

Back to Basics

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[0 : 00] This is a football. At the last service, I think it was the first time in the history of St. Albans somebody brought a football to the pulpit at the 8 o'clock service.

But there was a young man present who kept waiting for me to throw it into the congregation. And I told him that I don't trust my arm and that I would probably hit some elderly person in the face with it, which would destroy any attempt at good teaching from the illustration.

But this is a football. And many of you know that I'm a big football fan. I watched parts of both of the playoff games last night.

And I don't do church services in the evening on Super Bowl Sunday because I watch the Super Bowl. You can have a service, but as long as I can get home by about 4.30, I'll come to it.

But after that, I'm not going to do the service because I watch the Super Bowl. There's a famous story about, I think it's Vince Lombardi, who was one of the greatest football coaches who ever lived, that his team had been on a losing streak.

[1 : 19] And one day when the team came after its loss and they came to gather into the room to begin their practice for the week, Vince Lombardi said, Men, this is a football.

And then he proceeded to teach them the basics of football. They'd just reached the point in time he'd realized that they weren't doing the basics of football properly. They weren't doing the fundamentals properly.

And he said, we're going to start right at the beginning. And right at the beginning, if you want to teach somebody football, as you say, this is a football. My sermon this morning is a this is a football type of sermon.

It's because not only do bad teams need to remember the basics, but good teams need to remember the basics. Those of you guys and probably some women as well.

I know. I don't know how many here remember Audrey Foster. Audrey Foster was the head of the altar guild in this church for half a century.

[2 : 23] She was also season ticket holder for the Rough Riders for half a century. And so I know there are women who like football. And, you know, one of the things they talk about when they're talking about football is that it's a team that does the fundamentals and the basics well.

So good teams need to do the fundamentals and the basics and bad teams need to relearn them. And churches can get confused about what the fundamentals and the basics of a church is.

This is not just speaking. I know many of you here aren't lifetime Anglicans, but Anglicans in particular are profoundly confused nowadays about what the church is.

We think it's a name. You know, the Anglican church is fighting people over the use of the word Anglican here in Canada. Or we think it's the presence of a bishop. Or we think it's the presence of a building.

Or, you know, or we think that if we want to get back to basics, we go to the third century. Or we go to the twelfth century. Or we go to some century or another. And churches, the Anglican church in particular, and I'm speaking as an Anglican clergyman, the Anglican church in particular is profoundly confused about what is a church.

[3 : 35] And the reading of scripture which Janice read this morning is something which is going to be in our minds over the next, this week and the next three weeks. As we, in a sense, look again at what are the fundamentals.

What is the basics of a church? What makes a church a church? What makes a church a church? So take your Bibles and turn in them to page 944.

Those of you who've brought your own Bibles, it's Acts chapter 2 verses 44 to, sorry, Acts chapter 2 verses 40 to 47. And the first thing we're going to look at is verse 42.

And this, throughout the ages, has been recognized as a text. This one text gives the four marks of what a real church is. I think it was two years or three years ago.

Well, it was 2003, so I guess it's now almost three years ago. I went to Amsterdam for the first time. And if you go to Amsterdam and you get any of the touristy type of map stuff, you'll see that there are churches listed.

[4 : 50] Like here you have this secular Dutch government advertising churches. Now, I wasn't taken in for a moment. Because if you go to them, all it is is a building.

It's a really nice building. It's a really dramatic building. And if you want to pay several euros, you can go into it and have a tour.

And at least in one of the ones that I was in, which was the really dramatic building, there hasn't been worship in that building for decades, decades and decades.

It's a museum with the odd classical music concert and the odd lecture. But it's not a church, even though it has church on the outside. And even though the Dutch government calls it a church.

And even though the advertising calls it a church, it's not a church. It's just a building. It's a building that used to be owned by a church. Acts 2, verse 42.

[5 : 46] And one verse gives the four marks of a real church. Listen. And they continued. Another way to put this as they were devoted.

