

What is the Church and why do we meet?

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Preacher: Rupert Evans

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. The reading this morning is from Deuteronomy chapter 4 and I'll be starting at verse 1. Deuteronomy, if you're looking it up, is at the beginning. It's the fifth book in the Bible, but it's also on the screen. So Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 1 to 14.

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live and go and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you. Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal Peor, for the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes will say, surely this great nation is a wise in understanding people. For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? Only take care and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children, and your children's children. How on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so. And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form. There was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. Good morning, everyone. Before we start, just a quick word or two about this series. As Simon said, we're starting a new three-week series thinking about the church. Normally, our passion at Grace Church, as you know, is to go through books of the Bible, to look at the Bible in the way that God has given it to us. So he sets the agenda. But every now and then it's helpful, isn't it, I think, just to look at one particular theme or doctrine, and to see what the Bible as a whole teaches us about that theme. Sometimes when we do that, it's possible just to look at one passage. That's very helpful, because we can all see what it's saying, if there's one passage that covers all the sort of key ground. Other times, it's more helpful, I think, to do around a little bit, so that we can get the whole sweep of the Bible on a particular subject. We're doing a little bit of both today, one main passage from Deuteronomy, but we're going to also see what other parts of the Bible say about the church. And for that reason, I hope people read Vicky's email, where she encouraged us this week in particular to print off a handout. I think for this type of talk, it's more helpful to help us follow along. Some stuff will go up on the screen, if not. But I think for the next couple of weeks, if you can print off a handout and bring a Bible to trace up different verses, always useful to do, but in particular, over the next couple of weeks. We've already prayed, so we'll dive straight in. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed our experience of church.

[4 : 0 0] Midweek and Sunday gatherings have moved partially or fully online. We can no longer sing or have coffee together. For the children among us, Sunday Club is currently closed. And in such an environment, it would be very easy to get detached from church or even to put it on hold altogether until after lockdown. It's a time, sadly, when many people might drift from church or think it doesn't really matter because isn't the important thing me and my own personal relationship with God. Ten months into the pandemic, we've now got used either to not having to see each other if we're watching online or not having to talk to each other if we're meeting in person.

And these changes are likely to raise all kinds of questions for us. Does it matter if we don't meet physically? Can I join a different church online every week or listen instead to my favourite preacher on the other side of the world?

Could we carry on with online church after the pandemic? After all, it would save money on rent at Rosendale. Well, to help us think about these issues, we're kicking off this new series today by answering the question, what is the church? What does the Bible mean by the church? And what does it expect the church to do when it meets? Or to put it differently, why do we do things at Grace Church as we do? It's an important question, not just now, but also because if we ever leave Dulwich or, for those in JAM, go to university, we need to know what type of church to look for.

So let's turn to the Bible and you'll see we're going to tackle this subject under two main headings. First of all, what is the church? What is the church? Many people think of the church as the equivalent of a temple, in particular the Old Testament temple. In other words, a holy building where people offer something to God. Or to put it differently, the church is where we find God and where we worship God. But as we'll see, that isn't how the New Testament views the church.

There is an Old Testament equivalent of the church gathering, but it's not the temple. The word translated church in the New Testament literally means assembly or gathering. And it's the Greek equivalent of the word used to describe what happened at Mount Sinai in Exodus when God's people gathered before him. That's the event our Bible reading from Deuteronomy 4 is looking back to, and which is described three times in Deuteronomy as the day of the assembly, or it could be translated the day of the church. So if we want to understand what the New Testament envisages by the church, we need to understand the Old Testament background. What happened on the day of the church when the Old Testament people of God met? And that's the first thing I want us to notice from these verses.

[7 : 03] The church is the people of God. Let me read verse 10 of Deuteronomy 4. Moses reminds the people of how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God, the day of the church at Horeb, the Lord said to me, gather, or we could say assemble, or even church, the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so. We'll think later about what this verse teaches us about why the church gathers, but notice that the gathering or assembly is a gathering of people.

The day of the church was the day when God's people gathered, because the church is the people. And this is a consistent message of the New Testament when it uses that word church.

