

Why Church?

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[0 : 00] We're here this weekend to talk about the church, so I just want to ask you two questions about the church. I guess, what are your expectations for us in the teaching sessions this weekend?

As evangelical Christians, we don't think or talk very much about what the church is or what the church does. We assume it. So I think what I'm hoping for is that we'll understand the church theologically, but it's just a different way of saying, I want you guys to understand that the church is a gift.

It's not a burden that God's putting on us. It's not just kind of the thing you do to get something done. It's actually a gift. It's one of the ways God can assure us of our faith.

So that's my hope for the weekend. I spoke just a few weeks ago at a student conference in Sydney, and I gave five talks on worship, and I'd done hundreds and hundreds of hours of preparation.

At the end of it, this big Tongan guy comes up to me and says, Hey, mate, I want to thank you for your talks. I don't really get the point of it, though. Like, church is a song and a talk and a prayer, right? Oh, my goodness, fail.

[1 : 09] That he couldn't see past, that you just do some stuff. Where actually there's, behind those things that you do, some prayers or talk or some singing, is a magnificent gift from God that gives us assurance.

That's my hope for the weekend. Why don't I pray as we stand, and then Rhys will come up to teach us. Father God, we're so grateful for the church, for the gift of the church, that you would call people like us to be part of your people, to be part of Jesus' body.

Thank you for that privilege. Please change our view of church this weekend. Please deepen good convictions. Please give us new convictions. Please be with Rhys as he speaks to us now.

Father, thanks for this opportunity. In Jesus' name, amen. How great that we can be together this weekend. I'm thrilled to be invited, that we can talk about these very important concerns together. I read from Matthew chapter 22, from verse 34 to 40. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

[2 : 23] And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?

He said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

And, a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Jesus, in the last few days of his life on earth, finds himself answering, not just answering questions, but answering provocative questions.

answering questions that are trying to trip him, to trick him. And he's asked a question by the Pharisees.

Those lay people, they weren't ordained. Those lay people who had very, very high standards for who was in and who was out. This particular lawyer asks him a question.

[3 : 36] A lawyer doesn't mean someone who takes part in a court of law, as we might think. A lawyer is someone who knows the Old Testament well. They're an Old Testament law person.

This is a theologian asking the question. And he asks the question to trick Jesus, to test Jesus. In part, he's just been having a fight with the Sadducees.

And so he, as a representative of the Pharisees, is wanting to kind of put them in their place as well. There's lots of internal politics behind this question.

And these Pharisees and Sadducees had gathered together, much like in Psalm 2, the nations gathered together to mock the Lord. This one particularly brave or perhaps stupid man decides to

test Jesus.

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? Let's do some sums. Let's work out which one you think is the one that stands above all the others.

[4 : 46] There have been many debates amongst the Jews as to which law, which commandment, was the one through which you interpreted all the other commandments. And Jesus kind of pokes him in the eye.

You shall love. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

With all of you. You shall love. Which of course is exposing this guy's lovelessness.

He hadn't come to Jesus because he was loving the Lord. He'd come to Jesus because he wanted to see someone get trapped. Not unlike our own politicians in national debates trying to see the other guy stumble.

You shall love. And of course, Jesus is quoting from the law from Deuteronomy 6. you shall love. You shall love.

[5 : 53] But not just occasionally or with one bit of you. But you shall love with all of you. There's no part of you that is exempt from loving.

It's all of you. It's your soul, heart, and your soul, and your mind, and in Luke's version, your strength as well. You can't love and serve God unless you're all in.

Your body's on the line. Every part of you is called to love. And don't think that this is just vertical, loving the Lord.

A second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Loving the Lord involves horizontal commitments as well.

Love your neighbour as yourself. And if you get these two things right, under his breath, by the way, which you're not getting right, on these two things to pen all the law and the prophets, finally you'll be able to read the Old Testament correctly.

[7 : 15] So many of us think that we can serve God with one bit of us and the other bits of us are exempt. That we can love God with our mind, that he's happy if I'm reading Christian books, surely, or we think we love God with our soul, that we've prayed today so that's enough, that we should love God with our heart.

