centred and Spirit-led. It only exists where the Church exists and it speaks to the heart of this new movement which began over 2,000 years ago.**

This radical concept of fellowship and interdependence flies in the face of the individualism which dominates our society and that only highlights our need to re-connect with the true nature of the Church.

For millions of Christians today across the world, Church life consists of a Sunday worship service and that's all - and even for those involved in a small group of some kind, the true purpose and importance of that small group is not fully understood by many. Now I firmly believe in the tremendous value of communal celebration and worship on Sunday, or any day, and I believe that solid teaching times are crucial for depth and strength. But you simply can't read the New Testament and come away thinking that group gatherings in an auditorium once a week are the sum total of what Church is supposed to be. In fact, such gatherings, which have been the primary expression of the Christian Church across much of the world for generations, can't be found in their current form anywhere in the New Testament – that foundational document upon which the Church stands! We are also facing a global pandemic right now which has removed those weekly face to face gatherings completely and yet the Church Jesus promised to build still exists.

So let's look more closely now at this wonderful concept, captured by the Greek word *koinonia*. This word appears 19 times in the New Testament and this is the first time. It literally means 'common' or 'communal' and it signifies a close relationship, a sharing together, a participation, an intimacy.

Now the word *koinonia* may only appear once in the passage I read from Acts 2, but the concept of *koinonia* runs through almost every sentence of this wonderful description of the Church.

“They devoted themselves ... to fellowship (koinonia) .. All the believers were together (koinonia) and had everything in common. (koinonia) Every day they continued to meet together (koinonia)... They broke bread in their homes (koinonia) and ate together (koinonia) with glad and sincere hearts ...”

At the very heart of this new community of faith was *koinonia* – rich, personal, intimate, daily fellowship. So what brought them together in this close bond of fellowship? Not sport, music, hobbies, race, gender, jobs, economics, education, personalities, social status – no, nothing in this world created that special 'togetherness'. What brought them together was their shared life in Jesus Christ! This fellowship wasn't merely a social activity, shooting the breeze or hanging out together. Not that there's anything wrong with that, and that is often the starting point of true *koinonia* fellowship, but we need to realise that just socialising isn't what the Bible portrays as fellowship.

Fellowship also isn't a place or a description of a group. We can call our Congregation a 'Christian Fellowship' but that doesn't guarantee that *koinonia* is actually taking place. It's more than a place and it's more than an event. **Fellowship is our common, shared life in Jesus Christ. Fellowship is not a label – it's an experience.** In 1 John 1:3 we read:

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Any gathering of the Church that leaves Jesus out is not *koinonia*, it's not true fellowship. For something to qualify as fellowship, the manifest presence of Christ has to be evident. True fellowship always begins with God. In the book of Acts they were called 'believers'. The glue that brings us together, holds us together, and keeps us together is Jesus Christ and our faith and belief in Him and His finished work of salvation. Look at what the Apostle Paul says about what happened to you when your eyes were opened to the reality of your Salvation in Christ.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

When we become believers our eyes are opened to the union we have with Jesus Christ, we recognise that we are part of God's family and as such, we become aware of a whole household of brothers and sisters. When we have fellowship with Jesus Christ, the dynamic of that relationship is meant to outflow into many relationships – into fellowship with each other. 1 John 1:7 says

"If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another."

So, in this modern era, is it even possible to experience this close, caring community like we see in the early Church? What keeps this passage in Acts 2 from being a fairy tale from a lost era - an idealistic dream - instead of a 21st century reality? Can this imperfect group of forgiven believers really live together in community and intimacy? The Bible says we can.

God has designed us for closeness in the Church Jesus promised to build and He wants us to make the effort to BE TOGETHER as often as we can. Being together is God's way of building *koinonia* in practical, visible, and tangible ways in the Church. The New Testament stresses our involvement in this 'together' dynamic with a key truth captured in the recurring phrase 'one another'.

Just in case we miss the importance of fellowship and relating to each other, there are over thirty five 'one another' statements in the New Testament. As you read them now, don't let them be 'theology' or 'doctrine' or a dry list in a sermon. I want you to imagine what these concepts could actually look like and feel like in your life and in the lives of those around you who claim to be your brothers and sisters in Christ. I want you to dream about the kind of Church we will be when these statements are actually observations of who we are – rather than who we might like to be. Here are just some of the 'one another' statements from the Bible:

Fellowship with one another - 1 John 1:5-7

Confess your sins to one another - James 5:16

Offer hospitality to one another - 1 Peter 4:9

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another - 1 Peter 5:5

Do not lie to one another - Colossians 3:9

Comfort and encourage one another - 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:1

Spur one another to good deeds - Hebrews 10:24

Do not slander one another - James 4:1

Do not grumble at one another - James 5:9

Agree with one another - 1 Corinthians 1:10

Serve one another - 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 2 Corinthians 4:5

Have equal concern for one another - 1 Corinthians 12:25
Do not be conceited, provoking and envying one another - Galatians 5:26
Restore one another - Galatians 6:1
Bear with one another - Ephesians 4:2 - Colossians 3:13
Be kind to one another - Ephesians 4:32 - 1 Thessalonians 5:15
Sing to one another - Ephesians 5:19-20
Submit to one another - Ephesians 5:21
Wash one another's feet - John 13:14
Live in peace with one another - Romans 12:16 - 1 Thessalonians 5:13
Honour one another - Romans 12:10 - Philippians 2:3
Stop judging one another - Romans 14:13
Accept one another - Romans 15:7
Teach and admonish one another - Romans 15:14 - Colossians 3:16
Greet one another with a holy kiss - Romans 16:16 - 1 Cor. 16:20
Love one another - John 13:34-35

Now, let me ask you something: Can all these 'one anothers' happen in just one worship service a week? No, of course they can't. That list itself demands a community of faith which shares its life together, just as they did when our Church was born! Sunday worship gatherings have a purpose. This is where our congregation gathers together in celebration and corporate worship and to receive teaching and to celebrate communion and to share some fellowship. It is certainly not meant to be the only thing that happens each week for those who belong to the family of God and for most of us right now, that weekly gathering is not happening at all because of a pandemic. But being the Church consists of so much more than that weekly get together.

Just imagine if we had only spent an hour or two once a week with our own families all those years we were together. What kind of relationship would we have with each other? How close would we be? How united in purpose would we be? How loved and appreciated and encouraged would we feel? How much would we be able to give to one another? How much would we even know each other? Well, so it is with the family of God – the community of faith – the Church. Without the willingness to be involved in the lives of others, neither you nor they will grow and become the wondrous miracle the Church is meant to be.

Ok, that's the easy part! Essential as it is to identify the need (some don't even bother doing that) ... the hard part is addressing that need by making different choices to the ones we've made in the past. That's the only way things change. That's the only way anything can improve or grow or mature or become more fruitful – by people deciding to make different choices. Those choices could be as simple as deciding to invite someone from your Church to your place for a meal when its safe to do so to get to know them and their story and grow closer to them in their spiritual journey in Christ. Then invite someone different next time. Maybe make it a monthly thing. How hard could that be? Perhaps in these restricted times that could be a phone call to catch up with someone from Church and see how they are going. It is not difficult to maintain fellowship, but it does require a commitment or it just won't happen. Let me tell you that if everyone in every congregation decided to spend quality *koinonia* time together by phone or in person where possible, the Spirit of God would move through the Church in this nation like a fire! If hosting a meal is too much for you, then a cup of tea and a biscuit for morning or afternoon tea is more than enough reason to gather together and give God an opportunity to show you what *koinonia* fellowship really feels like! You could even meet down town for a cuppa at a café if you are not comfortable hosting people at home.

Now one of those different choices when the Covid-19 restrictions ease might be to join or form a home group, where you can meet regularly with some of your brothers and sisters and unpack the teaching from Sunday and share our lives together and learn from God through each other and studying the Bible. Every Church which is thriving across all denominations has a vibrant home group ministry. There are many aspects to being the Church, but at the centre of them all – at the very heart of this organic, dynamic miracle of God, is *koinonia* – real fellowship: a dynamic, Spirit-led, gospel-centred, relational community.

From the moment the Church was born, we have been presented with a choice every day of our lives: relationship or religion. Every morning as your feet hit the floor and you begin a brand new day, you have that same choice before you: relationship or religion. Our relationship with God and each other is what defines us as His people, His disciples, His Church and if those relationships are growing, deepening and strengthening, then so will the Church. God guarantees it.

Do we want our Church to impact the community around us? Do we want to see God adding to our number daily like He did when all this began? Some people should answer no, to be honest, because some people might be comfortable with our Church as it is, as they have experienced it for many years. But those who answer yes and genuinely want to see the Lord add to our number, must face the challenge God is presenting to us today, and every day. If we want a different outcome, we need to make different choices. There's nothing very spiritual about that truth, but when applied to spiritual matters like the spread of the gospel and the health of the Church, the outcome will be life-changing as the community around us is transformed by the power of God.

How devoted are we to fellowship, to *koinonia*, to the community of faith which Jesus promised to build, not the institution which man has built in Jesus' name? May God help us answer that question in the days ahead and may we have the courage to make some different choices and thereby become the answers to our own prayers for our community and our nation. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons we will learn from this pandemic is just how important fellowship is to the life and health of the Church and the mission of Christ.

May those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to us this day.

