

What Next?/Why Believe?

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Matt 10³⁴⁻³⁹ / Acts 4²³⁻³⁷

We've been talking about the Early Church these last few weeks largely because it is the season when the church celebrates Pentecost which is when we believe the Church was born. Now we must move on just as they had to move on. Now we must ask ourselves as the Church has always had ask itself over and over again – what does it mean to be the Church? So what do you think? What do you think it means to be the Church? Give me some ideas?

One of the ways people down through the centuries have answered this question is simply to go back to the early church and ask – what did they think 'being the Church' meant? And if we do that we come up with a number of different pictures.

Firstly it mean committing to the relationship which had made them the Church in the first place – the relationship with Jesus through the Spirit.

We read in Acts 2 that...

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2)

So this commitment meant making several activities fundamental to their lives and these were... worship, prayer, the breaking of bread and the ministry of the Word. These 4 activities brought them into contact with God's Living Presence and enabled them to determine both what God wanted and what God was saying to them.

Having a sense of God being intimately acquainted with our everyday lives is what it means to have God's Kingdom near to us. When we live in and for that Kingdom we live in the knowledge that God is **in our lives and is never far away** and so we can go to God for everything we need and with everything we feel – even the bad feelings.

The key, however, is to **stay connected to God**. How do we do that? We do that by giving ourselves to the activities through which God continues to be revealed; worship, prayer, fellowship and the teaching of the Word.

C S Lewis had a wonderful quote in this regard. He said,

'Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.' C S Lewis

When the great aim of our life is God we get all things and that doesn't mean we own all things it just means we get to enjoy all things. Ownership is vastly over-rated and yet we have come to believe in this day and age that we must own things in order to enjoy them. How foolish. Most of the things we enjoy most we will never own. We will never own our family and yet they are dearest to our hearts and neither will we own the mountains and the rivers, the seas and the shores and yet how much joy do they

give us. Ownership is both temporary and a figment of our imagination – it never guarantees joy.

Aim at heaven and you won't have to own things to enjoy life.

1. Secondly in meant survival and by this I mean believing that amidst the chaos of the world God had a way for them.

Those who were part of the early Church were thrown into incredible chaos – so chaotic that within 40 years they would all be dead or have left Jerusalem. You see, quite apart from the ongoing persecution of Jews who did not want to believe, the young church had to deal with a growing resentment by the Romans of Jewish stubbornness and difficulty. And this all came to a head in 70AD when Vespasian, a decorated General, sacked Jerusalem burning the Temple and much of the city to the ground. However it seems that by means of a prophecy the Christians were warned to flee the city before the war began and Eusebius the historian of that era records that...

“The members of the Jerusalem church by means of an oracle, given by revelation to acceptable persons there, were ordered to leave the city before the war began and settle in a town in Peraea called Pella.” Book III, 5:4” Chaos and yet the Church continued to grow.

Now we could dismiss this period as an aberration and yet I suspect that we shouldn't. **I think chaos is a part of the world we live in.** Let me repeat that, **chaos is a part of the world we live in.** The doctrine of sin includes this insight. Sin effects not just us but the whole cosmos and hence the whole world. A part of this is to

bring chaos back into the world and this includes personal as well and societal and global chaos. The truth is that until Christ comes again we will always have to live with chaos or the possibility of chaos.

The early church was birthed in chaos. The chaos of the crucifixion; the chaos of a violent rejection by some Jews and by some Romans; the chaos of having little example of how to be the Church; the chaos of being considered pagan by most of the world; the chaos of the destruction of Jerusalem. So much chaos and yet it didn't just survive – it thrived.

I wonder if you feel that you're coping with a whole lot of chaos today and where's God in all of this? You know God might just be there in spades to help you thrive if you will just hang on to him. God has a plan for you amidst the chaos. God is familiar with the chaos. God knows how to handle the chaos. God will be with us in chaos and lead us through it if we will just give Him a chance.