They continued, or were devoted, in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Now, over the next couple of weeks, we're going to sort of, you know, look at this in some depth.

But just sort of to give you the big picture of these four simple marks of what makes a church a church. The first thing is that the church, a true church, a real church, is a group of people devoted to the apostles' teaching.

In fact, in this version, it says it is a group of people who are devoted to the apostles' doctrine. And we now understand that that means the New Testament. It means that the mark of a real church is a church which is completely and utterly, wholeheartedly devoted to understanding what the apostles taught about the person of Jesus Christ, about the meaning of life, about what happens after we die.

It means a group of people completely and utterly devoted to hearing the witness of the apostles, which means a church is a people devoted to the New Testament and through the New Testament to read the Old Testament.

[7 : 10] It is a church devoted to the Bible. And you know what? It doesn't matter if, you know what? It doesn't matter if we have, we could have 20 bishops in here. We could have five primates in here.

We could have 10 learned professors, emeritus here from divinity schools. But if they all gathered here and they weren't committed to the New Testament, to having, to being a group of people who are formed and reformed by the New Testament, then there's not a church here.

Doesn't matter if they own the name Anglican. Doesn't matter if they're all of those people. A church is a group of people who are devoted to being a New Testament people.

A people devoted to apostolic teaching. Listen again to the words of Acts 2.42. They continued steadfastly, or they were devoted, in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship.

And that second word, fellowship, is a hard word to translate. The Greek word is koinonia. And it could really also be translated as communion.

[8 : 20] And so what does it mean to be a people devoted to communion? The word koinonia points us that, first of all, we are to be a people devoted. Like, you could have a group of people devoted to Shakespeare's writings.

You could have a group of people who are devoted to maybe Jane Austen's writing. I know there's piles of people every year who go to Prince Edward Island because they are devoted to Anne of Green Gables.

And they read the book over and over and over again. And if all the church was was a group of people devoted to the New Testament, there would be maybe nothing different than us in the university down the road who have professors devoted to different writers or different topics.

But the second one points to something deeper. Remember, we are a group of people devoted to communion, to koinonia. And first and foremost, that is a word that points us to being devoted to communion with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

That's what this word is pointing us to. Not just a group of people devoted to intellectual mind games and academic discussions about curious things about the New Testament.

[9 : 29] Maybe read the New Testament to see what it does to reflect upon the changing roles of women in first century pagan culture as they clash with Latin and Greek culture and things.

It's not like that, folks. It is a group of people devoted to New Testament teaching, to the apostolic teaching, and a group of people devoted to communion. And that means first and foremost, communion with God.

And secondly, communion with other people who desire communion with God. You see, the Christian life is never the life of the Lone Ranger.

It's always a life of communion and community. And so we are to be devoted first and foremost to communion with God. And as part of our devotion to communion with God, it means communion. Well, look to your left and look to your right. It's devotion as well, a complete and utter commitment to other people who also desire communion with God.

[10 : 31] Acts 2.42, the third mark of a church. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, *koinonia*, in the breaking of bread.

And here, the definite article, the, belongs there. And it's referring to the Lord's Supper. And it's referring to the Lord's Supper, not just as a ritual which we happen to go to.

And, you know, a church which never has that ritual isn't a real church. You know, you have to have the ritual. But it's more than the ritual. It's what the ritual is about and what it allows us to enter into.

Remember, we're to be a people devoted to apostolic teaching, a people devoted to communion with God and communion with others who are in communion with God.

And we are to be a people who regularly gather to remember Jesus. Regularly gather to remember that Jesus is the Messiah of God, the anointed one, the mighty savior, the mighty deliverer, that he is the one who died on the cross for you and for me, bearing all of your sins in mind, tasting all there is to taste of sin and of death, and on the third day, rising from the dead, and defeating sin and death and hell and the evil one, and all things that keep us far from God.

And we are to gather daily. We are to gather regularly to partake of the Lord's Supper. And more than that, to remember Jesus. To remember Jesus.

