

**“Community”**  
**Acts 2:42 – 47; 9:1 – 19**

“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 miraculous signs done 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.”

So this morning we continue in the book of Acts where we’ve been picking up on key themes.

You know, core ideas, issues, subjects that keep popping up and shape what Acts is about.

Theme’s like the kingdom of God – Jesus the King.

We’ve talked about witness, especially this act called evangelism – this verbal speech act of speaking to and with others about Jesus.

Then last time talked about power encounters where, in the name of Jesus, the power of Holy Spirit confronts the power of malignant spiritual beings to bring freedom, hope and peace.

Today is another key theme.

So by way of introduction, have you ever been asked this question:

***“Do I have to go to church to be a Christian?”***

If you have, how did you answer?

If you haven’t, what would you say?

Have a chat to kick things off this morning.

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I’ve travelled with this questions for most of my Christian walk.

I mean, have you ever been asked this question?

It’s vexed question.

I'm sure we all know of good Christian people who ask that question or say as a statement.

Of course it depends on what you mean by 'church' and it depends by what you mean by 'Christian'.

When we talk about church, we are talking about the church in *all* its different forms.

I mean, each week Christians gather for worship in mud huts and Gothic cathedrals, in prisons and nursing homes, in warehouses and village squares, in sprawling mega-churches and old country chapels, in homes and neighbourhood places of worship.

We know they don't just gather on Sunday's either. The life of the church spreads out across the many ways Christians do meet and spend time with each other.

By the way the church did initially they meet in homes after they were kicked out other the synagogues.

They were home churches.

And there are many people today who say, "*We should do the same.*"

It's the Biblical pattern therefore we should meet in homes to do church properly.

***Again, what would your response be to that?***

I've had that said to me.

And again, there's no denying that.

So should we be meeting in homes from now on???

Well, when it comes to the Biblical picture of churches meeting in homes, we shouldn't picture your typical 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western lounge.

I mean, how many people can you comfortably fit in your lounge space?

Who's like 10? 20? 30?

Well when you do the research you find that the early church would typically meet in the home of one of their wealthy members which would be large.

And these houses had a mostly-covered area called an atrium.

In the smaller Roman villas, these areas would have seated 50-60 people.

In larger homes, they could have seated as many as 150.

Think of an open area with anywhere from 60-150 people gathered for worship.

So when someone says they're meeting as the first believers did, well not quite and of course there is nothing wrong with meeting in home churches today.

So one of the key themes in the book of Acts is the birth and growth of the Church.

The growth of the church came about on the day of Pentecost and who's communal life in Jerusalem is laid out in our reading today.

Acts outlines the growth of the Church as it exploded into the Mediterranean and turned the world upside-down.

So the book of Acts shows us the birth the church and it's growth and there one more that is part of this theme: it's the *centrality* of communities of faith gathered in Jesus name for God's purposes in the world.

The Church is created by God and for God.

The Church is called the people of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ.

Ecclesiology is the fancy word for what you believe about the nature and structure of the Church.

The theme that runs through Acts is that God not only saves individuals, He gathers these people together.

I said this before: the Church and churches are not just another human institution.

We see this is in the story of Paul.

Paul was this zealous persecutor of the believers.

He has an encounter with the risen Jesus and becomes this radical, zealous preacher of the good news of Jesus.

And in the power of the Holy Spirit he doesn't only see converts Paul also plants communities of faith in Jesus called the church.

It happens again and again and again.

Paul preaches and plants in Ephesus, Phillipi ,Corinth. Three churches were planted in Cypress and Crete. There's also Thyityra, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Laodicea, Pergamon, Syria, Arabia, Sardis.

Before that though, who was Paul persecuting?

What does it say in Acts 9 verses 1 and 2?

Well, it says the church.

But then what does the risen Jesus say?

Jesus doesn't say, "I am Jesus, you're giving my good mates a hard time."

Jesus doesn't say, "I am Jesus, whose followers you are persecuting."

Jesus says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?"

He says, "I am Jesus, *whom* you are *persecuting*."

We can only come to one conclusion about the church:

there is such an intimate connection between God and His people – Jesus so deeply identifies with His people – that in encountering the Church we encounter Christ.

It's an astounding claim!

But I don't know if we can read it any other way.

The church (for better or worse) is the presence that Christ has chosen in the world.

It reminds us that this church and the Church is not church and it's not your church, it's Christ's church.

We don't meet Christ in an exclusive way in the Church but in a *powerfully significant way* that no other way compensate for.

### ***So What?***

Life is difficult to do alone.

The Christian faith is nigh on impossible to do alone.

So the Lord gathers us together and in gathering us together we receive something so fundamental, so often talked about in the New Testament, that we miss it.

What do you think it is?

Tell the person next to you.

Hebrews 10:25:

"Let us not stop meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..."

And a lot of people stop there.

It goes on to say, "but let us encourage one another".

Encouragement is God through you and others, keep going! You can do it!

These are what are called the 'marks' of the church and each is encouraging in its own way

There is **teaching**.

There is the apostle's teaching which consisted of the Old Testament and what they received from Jesus himself.

Today we have the Old Testament and the teaching of the apostles preserved in the New Testament.

It's so encouraging when you have good teaching from the Bible.

Sometimes it's like, "*We were just talking about this the other day*".

Or "*I was thinking about this the other morning.*"

Or "*That message, that message was like it was speaking just for me.*"

Or it could give a new perspective or highlight an area of life that God is calling attention to.

There is a myriad of ways teaching is encouraging.

There was **fellowship**.

Intentional community.

Intentionally deciding to do life, to muck, get involved with others that grows into deepening relationship.

Can I say that two areas are crucial here?

One is welcome. Do not underestimate the power of simply welcoming someone on say a Sunday morning.

And the other is that you force this. You can make people go deep in relationship. It actually has the opposite effect.

But fellowship that goes well is simply being who you are in Christ and talking about what God is up to in our world and in your life.

When you strike good fellowship, it's gold. It's so encouraging.

Then we have the **breaking of bread** which is what?

It's two things – it is the act of communion where we remember that Jesus died of the cross for our sins to bring us to God.

And it is also the area of hospitality, of welcoming people into our homes around food.

A church I know of has as one of their mottos, "Less meetings, more bar-beques."

It's a great motto.

Some of us are gifted in the area of hospitality; all of us those can grow in it.

Being welcomed into a home to share a meal is encouraging.

Then there's *Prayer*

This is communal prayer; prayer with others for others.

There is personal prayer but this is prayer in a group.

There is another area too: there is an evangelistic dimension comes with gathering together for Sunday worship.

Acts 2 says that the Lord added to their number daily.

Pauls speaks of non-believing people being present at their church services and then coming under the conviction of God and are saved.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly the early church that didn't set up a seeker-service. That didn't say we need to think about a new way of being church.

They were just themselves.

They trusted in the power of God to bring conviction and change.

So when songs are sung, prayers are offered up, the Word of God is opened and read, and His people meet, God's praises are declared and the Holy Spirit is at work.

There are many people who can attest to the power of attending a worship service like churches have held for nearly 2000 years.

People like Emma. Emma was a young mum and outright atheist. In fact one of her earliest deep conversations with her pastor she said, "Look, I'm an atheist, I was raised atheist, so don't bother trying to convert me." Emma happen to go to church because her friends were having their baby baptised. It was part of a Sunday service, sandwiched between prayers, Bible readings, songs of praise, a sermon and weekly notices.

Emma could count on two fingers the number of church services she had been to over the years, but she left the service "struck by the spiritual feeling of it all." She came back next week, and the next. Each week she said the same thing, "I'm not religious, but boy I like this stuff." Eventually she was invited to an evangelistic course that over five weeks took her through the life of Jesus. She went along. Within weeks this self-proclaimed "atheist" was a passionate and vocal supporter of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:24 – 25.

Having said that, if we have been around long enough we all know the horror stories of churches that fail people. Churches that are bastions of control and containers of unwelcome. I'm fully understand that.

Timothy Keller speaks of the church of Jesus Christ being like the ocean. It is enormous and diverse. Like the ocean there are warm and clear spots and deadly cold spots, places that you can enter easily without danger and places that will immediately whisk you away and kill you. There are places that are almost pristine, and there are places that are contaminated and polluted and poisonous for those who spend any time in it. <sup>2</sup>

But I don't think we are polluted or poisonous.  
I think we are a people of warm encouragement and let's continue to grow in that.

Question to reflect on: out of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread/hospitality, prayer and the witness of gathered worship, what stands out to you?

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 236.