'Being the Church' – Part 8 *'Giving the Church Back to God'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Throughout this teaching series we have been challenged over and over again to stop 'going to church' and start 'being the Church.' In fact, that very phrase 'going to church' runs contrary to everything we learn about the Church from the New Testament. Church is neither a destination nor an event. Church is not a particular building and Church is not even a particular gathering of people. Church is the collective word describing all the disciples of Jesus Christ who have been called to join His mission to advance the Kingdom of heaven on earth. There is no building, no denomination, no creed or confession which can define or confine the Church which Jesus is building. There are no boundaries to this Church. There is no calendar which defines when we are the Church and when we are not. We are the Church seven days a week and every day is the Lord's day!

Now we've been looking at the last part of Acts chapter 2 which gives us that beautiful and powerful snapshot of what the Church Jesus promised to build looked like when it began and how it remained for many generations and I hope we never stop examining our roots. Today I want us to fast forward to Acts 17 and take a glimpse at the impact this Church and Jesus disciples had on the world around them – the same impact we will have on the world when we stop 'going to Church', stop perpetuating religion - and start living out the calling and relationship we have in Christ.

"After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.' Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.'" (Acts 17:1-7)

What a tribute to Paul and Silas, to be referred to as the people, *"who have been turning the world upside down .."* (v.6) Wherever Paul went, things happened. Souls were saved, people took sides, fights broke out, feelings were stirred, decisions were made and lines were drawn. Paul didn't just slip into town, hold a few quiet meetings, enjoy some good home cooking, pick up a generous love offering and slip back out of town again without anyone knowing or caring that he had been there! He turned the place upside down! But how? How did the early disciples turn the world upside down? What was the secret to their success? Well we already know from Acts 2 that the foundation of this new community was, in large part, the cause of their success. Their devotion to the Apostle's teaching, to fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer and worship became the bedrock upon which Jesus began building His Church through His guiding, empowering Spirit. But as this new Church grew and moved out into the wider community and gained some experience, there were four other important observations I would like to make which explains why their impact on the world was so significant, and for so long.

Firstly, they turned the world upside down because they possessed a power which was not their own. Paul explained this clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power...” (1 Corinthians 2:1-4)

Paul did not rely on persuasive arguments, human rhetoric, eloquence or human wisdom. He did not come with fancy language. He did not come as a Christian salesman. He did not come with clever marketing pitches to get them to make a profession of faith. He had determined that he was not going to use gimmicks. He did not rely on his personal ability. He came to them, *“in weakness with great fear and trembling.”*

So when Paul considered on one hand his supreme weakness and limitations and on the other hand the importance of the message, he recognized it would take a supernatural work of God to achieve anything at all through him. It was not Paul’s ability but the Holy Spirit’s ability and Paul’s availability that made things happen. Paul did not trust in his own natural talents. He later wrote that,

“Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” (2 Corinthians 3:5).

It is the Holy Spirit Who must convict, convince, and transform the human heart. Paul was the proclaimer, the Holy Spirit was the persuader. Paul gave the invitation, the Holy Spirit drew people into the Church. Paul recognized the Holy Spirit’s power. His preaching carried conviction because of the power of the Holy Spirit – not because of the quality of his preaching.

Organization will not turn the world upside down. Personality will not turn the world upside down. Money will not turn the world upside down. Ordinary men and women filled with the power of the Spirit of God can and will turn the world upside down! The Holy Spirit is present in every believer, prominent in some believers, but He was pre-eminent in those early believers when the Church was born and it’s from them we need to learn where the true power of ministry comes from at all times.

‘Being the Church’ will continue to be an unrealized dream if we do not give the Holy Spirit His rightful place at the helm of our lives and His Church! We simply have to give the Church back to God. We have to loosen our grip on our programs and plans and let the Holy Spirit lead us daily like He did when the Church was born. Sadly, for many believers, the Trinity has become the ‘Father, Son and Holy Scripture.’

Now I love the Bible. I have spent most of my life reading it, studying it, preaching from it and encouraging people to embrace God’s Word contained within it. But I also respect what the Bible is and what it is not. Without the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is the most confusing book in the world and potentially, the most dangerous! Wars have been fought over this book because people have read it without the Holy Spirit’s guidance. We have to be very careful. The Bible will not give us detailed instructions about how the Church should operate and be structured in 2020 in Australia. But the Holy Spirit will - and He will use many wonderful Scriptures in that process. We just need to make sure we don’t end up trusting a book the early Church didn’t have - more than we trust the Holy Spirit they did have.

Secondly, they turned the world upside down through prayer. For every problem the early Church encountered - their first response was to pray. They were confident in the power and effectiveness of prayer.

You can see this all the way through the book of Acts. (4:17,18, 23, 24 and Acts 12:1-5, 6,7). Satan might have walled them in and surrounded them at times, but He could never roof them in. They always got through to God in prayer. All too often we pray when there's nothing else we can do - but Jesus wants us to pray *before* we do anything at all. Prayer does not fit us for the greater works: prayer *is* the greater work. Prayer is not an escape from responsibility, but rather it is our response to God's ability. The early Church brought everything to God in prayer: their frustrations, their feelings, their enemies, their friends, their failures, hopes, dreams, fears and their praise for His grace and favour and victory. Prayer was not a ministry – it was part of their very personalities and their lives. Prayer was not something they did, it was how they lived – and the results were obvious.

For many of us prayer has become a component of our Christian life; a ministry within the Church – but for the early Church it was an integral part of daily life. Talking to God in prayer was as natural as talking to each other. It was also absolutely essential. So much of the leading of the Holy Spirit actually came in answer to the prayers of the disciples!. Prayer doesn't inform God – it transforms us! God knows everything already – even the prayers we haven't thought of yet! Prayer transforms us; it humbles us before God; it reminds us that He is God and we are not; it removes the pride, arrogance and misplaced confidence we have in the flesh as we confess our need of God. Prayer is powerful and effective because it crucifies the flesh and releases the Spirit of God in us to do the work of God!

Thirdly, they turned the world upside down because they preached Christ crucified. Do you remember that very first sermon from Peter when the Church was born on the day of Pentecost? Let me read some of it to you, starting from verse 22 of Acts 2:

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” (Acts 2:22-24)

The all-consuming desire of the early Church was to preach Christ crucified and introduce others to the risen, living Lord Jesus. This was their highest priority. This was their calling. This was their mission. Teaching and preaching Jesus Christ and bringing people into a saving knowledge of Christ was why the Church existed. This is what being the Church looks like.

If Christ is not in the centre of everything; if preaching and living the gospel is not our highest priority, our greatest passion and our main strategic purpose, then we are ‘being’ something other than the Church.

The institutional church we see in the world today has taken up many noble causes and, as citizens of the earth, most of those causes are worthy of our time, effort, money and passion. But none of those causes actually define the Church. None of those causes can ever rise above our basic purpose which is to preach Christ crucified, risen and coming again and introduce people to our living Lord and Saviour and call them to embrace His free gift of salvation as His disciples. When that single priority and defining purpose is overtaken by some other passion or cause, we stop being the Church that we see in the book of Acts; we stop being the Church Jesus is building and we start being something else, something far less.

This past week I did a little experiment which I have done a number of times over recent years. Actually, it's more like a research project. I went online and started looking at Church websites across Australia and around the world.

I wanted to see how central Jesus Christ was and more importantly, the gospel message of 'Christ crucified' which the Apostles preached every day of their lives. Well I certainly had my eyes opened. It was a very enlightening exercise indeed. It was also the most depressing thing I have experienced for some time. The vast majority of websites highlighted their service times, location, personnel, lists of ministry programs and activities etc. Some of them had a catchy mission or vision statement somewhere and some of those had a gospel focus of sorts – but nowhere was that unpacked and explained. If preaching Christ crucified lies at the very core of the Church Jesus is building, you would never know it from those websites or perhaps from the newsletters and activities of those churches either.

Preaching, sharing and living the gospel is our highest priority and our defining purpose as the Church. If that is not obvious to those within the Church and those outside looking on, then we have lost our key distinctive and allowed lots of other worthwhile activities and priorities to overshadow the very reason we are here! Being the Church will always involve a return to the gospel in every aspect of Church life. If you go to our Church's website you will see a 'Why Jesus?' link at the top which introduces people to Jesus right up front and at the bottom of that page is a 'What is the Gospel' link which takes people to a full description of the gospel and the saving work of Jesus Christ. It saddens me to say that such a prominent focus on Christ and the gospel is not evident on most of the Church websites I have visited. It's like KFC running a marketing program and talking about everything except fried chicken? What would be the point of that? What is the point of any Christian ministry which does not have the life, death, resurrection and mission of Christ front and centre and the primary focus of everything they do and say?

Finally, these first disciples turned the world upside down because they were prepared to pay the price. Many of the early Church members were martyred for their service to Christ. They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the cause of Christ – even if that meant their own death. The measure of the importance of Christ is manifested in the lengths to which you will go to make Him known to others. If it meant jail or death to the early church, so be it. They were not going to stop teaching and preaching Jesus Christ. The cause was greater than life itself. They went to extremes to make Christ known. It does not take great men and women to do great things; it only takes committed and called men and women.

John Wesley once said,

"If I had 300 men who feared nothing but God, hated nothing but sin, and were determined to know nothing among mankind but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, I would set the world on fire."