If our emotions are passionate, then surely that's the only thing that counts before the Lord. No, Jesus doesn't give this answer to, as it were, break a human being down into parts.

He's giving this answer to show that all of you has to be in. no part of you cannot love. And if someone came to you who wasn't a Christian and said, I want to become a Christian, Rhys, tell me what's the bare minimum I have to do to get over the line.

I want to be a Christian, I don't want to be one of those really enthusiastic Christians, you know the sort. what's the bare minimum Rhys I have to do to get in God's good books?

Well, I'd say you actually haven't understood what being a Christian is if your question is what's the bare minimum? Because Jesus says here, we're not talking bare minimums, we're talking all in, every part of us.

[8 : 49] But I wonder whether people when they think about what the church is, sometimes make the same mistake.

I hear this question quite often, Rhys, what's the bare minimum I have to do in my Bible study group or my campus group to become a church?

What's the bare minimum we have to do to be a church in our suburb? I'm planting a church wreaths. What's the bare minimum I have to do to make this thing that we're going to do actually a church? What's the bare minimum?

What's the bare minimum? I really have a problem with that question. I hope we'd all have a problem with the non-Christian who says what's the bare minimum.

And I hope we'd also see that it's also not a healthy question to ask about church life as well. It's not about what's the bare minimum to be a church. The real question is what does God want this community in Doncaster to be?

[9 : 50] What's the way we can max out our commitment, our witness, our devotion? Can you see the difference? things? So this morning I'm wanting us to think big thoughts about what is it, what's everything that God wants this fellowship to be?

I want you to turn to some people at your table, perhaps in twos and threes, to make sure everyone finds their voice, and ask each other the question, what do you like about serving in this fellowship? How can you in a sense, not just demonstrate, but how can you engage all your mind, body, soul, and strength in serving here, and what do you like about that?

You've got three minutes, go. Go.

Go. Go. Hey. Hey. How wonderful it is that God gives us opportunities with our heart, mind, body, soul, and strength to love him, to serve him, to worship him in a place like this.

[11:25] But it is important that we understand what a church is, what church is about, before we get down to thinking about what church services are about. If you want to know what serving God is like, then you've got to understand what the purpose of the church is, or the purpose of church services. To clarify this will help you understand better what it means to love and serve, right? So I want to give a definition of the church, and then in small groups in a little while, to talk about this definition and one that you might normally resort to. I want us to think about church in a maximal way, not a bare minimum kind of way. So I suspect that if you were asked what church is, you'd kind of come up, pretty standardly I hear this answer, church is the people, not the building. Well, yep, you're right. It does involve people. But that's a pretty minimal definition, right? To say that, you could also say that a football club is about people rather than the gym, or that a scout group is about the people rather than the clubhouse. It doesn't really say very much to say that it's the people and not the building, right? It's not very theological to say my definition of church from the Bible is it involves human beings. You can kind of probably default to that, right? This is what I'm suggesting, and it's on your handout. That if we're to understand what the church is, or what the church is for, or what

Sunday services are for, we need to think about God's promise, God's presence, and God's purposes.

God's promises, God's promises, God's presence, and God's purposes. I think we need to have all three to have a healthy definition of what the church is. You can't have our response to God with love unless you've first heard God's promise to you. God's offer, God's promise always comes before our response, right? You can't respond to something unless there's been an offer made before you respond, right? Kind of logic. God makes promises to us. He makes promises to us through his word.

He makes promises to us ultimately in the person of the Lord Jesus in whom God's or God's promises are yes, according to 2 Corinthians. Interestingly, when God gave instructions to Moses to build the tabernacle, then ultimately to build the temple, you know what happened in the Holy of Holies? God put his law there. The language we speak of it was the Ark of the Covenant, and you might have been watching some Indiana Jones recently to kind of remember what the tabernacle was about. But really, it was just a copy of the law that was put in the most holy place, the Holy of Holies in the building.

God's word, God's promises were in the heart of the whole building. But it wasn't just that. God said, where my word is, that's where I'm going to have my throne. God's presence was connected to his word.

