

'Being the Church' - Part 1

by Rev. Robert Griffith

As I enter my second year among you, I've been reflecting on the very clear vision the Lord gave me almost two years ago when the first of many people approached me and suggested God might be calling me to serve His Kingdom in and through Lismore Regional Mission. Some of that vision emerged in my first few sermons here a year ago and I'd encourage you to read them again on our website, for I believe God was speaking to us all clearly as this chapter in our shared journey began.

Today, I want to begin unpacking that vision as we spend at least the next few months, exploring what it means to truly be the Church. Of course the best place to start in that exploration is way back at the beginning. In Acts chapter 2 we have a snapshot of the birth and infancy of the Church which Jesus promised to build. Here we see what the Christian Church looked like before we messed it up. This is how the followers of Christ lived and ministered before the Roman Emperor Constantine dragged us away from our daily worship, our home group meetings, fellowship meals and daily times in prayer, and shoved us into pagan halls where we held events and gatherings. Over just a few decades, the entire concept of the Church was changed.

That was a couple of hundred years after Christ walked the earth and that was the point in our history where the spiritual, God-ordained, intrinsic, relational concept of 'being the Church' was replaced by a secular, extrinsic, activity-based concept of 'going to Church,' a concept which remains to this day. What began so clearly as a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week lifestyle flowing from a personal relationship with a living, present God through His Spirit, sadly became a series of events and then a place we 'go to' once a week or maybe more if we're really committed.

Now when the resurrected Christ spoke to His disciples just before leaving this earthly kingdom, He told them to wait. Wait for what? For the promised Holy Spirit. In essence Jesus was saying, *"I have called you, equipped you, taught you and led you these past few years as a man. However, if my kingdom purpose is to be fulfilled across the whole world, I can no longer lead you in this way. I promised I would be with you always – to the ends of the earth - and I will. But that can no longer be in the flesh, it must be in and through the Holy Spirit."*

So on the day we now call Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ was released in the hearts of hundreds and then thousands of people and the Church as we know it (or should know it) was born. The final verses of Acts chapter 2 show us what this new spirit-led, relational Christian community looked like. Let's read it again.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

Now I've read those words thousands of times and, after all these years, the hair still stands up on the back of my neck! I don't know why. Perhaps its simply because when I see who we once were, I have renewed hope that we could be that community again today.

But I must confess that as I get older and my years in ministry grow in number, that sense of hope can sometimes find itself under attack as bewilderment and despair rise up around me. I'm a 'glass-half-full' kind of guy, I am not discouraged easily, but I also have to face the facts. I have to accept that this amazing portrait of what 'being the Church' really looks like has been in our face in the book of Acts for over 2,000 years and yet the majority of people who identify as active Christians are still just 'going to Church' and wondering why there are less and less people when they get there or why the ones who are there don't behave or live or worship like those who have been powerfully, gloriously and permanently set free by the living, reigning, present Christ in their hearts and in their midst.

It says in Acts 2 that in this Church which Jesus was building, *"everyone was filled with awe ..."* It was a miracle of God. Previously antagonistic, hostile people were brought together in love by the power of the gospel. The sense of anticipation and awe at the movement of God's Spirit among the people was palpable. It was profound. It was tangible. God was manifesting His presence, His power and His Kingdom purposes right in their midst; in their homes; around their dinner tables; on the streets; in the marketplace. They could see the vision and the mission of Christ exploding before their eyes. In fact, they were part of it, every single day.

In Proverbs 29:18 we read a simple, yet profound truth, *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."* The word 'vision' has been given all kinds of meanings in the modern world and most of them have nothing to do with this verse. But when the NIV Bible was written, the translators tried to be more accurate to the original meaning of the text and this verse became, *"Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint."*

What the King James Version translated 'vision', the NIV translates 'revelation.' You see, vision can (and most often does) come from us. Revelation comes from God. Now this is not just an issue about how a verse is translated. This verse, when properly understood, becomes an explanation for nearly all of the Church's highs and lows over its entire history. When the day by day revelation of God is not continually being sought, discerned and applied, then we 'cast off restraint.' We go our own way - tragically thinking it's God's way because we opened our 'vision' meeting in prayer!

When Eugene Petersen wrote *The Message*, a contemporary translation of the Bible, he unpacked this verse even more and made it abundantly clear what Proverbs 29:18 really means for us today:

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what He reveals, they are most blessed."

