

The "Why" and "How" of Church

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 0 0] I'm going to start with somewhat of a parody, just a little parable, if you like, that is a parody. John Christian is back at church. He got out of bed a bit earlier this morning.

He beat Mrs. Jones to his pew and just as well too, he was beginning to get just a trifle annoyed with her. Now he sits down and he's all alone. He's got a pew to himself just as he likes it, quiet and alone. And so he begins to gather his thoughts. He prays, he meditates, he opens up the Bible and he meditates a bit on the verses that he's up to at the moment. And he waits for the minister to walk in. And then this hubbub begins up the back of church and John cringes in his pew.

He knows that sound and it grates on him every week. Josephine friend has arrived. And what that means is that John's peace and quiet has been shattered. You see, Josephine insists on talking before the service. She insists on checking everyone out, saying good morning to everyone she can possibly see and just generally being friendly. The way she acts, you'd think it was a local pub. And then to top it off, John notices those two shadows out of the corner of his eye.

A young couple is walking in. Oh no, it's Jack and Mildred. They usually go to that later service. I wish they wouldn't bring that stupid kid with them. They know it will only make a noise, screaming, gurgling, playing with the rattle. And so John gives up at this point. That's ruined it.

There goes his quiet, relaxed morning service. And so 60 minutes later, John walks out. He's resentful. He's frustrated. He's upset without his expectations having been met. And that brings us to this morning's talk. You see, I've parodied things, but we do all have expectations of church, don't we?

[2 : 0 0] I've just sort of taken one particular person and perhaps amalgamated a whole lot of things into it. But we all have expectations of church. We have ideas about what church is and what we should do when we get there and how we should go about church. And it's those very questions I want to address today in our second sermon on the church. I want to ask what makes up church and what is at the center of church and how should church be done? What does the Bible have to say about these matters?

And there's a process for what we're going to do today. What I'd like to do, while I'd like to do some Old Testament background, we simply don't have the time to do it. So what I'm going to do is look at two places in the New Testament where I think that we get some helpful advice about how to do church. The first is from the very first description given of a Christian church in Acts. And the second is some teaching given by Paul in the first epistle to the Corinthians. You see, I think some things have gone dramatically wrong in Paul's view in Corinth, and they had some significant things they needed to learn about church. And in the process of teaching them, he tells us some important things about what should happen when Christians meet together and how they should and should not happen. So let's get started. I want you to open your Bibles at Acts 2 42. And I've forgotten the page number, I think it was 700 and something.

But you can find it, or someone can put it back on the screen for us to that relevant slide. So Acts 2 42. Now, let's set the context for this. In the first part of Acts 2, God has poured out his spirit for the first time upon Christians. And in doing so, what he has done is that he has created a new group of people who are bound together by the fact that they possess the Holy Spirit. He has, in fact, created the church. And as if to celebrate and mark this day, 3,000 people are brought by the Lord to know him. They've been added to the church this day. And in Acts 2 42, we're given a description of what they do. We're told in verse 42 that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Now, I'm going to read it again.

Notice the things. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer. In my view, what is being said is that if you wanted to summarize the activities of the early church, this is what you would say. These were the marks of what they did and who they were. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They devoted themselves to the fellowship. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, and they devoted themselves to the prayers. Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers. Now, let me just explain what each of them means, because though it looks self-evident, it may not be for some of us. First, the apostles' teaching.

What does this mean? What does it mean? Well, it means that they didn't just stop with what they already knew and had experienced. Rather, they pressed on. They strengthened their faith by subjecting themselves to the teaching of those whom God had appointed and given authority to, the apostles.

[5 : 19] They heard from God through them, through his divinely appointed messengers. In this way, the church could be said to be grounded on the teaching of the apostles. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians later on. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people, also members of his household, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself, the chief cornerstone. So what is a real church? A real church is a church which is committed to listening to the apostles' teaching. This was so then, and it's so now. A distinguishing mark of the church is, therefore, that it is a church that listens to the apostles' teaching.

And the way we do this today is that we read and explore the writings that God caused those apostles and some others to write down. We make that a priority. That is, we devote ourselves to this and every area where we might hear God. This has a principal focus when we meet together. The next one is the fellowship. Now, the early Christians devoted themselves to what was called the fellowship. Now, when we think of the word fellowship, I think stacks of things come to mind, don't they? But in Acts 2, it probably means the concern that Christians had for the well-being of those in need. It refers to the way that they reached out in care and concern for each other. They shared, they fellowshiped with other Christians, they helped each other. And we see a bit of that in action. If you go on just in the last few verses of Acts 2, and you can see it again in Acts 6. And one way in which that fellowship or sharing was expressed was the sharing of meals together. They expressed that they had a shared common Lord, a common hope, a common spirit, a common goal in life. And eating together was a clear and concrete expression of that fellowship. They ate together and did all the things that go with a meal.

