



## We believe in The Church

## Acts 2:42 to 47

Well of course you do – that's why you turn up each week. But what is it? Is it the place that people decided was a good idea when so many people were becoming Christians and they needed a place to meet? Or was it **God's** idea. It's always good to ask the question – what did Jesus say about it? Perhaps his most memorable statement was to Peter after his confession of Christ as Lord

***'And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it'***

Matthew 16:18

What do these words of Jesus tell you about the church?

In the New Testament, the Greek word for church is 'ekklesia' which usually means a local congregation of Christians and never a building. It had a broader meaning in the 1<sup>st</sup> century meaning a public assembly that had been summoned to attend. So when Christians adopted the word they understood it to mean a group of believers summoned (or 'called out') by God. The church was never seen as those people who chose to attend – it was seen as God calling his people to gather to worship him.

How does this 'called out' idea change our perception of church?

Do we tend to treat church as one of the things we choose to 'consume'?

No pressure, but do we ignore God's call to meet with his people?

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 suggests that the church is place where disputes are solved.

***'If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church'***

Matthew 18:17

Even when Christianity was based around Jesus and his followers only, Jesus sees the church as the place of Christian community. It is therefore not surprising that when the gospel spread around the Mediterranean in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the book of Acts records many new churches being established. Initially they were in homes but they were seen as Christian communities. On the day of Pentecost 3000 people were 'added to their number' (2:41).

After such a large number became Christians, we read 'they devoted themselves .....

What does that tell you about the level of commitment of these new believers?

Do we take the discipling of new believers seriously enough?

This short passage at the end of Acts 2 is a blueprint that became the pattern of church life all over the Mediterranean world. There has to be some structure to provide nurture for the vast numbers of new converts. Luke has listed some of the key things that became part of the life of these new churches and have given us the basis of our practice today.

Jesus spent large parts of his earthly ministry teaching his disciples. Much of what he taught became 'the apostles teaching'. They were simply passing on what Jesus had taught them.

How important is it for us to hear the teaching of Jesus? What could we do to learn more?

Fellowship is the next key activity – John Stott described this ‘koinonia’ as ‘being together in Christ’. It is not the same as a sports club or dramatic society. The word contains the idea of ‘sharing’ and it also speaks of intimacy. The word is also used to describe the ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 13:14), So when we gather in church it is not just to meet our friends (valid as that is) it is to be close to other believers and meet with God.

We have all missed this aspect of our lives in recent months.

What have you missed most about not being with other Christians in lock down?

Is it possible to be a lone Christian – is it biblical?

How vital is the support of other Christians to you?

There are two references in this passage to breaking bread. Some say that v42 refers to the Jewish custom of blessing and breaking bread at the start of a meal whereas v46 applies to families and friends eating together. The celebration of The Lord’s supper may have been an annual event at first whereas eating together is much more regular. It should also be said that, for first century believers, a meal was regarded as a time of close family intimacy. We’ve lost a lot of that in our microwave era. Whatever the two references relate to, it was clearly important to believers that they remembered what Jesus celebrated in the upper room and that they had intimate fellowship around a meal table.

Early remembrance of the Lord’s supper was merged with family meals.

Are there some things we can learn from that?

What does communion mean to you?

And finally, prayers? This could refer to prayer during the set times of the Jerusalem temple. (Acts 3:1) But there were also times when they prayed on their own (e.g. 1:24, 4:24, 12:12). There had always been a Jewish tradition of prayer but it tended to be rather formal. The great contribution of Jesus’ understanding of prayer was intimacy with God – you could call him ‘Father’.

Once they were blessed with the Holy Spirit there was nothing to stop deep and intimate conversation with our Father. Do we find this easy?

The rest of this passage is about the activity of the new church. If you have time, look at some of them and try to decide how these might look in our church today.

- Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. (Should we expect this to happen?)
- All the believers were together and had everything in common (How ‘together’ should we be?)
- Selling their possessions and goods they gave to everyone as he had need (Is this possible in a consumerist world?)
- Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. (How often should we meet and for what purpose?)
- They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

And there are three huge consequences (v27)

- They were praising God
- Enjoying the favour of the people (i.e. they were well thought of by society)
- The Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved

They were clearly doing something right – what can we learn from this?