I guess if you ask the man on the street, or many churchgoers for that matter, what the church is, you'd be likely to get one of two answers. Either that the church is a building, like when people say they want a church wedding, or that it's a denomination, like the Church of England.

But the New Testament defines church very differently. Turn with me, if you would, to Acts chapter 12 in the New Testament. Acts chapter 12, we're turning to a couple of verses we're going to look at here.

Acts 12, it's on the screen, and have a look at verse 1. We're told there that about that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. We'll look on a few verses to verse 5.

[8 : 43] So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. Quite clearly, it's not a building Luke has in mind here. The early Christians met in people's homes, or hidden away in caves, just as many churches today meet in schools, or warehouses, or in some parts of the world in the open air, as at Sinai. The church, rather, is God's people. A few chapters further on in Acts, in chapter 20, Paul tells the Ephesian elders to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Who did Jesus share his blood for? Well, not a building of denomination, but his people.

And it's not just Luke who has this view of church. Have a look at Romans 16, verses 4 and 5 on the handout. Notice Paul speaks of how all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well, and then says, greet also the church in there, referring to Priscilla and Aquila's house.

Do you see how Paul distinguishes between the building where the church met, the house, and the church itself, the people who met there? The church is the people of God.

So actually, I think it's good practice to try not to talk about a church building as a church. One of the advantages of meeting in a school is that when we say we're going to church, we're less likely to think of the building, and more likely to think of the people.

Now, before we move on, it's worth recognizing the New Testament uses the word church in two main ways. These are sometimes called the universal church and the local church.

[10 : 34] The universal church is all believers everywhere throughout history. So look at Ephesians 1, 22 and 23 on the handouts or the screen, where Paul writes that God put all things under Jesus' feet and gave him his head over all things to the church, which is his body.

That's clearly not a reference to one particular church, such as Grace Church Dulwich, but to all believers. Similarly, when Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 how Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, he means the universal church, all believers.

Perhaps have a look at Hebrews 12, 23 later for another example of this. It's an exciting reminder to us that we belong to a global body of people that spans across the globe and throughout history.

It's why it's so helpful to have mission partners in Italy and Ireland, Soweto and Streatham and Zambia. But as well as the universal church, the word church in the New Testament can also refer to individual local churches.

Those verses we saw earlier in Romans 16 spoke of the churches of the Gentiles, referring to a number of little gatherings of the universal church and the church in Priscilla and Aquila's house.

[11 : 58] Or in 1 Corinthians 1, 2 on the handout, notice Paul addresses his letter to the church of God that is in Corinth. Not the universal church, but a local gathering of believers.

And in Revelation 2 and 3 we find Jesus writing letters to seven individual churches. These churches are, if you like, little outposts of the universal church and share its name.

A bit like how British embassies all over the world are little outposts of British rule. Indeed, to be a healthy member of the universal church, we need to be committed members of a local church.

A little outpost where we can encourage and be encouraged by Christian brothers and sisters, be taught by pastor teachers, and reach out as ambassadors with the good news of Jesus to others.

More on that next week. But notice for now, it's not very helpful when a denomination like the Church of England calls itself a church, because that neither refers to the universal church, nor the local church, if you think about it.

[13 : 10] So what is the church? Very simply, it's God's people. A family that, to use the language of Acts 12, we belong to. And that will have various implications for us.

For one thing, it means we therefore belong to each other. The most common word used to describe Christians in the New Testament is brothers. We're brothers and sisters in Christ.

Family. With all the privileges and responsibilities, joys and tensions, which come from family life. Is that how we think of each other, I wonder?

It's particularly important we remember this during COVID, I think. If church is a family, we need to care for family members at this time who are lonely, anxious, depressed, grieving, or sick.

I wonder which Christian brother or sister we might be able to pray with, or phone this week, or serve in some way. And this is also the reason why it's not healthy to join different churches online each week, because church isn't a spectator sport, but a particular family who have commitments to one another.

[14 : 23] But also by way of application, we need each other. That is to say, we can't be lone ranger Christians.

Being part of a local church, a local outpost of God's people, is not an optional extra for keen Christians, or something we participate in as a consumer when it suits us, or we need help.