Sharing with each other, caring for each other, watching out for each other. And that is what, that is part of what is meant by the third element as well, the breaking of bread. It means what it says. That is, they had a meal together. They broke bread because in the ancient Near East, you know, bread was part of so many meals and you broke it together and shared it together. You can see it in verse 46. The early Christians took the main meal of the day in each other's houses. And they, while they did that, they often stopped in the middle of the meal and observed the Lord's Supper together. And you can see that in places like 1 Corinthians 10 verses 16 and 17. Let me read it to you rather than have you look it up. Paul's speaking to the Corinthians and he says this, is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ, a sharing, a fellowship in the blood of Christ. And he's not the bread that we break a participation, a sharing, a fellowship in the body of Christ. Because there is one life. We who are many are one body for we all share in the one life. You see that they, when they celebrated the Lord's

Supper, often in the context of a meal, they were saying we are one together in this and we're sharing in this. Now as time progressed, what happened was eating together was separated out from the Lord's Supper and they largely remain separated today. But that doesn't mean though, you can't use them with the original purpose. You see, we still express our fellowship, our belonging, our oneness by sharing in a common bond and by eating together in the Lord's Supper.

But we should also, we should also express it in taking every opportunity to take care and concern for each other, by exercising hospitality in our homes, by sharing things together, whether it means, whether it be meals, food, time, resources, abilities, or the like. And we do this here.

[9 : 19] Being a church is about doing concrete things like making frozen meals for others, sharing food with people, looking after them as they walk in the door, looking after their children in Sunday school or whatever it might be. And, but we should do it particularly for those who are in need in our congregations, the poor, the sick, the lonely, the single parent, the widow, the widower, the aged. Our fellowship with each other should be expressed, friends. It is not something just to be, it's not a concept. It is to be expressed. We should be devoted to it, devoted to the fellowship and the breaking of bread. And the final item is the prayers. You'll notice that in some of our versions there, it's written in the plural and it has an article to it. That is the word the.

They devoted themselves to the prayers. What this probably means is they continue their link with the Jewish temple and they continue to observe Jewish hours of prayer. That's found in Acts 3, verses 1 to 10. But as well as this, the early Christians met in informal gatherings outside the temple and they prayed there too. And you can see that in Acts 4. Prayer was a central part of their daily activity. Like their Lord, they insisted that everything be done with prayer. They're committed to prayer, devoted to prayer. And so must we be. Not just 30 seconds before church on Sunday, not just five minutes during our services, not just prayer in our bedrooms at home, but collective prayer, endless prayer, not doing anything without it. Devoted to prayer. So let me see if I can sum up this passage. The first thing that this verse that I need to say is this verse is a description, not a prescription. That is, it's a description of what early Christians did, not a prescription about what we should do necessarily. Nevertheless, it does give us some guidance and principles about what constitutes their, constituted their meetings and what might constitute our meetings. And I wonder if as you look at it, you can see what's going on. Do you notice the process? They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. This could be represented by a vertical and downward arrow. That is an arrow down from God to us. Second, they devoted themselves to fellowship and the breaking of bread. In other words, they heard what the apostles had done, what from the apostles, what God had done for them in

Christ. And having heard, they responded to each other. They responded by devoting themselves to sharing with each other, what Christ had done with them and for them. They devoted themselves to expressing that they belong to each other and they belong collectively to Jesus. So we've now had the vertical, the downward vertical, and now we've got the horizontal, the outward horizontal. That could be represented by two horizontal arrows just going out. And that's in my diagram. If you've got it there in the outline in front of you. And the third item, they devoted themselves to prayer. In other words, they heard from the apostles what God had done for them in Christ. And having heard, they responded and they responded by devoting themselves to prayer. That is, they praised God. They thanked God for what he'd done for them. They expressed their ongoing dependence upon their father by bringing their needs to him. And they prayed that others would enter into what they too had entered into. And that could be represented by another vertical arrow, but this time going upward. And when we put all of that together, you'll see in my diagrams there, in your outlines, we have a diagrammatic picture of the church in action, a downward arrow, two outward arrows, and an upward arrow. And that friends is much of what we are about. These represent a checklist for the church. They represented the fundamentals. No matter what else we do, we must do these things. You could also represent it by a triangle, a downward arrow, and a cross arrow, an upward arrow. No matter what else we do, no matter what else we don't do, we must do these things. And so I want you to cement them in your mind. You might remember the diagram to help you do these. These are the things we aim for here. Now, before we look at ourselves a bit closer in the light of these verses, let me just make one thing clear. I want you to notice where the priority in the diagram comes. You see, the priority comes from hearing from God. It lies there.

