

The Church

[1] Acts 4³²⁻³⁷ / Matt 25³¹⁻⁴⁶

Big idea – we become the Church by following Jesus into the streets.

Have you ever gone to a movie and after 10 minutes said to yourself ‘What am I doing here!?’ **[2]** There are a million things I’d rather be doing just now and watching this isn’t one of them. Or perhaps you’ve gone to a social function of some sort and after half an hour you’re ready to either scream or leave – it just didn’t hit the spot and, again, there’s a million other things you’d rather be doing.

Now... what about church...? How many of have though after just a little bit of time at Church – man there’s a million things I’d rather be doing now! **[3]** Of course, today isn’t one of them because you have been so waiting for the preacher to preach – I know! But I’m sure, on other occasions... it’s happened!

Church is an odd animal in our society today. It used to fulfil a whole lot of functions which it just doesn’t anymore. Like it used to be the place where you picked up all the local gossip **[4]** – whose business is failing, who marriage has struck hard times, whose had a baby, whose going to have a baby, who wants to have a baby (there were a lot of baby issues a century ago!)

Again, church covered things like – where to meet really good looking guys... yeh! [5] There's still a few left here... and, of course, where all the cute girls were – I won't comment on that! And there were lot's of other things that got done at church which aren't really needed today. Church was your social media; church was the place to find out about who was sick and needed help; church was the place where most of the young people got together; church was the place where you got to meet new people.

But most of that is done elsewhere now so what's church for? What do you think church is for? [6]

You see the interesting thing about church is that in the Bible it is like the most precious thing. It's the thing that God wants to prosper and to grow and to develop. He even calls the Church His **Bride!** [7]

When Jesus returns He will be looking for one thing and one thing only and it won't be the good people. When He returns He will be looking for His bride – the bride of Christ. It is for the bride that Christ has given himself and what is the bride? It's the Church. The Church is the great treasure to flow from Christ's work. [8]

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Eph 5)

So again, what's so precious about the church that God sees it this way? What's it for? [9]

I'm going to spend the rest of our time dropping two competing models of the Church on you to think about this week both of which have supporters but only one of which I believe is biblical.

It seems to me there are two ways of looking at the Church. The first is of a gathering of saved people who've encountered Jesus and are ready to join His community and do the work of the kingdom of God. So the Church becomes what it becomes because it is made up of the right people – good people who've been saved. [10] And the emphasis in this model goes on bringing more saved people into the Church. It does tend to divide the population into those who are in and those who are out and there's a real problem there and it does tend to assume that we've got all the basics of Christianity under our belt before we become **real** members of church. [11]

In many ways in the West this is the approach we've tended to accept and understand as standard but there is another way of looking at the Church and one which I believe to be more faithful to the biblical text and it goes roughly like this...

The Church is basically made up of beginners – babies in the faith [12] – people who know God a little, who've experienced God a little – who are fundamentally rank beginners on the journey. And when they come into Church their main task is to join the mission of the Church.

And they are meant to do this for one reason and one reason alone... because this is the only way they will grow. This is the only way we will be changed because this is how we walk with Jesus today... by being with Him in mission. **[13]** It's the experience of being, as it were, 'on the street with Christ' which changes our hearts and our minds and our souls so that we, bit by bit, become like Jesus. This is exactly the process Paul describes in Philippians 3...**[14]**

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3)

Most of us would expect that Paul was the most mature Christian you could find. An Apostle, the writer of much of the NT, a miracle worker and a teacher of not just people of his own time but people down through all the centuries of time since he died. I mean how much more mature could you be and yet... he did not think he'd arrived. He knew there was more. He knew

that He needed to press into Christ which means He had to follow Him wherever he led.

There's a number of other problems with the first model that I want to point out as well. Firstly, it tends to imply that both our relationships with other Christians and our service to the needy are optional - that we can exist as individual Christians and as people apart from the poor and needy and still be a part of the Church. I suspect our two readings this morning suggests not.

The Acts description of the early Church simply leaves no room for people who will not share or participate in the activities of the Church. Once Christ is confessed the very next thing that must be done is to start participating in the Church's life of sharing and service. The Matthew 25 reading goes further because those who will not and do not participate miss Christ and find themselves not 'in the Church' but 'outside of the Church.'

And there's a further issue which I believe is even more important than these things and it's the issue of conversion. I believe the two models of Church I've raised before you today also assume two different models of conversion.

The first assumes that conversion is a doorway into the Church **[15]** and without it no one can participate in the Church. In this model conversion is adherence and confession of the faith and certainly, if we are talking about a shared understanding of who Christ is then this is important. Very much like a learner driver understanding that in New Zealand

we drive on the left side of the road. If you are going to drive you need to understand the basics. But does this make you a competent driver? Does this mean you should get your license? Does this mean I can trust you with my car? Absolutely not! [16] It just means you can start learning.

This is what is assumed by the second model – that the process of conversion is a lifetime process of action in and through the Church [17]; of learning about Christ in and through service to a needy world and outreach to that world. And, furthermore, the way to learn is by becoming involved in the mission of the Church. This is where we become disciples; where we learn how to be Christian and how we mature in the faith. Not beforehand in our heads – but afterwards through live connection with the mission of God.

We're going to examine this further in the next few weeks so think about that this week. Send me your questions. I'll put the notes up on the website and let's see where we go with it.

God Bless,

AMEN