

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

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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:

1 Corinthians 2:1-4 *“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...”*

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,

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

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:

Acts 2:22-24 "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."

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:

Revelation 12:11 *“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.”*

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.