No, the church is a family that will outlast our biological families, and we all need each other. We'll be thinking more about what these things might mean for our approach to church in two weeks' time with Jake.

But just as a hot coal will soon go cold if removed from the fire, so we'll grow cold as Christians if we stop interacting with one another. Which brings us on to our second main heading, Why Does the Church Meet?

Why Does the Church Meet? Now many people would answer this question by saying the reason Christians gather on a Sunday is to worship, as if the church were the equivalent of the Old Testament temple.

[15 : 28] We've probably heard people ask, where do you worship? Or say, I worship at St. Agnes'. Other people think of one part of a church gathering as worship, when they refer to the person in charge of the music as the worship leader, perhaps, or speak of having a time of worship when they sing, for example.

But the New Testament never uses the word worship in this way. And worship wasn't the reason God's people gathered on the day of the church, according to Deuteronomy 4.

So let's go back to Deuteronomy 4 and verse 10 once more. Why did the people gather at Sinai? Well, Moses reminds the people, of the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, it's another word for Sinai, when the Lord said to me, gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear or revere me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.

The people gathered to hear God's words. And notice they did so, not primarily to worship then, but to be equipped to do so afterwards, all the days that they live.

Why does the church gather? To hear God speak, so they can be equipped to worship him. And did you notice, teach others, their children to do so, equipped for ministry, we could say, and for those children who are here, wondering why they have to come along to church on a Sunday morning.

[17 : 03] Well, it's so your mums and dads can be equipped to teach the most important thing in life to you. Now, do we see how different this is from the popular misunderstanding of church as a place primarily for worship, like the temple?

The writer to the Hebrews uses Old Testament temple language to describe not what we do when we meet together, but what Jesus has done for us. Listen to these words from Hebrews 10.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

We now enter God's presence, not by visiting a holy place, but by faith in Jesus. Jesus' body is our temple, our meeting place with God, and we are temples of the Holy Spirit in whom God resides.

So the church doesn't meet to access God's presence or worship him. Vaughan Roberts puts it like this in his excellent book, True Worship. He writes, No worship we offer, whether in praise or in the sacrament, can bring us to God.

[18 : 28] We depend entirely on the worship Jesus offered when he died on the cross, offering his life as a sacrifice. In Christ, we already are in God's presence. There is nothing for us to do except draw near with faith.

We do not have to offer the mass or sing for half an hour to draw close to God. We are already close to him if we have trusted in Christ. In fact, we could not be closer to him.

And since the cross has brought us into God's presence, there's no need for special buildings anymore. A church building is simply a rain shelter, even if not always a very effective one at Rosendale.

That's why you may remember in John 4, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman the time was coming when people would no longer worship on the Temple Mount, but in spirit and truth. A time when worship wouldn't be restricted to a physical place.

And it's why when we get to the end of Hebrews 12, a book which unpacks what has changed between Old and New Testament when it comes to these issues, and the writer tells us to worship with reverence and awe, he then applies that in Hebrews 13 by talking not about what we do at church, but what we do outside church.

[19 : 48] About brotherly love and hospitality and submitting to leaders and sexual purity and how we use our money and caring for persecuted Christians. In the New Testament, worship isn't so much about what happens on a Sunday, although it will include that because all of life is worship, but how I live the rest of the week, at home, in the workplace, with my friends, and in private.

As Paul puts it in Romans 12, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. One church supposedly reinforced this point by placing an inscription over the exit of the church building with the words you are now entering a place of worship.

To make the point, worship happens when we leave church rather than by coming to church. So if we don't go to church to worship, why do we go to church?

Well, according to Deuteronomy 4, this Old Testament blueprint for the church gathering is to hear God's words in order to be equipped to serve him. In other words, the direction of church meeting shouldn't, as many suppose, primarily be upward as I offer something to God and inward as I have my own private encounter with God through music or ritual, but downward as he speaks to me through his word and outward as we then encourage one another.

And so it's no surprise that when the New Testament talks about Christians meeting together, it does so in those terms. So first of all, downward.