[15:38] Listen to this verse from 1 Samuel 4.4. The people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts. So they've gone to Shiloh and collected the box in which the law had been placed.

They went to Shiloh and brought from there the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God. Isn't that just a beautiful little summary? That the word is in the box and God makes his throne on top of the word.

God's promise is what the church is built on. You can't have a church unless at the heart is God making promises to his people.

God's word creates the church. But wherever God's word is, that's where his presence is available as well.

That verse from 1 Samuel 4.4 highlights that, but you can find it in a thousand places in the Old Testament when the tabernacle or the temple are described.

[17:13] Indeed, you and I believe in God, the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus, after his return to heaven, poured out the Spirit on the church so that we would know the intimate presence of God

himself in our midst, in our lives and in our heart.

The church is the place where God's presence is promised. Church is the place where we can enjoy God's close connection.

Part of the way, of course, that we enjoy that is God pours out his Spirit, gives me gifts, and with my gifts I serve you and you serve us.

But it would be wrong to think that the job of the Holy Spirit is just to give us gifts. The job of the Holy Spirit is to help us know God's closeness through his word.

In fact, you'll remember reading of the tabernacle and the temple. When the tabernacle, the temple were finally built, God's glory came and dwelt there.

[18:37] That beautiful picture at the end of Exodus chapter 40, let me read it. The cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled it. Physically, Moses couldn't get in. There was no room left. It was like one of those elevators, right, where you just say, no, let it pass me by.

I'll get the next one. There was no room for him. God took up all the space. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, they did not set out till the day when it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day and fire was in it by night in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

God dwelt with them. No wonder then that in John chapter 1, Jesus is described as coming to dwell with us, to tabernacle with us, to show God's desire to be close to us.

[19:54] So church is the place where we hear God's promises. Church is the place where we celebrate God's presence.

And church is the place where we discover God's purposes for the universe, for our church, for us as individuals as well.

It was interesting in the Old Testament that the tabernacle kind of led the people to the promised land. That there's some sense in which having a portable tent helps to lead you to your destination. But as well as that, even when the temple was built and couldn't move because it was on a hilltop in Jerusalem, the decorations inside reminded the people of the Garden of Eden.

There were pomegranates and trees and different kind of elements of this creation that were decorating the interior.

[21:05] This was kind of like the tabernacle, the temple. It's kind of like a reminder of the way the world should be. Perhaps not just the Garden of Eden, but perhaps the end of the world too.

Church is the place where we not just hear God's promises or celebrate God's presence, but we learn God's purposes for his people in the world.

And what's our purpose as the church? Well, our purpose as God's people is to dwell with him face to face forever and ever in the new world.

The goal is to see Jesus. We shall be like him for we shall see him. And not just to see him, but to enjoy being with him.

And there won't be a need for a tabernacle or a temple in that new world because God's presence will be so close, will fulfill all the purposes for which that tabernacle or temple were built in the first place.

[22:18] Let me read from Revelation 21 and 22. So that's chapter 21, verse 22 into chapter 22.

Then I saw no temple in the city. Well, we've reached our destination, right?

We don't need the temple anymore to help us get to our destination. I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. That's where I see God's promise.

That's where I see God's presence. That's where I see God's purpose. We are with the Lord forever. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it.

For the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb. We don't need the kind of helps that the Old Testament tabernacle had to travel. We don't need that kind of shiny glory.

[23:15] We have God. That's all we need. By its light will the nations walk. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there.

They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it. Nor anyone who does what is detestable or false. But only those whose name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life. Bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Through the middle of the street of the city. Also on either side of the river the tree of life.

With its twelve kinds of fruit yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it.

And his servants will worship him. Will serve him. They will see his face. His name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more.

[24 : 16] They will need no light of lamp or sun. For the Lord God will be their light. And they, that is the people of God, will reign forever and ever.

How glorious. The church are those people who've heard God's promises. Who celebrate God's presence.

And who pursue his purpose. Finally seeing him face to face and dwelling with him forever. As was his design from the beginning for his people.

I want to define church as that place where we hear God's promise. We celebrate his presence.

And we pursue his purposes. Now some churches do one of those things. Perhaps two of those things. There are some churches that are very good at God's promise.