The early Church got involved in the cause of Christ – they took up His mission and committed their lives to its fulfilment. We must get involved in that same mission to truly make an impact. They were completely surrendered to the cause of Christ and they knew that 'being the Church' was a total lifestyle commitment, not an activity on a Sunday and a few other selected times. In the book of Revelation we are told how the enemy of God, Satan, the prince of darkness, is overcome by us. Are you familiar with this verse? Do you even know you are able to triumph over the devil? Of course you can. Jesus made that possible, and we get to bring that victory into our daily lives. How? Here's how:

"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." (Revelation 12:11)

This is a call to arms for the modern Church. We overcome evil by the blood of the Lamb (Christ crucified!), the word of our testimony (preaching and living the gospel) and by going all the way, even to the point of death, if required.

Now God is not calling us all to literally die for Him - there would be nobody left to carry on His mission. But God is calling us all to have the same attitude, the same commitment, the same determination and faith as someone who is fully prepared to die for Christ. Do you want to be part of those who are described as, *"These people who have been turning the world upside down .."* That's who the Church is supposed to be.

If we are committed to truly being the Church then we will be people who turn the world upside down. As radical as that sounds, never forget that all this world-changing stuff always begins with the basics: devoting ourselves to the Apostles teaching, devoting ourselves to building rich, koinonia fellowship, devoting ourselves to sharing meals together, praying together, worshipping together and committing ourselves to the mission of Jesus Christ together.

Our forebears turned the world upside down in ways we may only dream of, and yet, we have everything they had and more! There is nothing stopping us having the same impact they had – and even greater

Come, Holy Spirit, teach us, guide us, empower us to be the Church Jesus promised to build. Amen.

'Being the Church' – Part 9

'Come, Holy Spirit'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Over several months now we have been examining what it truly means to 'be the Church.' We have explored the characteristics of the early Church and examined how they functioned and how different that might be to how we function today. Whenever we examine the New Testament Church we are confronted with the reality in which we find ourselves today and the stark differences between the two are unmistakable.

Now as important as it's been to embark upon this study and see the many areas we may like to revisit if we truly want to be the Church, we need to step back from the detail and ask the key question: how? How was all this possible? What was the secret of those first disciples' success in establishing a Church which grew at a phenomenal rate each year for more than two generations? Did they just follow a plan and tick off the tasks each day? Did they simply decide one day that they would devote themselves to the Apostles teaching every day, share deep, rich koinonia fellowship every day, share meals with each other in their homes every day and worship together every day? Were these things simply on their 'to do' list or part of some strategic plan and the rest just happened? Absolutely not. Human beings lack the capacity to discipline themselves to follow a list of tasks for that long and God only blesses and grows what comes from our hearts. The rest is just works-based religion and we all know that God hates religion.

So what was it that allowed our forebears to get it so right for so long and have such an incredible impact on the world around them? Well the correct question is not 'what' ... but 'Who' made all this possible. This 'Who' is mentioned in almost every chapter in the book of Acts and multiple times in many chapters. Of course I am speaking about God, the Holy Spirit. Everything about the early Church which made it powerful, effective, real, world-changing and dynamic – was initiated by the Holy Spirit. The disciples were responsible for listening to, discerning the presence of and then responding positively to the Holy Spirit.

This should not surprise us, because the One Who birthed this miracle of the Church, Jesus Christ, operated exactly the same way! Long before the book of Acts and the birth of the Church, Jesus modelled this Spirit-led lifestyle to His disciples. Jesus Himself is the one perfect manifestation in history of the complete work of the Holy Spirit in and through a human being. Jesus was begotten of the Holy Spirit. He is the only begotten Son of God. It was entirely by the Spirit's power working in Mary that the Son of God was formed within her.

Jesus also led a holy life and offered Himself without spot to God through the working of the Holy Spirit. We read in Hebrews 9:14, *"How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."* Jesus met and overcame temptations as other men and women may meet and overcome them - in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was anointed and fitted for service by the Holy Spirit. We read this in Acts 10:38, *"How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him."*

In Luke's account of the earthly life of our Lord we read, *"And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and there went out a fame of Him through all the region round about."* (Luke 9:14)

In a similar way Jesus said of Himself when speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* (Luke 9:18-19).

All these passages contain the one truth: it was by the anointing of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ was qualified for the service to which God had called Him. As He stood in the Jordan after His baptism, *"The Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Him like a dove,"* and it was then and there that He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and equipped for the service that lay before Him. Jesus received His equipping for service in the same way that we receive ours - by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was taught by the Spirit who rested upon Him. The Spirit of God was the source of His wisdom, direction and power whilst on earth. This was prophesied many years before by Isaiah:

"And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. And shall make Him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and He shall not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears." (Isaiah 11:2-3)

Further on in Isaiah we read, *"Behold My servant, whom I uphold; My chosen in whom My soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon Him ..."* (Isaiah 17:1). Matthew tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (see Matthew 12:17-18).

The Holy Spirit remained with Jesus in all His fullness and the words He spoke in consequence were the very words of God. We read in John 3:34, *"For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God: for He gives not the Spirit by measure."* After His resurrection, Jesus gave a commandment to His Apostles whom He had chosen through the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 1:2, *"Until the day in which He was taken up, after that He through the Holy Spirit had given commandment to the Apostles whom He had chosen."* This relates to the time after His resurrection and so we see Jesus still working in the power of the Holy Spirit even after His resurrection from the dead.

Jesus performed His miracles here on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 12:28, we read, *"I cast out devils by the power of the Spirit of God."* It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was raised from the dead. We read in Romans 8:11, *"But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwells in you."* The same Spirit who is to quicken our mortal bodies and is to raise us up in some future day, raised up Jesus.

Several things are plainly evident from this study of the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ: First of all, we see the completeness of His humanity. He lived, He thought, He worked, He taught, He conquered sin and won victories for God in the power of that very same Spirit Whom it is our privilege also to have. Secondly, we see our own utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit. If it was in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, lived and worked, achieved and triumphed, how much more dependent are we upon the Spirit at every turn of life and in every phase of service and every experience of conflict with Satan and sin?

The third thing that is evident is the wondrous world of privilege, blessing, victory and conquest that is open to us. The same Spirit by which Jesus was originally begotten is in us so we can be 'begotten' again (born again) of Him.

The same Spirit by which Jesus offered Himself without spot to God is with us so we may also offer ourselves without spot to Him. The same Spirit by which Jesus was anointed for service is with us so we may be anointed for service.

The same Spirit Who led Jesus Christ in His movements here on earth is ready to lead us today. The same Spirit Who taught Jesus and imparted to Him wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord is here to teach us. Jesus Christ is our pattern (1 John 2:6), "*the first born among many brethren*" (Romans 8:29). Whatever He realised through the Holy Spirit – we too can and should realise today.

Now perhaps we can understand why the book of Acts is full of references to the Holy Spirit. **The miracle of the Church and its impact on the world came in direct proportion to the people's knowledge of and submission to the Holy Spirit.** There are actually 45 verses in Acts which highlight the work of the Holy Spirit. Without that moment by moment work of the Spirit of God, there would be no Acts of the Apostles; there would be no Church. If we read through the book of Acts we see for ourselves just how prominent the Holy Spirit was. In the very first chapter of Acts we find Jesus warning the disciples to not do anything until they have the Holy Spirit.

"... (Jesus) ... gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:4-5,8)

Why did Jesus tell them to wait? Because without the Holy Spirit we are aimless and dangerous; we are ineffective; we are powerless; we are disconnected from heaven and the power of God. All we have is religion and a man-made institution which is completely powerless to change the world. Jesus had taught these disciples so much over the previous three years and they had a lot of knowledge and experience. But the main thing He taught them was that He achieved nothing apart from the Holy Spirit. Everything in His ministry was in response to the Spirit's leading and empowering. The disciples knew that, so they waited for that power from on high before attempting anything in Jesus' name. If only the modern Church would do the same. If only we would wait for that power from on high before we race off into our ministries and plans in Jesus' name.

Here are all the other references to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts:

"Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus." (Acts 1:16)

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (Acts 2:4)

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18)

"Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear." (Acts 2:33)

Peter replied, "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 2:38)

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people!" (Acts 4:8)

"You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David." (Acts 4:25)

"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Acts 4:31)

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" (Acts 5:3)

Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?" (Acts 5:9)

"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:32)

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." (Acts 6:3)

"They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 6:5)

"They could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke." (Acts 6:10)

"You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51)

"Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money. "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:15-19)

The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." (Acts 8:29)

"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away." (Acts 8:39)

"Jesus...has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 9:17)

"It [the church] was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers." (Acts 9:31)

"While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you." (Acts 10:19)

"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power." (Acts 10:38)

"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." (Acts 10:44)

"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." (Acts 10:45)

"Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (Acts 10:47)

"The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them." (Acts 11:12)

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 11:15-16)

"He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." (Acts 11:24)

"One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world." (Acts 11:28)

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2)

"The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia." (Acts 13:4)

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil." (Acts 13:9-10)

"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 13:52)

"God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." (Acts 15:8)

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements." (Acts 15:28)

"Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." (Acts 16:6-7)

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." (Acts 19:2)

"When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied." (Acts 19:6)

"Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. "I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." (Acts 20:22-23)

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." (Acts 20:28)

"Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." (Acts 21:4)

How much clearer can it be? Everything Jesus did, was in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Everything the Church which Jesus' birthed did, was empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. He was their constant guide. He was their only source of discernment about what they should speak and what they should do every day. He was the source of all their power, wisdom and truth. The Holy Spirit was the reason why anything they did actually bore fruit and impacted the world. Wherever the Holy Spirit moved and God's people responded, lives and families and communities were transformed. The success and impact of the early Church was unprecedented before and since that time. Nowhere else in history do we have such a powerful example of the transforming power of a group of ordinary people on the society around them.