[12 : 01] The fourth mark of the church. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in, and here if it was to be translated literally, it would say, and in the prayers.

And the prayers is a wonderful term. It means that we are to be a people devoted to prayer in two types. That we are, on one level, it describes that we are to be devoted to this type of the prayers, gather together to say and to do and to live the prayer of the church.

A public gathering. That once again, we're not just to be solitary, individual lone rangers, but it also means, it also means those of us who get up in the morning and kneel by the side of the bed, or before we go to bed at night, kneel by the side of the bed and pray.

Or those who gather in coffee shops, or in living rooms, or in kitchens, and pray with other people, or pray by themselves. It is a commitment to a life of conversation with God.

Because that's what prayer is. The four marks of a real church. It is a group of people devoted to knowing the apostolic teaching so we can be formed by it.

[13 : 17] It is a group of people who are devoted to be in communion with God, and in communion with others who are in communion with God. A group of people who are devoted to gathering together to remember Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and a group of people who are committed, devoted to conversation with God.

These are the four marks of the church. They answer the question, how do I recognize a real church? How do I know when I go to Amsterdam that even though the brochure says it's a church, the government says it's a church, the sign says it's a church, it's just a building?

We know this by Acts 2.42. Pray for us that we will be a people devoted to these basics. Pray for us that we will be a church, a group of people, a community devoted to these things.

Now this text, which Janice read, touches on two other questions. The first one is, how do you enter a real church? And secondly, how do you live in a real church?

We're going to look at the first one, how do you enter a real church? And here, we're not just talking about a building, although, you know, it's really important for us to be always sensitive about how hard it is to enter a building.

[14:37] I have a friend, or I had a friend many years ago who was into anthroposophy. I don't know if there still are many people who are into anthroposophy. I hope I pronounced that correctly. And I went with her once for one of their services. And I had been going to churches for a long time, but it was just very, very unnerving to go into a building devoted to anthroposophy. Like, you know, how am I supposed to act, you know? Like, what am I supposed to do? I went to a Buddhist wedding once. And, you know, when I first got the invitation to go to a Buddhist wedding, it was a cousin who was marrying somebody who was a Buddhist. And I was a bit apprehensive about, well, how do you enter into a Buddhist wedding ceremony? How do you enter into a Buddhist building? And one of the things that we have to pray about is that, you know, there are many people in our culture that the idea of walking through that door is very scary.

They don't know how to do it. And you know what? That's not their fault. Like, you know, we can't stand at the door and say, shame on you for not knowing how to enter this building.

[15:45] But, you know, and for many people in our culture, what they think is in this building is a combination of interesting things about the past and toxic waste. You know, because there's many people in our culture who believe that we're a repository of everything that is bad about Canada and the West.

And once again, that's not their fault. And one of the things we have to do is we have to pray and pray and pray that as people pass that door and as they maybe even consider that door that there's something welcoming about it and that we can do whatever we can in our power to make coming into this scary place a welcoming experience.

But that's an aside. The text here talks about how do we enter a real church. We're going to look at still on page 944, we're going to look at verses 40 to 41.

And with many other words, this is Peter. Luke is summarizing what Peter has just, how Peter's ended the first Christian sermon that took place 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus and the Holy Spirit has fallen upon the 120 people Peter has got up and preached.

Luke has given a summary of this first sermon. On one level, this is the birthday of the church and here's what Peter, this is how it sort of closes up. And with many other words, Peter testified and exhorted them saying, be saved from this perverse generation.

[17:16] Then those who were, those who gladly received his word were baptized and that day about 3,000 souls were added to them. verse 41 shows that there's two things involved in entering a real church because remember, a real church is not a building but people, a community of people.

There are two things involved. First, that we receive the word of Peter and secondly, that we are baptized. Now, the receiving the word of Peter means, it means receiving his witness forgiveness to Jesus, his death upon the cross, his resurrection, the fact that he is the Messiah of God, the fulfillment of all of the promises which God has been making for centuries and centuries and centuries.