[21 : 31] The fact that hearing God's word for us in the Bible is to be central to the church gathering is obvious from what the New Testament tells church leaders to do. So if we were to read the three letters addressed to church leaders in the New Testament, 1 and 2, Timothy and Titus, again and again we'd see how they're told to teach sound doctrine or preach the word or correct error.

Well, turn with me, if you would, to Ephesians chapter 4. I think Jake has kindly put the verses up on the screen. And look with me at verse 11.

Paul describes there how the risen Jesus has given the church word ministers like evangelists and literally pastor teachers or shepherd teachers. Why?

Verse 12, to equip the saints, all of God's people, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Christ. In a nutshell, the job of a pastor is to teach the Bible to equip all Christians to serve and worship God 24-7.

So it's no surprise that when the church gathers, it does so for that purpose, to hear God's word taught. In that sense, we do of course meet with God at church.

[22 : 50] We meet with him in his words. And it's why of course we must go to a church where faithful Bible teaching is central. Listen to Vaughan Roberts again.

He writes, the prime direction of our meetings as Christians is not from us to God, but rather from God to us. The focus is the congregation and its encouragement or edification.

He builds us up through his word. We do not meet to worship God so much as to encourage one another that we might be equipped to worship God better with the whole of our lives. So a church service could I guess be described as a bit like a training session.

Just as a sports team trains together to be equipped to perform better on the pitch. So we're coached through God's word when we meet to be able to worship Jesus more effectively on the pitch of our daily lives.

And this ought to change how we think about coming to church because we're to come to church to be equipped. It's why we're not to think of the sermon as a time we can switch off or something to critique, but rather to listen eagerly so we'd be motivated and taught by God's word to live for him.

[24 : 08] But as well as the downward aspect of the church gathering, there's also an outward direction. Just after those verses I read earlier from Hebrews 10, the writer tells us to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

You see, rather than looking inward at church and having my own private spiritual experience, I'm to look outward to others and consider how I can encourage you. Sadly, in many churches people sit as far apart from others as possible, are mere spectators facing what others are doing at the front, and go home afterwards without having interacted with anyone else.

But that's not how it should be. The most common phrase used in the New Testament for what's going on when the church gathers is not worship, despite one or two slightly unhelpful translations in our English Bibles.

I don't think that word is ever used to refer to the purpose of Christians gathering. But as in those verses from Hebrews, meet to meet or come together.

You see, the direction isn't so much vertical as horizontal with one another. And the implication, of course, is we're to come to church to encourage one another.

[25 : 35] Not just as passengers letting everyone else do the work, nor as parasites coming for our own sake, but as partners being actively involved in the work of ministry ourselves.

As I mentioned earlier, we'll think more about this in two weeks' time. But it shows we mustn't neglect the horizontal component of church during lockdown. For those watching online, it's why that time over Zoom in breakout groups afterwards is so helpful.

And why, even if for a number of us there may be good reasons not to come to church physically at the moment, we need to remember online church is not the ideal. and look forward to the day we can meet in person again.

It's why growth groups are so important where this horizontal work can be done more easily. And why it's important in normal times to stay behind to encourage others over coffee after the service.

Now next week we'll think about a different outward aspect of the church's role. Not with one another, but with the world. But in summary, I thought I'd end by reading out the short prayer that Andy Meadows prayed at the start of the 945 service last week.

[26 : 50] Being a service for all ages, it was very simple, but I wrote it down because I thought it was a brilliant summary of what we've just been looking at. He prayed this right at the start of the service. Dear God, thank you that we can meet together to hear from you.

Amen. Thank you that we can meet together to hear from you. there's an outward direction, meeting together, and a downward one, hearing from God.

A simple prayer, but impeccable theology that encompasses what we've been thinking about this morning and explains why we meet here at Grace Church. Shall I lead us in a prayer now?

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that as we saw, as many of us saw in our growth groups this week, the church is the place where your manifold wisdom is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

We thank you that the church is therefore so much more important than we often think. We thank you for what we've seen today, that church is not a building or denomination, but the people.

[28 : 02] We thank you that you have made us a family with one another. And we pray that you would so help us to understand that and to be excited by it, that we would long to encourage each other and to be equipped to serve each other as we gather together week by week.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.