It was extraordinary and it all revolved around the work of the Holy Spirit. But we must understand something about the Holy Spirit – He will not barge in and take over. The only reason the Holy Spirit was so powerful, so effective and so present in the life of Jesus is because Jesus chose to submit Himself to the Spirit daily. Jesus could have spoken and acted on His own, but He chose to speak only the words His Father gave Him to speak, through the Spirit and He chose only to do what He saw the Father doing, which was revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit.

The only reason the early Church exploded across the world like a raging bushfire, capturing the hearts and lives of millions of people is because those early disciples submitted themselves to the Holy Spirit every single day and allowed the Spirit of Christ, the head of the Church, to call all the shots – right down to their day by day instructions about where to minister and what to say!

For many years I have been pleading with my brothers and sisters in Christ and especially those in leadership in the Body of Christ to give the Church back to God and the book of Acts shows us what the Church will look like and be like whenever we have the courage to loosen our grip on what is not ours and never was. When we get over our demonic, irrational fear of the Holy Spirit and actually trust Him the way Jesus did and the way the early disciples did, then what we see in the life of Christ and the early Church will become our reality.

Jesus said, *“I will build my Church ...”* and there is only one way He can do that - directly and deliberately through His Spirit. When we let go of the reigns of the church we have built and let the Holy Spirit take the lead in every area of our lives and ministry, then we will finally see the Church Jesus is building and we will be writing our own book of Acts, just as powerful, confronting and mind-boggling as the first one written by Luke.

Jesus told His disciples to wait and not to go anywhere or do anything in His name until they received power from on high – until the Holy Spirit was released in their midst to guide them and empower this new Church. Jesus knew what would happen if they raced off in their own strength and tried to save the world with nothing but hearts full of good intentions. They would have ended up with a powerless, ineffective, marginalized, shrinking, irrelevant Church ... does that sound familiar? It should.

Perhaps it's time we burned all our Church growth books, cancelled our 'how-to' seminars and just decided to heed Jesus' warning again. Maybe we need to shut down every ministry of the Church we have built – close it all down – and wait in prayer, for as long as it takes, doing nothing else, until we receive that power from on high – until the Holy Spirit once again takes up the reigns of the Church Jesus is building and directs our every word and action. A global pandemic has actually provided most of that 'shutdown' for us right now . . . so I ponder what might emerge on the other side of this unprecedented ministry hiatus if we all spent this time on our knees in prayer before God, asking that the post-pandemic Church will be one led and empowered entirely by the Holy Spirit. I wonder what might emerge if we let go of all our plans and man-made visions of the Church and allowed God to rebirth the Spirit-led Church Jesus promised to build. My mind boggles as my heart pounds with anticipation of what could be.

The bottom line is this – and it's embarrassingly simple: **when you look at the life and ministry of Jesus when He was on earth and the life and ministry of the early Church He birthed, you cannot avoid the fact that the sovereign presence, power and moment-by-moment reality of the Holy Spirit is the only reason Jesus and the early disciples achieved anything at all.** And the fact that, with the Holy Spirit, they achieved so much – turning the whole world upside down – should be our strongest motivation and greatest encouragement to follow their lead.

Do you remember when Peter and John healed the lame man at the temple gate and news spread and they found themselves dragged before the Sanhedrin to answer for actions? They testified to the power of the resurrected Christ and were scolded the threatened and sent on their way. What did they do next? Let me remind you and give you another glimpse into what being the Church really looks like:

“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David ... Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all.” (Acts 4:23-33)

If we truly want to be the Church, then we have to let it go – we have to give the Church back to God as we allow the Holy Spirit His rightful place once again in our hearts, our committees, our conferences, our worship services, our ministries and our communities. Then, and only then, will we be the Church that Jesus promised to build.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

'Being the Church' – Part 10

'Come, Holy Spirit (2)'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In the previous sermon in this series we began to explore the central role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and in the life of the early Church He birthed, the Church which Jesus is still building today through His Spirit. In that study we were reminded that the only reason the Holy Spirit was so powerful, so effective and so present in the life of Jesus is because Jesus made a daily choice to listen to and submit to the Spirit. Jesus could have spoken and acted on His own, but He chose to speak only the words His Father gave Him to speak (John 12:49), through the Spirit and He chose only to do what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19), which was revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit (John 5:30).

The only reason the early Church exploded across the world like a raging bushfire, capturing the hearts and lives of millions of people is because those early disciples also submitted themselves to the Holy Spirit every single day and allowed the Spirit of Christ, the head of the Church, to call all the shots – right down to their daily instructions about where to minister and what to say!

So in this sermon I want us to further explore the most important and yet potentially the most controversial subject in the Church – the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Or to put it another way: the manifest presence of God. For hundreds of years now the Church has gathered every week around a sermon. The focal point of most Church services is that sermon and we justify that because of our true commitment to the Scriptures and the teaching of God's Word. But you may find it interesting to know that Israel camped around the Presence of God. I don't believe that anything I could ever do or say in a sermon could impact you more than gathering in the actual presence of God.

Since I embraced the call of God to full time ministry many decades ago, that has been my single greatest desire, my deepest longing and primary focus – to encourage, exhort, lead, guide and bring people into the presence of God Himself. That is the greatest gift I could ever give you. I recall a time recently when one of my congregation members said to me, *"You really do talk about God a lot, don't you?"* I smiled and said, *"I certainly hope so – my most important task is to lead you to God."*

There is a great prayer in Isaiah 64:1, *"Oh, that you would rend (tear) the heavens and come down.."* It's a prayer that revivalists have prayed for centuries and historically we see times when the presence of God would be so strong, so pronounced in a preacher or evangelist, people would fall under conviction of sin and turn to God whenever they were in the vicinity of that person!

One example I love to recount is that of the great American revival preacher Charles Finney in the late 1800's as he passed through a small community called Houghton in upstate New York. Finney was reading and praying on the train as the town flashed by his window, he was not even aware of it. But as Charles Finney's train passed through that town, the Holy Spirit fell on people right across the community. Men in bars instantly fell to their knees under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and asked Jesus to save them. Churches across town were full the following Sunday as people came searching for God. Finney didn't even stop and never preached a sermon in Houghton. It was the presence and power of God which accompanied Finney and his ministry which impacted that town in such a remarkable way.

Now you might find that story a little fanciful but it happens to be true and whilst I believe in coincidences, I don't think what happened in Houghton that day was anything other than a mighty move of God's Spirit.

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down ..." is a great prayer, a powerful prayer, a legitimate prayer. But it's a prayer which has already been answered. Let me explain. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel we read about Jesus' baptism and it says that when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens parted and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in the form of a dove – and John's gospel adds the words, *"and remained."*

Jesus was witnessing the answer to the prayer of Isaiah. When He saw the heavens parting, the word used for 'parting' there is the same word used in Matthew when he wrote about the temple veil being torn in two at the death of Jesus. It was a violent tearing of the veil and in that same verse it says the rocks around Jerusalem were torn apart – the same word - it is a violent rending, a tearing apart which cannot be put back together again. Those rocks would never be whole again. The temple veil would never be replaced and the heavens would never be closed. Did you hear that? The heavens will never again be closed. Isaiah's prayer has been answered.

As Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, there was a violent breaking of the powers of darkness which have clouded the minds of humanity for centuries. Now, here today, in Christ, the Holy Spirit rests upon and remains with every believer and our Father in heaven is jealous for fellowship with the Spirit that is within you and me and there is not a power in this universe which can get in the way of our Father's love. Most 'closed heavens' are between the ears of believers as they fail to embrace the truth of who we are in Christ and Who resides within us: the Holy Spirit. *"Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world."* (1 John 4:4)

It is too easy for us to become fearful of darkness; fearful of the times we live in; fearful about the next news bulletin full of bad news about man's depravity and evil triumphing somewhere. It's too easy to focus on the accomplishments of darkness and doubt the accomplishments of God. We pray against darkness and against things which afflict us instead of learning how to respond to the voice and actions of the Father, like Jesus did every day He was among us. If we live always in reaction to the darkness, then the devil is controlling our agenda and influencing what we do with our lives. But he doesn't have that right. He doesn't have the privilege to influence my agenda or yours at all. Jesus didn't live in reaction to the powers of darkness. He lived in response to the Father and said, *"I only do what I see My Father doing,"* and *"I only speak the words my Father gives me to speak."*

God is looking for a people who will embrace the privilege of living every day in response to God the Holy Spirit and a people who will not live one day in fear of the enemy's accomplishments – because the gospel that is in your mouth is more powerful than any dark force which has ever invaded this world. There is nothing that can stand in the way of the power of the resurrected Christ in us, through the Holy Spirit.

God is looking for a people who will learn to be good stewards of all that He has given them; good stewards of the money and resources He bestows upon us; good stewards of the gifts and abilities He bestows upon us; good stewards of the freedom into which He has called us in Christ; and good stewards of the Presence He has given us – the Holy Spirit. God wants to raise up a people who will usher in that Presence to every area of this dysfunctional world – people who are bold for Him – people who minister like Jesus did in the same power of the Holy Spirit like He did. But to be a good steward of the Presence of God in public, we must first be good stewards of His presence in private.