It is a message to turn to him in faith, to surrender to him in obedience. It is a message that Jesus is the one that opens the way to God and that when we turn to Jesus, he turns no one away who comes to him and we receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the way that we enter into a real church is to receive this word, to say yes and in saying yes to say no to whatever is not in keeping with that word and is to say yes, Jesus, thank you, thank you and the second thing is to be baptized.

Now, completely and utterly godly people in different churches debate the order that these two things have to happen in. Baptists, I was a Baptist.

I was a member of Alta Vista Baptist Church. I was baptized when I was 17 years old. I survived the interview by the deacons of several hours to allow me to membership in the church which given that I had hair down to my belt was quite a task.

[19:16] And I was a member of a Baptist church and Baptists, God loved them, they believed that first you received the word about Jesus and then you were baptized.

Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, say that the order doesn't matter as long as you do both. And some other time I can talk more fully about why we Anglicans in particular believe that it's appropriate that baptism happens for godly parents of their children.

That's another topic. But whether you're a Baptist or whether you're Anglican, you should believe in both. In fact, one of the tragedies today is that while it's understandable that Christians of goodwill can debate the order of receiving the word and being baptized, it is terrible that there are many who think that both are not needed.

There are many Anglicans, once again, unfortunately, who only think you have to be baptized. That, you know, you can come to St. Swithin's in the swamp as long as you're baptized you can receive communion and one of the wonderful things about St. Swithin's in the swamp is it doesn't matter what you believe.

That anybody, no matter what they believe, are completely and utterly, well, folks, that's not Christian. You know, I had a hard time for many years when I was an Anglican after I'd been ordained in Anglican Church to be able to say that, like, you know, come out in public and say, that's just not Christian.

[20 : 48] And Anglicanism, of course, does believe and teach that you have to have receive the word about Jesus and give your life to Christ and be baptized. Both of them have to happen.

Whether baptism happens first or second, well, that's just sort of, there's a whole sorts of reasons why things might happen in that order, but both are important. The church is a people who have received the word, the message of Jesus, responded with faith and obedience, and have been baptized.

As another aside, sometime within the next couple of weeks, I would like to provide an opportunity for people in this congregation who haven't been baptized or for people who would like to publicly reaffirm their faith.

Maybe they were baptized as infants, came to faith far later and would like to mark that somehow publicly. And also for those who would like to be received into the Anglican Church.

And I'm going to provide some means of some sort of teaching for that. And I will be making some announcements about that in a couple of weeks' time. So, the marks of a true church, a real church, how you enter a real church, and finally, how do you live in a real church?

[22 : 04] Once again, we go to this classic text. Remember, Acts chapter 2, 40 to 47, is a, this is a football text. It's one of those things we have to sort of look at time and time and time again to make sure that we're in the right direction.

And how do we live in a real church? Look at verses 43 through 47. I'll just read them briefly. Then fear, or awe, came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Just want to pause here. The first thing about living in a real church is that we are learning, we are a people learning to be open to God.

Learning to just be open to God. I mean, you know, so many of us go through times in our life when our relationship with God is sort of like this, and we're maybe in a fetal position, you know, curled up, and the goal of the Christian life and the goal of the people of God is to learn to be, not in a fetal position, but to learn to stand like this and be completely and utterly open to God.

And here in this simple verse, we see two of the three things that are mentioned in this text about how we're learning to be open to God. First, to be open to God is to learn awe.

[23 : 31] Like, the more you know about God, on one level, the more we know about God, the more we know that he is the kindest being you will ever meet, the most merciful, the most faithful, but he's also the most different.

He is God. And so it's appropriate that we learn a sense of the awfulness of him and his difference. And to be open to God means to be open to the supernatural.

It means to be open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It means to not quench the Holy Spirit. It means to be open to praying for miracles, to pouring out our heart to God for the needs of the world and for God to work miraculously and powerfully in and through the church and his people.