If you don't hear what God has done in Christ, then you can't rightly respond to each other. You don't know how to act toward each other in a godly way if you haven't had God's guidance on it.

And if you don't hear from God in the Bible, you can't rightly praise him and bring things to him and bring needs to him. The priority is to listen to the scriptures read and taught.

[14 : 15] And all else flows from that. We must be quick to hear, and then we must act on what we have heard. And rightly acting comes from rightly hearing from God. So there's a quick sketch of what the first Christians did at church. Now, let's switch to 1 Corinthians. In your Bibles, I think 1,000, if someone finds it first, 1 Corinthians chapter 11 is where I want to go to.

You can shout a page number if you find it first. 11.50. Thank you. Now, the first passage I want to look at is verses 17 to 34 in 1 Corinthians 11, and particularly look at, sorry, I want to skip over it, and I want to look at verse 18 in particular.

It talks about coming together as a church. It is therefore about what happens in church meetings. The next thing to notice is that church here involves a meal, just as it did in Acts 2.

And you can see that in verses 20 to 21. So can you see what's happening here? The horizontal is being observed. However, having the horizontal element needs to take into account that you're there also with a vertical element.

As the Corinthians meet, you see, they are to remember that everything that they do is to be one in relation to who God is and what he's done for them in Christ.

[15 : 35] That is, what they do horizontally is to be in sync with what they do vertically and who they are. They must not let those things get out of sync. You see, if they properly remember what God has done for them in Christ, then they'll not abuse each other in these meals, which they were doing.

The rich were hoarding things for themselves. The poor were doing without. And Paul said, that's not the Lord's Supper. Why? Because it's not keeping in sync the vertical, your relationship with God, with your relationship with each other.

You see, the Lord's Supper, verses 27 to 34, is about remembering who you are before God and what God has done for you. It's about examining yourself in the light of this vertical relationship with God.

And it's about reflecting that relationship in your relationship with others. So can you see it again? Church is about the vertical relationship with God. But it's also about a horizontal relationship with each other.

We meet not to just concentrate on God. We also meet to concentrate on each other. Both happen in church.

[16 : 43] And it does happen with our church. You know, one of the great things about our church is how long some of you stay around afterwards. Because that's an extension of church. That is church.

That encouraging of one another in the faith. You see, we need to concentrate on each other as well as concentrate on God. Both must happen in church. Both the horizontal and the vertical must be entwined together.

They must work together. The Lord's Supper is one place where that's seen graphically. Now, we're going to do a little more. We're going to next week look at the Lord's Supper closer. But let's move on.

Let's go to chapter 12. And we'll move at a little more pace now. I'm going to have to be very brief. Chapter 12 is about spiritual gifts. But I want you to look particularly at verse 7. And I want you to notice the thrust of it.

Paul says, Now, to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. So if you are given gifts by God, who are they given to you for? Other people.

[17 : 43] They are given for the good of the whole church. They are given for the good of others. So if God has given me a preaching gift, it is given to me for you. And if God has given you gifts, they are given to you for everyone else.

God distributes gifts. He distributes a wonderful variety of gifts, which we see here at Holy Trinity. And they're distributed for the good of the whole. They're distributed so that we might use them in the service of others.

So if you are good in terms of welcoming people, that is something God has given you for the good of others. If you are good at prayer, that is something God has given you for the good of others.

If you are good at cooking up bulk meals, that is something God has given you for the good of others. Whatever it is, these are things God has given you, not for yourself, but for the good of others.

Now turn to 1 Corinthians 13. it's a famous passage but I want you to notice the setting it occurs within it's set in the context of gifts and church and the whole focus is to make the point that gifts and the exercise of them is entirely fruitless if love is absent you see if a person says that they love God they want to serve him and they do it without respecting and loving those God loves they are living alive that's what Paul's saying here in first Corinthians 13 can you see what's going on he's very clear church may indeed be about the worship of God but it must not neglect the love and service of others the horizontal aspect of Christian meeting together must not be neglected you see church is not simply about coming to meet with God no it's about coming to meet with God's people as well and God's love for us is to be expressed in our love for each other and friends if you are not loving each other one wonders if you are loving God okay let's now see some of this at work in practice by looking at chapter 14 now first Corinthians 14 has some great principles to teach us about what should happen when Christians meet together it's much it has much to teach us about church however before we look at the details