If you grew up in the Church like me then you will remember the great stories about King David. The one I am drawn to most is the story about how this young man killed a lion and a bear with his own hands as he was watching over his father's sheep. What really impacts me about that story is David killed the lion and the bear when nobody was watching. That is what then qualified him to kill Goliath when two entire nations were watching.

God is looking for a people who will win private victories in secret places which are not for the audience or the applause of man. As we wrestle with our own doubts and fears; as our faith is formed in the crucible of life's trials; as we develop a personal history with God when nobody is watching – then, and only then, are we ready for God to use us like He used Jesus – and we have to believe that is possible. Jesus said, *“As I have been sent, so I am sending you.”* Jesus also said, *“Greater works than these shall you do.”* The more time we spend in the Gospels and the book of Acts, the more we will see and embrace Jesus, His mission, His passion, His purpose and His power.

Let me remind you of something which happened to Jesus one day when He walked among us. Jesus was walking down the street one day and He was talking to people as He went. He was already very well known at this point. People had heard about His teaching and His miracles and so He couldn't walk anywhere in public without being attached to a crowd. So as He walked, He was teaching them and counselling them and praying for them as people were pressing in around Him – trying to get as close as they could so they could tell others, *“I saw Him.”* or *“I was there when Jesus healed someone.”* But in spite of this thick crowd which was pressed in around him, somehow this one woman, who was not supposed to even be in public because of her physical condition, managed to push through as she reached out and touched a part of Jesus' clothing.

Now you have to picture this. Jesus is walking and talking and teaching and dialoguing with all these people. He is focused on multiple things, as well as not tripping over and being trampled to death, when a woman touches His clothing. She didn't touch Jesus – she only touched His garment. Immediately Jesus stopped and said, *“Power just left me – who did that?”* The power He is talking about is the person of the Holy Spirit. So think about this with me for a moment. How conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence does someone need to be to realize in the midst of conversation, whilst walking with a crowd of people jammed in around them, to notice when somebody makes a withdrawal from their account?

When I say withdrawal, I don't mean that Jesus lost some of the Holy Spirit or the presence of God. He was given the Spirit without measure – so He was not left without – but He did feel that presence flow into someone else. How aware of the Holy Spirit do you need to be to realize when someone has put a demand on your anointing? It is one of the most fascinating stories about Jesus – worthy of our regular contemplation. At this point many modern Christians think, *‘That's great, but I would expect that from Jesus – He was God.’* And with that one dismissive, ignorant comment, we destroy the whole miracle of the incarnation and condemn ourselves and others to a life of mediocrity. Jesus did all His miracles as a man – not as God the Son. When Jesus took on human flesh, He took it on fully and completely and so He was born just like you and me with no special privilege or special powers because God the Son left all that in heaven when He chose to become a man. Anything and everything Jesus did, He did the same way you and I will do – by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit within. That is why Jesus said, *“On my own I can do nothing.”* We read that and ignore it's true meaning because we think the second person of the Trinity said those words. We think that can't mean what it appears because this is God talking. It was actually a carpenter from Nazareth talking! Please read through the references from last week about Jesus' total dependence upon the Holy Spirit for every word, every miracle and every direction - every day of His ministry. If I think that Jesus did all that He did as God, then I'm impressed and I applaud Him. But when I realize that He actually did everything He did as a man, just like me, then I am overwhelmed and I am no longer content to live as I am and I am no longer able to let you live that way either!

Now by the end of Mark chapter 6 we see that the story of this woman being healed by touching Jesus' clothes spread like a fire. In today's lingo: it went viral. So we read in the last verse of Mark 6, *“... wherever he (Jesus) went - into villages, towns or countryside - they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak, and all who touched it were healed.”*

All this happened from the story of one woman who did something nobody else had done before. But here's the crazy thing, Jesus never taught about touching anointed cloth to be healed. After it happened He didn't stop and say, "Ok folks, there's a DVD set on the back table 'Seven Steps to Miracles' and No. 4 is 'Touching Anointed Cloth.'" He never taught about this. By the time we get into the book of Acts we see the Apostle Paul making tents and people would take his sweaty headbands and pieces of clothing from Paul and put them on demonized people and the demons would cry out and leave the person healed. Where did this come from? It came from the story of one woman touching the hem of Jesus' garment. But Paul never taught about this either. We have no evidence of him including this in any teaching he gave. Why? Well, we don't know, but personally, I just believe there are some things God won't let us find through instruction – He will only let us find them through adventure. They are hidden for those with child-like hearts to find.

But Jesus' story and Paul's story are eclipsed by Peter's story. In the book of Acts we read where Peter would make a habit of going to prayer at a certain time of the day and they had discovered that when sick people just got close to Peter, they were healed. So people began bringing their sick relatives and friends and have them lie beside where Peter walked so that as his shadow passed over them, they were healed. But you will not find an instruction manual or any teaching on the power of Holy Ghost anointed shadows. No such instruction existed.

So what does all this mean? It simply means this: God has made it possible for human beings to host His presence in such a way that we impact everything and everyone around us. This is incarnational ministry on steroids! This is where you and I must understand that we take the literal presence of Christ into every area of our lives. When you stand in the queue at the supermarket or sit in the Doctor's waiting room - the presence of God, the actual manifestation of Christ is in that place and the more you believe that, the braver you will become in engaging people in conversation and hey, you may even do something crazy and out of character like ask them to join you for worship or at least have a cuppa and a chat.

So the greatest news for every believer is that the Holy Spirit is in you. The same Holy Spirit Who was in Jesus when the woman touched His garment; the same Holy Spirit Who was in Paul throughout his four missionary journeys as people were healed by touching his sweat-soaked headband; the same Holy Spirit Who was so powerfully present in Peter that nobody had to even touch him or his clothing – they simply had to be near him!

Do I really understand any of this? Is the ministry of the Holy Spirit something I can clearly and cleverly explain to you in all its detail? No! I can't do that – nobody can. So much of this wonderful life in Christ is a mystery which must be embraced by faith. The Bible contains an enormous amount of instruction and teaching which we can know and embrace with our minds and our hearts. But the same Holy Spirit Who inspired what went into the Bible, also inspired what was left out. There are no detailed instructions about living and ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why they call this the Christian faith. Often, we just don't understand, but yet we still believe and when we believe, we receive. It's a faith journey from start to finish. Every sincere believer I have ever known is longing to find that 'peace which passes understanding,' but **the only way to find a peace that passes understanding is to stop trying to understand it.**

This is true for us all but it's especially true for those in leadership in the Church. There will be times when God will ask us to travel a road which makes no sense and goes against what our minds dictate and yet, if we allow God's Spirit to minister to our spirit – we will realize that some of the most important decisions the people of God will make, do not come with the level of understanding we would like. In fact, some of them make no sense at all at the time. If you learn to be the resting place for the Holy Spirit Himself – then you will be amazed at what happens in and around you!

When Jesus came up out of that water when He was baptised and the Holy Spirit rested on Him like a dove ... how did He walk from that time forward? How did He live? How would I walk around now if I actually had a gentle dove on my shoulder and I didn't want him to fly away? Every step I took would be careful, deliberate and always with that dove in mind.

Well, in a nutshell, that's how Jesus lived. That's how Peter and Paul and the early disciples lived. They were always conscious of the Spirit's presence and chose to be led by God, not by their own wisdom or the influence of others. That's why the ministry of Jesus was so powerful and so life-changing. That's why His mission exploded across the world through His disciples over the next couple of hundred years.

Brothers and sisters, *being the Church* will be nothing more than the title of a soon-forgotten sermon series if we don't truly embrace what I have shared in this sermon and the last about the role of the Holy Spirit. I will have more to say about the Holy Spirit in the next message and my prayer is that those who have ears to hear, will really listen to what God is saying to us all right now – I believe it's what God is saying to the whole Church right now across this nation. Are we listening? More importantly, do we have the courage to respond?

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

'Being the Church' – Part 11

'Walking in the Spirit'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Over the past couple of weeks we have been exploring the central role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and in the life of the early Church He birthed - that Church which Jesus is still building today through His Spirit. As a flesh and blood human being, Jesus learned how to host the Holy Spirit and defer to Him at every point in His earthly journey. Then before He left the earth He told His disciples to wait until the Holy Spirit came so that they could do the same. So as disciples of Jesus here and now, we are also called to live in step with the Spirit of God every moment of every day. We have more than a message to host. We have more than a job, an occupation or a ministry to steward. We have a Person – a Person Who has so intimately and so intensely devoted Himself to us that He rests upon us and is released within us - literally changing our environment wherever we go.

The Holy Spirit has been given to us without measure, without limit. Any limitations are on our side of this glorious partnership. We are the ones who deny ourselves, our families, the Church and our nation the power and wonder of 'Christ in us, the hope of glory.' We are the ones who grieve and quench the Holy Spirit and deny Him access to our thoughts, our hearts, our lives and our wills. This whole concept of God the Holy Spirit resting on us and flowing through us is awesome, it's extreme, it's mind-boggling – but it also happens to be true.