It means learning to be open to this and also means to be open to God in such a way that other people come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. It's the last verse of the chapter.

Praising God and having favor with all the people and the Lord added to the church daily those who are being saved. Like the part of the dailiness of learning to be the church is expecting and being open to God in such a way that we learn to have a sense of awe in his presence.

[24 : 47] We learn to be open to the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit and the acting of God in our lives and we are open to how God brings people to saving faith through fallen people like us.

fallen, unworthy people like us. Secondly, a church, a real church is learning to be generous.

Look at verses 44 and 45. Now all who believed were together and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all as anyone had need.

This is not a text that teaches communism. It's not part of the sermon. Some other time I can show. The whole text assumes private property. It assumes their possessions and in a moment we'll see it's their houses.

But the mark, you know, how do we live in the real church? Those of us who are learning to live in the real church are learning to be open to God and we are learning to be generous, especially when faced with need.

[25 : 53] especially when faced with need. That when we see real need, whether it's a need to send the gospel out, whether it's a need, a physical need of somebody in the congregation, the first thing that goes through our mind is how can I generously deal with this?

How can I deal with this generously with my property, with my time, with my money? How can I deal with this? When we're learning to do this, we're not there yet.

But to be a real church, I mean, to learn to live in a real church is to learn to be open to God, to learn to be generous, especially when faced with need. And finally, we're learning to live large and little.

Notice all those L's in that sentence. This is my Baptist roots, you know, learning to live large and little. Look at verse 46. So continuing daily, day by day, the word daily here presents a picture of the normal life.

You know, it's a homey word. Like, what's your daily life like? Well, you know, your daily life, you brush your teeth, you know, you get up, you have coffee, you go to work, you know, you say hi to your friend, you go to your regular place for coffee.

[27 : 10] Like, it's a daily, homey type of word. And so in verse 46, so continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they eat their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.

You see, they're learning to live large and little. And that means that part of this normal life in a real church, part of a real people who are really committed to Jesus Christ means that large gatherings like this are just part of our normal life.

that's the word there they met in the temple daily. It's just part of their normal life that we would come together with larger numbers of people and that we'd worship God together and this is part of the normal Christian life.

But not only are we learning to live large, but we're learning to live little because they meet also daily house by house. And this is really what we would now call small groups.

And it would be also those mentoring types of relationships. It's not only Christian families, but it implies something beyond the family of a life where we remember Jesus and we say the prayers and we study the Bible and we learn about each other's needs and we use our spiritual gifts not only when we gather in large settings, but also in little sessions.

[28 : 35] And if we as a church only do the large without the little, there's something wrong. And if we only do the little without the large, there's something wrong.

Because part of what it means to learn to live in a real church is that not only do we learn to be open to God, not only are we learning to be generous, but we're learning to live large and little.

Which means, you know, whether it's the small groups that are advertised in the bulletin or I don't know if they are advertised in the bulletin, Vi's been, Vi is sick and I don't know if the bulletin's all up to date, but whether it's one of the small groups that we offer, whether it's a small group that we want to start in our home or whatever, but learning to live little is part of what it means to be the real church.

Please pray that St. Albans will never forget the basics, but that we'll do these really, really well.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we thank you that you are so patient with us.

[29 : 55] We give you thanks and praise that you don't look at us and try to weigh our merits, but that you pardon our offenses. We give you thanks and praise that you don't sort of look down your nose at us if we're not doing as good a job as we should be, but that you just day by day and moment by moment that you smile at us and look at us with eyes of love and desire only the best for us.

Father, we give you thanks and praise for your fatherly care, your gentle care, your kindness towards us. Loving Father, pour out your Holy Spirit with fresh power upon us as a congregation. May these marks be the marks that characterize us as a people. may you help us to help people to enter into your people, people who are learning to call on your name. And Father, may you help us to learn how to live as your people. Help us to learn how to live large and little and to live more generous lives and to live lives that are completely and utterly open to you. Father, this we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen.