

## **'Being the Church' - Part 4**

by Rev. Robert Griffith

When it's functioning properly, the Church of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. It's the only force on the planet which is capable of healing broken lives, pointing people to God and fulfilling the deepest longings of our souls. It's in the Church that the rejected find acceptance, sinners receive forgiveness and the lonely experience love.

It's in the Church that we discover and encounter God and live out our true life-purpose. This is **worship**.

It's in the Church that we receive teaching and training for how we can be the people that God has called us to be. This is **discipleship**.

When the Church of Jesus Christ is functioning properly, each member is using his or her God-given gifts, talents and abilities to serve one another and the world beyond. This is **ministry**.

There's also a deep and supernatural sense of community within the Church of Jesus Christ, that fulfills our longing for friendship and intimacy with others. This is **fellowship**.

When the Church is functioning properly, the lost - those who are yet to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ - receive the opportunity to accept Christ as their Saviour and come within the folds of the Church and experience everything I just mentioned. We call this **evangelism**.

When it's functioning properly, the Church of Jesus Christ is truly the hope of the world. So, over the next several weeks we are going to spend some time talking about the type of church that God wants us to be – not the kind of Church we attend or align ourselves with but the kind of Church we are.

It's not enough that we come to this building on Sunday mornings; it's not enough that we sing songs, take communion, give our offerings, sit through the sermon; it's not enough that we come to a gathering we call church, if we fail to truly *be* the church.

So over the coming weeks we will be looking again at Acts 2:41-47 as we examine the characteristics of the Church which Jesus birthed and promised to build. The Holy Spirit had come upon Peter and the other apostles, and they preached the gospel of Christ in Jerusalem with great success. Many were converted to faith, and the church was born. Let's read it again now.

*"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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 favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* (Acts 2:41–47)

This church had five characteristics which are really important and so we will spend some quality time looking at them over the coming weeks. Today, I just want to give you an overview.

## **1. The Church grows warmer through fellowship.**

That's what the church we read about was doing. Look at verse 42: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship."* And verses 44-46:

*"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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 . . ."*

They were devoted to fellowship. They were sharing their lives with each other. They were becoming a family. We live in a world where families are fragmenting and disintegrating. We know that divorce is an ever-present reality. But its not just divorce that causes families to splinter. We live in a mobile society. Kids grow up and move away. People move in and move out of neighbourhoods and homes because of job transfers and new opportunities. While some of you have lived in this local area most of your lives, there are many other people living in the area today who did not grow up here. Many of our families are far away, and we may find ourselves somewhat displaced and lonely.

We live in a world, because of our mobility and our failed marriages, where 'family' is no longer a constant; no longer something we can count on. And all around us there are people who feel disconnected, who long for closeness with other people, but they don't know where to find it. They try the bowling club, the golf club and various community groups but something is still missing.

Do you remember watching *The Waltons* on TV years ago? Do you remember how everyone lived together - Grandma, grandpa – Zeb and Esther Walton; mum and dad – John and Olivia Walton; and seven children: John-boy, Jason, Mary-Ellen, Erin, Benjamin, Jim-Bob and little Elizabeth. This was a true family and we got to see them in action week from 1971 through to 1981 and that show tapped into a need in every single one of us. Every member of this family was able to rely upon every other member of the family. Why was that? Because they were a true family and many of us wish our families were a little more like the Waltons. We long for a simpler time when families stuck together and took care of one another. Some of us may have families like that, but a whole bunch of us don't.

That's why when God created the Church, He created it to be a family where real fellowship and community is experienced, where the members can count on one another for support, love and encouragement. That's why God wants us to be a church that grows warmer through fellowship.

So I am hoping we will take some steps over the next year or so to increase the level of fellowship in our Church and to make sure that we are functioning the way God wants the Church to function. I want to encourage you all to embrace those opportunities as the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into the heart of God and His purpose for His family – the Church.

## **2. The Church grows deeper through discipleship.**

'Discipleship' is a word that basically means, 'to learn to follow Jesus.' That is what the church that we read about in Acts 2 was doing. Look back at verse 42: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ."* These Christians wanted to grow in their Christian walk. They wanted to learn about Jesus so they could become like Jesus, so they were devoted to what those who had been with Jesus were teaching them.

Now, 'devoted' is a word that means 'committed to' or 'dedicated to.' These first Christians were committed to learning what it means to follow Jesus. God wants the Church to be like that. He wants the Church to be filled with men, women and young people who genuinely want to follow Jesus.

He wants people who are excited to learn about Him and grow in their understanding of His mission and purpose for us, in us and through us. Is that you? Are you excited to learn about Jesus, still after all these years? How committed are you to sit at His feet and hang off His every word? How devoted are you to the Apostles teaching, which for us is the New Testament? Over the coming weeks it is my prayer that we will commit to being the type of church that really seeks to learn how to follow Jesus.

### **3. The Church grows stronger through Worship.**

That's what the church in Acts 2 was doing. Verse 42 talks about how they were devoting themselves to "*the breaking of bread*" which partly refers to celebrating Communion together, "*and to prayer.*" And then verse 47 talks about how they were "*praising God.*" These words are worship language.

These people were taking time out to worship God. God has created all of us with a desire to worship Him. And, when we fail to worship God, there is something missing in our lives and we lose our perspective on life – a perspective which always places God above everything else we experience. When we lose that perspective, worldly pleasures and worldly values take over. That's why we are surrounded by people in our world who have money, have health, have fancy lifestyles, but are still searching for something to fill an emptiness inside them which will only ever be filled by them reaching out to the God Who is reaching out to them. That God-shaped vacuum inside them can never be filled by anything but God.

Have you ever noticed how great you feel when you have truly worshiped God? Worship is something we give to God – it's us praising God for Who He is and for all His goodness to us - yet, worship is also something that ministers to us; worship is something that reminds us Who God is and boosts our faith and trust in Him to get us through another day and use us in some way to further His Kingdom. Worship, though, is more than singing songs on Sunday, and in coming days we will discuss all that worship entails, and why it's so central in the lives of those who truly know what it is to be the Church.

### **4. The Church grows broader through Ministry.**

Some people have the idea that the reason a church appoints a minister is so that the minister can 'do the work of the church.' I hope you don't have that misconception; because, if you do, you are going to be very disappointed in me! The truth is every member is a minister of the gospel in the Church. God has given every Christian gifts to use for Him. The only way the Church can function as it should is if every disciple of Jesus is using those gifts to advance the Kingdom of God and build up the Body of Christ. That's what the church in Acts 2 did. The apostles certainly played a key role in leading the way, but the people were letting God use each of them to minister to each other and that's how they created such a strong community of faith. That's really what ministry in the Church entails: using the gifts God has given us to meet the needs of others and to be a blessing to God as we advance His Kingdom on earth.

Now, the problem in many churches is that 'ministry' or 'service' have been defined very narrowly. Teaching Sunday School is defined as service, and leading singing is service, and serving communion is service, but if you can't do one of these 'up-front' things, in many churches you feel like you must not have any gifts to use to serve. However, the Bible says that every Christian has been given gifts, talents and abilities by God to use for Him and the Bible lists a wide range of such gifts, talents and abilities beyond those highlighted in most churches. As we'll see when we talk about this in the weeks ahead, the Bible's list of gifts is not exhaustive – these are just examples of the many gifts God bestows on the Church and the Bible says that the Church is only truly functioning as God desires when every member is using their gifts to glorify God. Now, part of my job as a Minister is to help you discover the gifts God has given the Church through you. Your job as a Christian is to put your gifts into action, thereby helping the church become all that God wants it to be. I look forward to that.

## 5. The Church grows larger through Evangelism.

Now when the people are God are devoting themselves to teaching and making a sincere commitment to fellowship, discipleship, ministry and worship, there is a natural outflow from that and we call it evangelism. This is just a big word which means reaching people with the gospel of Christ and having them respond.

Now I have always believed that evangelism is not something we do. It's not a task as much as it's an outcome. True evangelism is the fruit of everything else we do. **True evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church.** Acts 2:47 shows us this truth more clearly than any other verse in the New Testament. After giving us an overview of what the early Christians were doing day by day, we then see the fruit of that when it says, *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Now Acts 2 does not provide a magic bullet or a failsafe formula for being the Church. But it does provide us with a very clear picture of what was important to our brothers and sisters all those years ago when this wonderful community we call the Church was born. We also know from Church history that this new church continued to grow at a phenomenal rate and impact the world around it in immeasurable ways for well over two hundred years! That's almost as long as the modern nation of Australia has existed. Can you even imagine what this nation would be like if the Christian Church in Australia continued grow at the rate the early Church grew – for 200 hundred years? Can you imagine what our society would be like today? Well that's what Jesus intended from the beginning! That's why we are all still here.

We don't need some new Church growth technique; we don't need a different way to be the Church in the 21st century – we just need to go back to our roots and discover how people like us managed to get it so right for so long! Whatever they were doing and not doing, however they were living out their faith, it was working - for centuries! So we really need to know why and we need to know why that stopped. Both discoveries will give us the key to truly *being the Church* again as Jesus always intended.

There are undoubtedly some cultural realities in the early Church which simply do not exist in our nation in 2018. However, the true message of Acts chapter 2 has nothing at all to do with culture. It is a timeless message, a life-changing, Church-defining, nation-transforming message and I look forward to re-discovering that message with you in the weeks ahead.