Now Jesus made a very interesting statement one day when He was here among us. We can read it in John 6:63. He said, *"My words to you are Spirit and they are life."* Think through this. *"My words are Spirit ... and the Spirit gives life."* This particular sermon of Jesus in John 6 was the most offensive sermon He gave in His entire ministry. He started with a crowd of almost twenty thousand people and He ended up with just a handful of disciples. He offended the crowd so much that most of them walked away and refused to accept what He was teaching. However, Jesus was simply telling them what the Father told Him to say, through the Spirit.

Sometimes God will bring a word to us that we don't understand or accept, just to test our heart. Did you know that God is in the business of revealing hearts? Well He very often does that by offending our minds. At such times we are forced to ask, *'Am I in this for intellectual gratification? Do I need to be in control? Do I need to manage this issue or these people? ... or ... am I totally yielded and surrendered in my relationship with God and am I willing to embrace what I don't understand?'*

That's what the Lordship of Christ looks like in our lives. It's when we are able to say, *'I don't get this. I don't understand it. But I do know His voice and I will heed that voice regardless.'* When we step outside human reasoning and our own sense of personal control then all of heaven shows up to confirm and celebrate our obedience to the Lord. Every believer is put into such a position many times in their lives and some of them let their flesh, their mind, their pride, their fallen humanity have its way and some let the Spirit of God have His way. The outcome of that choice is very significant. One feeds and empowers our flesh and our need to control people and the circumstances of life - the other empowers our surrender to the Holy Spirit and Christ's mission to advance His kingdom.

I can tell you from personal experience, from counselling and from walking alongside thousands of brothers and sisters over many years, that you will not get the peace of God which passes all understanding until you give up the need to understand! There are many things I understand about God, my life and the mission of Christ. For that I am grateful – but that understanding is a bonus, it's not my right and nor do I have to understand in order to follow God's voice.

One of the most powerful and liberating things a human being can do before God is to lay down the right to be in control and choose to follow the Holy Spirit – even if, and especially when, we don't fully understand what's happening or why.

Now there are two instructions the Apostle Paul gives us regarding this relationship with the Holy Spirit and they are both essential. The first one is, "*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.*" (Ephesians 4:30). The second one is, "*Do not quench the Holy Spirit.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). These two warnings serve as guard rails, if you like, in our walk with God. As we journey through life and are careful not to grieve or quench the Holy Spirit in thought, word or deed, then our relationship with Him and our understanding of His role in our life and the ministry of the Church continues to grow and mature and His empowering presence grows accordingly. I'll come back to those two guard rails in a minute, but let me go back to what Jesus said.

Jesus said, "*My words to you are Spirit and they are life.*" So here's Jesus, the Word made flesh, and when He speaks, the Word of God is made Spirit. Something happens when you find the heartbeat of God and speak it out. Some of you know this from experience. Many of us in ministry have been in that situation when we are talking with a brother or sister about God and it might be in a home group or just over coffee and we are discussing the things of God and then out of our own mouth comes words which are so spot on, so appropriate, so right for that moment, that there is no way in the world we thought that stuff up! Suddenly the whole atmosphere changes and there is a Presence we did not experience before. What just happened? It's simple really. God gave us words which became Spirit and that Spirit gave life!

We are responsible stewards of the words of a Person and each day we travel between these guard rails of grieving the Spirit or quenching the Spirit and as we learn how to move in that anointed space our lives and our ministries are transformed. These are not legalistic barriers, they are necessary guard rails which we should welcome.

Now to grieve the Spirit is to sin in thought, in ambition or in attitude of heart. That grieves Him and brings Him much pain when we choose to do something that would undermine our purpose and our calling in Christ. To quench Him means we restrict the flow of the Spirit. We hinder His movement in us or those around us or in our ministry or the Church. You know how we pick up a garden hose which is running, usually with a sprinkler on the end, and we kink the hose to stop the flow so we can move the sprinkler - well that's the concept behind this word *quench*. We restrict the flow of the Spirit through our unbelief or our need to control people or situations or through our demonic fears and doubts. Grieving is about character. Quenching is about power and flow. Which is more important – character or power? Well, that's like asking a bird, 'Which is more important – your left wing or your right wing?' Both are essential.

Jesus is calling a people to Himself who can display purity and power and this relationship we have with the Holy Spirit puts us in that place where deep in our heart of hearts we have the confidence that nothing is impossible with God. God is raising up a people who will no longer be satisfied with human accomplishments which we then call ministry. I am thankful for the talents, skills and experience which people in the Church have been given. I am thankful for the buildings we can erect and enjoy in the Lord's name. I am thankful for the works of service we can perform and the mission projects we can launch or support. That's all great, but at the end of the day if we have not truly invaded the impossible, the supernatural, then we have not demonstrated the gospel as it was meant to be demonstrated. The things that you and I should remember most are the things that we cannot take any credit for – the things that we saw God and God alone do. How did Jesus turn the world on its head, impact so many people and draw such huge crowds? It's simple - when people came to Jesus they encountered God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Why did the early Church explode across the world and unite the most divided human community in history and reap such a mighty harvest for so long? It was because when people came into contact with the those early Apostles and disciples, they encountered God through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters I beg you to listen to this, in Jesus' name. When Jesus said, *"On my own I can do nothing,"* that is exactly what He meant. Without the presence, power and ministry of the Holy Spirit in Jesus and through Jesus all the world had was a carpenter from Nazareth with a bunch of radical ideas! Without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that special day of Pentecost would never have happened, the Church would never have been born and history would never have been re-written by a handful of ordinary people. Without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit right here and now, in your life, in my life, in this Church and in its leaders ... we have nothing to give, nothing to say and nothing we could possibly do which would impact the world around us!

To those who may long to see our building full to overflowing one day I say this: God is not going to send people to us so they can encounter me or our musicians and singers or any of you. God will send people to us when He knows those people will encounter their God in our midst and when they do, they will never be the same again and nor will our Church. Our programs, our ministries, our services, our sermons, our songs, our prayers, our very lives mean nothing, will amount to nothing and will have zero impact on the needs of this world until we learn to walk in the Spirit as Jesus walked in the Spirit.

Without the active ministry of the Spirit of God we have nothing to give, nothing to offer and no power to change anything in this dysfunctional, broken world! God is the only One Who has ever changed history and God will change history again through us, here and now, if we let the Holy Spirit have His way in us and among us! The power of the gospel needs to flow through yielded vessels who say, *'I'm tired of the status quo; I'm tired of routine; I'm tired of traditional boundaries; I want to see Jesus glorified the way He is in the Book!'*

In Matthew 10:7-8 we read where Jesus says to the disciples, *"And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand....'"* A pretty simple message. That was it. Maybe you missed it. So let's read it again. Here's the sermon Jesus gave them to preach: *"And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand ... (then, when you have given people that context, when you have preached that simple sermon - show them the kingdom of heaven in action) ... 'Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.'"*

Now there are a lot of people in the Church today who don't know what to do with those two verses from Matthew 10. Many ignore them. Some fear them and wish they were not there. Some just don't believe what they read and others are challenged by it. But Matthew 10 is like 'Ministry 101' for the disciples of Jesus. Just picture it. Jesus pulls them together and they sit in a circle and He says something like,

"Ok team ... it's time for you to do the stuff. It's time for you to embrace your calling, pursue your purpose and truly follow Me. Here is what you need to preach ... write this down ... 'The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.' That's it. Then, you need to show them what the kingdom of heaven looks like. You need to release heaven on earth as you heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons. I have already given you everything you need freely, so now get out there and freely give it away."

Then down in verse 12 Jesus says, *"...when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it."*

Ok just hold that thought for a moment while I take you all the way back to Noah:

“He (Noah) sent out from himself a dove, to see if the waters had receded from the face of the ground. But the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, and she returned into the ark to him, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her, and drew her into the ark to himself. And he waited yet another seven days, and again he sent the dove out from the ark. Then the dove came to him in the evening, and behold, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in her mouth; and Noah knew that the waters had receded from the earth. So he waited yet another seven days and sent out the dove, which did not return again to him anymore.” (Genesis 8:8-12)

What is the international sign of peace? A dove with an olive branch in its mouth, right? Fascinating. In what form did the Holy Spirit descend and rest upon Jesus at His baptism? A dove, right? So the Old Testament story of Noah and the dove is a prophetic picture of New Testament – New Covenant ministry. Jesus said we are to go into a house and release peace there. Luke’s gospel says that if there’s nobody in that house worthy to receive that peace, then that dove, that peace will return to you like it did to Noah. Now if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this:

You and I are ministers of a Person. We have more than words, more than a message, more than a concept, more than a spiritual argument to give to people. We have a Person resting upon us and residing within us Who longs to be released into the environment in which God has placed us.

What was it that was drawn from Jesus when the woman touched His garment and He felt power move from Him? What was it that was drawn from Jesus in town after town over those three and half years of intense ministry? It was the person of the Holy Spirit – given to us without measure, without limitation to impart to any and all who receive Him. That is the normal Christian life! That is why we are here: to advance the kingdom of heaven, by God’s grace, for God’s glory and through God’s Spirit. That is *being the Church!* Take a look at John 20:19-22. This is after the resurrection.

“Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Remember what Jesus taught them to do when they entered a house? ‘Let your peace come upon it.’ Well this is where I think they finally understood what He was talking about.