If the early Church had persevered in 'attending to what God was revealing', then they would have said *"No thanks,"* to Constantine in 313AD when he signed the Edict of Milan and declared that Christianity was now the official religion of Rome. They should have seen through this 'victory' and realized that everything was about the change, and not for the better. They should have remained a loose movement of persecuted pilgrims who worshipped, fellowshiped and ate together in each others homes, devoted themselves to prayer and New Testament teaching as they continued to infiltrate every area of society seven days a week. If the Church was attending to what God was revealing it would not have allowed Rome to dictate how it behaved and operated and the legalism and corruption of the Church would not have emerged the way it did. There would have been no need for the Reformation over a thousand years later.

In fact, you can trace every stumble, every error, every backward step, every loss to the enemy of truth back to the Church failing to see what God was doing. Worse still - not appearing interested in the first place! Now it's clear that the people mentioned in Acts 2 clearly saw what God was doing and so they didn't do much stumbling for a very long time! They attended to what God was revealing and they were blessed beyond measure. Read though the book of Acts in one sitting when you have time and something will be very clear to you - the Holy Spirit was running the show!

What they preached; when they preached; to whom they preached; who they healed and who they didn't heal; what towns they went to and how long they stayed. Everything was under the day by day direction of God through His Holy Spirit and the more they attended to what God was revealing to them, the more they grew and God's kingdom exploded across the world.

So now it's 2018 and in so many areas of the Church we are still stumbling over ourselves and not seeing what God is doing or hearing what God is saying. But even in that statement there is hope – great hope. In spite of our actions or inaction, God is still speaking, for those who have ears to hear. God is still revealing to those who have eyes to see. God is still active and moving among us and fulfilling His purposes. God has never left us – no matter how wrong we get it or how often we do it our way and not His way – He never goes away and He never stops speaking. We just stop listening. Sadly, some of us never even started. We have no expectation whatsoever of God speaking to us.

In my very first service here in Lismore I encouraged you all to ask two questions every morning as your feet hit the floor and you begin a new day. Can you remember what those two questions are? “*What are You doing, Lord?*” and “*How can I be part of it today?*” That's what I've been doing my entire ministry and that's what I've been doing every day since I arrived here and I've encouraged you all to do the same. I believe the more we ask those questions and learn to discern the voice of God as He answers – the more we will see the huge difference between ‘going to Church’ and actually “*being the Church.*” It is my prayer that the Spirit of God will lead us all to the point where we stop going to Church! Yes, you heard me correctly. I want you all to stop ‘going to Church.’ The term itself is grammatical nonsense and theological heresy. We don't ‘go to’ Church. We are the Church and we need to learn once more how to truly ‘be the Church.’

And so, as we begin this teaching journey together today, I want to make a very bold promise to you: If you truly open your mind and heart and actually engage with this teaching ... by that I don't mean turn up each week and endure another sermon ... I mean actually engage personally with what is being shared as though it is a word from God to you ... if you do that – regardless of your age, your experience, your gifts or your talents – I can guarantee that you will be transformed by God into someone you may not recognize, but the person God saw in you all along.

Trust me when I say that you will be amazed at what God can achieve through this rag-tag band of believers, when we really decide we want to stop just *going to Church* and start ***being the Church!*** Full text sermons will be uploaded after they are preached and we can print copies for those who are not online. The fact is, most of what you hear come out of a preacher's mouth each Sunday has gone again before you reach the bottom of the stairs! That's no reflection on you or the preacher, it's just the way it is. But if you choose to spend some time with that word after each Sunday and let God really drive His truths home in your heart during that week, I can guarantee that ‘being the Church’ will not be a chore or an expectation or a religious activity, it will be a spontaneous reality as the life of Christ explodes within you and those around you. Then, before we know it, the book of Acts will no longer be a dusty historical account of where this all began, it will once again be a commentary on where we are now, and who we are becoming as we give the Church back to God and watch Him do today and tomorrow, what He did back then. That is my agenda. That is the primary reason I am here – to lead people to the God Who still speaks, still heals, still transforms lives and whole communities. Everything I do, say, preach and pray is directed towards that end.

The flood washed a lot of things away in this place last year, physically, but also spiritually and emotionally. God is now ready to replace everything we've lost with the only thing we ever truly needed: Jesus – the living, present, Lord of the Church. Jesus, the One who promised to build His Church, right here, right now, if we let go the reigns and trust Him.