

The Church Unleashed as Organisation

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[0 : 00] The title of our current series is The Church Unleashed. It's a pretty powerful set of images. It's there to remind us that if we're ever tempted to think that the church is boring or dull, well, we'd better think again.

It's there to remind us that in the Bible, in the book of Acts, we're shown that God wants the church to be a revolutionary movement through which the world is changed for the better.

It's there to remind us that when we take all that on board, when we open up ourselves to God's Holy Spirit, then we are unleashed. That is, we're set free to do all the amazing stuff that God wants us to do.

So as we look at this series, we've got some pretty exciting themes week by week. We've been looking at what it means to be the church unleashed as a radical family of God's children.

We've been thinking about what it means to be the church unleashed as God's servant, serving those around us in our everyday life and transforming lives.

[1 : 06] We've been thinking about what it means to be the church unleashed in power, experiencing signs and wonders and miracles. It's all really exciting stuff. So when I looked at the series planner to get ready for this week, I had pretty high expectations for getting stuck into something exciting and interesting and challenging.

And then I saw the title for this week. What is it? The church unleashed as get ready for this. The church unleashed for the church unleashed as an organization.

Rock and roll. And I guess that's the point. Most of us don't really get very excited when we think of organizations and establishments, especially when it comes to faith and spirituality.

So many people are wary of religious institutions. And if I'm honest with you, I am too. But the bottom line is organization is essential if the church is going to be effective in being a missionary movement.

Imagine an outdoor water tap. If you try to water the garden from it directly, you turn it on, but it would only gush straight to the floor. But if you attach a hose pipe, then suddenly you can direct all that water across the whole garden, getting it where it needs to be.

[2 : 29] The church unleashed as an organization is not about confining or limiting the dynamic nature of God, but it is about creating flows and systems that allow the spirit to do his work.

And today's Bible reading, which we'll turn to in just a moment, is from Acts chapter 10. In this chapter, we see something of a turning point in the early stages of the church being set up as an organization.

To understand the importance of what's going on here, we have to remember that the church was born from the Jewish faith. Most of the early followers were Jewish, and they were still following many of the laws found in the Old Testament.

More fundamentally, at this point in history, they had a very exclusive understanding of who the people of God were, to the extent that they would not enter the homes of Gentiles, that is, non-Jewish people.

But that was about to change. And in the passage that we're about to hear from, we see Peter, who was sent by God to the home of someone called Cornelius, who was a Gentile.

[3 : 37] And as he enters, something radical happens. So let's turn now to our reading. Acts chapter 10, verse 34 to 48.

Then Peter began to speak. I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in

Galilee after the baptism that John preached.

How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

[4 : 46] He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.

So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. Living in a 21st century liberal Western society, it's easy for us to miss the importance of what happens in this story.

[6 : 10] Peter and his contemporaries would have grown up, steeped in the tradition that their own people had a unique covenant relationship with God. That's the story of what we refer to as the Old Testament.

But Peter was there when Jesus, having risen from the dead, told his disciples to go and take the good news to all nations. And here we see that in action in the book of Acts, as God's Spirit pours out among Gentile people.

And so Peter tells them to go on and baptise them. Traditions are overturned and new structures come into being because God is breaking through boundaries and doing a new thing.

And that's what it means to be the church unleashed as an organisation. To be set free, to be ordered in a new and different way, in response to what God is doing.

And remember this, the church is no ordinary organisation. This point is well made by the evangelist J. John. J. John is a Church of England minister. He describes how, over the years, he's found that people tend to turn off when he tells them what he does for a living.

[7 : 24] So one day, he decided to try a different approach. He'd just boarded a plane and settled into his seat, which happened to be next to a complete stranger.

Well, they got talking and soon enough, she asked him that inevitable question. So what do you do? This was his answer. Well, he said, I work for a global enterprise.

She said, do you? He said, yes, I do. We've got outlets in nearly every country of the world. She said, really? He said, yes. In fact, we've got hospitals and we've got hospices and homeless shelters.

We do marriage work. We've got orphanages. We've got feeding programmes, educational programmes. We do all sorts of justice and reconciliation work.

Basically, we look after people from birth right the way through to death and we deal in the area of behavioural alteration. She went, wow!

[8 : 31] And it was so loud. Loads of people turned around and looked at us. She said, what's the name of your organisation? I said, it's called the church.

Have you not heard of it? That, my friends, is our organisation. It's not just some collar-wearing brigade. It's all of us as Christians.

And it's not an organisation that you just sign up to and hang around as some kind of spectator. If you're in it, you've got an active part to play. So let me tell you one last story.

As a young man, Philip was kidnapped and held hostage in Greece. And there he remained for several years. During this time, he received a military education.

Then he returned to his homeland, which had conceded many defeats and had lost much land. Within five years, though, he'd become king of that land.

[9 : 29] So Philip II desperately needed his army to stand firm. He's remembered for two major innovations. The first is the design of a very long spear.

The second is the redevelopment of a rectangular military formation used by ancient armies known as a phalanx. A corps of highly trained infantrymen, armed with Philip's longer spears, would stand shoulder to shoulder in files, normally eight men deep.

As long as they stood side by side and did not break rank, they were virtually invincible and they struck fear into the hearts of their enemies. Using this tactic, Philip united the city-states of Greece and in 356 BC conquered the city named after him, the city of Philippi.

Several centuries later, one of the first churches was founded in that city and not long after, St. Paul wrote a letter to that church, a letter known as Philippians, that became part of the New Testament. And in the 27th verse of the opening chapter of Philippians, Paul urges the church in that place to organise themselves so that they are, and I quote, standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

[10 : 52] Now that's what it is to be the church unleashed as an organisation, to be side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Will you stand with us?

Will you stand with us?