

## '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 these verses:

**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, fellowshiped and ate together in each other's 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 reins and trust Him.

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