“When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

What happened here? Jesus walked into a room full of fearful believers and released the peace of another world in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to walk into a world full of fearful people and bring peace. Right now we need a generation of people who can walk into a room, into a community, into a city and a nation and bring the hope, healing and reality of another world through the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus walked into that room and said “Peace” and they didn’t receive it at first because they were fearful – and understandably - some guy who was dead just walked through a closed door! So Jesus said it again and His words became Spirit and He imparted a Person to them ... not a hollow platitude or a powerless blessing ... but a Person. Is any of this making sense to you? I pray that it is because all ministry involves us learning to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and then to impart Him to others.

Do you remember in Noah's story that the dove flew around looking for a place to land? Do you understand that the Holy Spirit is always looking for a resting place in another person? He is always looking for someone to rest upon and help bring that person to their purpose in life.

The Christian life is not that complicated. It has always been about the partnership between heaven and earth so that the purposes and will of heaven would be displayed and manifested on earth. That is why Jesus asked us to pray and believe it will be answered: *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Our purpose as a Church has always been to advance the Kingdom of heaven, by God's grace, for God's glory and through God's Spirit – and that Spirit has been given to every single believer - freely and without measure or limitation.

Every morning as you rise from your slumber you have a choice: You can ignore, quench or grieve the Holy Spirit within you ... or you can submit to Him, walk in His power and impart Him to those around you throughout that day – wherever you go. It will be that choice, made each and every day by each and every one of us which will determine if we are *being the Church* that Jesus is building – that Church which will finally bring this world to its knees in worship, adoration and submission before the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

If you really want to stop 'going to Church' and start truly 'being the Church' then what I have shared with you here is not negotiable. Zechariah said it better than anyone thousands of years ago:

"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6)

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

'Being the Church' – Part 12

'The Dwelling Place of God'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

What is the Church? How can believers 'be' the Church instead of just 'go' to Church? Such are the questions we have been wrestling with throughout this teaching series. They are simple questions, but the answers are not always simple and there is no single answer. There are many things we should do (and stop doing), believe (and stop believing) in order to truly be the Church Jesus birthed and promised to build.

The problem with many Christians is that they have a low 'ecclesiology,' that is a low understanding of what the Church is and their role in it. For many of us, being the Church simply means that we call ourselves Christians and attend Church activities on a regular or semi-regular basis. But outside of that we may have no real commitment to or investment in the Church of Jesus Christ. If we don't fully understand the purpose of something then it is destined for misuse or neglect. I believe that is exactly what has been happening in the modern Church. This is not new - there was something of this happening in the early Church and Paul addresses it in his letter to the Ephesians.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

In the preceding verses (11-18), Paul calls for the Gentiles to remember their past when they were hated by the Jews, called "the uncircumcision," without citizenship in Israel, without covenants, without hope, without Christ and without God. The Jews were called to be a holy nation that drew the other nations to God. However they became prideful in their lofty position as God's people and instead of ministering to the Gentiles - they hated them. There was tremendous animosity between the two groups. But through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ brought these two hostile groups together before God. He made them one people - one body. He made them His Church.

It seems that Paul addressed this because there was still division in the early Church. Though they were saved and part of Christ's body, they weren't really *being* the Church. In Romans 14, Paul writes of division over eating meat offered to idols, practicing the Sabbath day and other things that divided Jew and Gentile Christians. Even the apostle Peter would not eat with Gentiles when certain Jews were around (Galatians 2).

No doubt, they started to form separate Jewish and Gentile congregations. Many in the early Church did not fully understand what Christ had done for them and therefore they were not being the Church Jesus promised to build.

The same is true today. Many Christians don't understand the Church and therefore are not really living as the Church. Church is often something simply attended - with few ramifications other than that.

As we conclude this series in which we have been exploring what it means to truly be the Church I want us to examine the three metaphors Paul gives us in this Ephesians passage. In many ways these three pictures Paul gives us of the Church are a fitting summary of this entire teaching series and a good place to finish.

1. Heavenly Citizens

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Ephesians 2:19)

The first metaphor Paul uses is that of citizens in the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God). He says, *“you are no longer foreigners and aliens.”* Foreigners and aliens were often looked at with suspicion and discriminated against and this is how the Gentiles were treated before Christ established the Church. They were like second-class citizens as far as worshiping God. They could not enter the temple; they could not be priests and, in most cases, were despised by Israel. However, in Christ, Gentile Christians were now full citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Among Christians there is some disagreement over what the kingdom of heaven is. John the Baptist preached the kingdom of heaven and so did Christ and His apostles (cf. Matt 3:2, 10:7). However in studying texts on the kingdom of heaven, it clearly has both a present and a future reality. For example this one from Luke:

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21)

Christ says the kingdom of God is within you, or it can be translated “in your midst.” The kingdom of heaven is present, and yet, we still wait for its complete fulfilment. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10). Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is wherever people proclaim submission to God. It is in our hearts, and yet it is also a coming reality. One day, at Christ’s coming, He will literally rule on this earth as in heaven and as the Church, we should currently live as citizens of this kingdom. How does that look?

a) Heavenly citizens will have different cultural norms than those of the earth.

These different cultural norms include different speech, dress, values, etc. Ephesians 4:29 says, *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”* Citizens of heaven will only let words come out of their mouths that will be helpful and build others up. They will not be known for sexual jokes, cursing, or other language that defiles.

1 Timothy 2:9 says, *“I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.”* Though Paul speaks to women in this text, the principles apply to all Christians. In the world clothes are often used to show one’s wealth and to draw attention and glory to the wearer. But the Christian will want all glory to go to God and therefore avoid lavish, sexually alluring, or ragged clothing (often another way of seeking attention).

Not only will Christians be different in their talk and their appearance, but also in the way they think. Romans 12:2 says, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* The world culture trains people how to think about beauty, success, life, and death. However, citizens of heaven will think very differently about these things, because their views are based on Scripture. Citizens of heaven will be continually transforming their minds through the Word of God.

b) Heavenly citizens will continually walk in righteousness.

Romans 14:17 says, *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* These are all present realities that should be growing in our lives.

We are meant to be manifesting the righteousness of Christ in our lives more and more and helping others to do so as well. We will be living in the reality of our peace with God which leads to peace with others. We will also be growing in joy regardless of our circumstances because our joy is in God. Philippians 4:4 says, *“Rejoice in the Lord, again I say, ‘Rejoice!’”*

c) *Heavenly citizens will continually proclaim the kingdom to others.*

Acts 28:31 says this about Paul: *“Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul continually proclaimed the kingdom of God - preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. This should be true for us as well. As citizens of heaven, we should continually proclaim the gospel to all who will hear. The good news is that this present world is not the best there is - there is more. The sin, discord, death, and decay of this world are not God's plan for us. God has more. Jesus Christ ushered in a whole new world – a new kingdom – into which He calls each of us.

d) *Heavenly citizens will long for the kingdom of heaven.*

Hebrews 11:16 says this about Abraham and the other patriarchs of the faith: *“Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”*

Though living on the earth, Abraham and the patriarchs longed for their heavenly home - and God is not ashamed to be called their God. God is pleased with those who long for the coming kingdom. One of the ways we long for this coming kingdom is by praying for it. Again, the Lord's Prayer gives us those mighty words, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done.”* We should long for it especially as we see the sin and destruction happening daily in our world.

Another way we long for the kingdom is by longing for our King - our Saviour - to come. Paul says this in Philippians 3:20-21:

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

If we are truly being the Church then we will be living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Our language, our behaviour, our priorities and our hopes will be different to the world around us.

2. The Family of God

The next way that Christians can be the Church is by living as family members.

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.” (Ephesians 2:19)

Not only has Christ made us heavenly citizens, but also members of the same family. There is greater unity and intimacy between family members than between citizens. This should be something that characterizes Christians. Christ says this about His followers:

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:48-50)

Christ regarded His disciples as family members and God as their Father. He taught the disciples to pray, *“Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name ...”* (Matthew 6:9). When we began following Christ, we became family. This family includes people from different socio-economic backgrounds, races, ethnic groups and it includes believers both in heaven and on earth. Ephesians 3:14-15 says, *“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.”*

In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Paul says this about how believers should treat one another: *“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”* We should treat one another as family. Christ said, *“They will know you are my disciples by the way you love one another.”* (John 13:35). We are to be known by this intimate familial love.

a) *As family, believers often use familial terms.*

Paul calls Timothy his “son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). He refers to himself as a “father” to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:15), and calls the Romans “brothers and sisters” (Romans 12:1). We should feel comfortable using these familial terms as well.

b) *As family, believers place a high priority on being the Church.*

Galatians 6:10 says, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* Yes, we should do good to all, but especially to believers. They should be our priority. When something is your priority, you invest your time, money, and energy in it, and you give up other things to focus on it. This should be true of our investment in the Body of Christ.

Sadly, for too many people, job, schooling and housing are the main priorities instead of the Church. Believers often uproot their families from a great Church community where God is using them and move for career and other opportunities. This often leads to spiritual struggles. They find a new Church fellowship, but often struggle to get involved - and it never feels like home. Their spiritual life suffers because they didn't prioritize their kingdom ministry - their Christian family. Where has God planted you? How is God calling you to make Church and the mission of Christ your priority?

c) *As family, believers must develop intimate relationships with one another.*

Family is a place where we share intimate secrets and struggles, and this should be true of the Church as well. James 5:16 says, *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”* Sadly, many have no transparency in their Church relationships. People in the Church are too often kept at arm's length, if not an entire body's length. We need to develop intimate relationships within the body of Christ. We should learn to confess our sins and share our successes with one another and also to seek the prayers of the saints. These are practical aspects of being family.

d) *As family, believers must encourage one another in their spiritual growth.*

In families, parents invest their lives, money, and time in helping their children grow as individuals. Church members should help one another grow as well, especially in their relationship with Christ. This is the priority of people who are “being” the church. As the writer of Hebrews says, *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”* (Hebrews 10:24).

