

The Church

Good morning everyone - last week I talked about being 'born again' and I asked the question are you born again? And I gave you some biblical tests of whether you are.

I said at the time I was not trying to condemn anyone but that it is right and proper to question these things - scripture says "*Examine yourself see whether you're in the faith*" (2 Corinthians 13:5) and "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure*" (Jeremiah 17:9)

And Jesus says: "*no one will see the kingdom of God unless you are born again*"
John 3:3

It's absolutely foundational to our Christian life, it all starts here - you cannot live the Christian life, you cannot even get off the starting blocks, until you're 'born from above'. I hope these things don't just go in one ear out of the next! It's a teacher's biggest fear and frustration. Because these things are a matter of life and death.

I'll say it again; Christianity is all about a relationship with Jesus - do you know Him does He know you? You will know, because you will be in regular communication with Him talking to Him throughout the day.

This week I would like to talk about the church.

What is the church? We all come here on a Sunday morning. Why do we come? What are we doing coming here, and meeting together? What's the purpose of it? Why do we feel it is important to do so?

The reality is, people come along to church for all sorts of reasons; out of habit, out of a sense of guilt, or because they feel their doing their duty, a common one is for the social aspects, meeting other people. The truth is people come to church for a whole host of reasons, so it's vitally important that we grasp the true nature of the church and what's it is really all about.

And to get an understanding of these things we have to go back to the origins of the church, in the first century, the Acts of the Apostles, and use that as our guide, our model, the standard we measure our modern day church by.

We have standards in every walk of life we set our clocks by GMT for example.

Edwin and I were very aware in the industry we worked in that if we checked anything or another person's work we had to do so with instruments, equipment, that conformed and were traceable back to National Standards.

And the Bible is our standard in everything we do, we measure our lives by it and if we want an understanding how the church for today should function - then the standard is the first century church.

It is interesting to note, that when we get revivals, a pouring out of God's Spirit. If you study them in any degree you will see these revivals and the effect they have on the church always manifests itself back to how things were in the first church.

People eagerly wanting to meet together, the gifts of the spirit, incessant prayer, powerful preaching, and people's lives dramatically turned around.

So to begin with, what is the church? The word "church" is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is defined as "an assembly of people" or "called-out ones." **So the root meaning of church is not that of a building or denomination but of a group of people. A group of people 'set apart'.**

This definition is really helpful in our understanding of what a church is (And what a church isn't as we will see later on).

So when we talk about church we are saying it's a gathering of people.

But who are these people and what has happened to them?

Well we could define the Christian church as a group of people who have experienced something supernatural - something extraordinary and because of that have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

And if we go back to the book of acts - what happened that brought these first Christians together? Well it all happened after Jesus was crucified and risen and had ascended into heaven.

It goes back to this one event; when Peter one of the original disciples of Jesus opened his mouth and preached the good news message of salvation to them - and this is the extraordinary effect it had on them - it says in acts 2:37 "when *the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do"?*

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day"

The remarkable thing here was; these were the same people that had crucified Jesus! But they had had such a life changing experience. So much so that afterwards they were willing to sell all their possessions, it says in Acts 2 'they met together daily and devoted themselves to one another'.

How different to today where people that just turn up now and again to church, they had the opposite problem in the early church they couldn't send them home!

So this is the first thing I want to say, and it might sound obvious, but the Christian church is made up of a group of people that have had a life changing experience, this in turn has brought about an incredible change in their lives - they are 'born again'

Sometimes to get a better understanding **of what something is** (the church) we need to understand **what it's not**.

That is a very important point; **what a church is not** – **firstly** the church is a gathering of people; it's not a building or a denomination. There is a lot of talk today about unity about the 'ecumenical movement' joining together of Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans etc...

Jesus says in John 17 *"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, **that they may all be one.**"*

So what is Jesus is talking about here? When he says "that they may all be one"? **It isn't oneness and unity between church denominations but unity between believers.**

Believers that have the same thing in common! Those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who are born again. If we do not have this fundamental foundation in common there cannot be unity between believers, let alone denominations.

Scripture says *what fellowship has light with darkness?* (2 Corinthians 6:18)

Secondly a church is not a social club or entertainment centre where we all come together and play games and chat and have a good laugh together.

You may say to me well what's wrong with social activities? Well there's nothing wrong with it – meeting together outside church that is, but what I'm saying is; it shouldn't be our prime purpose when we meet together on Sunday, or for prayer, or in the week, **our primary purpose should be to glorify God and worship Him.**

If you look at this new initiative we decided on 'soup and the warm place' we meet together to build each other - yes and even have some good humoured banter, but our main objective is to see those that come in from outside come into the kingdom of God. I say this unashamedly - you may say I'm too 'spiritual'!