[25 : 22] But aren't very good at celebrating his presence. There are some churches that are very good at celebrating his presence. But it's all about them. And they don't understand God's purposes in the world.

There are some churches that are very good at pursuing God's purposes in the world. But actually aren't very good at hearing his promises. Or celebrating his presence. It's very hard to do all three things at the same time well. But that's okay, right?

Churches are a work in progress. We're always reforming. We're always changing. We're always rethinking what we do. Why we do. Such that we can better represent God's promises.

God's presence. And God's purposes in the world. Now you don't have to agree with my definition of church. That's fine. I love pushback. But at least this gives us, I think, a healthier theological starting point.

So that rather than saying the church is the people, not the building, which is kind of a bit obvious, we can actually start talking theologically about what the church is.

[26 : 29] That it has to have God's promises, presence, and purpose if we want to be everything that God wants us to be, right?

So I'd like you to take a few minutes at your table and talk about what you think the strengths and weaknesses are of saying that the church is the people, not the building.

I get that there are some strengths to the line. But perhaps as well, you might discuss for a few minutes my definition that the church is that place where we hear God's promises, celebrate God's presence, and pursue his purposes for the world.

Give that some thought around your table for the next few minutes. Good.

Let's regroup. I hope that was at least the beginning of a helpful conversation about what we think church is about.

[27 : 41] And whatever decision you come to, please may it include Bible words or Bible categories. So the way I've tried to do it is to say that church is about God's promise, presence, and purpose.

You might choose other words. But the advantage of those words, at least, is that they are closely connected to Bible categories or Bible stories. So my appeal is whatever decision you come to, can you please be using Bible categories to explain what you think church is for or church is about.

I think the strength of these words, at least, is that we can find their equivalent in the Bible quite easily. But also they open up big questions about how the church works in the world.

And I think that's a useful conversation for us as well. God's promise, God's presence, God's presence, and God's purpose. After morning tea, we're going to be thinking about how these three words, or perhaps better categories or Bible themes, get expressed in a Sunday church service.

Is there acknowledgement of God's presence?

[29 : 22] Hearts full of thanks for the church as a gift from God. Okay, church is a place where we hear God's promises.

We celebrate God's presence. We pursue his purposes. But that's because the church, first and foremost, is his gift that comes to us in a promise. Or his gift that comes to us through his presence. Or his gift that comes to us as his purposes are taught and lived. The church is a magnificent gift from God.

The church involves all of me. At church, I need to worship God with my heart and with my mind and with my soul and with my strength, my all, my bodies.

Church is really good for me because church helps me to think healthy thoughts about my own personal life.

[30 : 28] That God is addressing every part of me here, right? And he's helping every part of me to connect to every part of me.

I'm hearing his promises. I'm celebrating his presence. And I'm living out his purposes in the world. There's no part of me that's exempt. There's no part of me that's not addressed when I make myself a member of a local Christian community.

Sometimes I wonder if I weren't a Christian, if I stopped being a Christian, whether I'd stop going to church. Because I love church so much. The danger would be, I think, for me, that I'd keep going because I love the things that I receive in the fellowship.

The church provides us with resources for healthy living. Healthy living as a Christian. Healthy living as a human being.

Christians are the beginning to learn what it is God wants for human beings in this world. If you don't go to church, the way you work out what it means to be a healthy human being is to watch Oprah or Dr. Phil.

[31 : 49] Or name your reality TV show of choice. We turn to someone, somewhere, to get some clues about how relationships work.

Or how we should think about work practices. Or how we should think about doing you. Isn't that just a nice foul phrase?

I saw on a reality show recently, someone said, it's really important that I do me. I go, well, the choices are limited. You can't do anyone else. What does it mean to do you?

But we turn to TV to give us some of those very deep answers. No, actually, church is the place where I can find healthy resources for healthy living.

Where God addresses all of me, all of us, together. I was just talking with Andrew in our discussion time about the job of the Holy Spirit.

[32 : 58] We think, of course, that the Holy Spirit's job is to give us gifts or to produce fruit in us. Of course, that's true. But there's something even deeper about the Holy Spirit's job description.