[20 : 00] I want to just take a brief interlude and remember the context the context is that Paul is speaking to a church who's got the horizontal aspect of worship wrong so his focus is on relationship and love in the horizontal aspect of meeting together elsewhere in his writing he strongly advocates that Christians in their meetings focus on God and what God has done Christian worship is strongly and vividly and characteristically God-centered and Christ-centered it gravitates around God and his son it's about responding to God and what God has done in his son it is therefore definitely and solidly vertical it listens to God it responds back to God in worship adoration obedience and thankfulness such God-centeredness and Christ-centeredness is seen in a variety of Paul's writings and elsewhere in the New Testament but perhaps it's in Revelation 4 and 5 where it's most vivid in chapter 5 God is worshiped by his people and where Christ is at the center of and worshiped by all of his creation then in chapter 5

Jesus is worshiped he is the center of the worship because he's the lamb who was slain God you see is presented as transcendent awesome creator before all of whom all creation bows and even exalted angels cover their faces then in chapter 5 we meet the son the lamb of God the lion of Judah he stands without fear in the court of God and is worshiped by all as one who's been redeemed friends in the Old Testament God's people were saved for their worship of God and in the New Testament we are saved for the worship and service of God but we know him through Jesus and so we worship not only God the father who sits on the throne but also the lamb and this worship will be filled with adoration and praise and good works it'll be rightly directed toward God it will be rightly vertically directed but it will also be horizontal in its focus and with that I want to go to 1st Corinthians 14 so keep your eyes there and I want you to look at verse 1 look at what it says in the first part it speaks of the horizontal aspect of church Paul tells his people to to follow the way of love love is to color and flavor and dominate our relationships in church in the second part of verse 1 Paul speaks of prophecy which I think is the vertical it's about speaking to people from God for their strengthening prophecy does some vertical and some horizontal things together doesn't it a later verses indicate that prophecy comes from God it's therefore a vertical thing but look at verses 3 and 4 it also control comforts strengthens and edifies these are horizontal aspects one Christian ministering in the spirit of God to another Christian for their edification and building up that's what prophecy is but read on notice how often the word edify occurs in these verses look at verse 4 verse 5 verse 17 but look particularly at verse 26 which is the verse with which we will stop look at what Paul says he says what then shall we say brothers and sisters when you come together each one of you has a hymn a word of instruction a revelation a tongue and interpretation that is you bring your gifts with you to church but everything must be done there so that the church may be built up the words built up are derived from the same root that was used to translate edify earlier on and I need to emphasize it you see many of us come to church I think for entirely vertical reasons some of us come so that God might speak to us from his word some of us come so that we might respond corporately to God in adoration and praise these things are part of church however without being expressed in the horizontal they are incomplete friends can you hear what God is trying to say to us through the apostle Paul you see the main concern clearly falls on the horizontal that is how people are treating each other he does this because in some sense how you treat each other is how you treat God if you are so absorbed with God in church that you cease to notice and love those around you then you are not being very spiritual at all and your worship is somewhat vacuous somewhat empty in fact if you were truly focused on God and his wishes you would truly be aware of others and focused on them friends let us not be pagans you see I think our church services have an element of the pagan in them they're shaped by pagan ideas of worship let's measure worship and church by Christian principles and Christian principles are that it's about loving God and loving each other

it is about hearing from God and responding back to him but it's also hearing from God and responding to each other in love and strengthening and service and edification so friends when we come together as a church here at Holy Trinity let's do it biblically let's bring our gifts for each other love service hymns hymns hymns and songs I like to say one more thing in passing words of encouragement words of encouragement ways of caring things that strengthen and build each other up oh and by the way as I finish up I do think it might be helpful to say one more thing in passing I want you to notice something did you notice that Paul has nothing to say about formality versus informality spontaneous versus structure. Oh, he does say something about order. He does want order in church, but most importantly, he wants us to treat each other rightly and to do what will edify each other. So will you make this your goal in coming here to church at Holy Trinity? I know many of you do. I know we are quite strong with it, but let us excel even more. Will we come to respond, to hear from God, to respond back to him in praise and adoration and exaltation?

And will you come to strengthen and edify and encourage and build up the body of Christ? And will you come and do this for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and for his honor and glory? Let's pray.

Father God, we pray that you'd help us here as we meet as a church to be devoted to the apostles teaching, to be devoted to loving and caring for each other, that is, fellowshiping with each other, to be devoted to the prayers.

[27 : 22] Father, please form us like this here, that we might truly represent what you want your people to be and that we might build up each other, edify each other, strengthen each other, encourage each other, care for each other.

Please, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.