2. Thirdly it meant dealing with what was in front of them.

The Early Church had no choice but to cope with the problems of a huge influx of people who were needy. The very first major problem of the Church we read about in Acts is... feeding widows. Widows in this society were at a huge disadvantage because they had no way of becoming a part of the economy. They were either incapable of or shut out of gainful employment by which they could earn a living. They relied totally on surviving male relatives and perhaps generous female ones. So it seems as if the new converts to Christianity consisted of many many widows. And these widows had nothing – they needed feeding. This was the reality that confronted the early church and it was to this reality

that they gave themselves. **This is what it meant to be the Church!**

To confront the reality of the situation, and the reality of its chaos, with faith. To deal with things as they were and not be sitting back wishing they weren't. What are the issues we should be confronting both as individuals and as a Church? What are the issues which are front and centre in our life? Is there something we've been avoiding – something we're not really facing up to; something which is really quite desperate and yet which we're burying? God wants us to face up to it – not alone but with help but we have to make the first move.

The Spirit of God led that first Church to face up to the injustice faced by widows – the injustice that once their male relatives died they were basically left to starve or to make money in very unsavoury ways. We too will be confronted by injustice and chaos. Are we dealing with it? Are we doing something about it?

Now there is a common thread running through each of these activities which I want to highlight in finishing this morning.

If we look carefully at each of these activities I think it's fair to say that they each contain two clear movements. **First they begin with faith** and by that I mean they make a decision to do what they believe God is calling them to do. **Secondly, they lead to a lifestyle change** – a change in how they live, in what their priorities are, in what they do with their lives. **And this is what it means to be Christian.**

If we look at their commitment to a relationship with God it involved a new kind of being together as a community that

changed the way the Christians lived. So the Early Church made a decision to worship together and to be together in obedience to the command of Jesus so that they might stay in relationship with God. But this led immediately to a lifestyle change. They met more regularly, they worshipped more regularly and they lived very much more in community.

If we look at their reaction to the chaos around them they simply had to make huge moves in the way they lived often having to shift hundreds of miles to new cities and different countries in order to escape and find places to continue with their lives.

If we look finally at their response to what confronted them clearly that was mediated by their understanding of who God was and of what God wanted them to do. Their previous lifestyle did not dictate that they should feed widows now that they should share their possessions and money freely or that they should do a whole lot of others things which involved a complete turn-around in how they lived.

The same is true of us. When God comes to us, when we are confronted by the claims of God on our life we need to know this... **it will eventually demand something significant in terms of the way we live.**

G K Chesterton was fond of saying this... **“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”**

Generally it's not hard to believe in God, especially the God of the New Testament who is a God of Grace and Love and Mercy. **What's hard is when that belief leads us to have to choose to live**

differently. To leave to home comforts of a life well established and to do things which are not familiar to us.

And this is so important because ultimately it is our lives which will preach the best sermons. It's our lives which will convict the world both of its sin and of the fact that there is a loving God. It's our lives which will speak most eloquently of Christ and it's our lives which will breathe love into a hate filled situation.

Let me finish with this...

Nicholas Kristof, an op-ed columnist for The New York Times wrote a column in March 2015 entitled, "A Little Respect for Dr. Foster." Kristof makes clear that he isn't an evangelical Christian, yet he says, "But I've been truly awed by those I've seen in so many remote places, combating illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord's work as they see it ... " He focuses on "Dr. Stephen Foster, 65, a white-haired missionary surgeon who has lived in Angola for 37 years—much of that in a period when the Angolan regime was Marxist and hostile to Christians." "We were granted visas," [Foster] said, "by the very people who would tell us publicly, 'your churches are going to disappear in 20 years,' but privately, 'you are the only ones we know who are willing to serve in the midst of the fire.'"

Kristof writes, "One son of Dr Foster's contracted polio; a daughter survived cerebral malaria; and the family nearly starved when the area was besieged during war and Dr. Foster insisted on sharing the family rations with 100 famished villagers."

Kristof concludes: "The next time you hear someone at a cocktail party mock Christians, think of Dr. Foster and those like him. These

are folks who don't so much proclaim the gospel as live it. They deserve better." Will our record be something like this?