The Holy Spirit binds, unites, unifies. So the Holy Spirit binds together Father and Son in the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Spirit binds together the divine and the human nature in Christ. The Holy Spirit binds us together as Christ's body.

That's good for me. That's good for us. That's a gift God gives. For our good and for his glory. In the end, I think the overall purpose of church is one more strategy for God to give us assurance of salvation.

God is so desperate to help us receive the gift of assurance that he puts us in a community that we might receive reinforcement, extra dollops of grace, extra help in understanding that we are safe.

[34 : 25] We are safe in him. Church is good for us. Church is a great gift from God to us on Sundays when we meet and other days of the week as well.

Because we're still brothers and sisters when we're not in church on Sundays, right? Church is a great gift from God to us on Sundays when we meet and other days of the week as well. Church is a great gift from God to us on Sundays when we meet and other days of the week as well.

Belonging to God's people who celebrate his promise, presence and purpose is a wonderful gift. Of course, I want you to come to church to serve.

but before you serve we can receive that is you're not just serving out of your own strength or energy you're serving because god has already given to you grace that you might serve you serve at church not because you want to get into god's good graces but you serve at church because you just love him and all that he's already given you don't serve at church to get god's attention you serve at church because you already have his attention he's already lavished his good gifts on you and me on us so we can't but serve right friends church is good for us i wonder if you want to call

out to the room what do you think or how would you describe why church is good for us are there other things you'd like to add question time we'll have at the end of the second session so we'll hold back questions now is there anything you think i've missed mutual accountability as a gift us that's right isn't it that my own growth brother you are answerable for as i'm answerable for your growth we're in this together thank you personal discipline yes yes yes sure yes i think we don't often think that one church is a place where there should be discipline but secondly we often in our culture don't think that discipline can actually be good for us we live in a culture that says the way to be yourself is to express yourself not to discipline yourself and of course that's wrong here oh yes sure yep great thank you yep so after morning tea i'm going to introduce us to five different ways we can think about church services and one of them is that a church service is like a gym where we're actually practicing we're training for the event strengthening number that is i feel more like i can make a difference in this world if i know that other people are with me that kind of thing you mean oh yes sure that the the whole is greater than the sum of the parts that kind of idea that together we can achieve more than when we're apart yeah sure and in the bible storyline god's people are safe when they're gathered and they're often at risk of being attacked when they're scattered so there's a safety as well for us to be to be with each other yes sister yes sure yes so i think the best kind of encouragement is lots of little things rather than just being encouraging of your brother or sister once a year right that is big gatherings are helpful but lots of little encouragements are probably even more important as we walk as we walk on the road together yeah over here i think the other brother support yep yep so i don't have to do everything all the time if life has dealt me i was gonna say does life deal

you a curved ball no i think that's mixing metaphors uh life deals you a joker no i think i'm getting my metaphors all mixed up now um throws you a curveball that's right yeah i'm i'm allowed to not contribute to church that's okay i don't have to be the person who all the time is doing everything for everyone if there are times when you have to withdraw because life is really difficult that's okay your brothers and sisters will pick up on it we're in this together yes yes of course laughing when people laugh and and being sad when people are being sad and and uh learning how to be emotionally flexible that is i'm not feeling sad but you are so i'm going to work hard to to walk in your shoes today i think one of the one of the challenges for millennials i see this with some of my youngest students at ridley is that it's difficult to be to have two emotions at once which i think actually being christians enables us to have a very complex emotional life a friend i buried a friend's four-week-old son recently and his the non-christians at the funeral said how can you be happy that he's with the lord and sad at the same time that was the standard non-christian reply they had no theological categories for doing two things at once whereas of course as christians we have lots of ways of understanding how i can be joyful about my friend's presence in the lord with the lord right now and sad that they're gone right we have theology that enables us to do that but i was kind of taken back by how strong the non-christian puzzlement was that the the the two emotions were happening i think there's a question over here sister yes as a as a focus yep yep and after after the break uh one of the ways i'll think it help us think about church services that it's a compass it kind of keeps sending me back to moral north great thank you