3. God's Temple

"... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:20-22)

Paul also teaches that the Gentiles are being built into a holy temple where God dwells. No doubt this conjured up images of the Jewish temple, which Gentiles could never fully enter. However, they were now God's temple.

a) *As God's temple, we will constantly worship God.*

That was the primary purpose of the physical temple. There, people gathered to worship and offer sacrifices pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:15-16 says: *"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."* Here the author says praise, good works, and giving are sacrifices that please God. This will be our continual endeavour as God's temple. We will ask ourselves daily, *"How can I worship and bless God today both individually and with other believers?"* Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."* Everything we do can and should be worship.

b) *As God's temple, we will live carefully - in a God-honouring manner.*

In one of Watchman Nee's books he says that if you have a little bit of change in your pocket, you can walk around carefree. However, if you have a large sum of money in your pocket, you will walk very carefully lest you lose it. Not that we can lose God, but he who dwells in us is so valuable that His indwelling should drastically change how we walk. We should be different. So let us walk carefully so we might always honour God with our mouths and our meditations. Let us always remember that our individual bodies, and also we as the Church, are his temple – the dwelling place of God.

c) *As God's temple, we will live as God's holy people*

The priests and Levites made sure that God's temple never became defiled. There were ceremonial washings and cleansings even for the plates in the temple. In the same way, as the temple of God, we will keep ourselves from anything that might defile. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 says, *"Avoid every kind of evil."* When Jesus went into the temple, He made a whip and turned over tables because God's house was being defiled. We must have that same type of zeal for God's temple - our bodies and the Church. We must get rid of all sin and anything that does not honour God. Paul further expands on this idea of God's temple by considering three critical elements.

> The apostles and prophets are the foundation of the temple

Ephesians 2:20 says the temple is built on the *"foundation of the apostles and prophets."* There is some controversy over this. Is Paul referring to the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles? Or is he referring to New Testament apostles and prophets? Most likely he is referring only to those who ministered in the New Testament. The primary support for this view is the order in which he lists the two groups. If he is referring to the Old Testament prophets, then it would make sense that the prophets would be listed first. Instead, he is probably referring to those who ministered with the apostles in building the foundation of the Church.

"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." (Ephesians 3:4-5)

The apostles were specifically a small group whom Jesus chose, called and authorized to teach in His name and who were eyewitnesses of His resurrection, consisting of the Twelve plus Paul and James and perhaps one or two others. How are the apostles and prophets the foundation of the Church, especially since Scripture says Christ is the foundation of the Church (1 Cor. 3:11)? The primary way the apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the church is through their teaching. They wrote the New Testament Scripture on which the Church is built and they founded local churches based on these truths. Paul confirms here:

“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11)

The apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the Church through their teachings, and their emphasis on the resurrected Christ. There are several principles that we can learn from this about being the Church.

Since the Church is built on apostolic teaching, we, as committed members of the Church, will be devoted to apostolic teaching. As we saw early in this teaching series, the early Church *“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42). We must be devoted to daily studying God’s Word, memorizing it, teaching it, and sharing it with others. Since the Church is built on apostolic teaching, when seeking a Church fellowship, we should look for one that faithfully preaches the Word of God. Many Church communities no longer preach from the Bible. They say it is too antiquated, full of errors, and irrelevant to the needs of the people. Instead, they preach psychology, history, stories, and anecdotal socio-political diatribe. Paul warned Timothy of such times:

“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

Because Satan knows that the Word of God is the foundation of the Church, he always attacks it in his attempts to bring the Church down. Even at the beginning of time, Satan attacked the Word of God. He asked Eve, *“Is that really what God said?”* Tragically, that same question is being asked by a growing number of modern ‘Christians’ about some of the foundational truths of our whole faith.

> Christ is the cornerstone of the temple

Ephesians 2:20-21 says the Church is: *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.”* The cornerstone was a messianic picture of Christ in the Old Testament. Isaiah 28:16 says, *“So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.’”*

A cornerstone was important for two reasons. It was part of the foundation, and it also fixed the angle of the building and became the standard from which the architect traced the walls and arches throughout. Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is on Him, His Word and His finished work that the Church is built. When Jesus asked Peter who he was, Peter replied, *“You are the Christ, the Son of God.”* And Jesus replied, *“On this rock, I will build my church”* (Matthew 16:16-18). Christ is this rock. He is the cornerstone on which the Church is built. Only those who accept Christ and his teachings are part of the Church. Is your life built on Christ - His life, death, resurrection, and teaching? Any other foundation will fail.

Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is through Him that the Church is unified. Paul says this in Ephesians 2:21, *"In Him the whole building is joined together."* Then in Ephesians 2:14, *"For He Himself is our peace, Who has made the two one."* He is the one Who joins the Jews and Gentiles together, abolishing that ancient hostility. He is also the one who brings the Church together today. We can be unified because of Him, whether we are Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, male, or female. We can only have this kind of unity based on Christ. If our unity is based on culture, affinity, gender, socio-economic status, hobbies or anything else, it will not stand. Only Christ can unify the Church and keep it unified. Are you walking in unity with the rest of the Church? Yes, certain people's personalities may get on your nerves; they may think differently than you; they may even hurt you. However, you can seek unity because of Christ - He is the unifier. Let that commonality trump any and all other differences. Christ is our cornerstone.

Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is through Him that we grow. Ephesians 2:21 says, *"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."* It was upon the foundation, the cornerstone, that the rest of the building was built. In the same way, both our individual and our corporate spiritual growth come through Christ. Christ says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). It is only by abiding in Christ, our cornerstone, that we can grow and ultimately fulfill our purpose. We abide in Christ and therefore grow spiritually through studying Scripture, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and serving. Many are not growing because they are not abiding in Christ - they are not staying connected to the cornerstone.

> **The people of God are bricks in the temple**

Now the third aspect of the temple that Paul refers to is us. Ephesians 2:22 says, *"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."* Though Paul does not actually say so, the implication is that he is referring to individual believers as bricks or stones in the temple of God. Peter uses this same analogy in 1 Peter 2:5 when he says, *"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* Yes, Scripture teaches that individual believers are the temple of God. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body."*

Scripture also teaches that when believers gather together, God is with us. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* The word *you* in this passage is plural, referring to the Church. Similarly, Christ says in Matthew 18:20, *"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."* When believers are present together there is a special way in which God meets with them. In fact, there are some things God does in a corporate gathering that He does not do when we are alone.

Now as 'bricks' in the 'temple of God' we obviously need one another. A brick is not good for much by itself. But when it is bound together with other bricks, can become part of a beautiful building. In the same way, apart from the body of Christ, we may miss God's best. As bricks in the temple of God, the Lord is constantly adding other bricks until the temple is complete, and we must aid in that process. One day God will add the final Jews and Gentiles to the Church and the temple will be finished. He has called us to aid in that process by faithfully sharing the gospel with others. In Matthew 28:19 we are called and commissioned to, *"go throughout the earth and make disciples of all nations."* Those disciples are the bricks Jesus uses to build His Church and that Church which Jesus promised to build is the only Church God recognises, empowers and trusts to fulfil His Kingdom plan and purpose.

Conclusion

As I draw this teaching series to a close, I don't believe for a moment that I have said all that could be said about what it means to truly be the Church. I could probably preach for years on this topic as I continue to explore the depth and breadth of this wonderful faith community into which God has called us. However, I do sincerely believe that if you understand, embrace and apply the teaching in just these twelve sermons, Jesus will fulfill His promise to build His Church in you, through you and around you. You will marvel at what is possible as you fully embrace the Church that God sees and longs for, which may not be the Church humans have tried to build in Jesus' name. I want to finish now where I started by repeating what I said at the end of my very first sermon in this series:

You will be amazed at what God can achieve through you and the believers around you when you decide you want to stop just going to Church and start being the Church! But we need to work with God here and go looking for His hand at work and listen for His voice to us. These sermons need to be studied and prayed through - not just read once and discarded. I would strongly suggest when you have made your way to the end of this series that you go back and work through the sermons again one by one, in prayer, asking God to reveal His word to you today. Download the PDF's and print them off and grab your pen and highlighter and go to work! If you choose to spend that time and let God really drive His truths home in your heart, then I can guarantee that 'being the Church' will not be a chore or an expectation or a religious activity - it will be a spontaneous reality as the life of Christ explodes within you.

Then, before we know it, the book of Acts will no longer be a dusty historical account of where this all began, it will once again be a commentary on where we are now, and who we are becoming as we give the Church back to God and watch Him do today and tomorrow, what He did back then. That is my only agenda. That is the reason I preach - to lead people to the God Who still speaks, still heals, still transforms lives and whole communities. Everything I do, say, preach and pray is directed towards that end. I truly believe God is always ready to redeem what we've lost and give us the only thing we ever truly needed: Jesus - the living, present, Lord of the Church and the One Who promised to build His Church, right here, right now, if we let go the reigns and trust Him.

- THE END -

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