But I believe this should be always the purpose behind these things - for people to come into the kingdom of God. This has to be our bottom line - the end goal. It would be pointless otherwise, you can do plenty of 'good works' in our world in our community, and many do - but for us as Bible believing Christians unless

it leads to someone coming to faith - being born again then what real value does it have?

That is why it is so tragic that today we see church institutions do almost anything to get people into a church, building golf ranges, helter skelters, trying to entertain and adapt to the culture, and then if they do manage to attract people in, they say nothing about the gospel to them.

Thirdly something else a church is not is - a 'one man (or woman) ministry' it is very common today to see the pastor, the vicar, the official church leader doing everything, having their 'finger in every pie' so to speak.

Can I say this is such a contrast to the first century church - it's just not biblical. In New Testament days, during the apostle's time and most certainly after they had died, they appointed those people who had a gifting to lead the church.

The NT describes these people as elders, deacons, overseers, bishops even, but all these titles were interchangeable, they meant the same thing, that is; someone who the local congregation had identified as having the ability to lead.

However before long in church history they were appointing 'bishops' in charge of a number of churches rather than one, then had country bishops and town bishops with powers above the local bishops, then region bishops, who had the authority over town and country bishops!

And so we moved on and on until we got the hierarchy we have in the church today, titles made up of arch bishops, deans, cardinals, arch deacons, you name them and even the pope. The truth is it was never meant to be like that.

Finally the church should never be tied to the state – church and state are 2 separate kingdoms.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36)

Without doubt the church started its descent into corruption, into secularism, liberalism and compromise after Christianity moved away from being a persecuted faith to being accepted and 'political correct' under Constantine in the 4th century.

One of the tragedies of the reformation under Martin Luther in the 16th century was the church and state became one. Compromises always have to be made and it's always the church that has to make them. The church has to keep its independence to stay effective.

That brings me onto what the church really is - and for that we go back to acts 2.42;

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"

These are the 4 fundamentals of the Christian church and every Bible believing church should centre on these activities.

But before we look briefly at each one please note the order;
Firstly they dedicated themselves to the 'apostles teaching' or doctrines this is top of the pile - **the teaching of God's word.**

Can I say this is the danger of the ecumenical movement, they change the order of things, and they put fellowship before teaching? They say "what we must do is have unity at all costs - it doesn't matter what you believe, it's not that important, put our differences to one side, for the sake of the common good"

What is really important they say is "the fellowship, doing things together" **but they forget that the Holy Spirit will only honour His truth.** We change the order of things at our peril and it leads to error.

So firstly the apostles teaching / doctrines - as I said this is of prime importance in a bible believing church. Where do we go for wisdom for guidance? - We go to the scriptures, that's our standard.

It's interesting that the puritans back in the 16th century built their pulpits high because they saw the teaching and preaching of God's word as the climax to the church service.

However today we have relegated it to a secondary place, replaced it with all sorts of other things. But when we go back to the first century **it was through the preaching - through the spoken word people were saved.**

Secondly they dedicated themselves to the fellowship I cannot stress the importance too much of fellowship, in its right context - meeting together as a body, a church. It is where we are encouraged - its where find our purpose, our spiritual gifting. It's a terrible trick of the devil to keep people away from church. You will never grow as a Christian; you will be totally ineffective spiritually if you're not at church and you fit and able to be so.

Breaking of the bread

It's what the church is all about, the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's where we remember what he has done for us. Our flag says 'lest we forget'. That why we break the bread together - to never forget.

Prayer - you cannot stress too highly the importance of prayer and it's no coincidence that things are changing here at CBC at about the same time that we were have started praying down at the church.

Prayer is behind everything that happens in Gods kingdom.

And finally the church is a body - a family. **1 Corinthians 12:27** "Now you are the body **of Christ and individually members of it**"

As we have said, a physical body has many parts and each of them cannot work independent of the other.

I heard this the other day;

"Others have pointed out that with each passing day, the church is more and more like a football game where, from the stands, a crowd observes a small number of players who offer a great show.

However those that put forth an effort on the field urgently need rest, whereas the spectators desperately need to exercise!"

That why I put such a big importance **of us all** playing a part here at CBC. That is why this emphasis of one man ministry is so wrong, it is not the way the church is meant to function – this idea of the congregation just being passive observers, and the select few do everything is so far removed from scripture.

No, **we only** move forward when were all active, using our gifts, being intentional in doing so when we come to church.

Leave it there this morning, I do hope you have grasped a little more what church is all about, it's the greatest privilege to be 'called out' and be part of Gods church - lets pray we may all live up to this high calling.

Amen

Tony Troy