

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Why Do Christians Go To Church?

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Acts 14:23 and various

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 14:23; that’s on page 923 in your pew Bibles. If you are a Type A personality then you are already wondering why it is that I am starting this week with the same verse we ended with last week. Last Sunday we talked about how in the second stage of the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas went back to every town and village they had visited in order to set things into some semblance of order. Acts 14:23 says:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23 ESV)

Last week we focused in on that detail about the appointment of ELDERS – some of whom had only been believers for 4-6 weeks – but this week I want to focus in on the fact that the Apostles gathered all of their new converts into CHURCHES. The Greek word used there is *ecclesia* which literally means “congregation or assembly”. Everywhere the Apostles went they gathered their converts into LOCAL CLUSTERS – why is that?

And it wasn’t just Paul and Barnabas that did this – all the Apostles seem to have done this. Peter was working from the same play book here – in 1 Peter 2:4-5 he says to his people:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4–5 ESV)

So Peter’s assumption was that if you have been converted then you are going to be included in these corporate entities. Individual stones are going to become part of the spiritual house.

But why is that?

That’s the question I want to wrestle with today because while we SEE that happening all over the Book of Acts and while we hear that being commended in all the letters of the Apostles – I’m not sure that Christians INTUITIVELY make that connection in our day and age. And I’m not being critical here by saying that; I’m being sympathetic. If you become a Christian today you are coming out of the most individualistic culture in the history of the human race. There are many historians and other scholars who make that observation – and many who identify that as the primary reason why Christianity seems so foreign to people living in the West today. Jean Twenge for example, in her new book *Generations* notes that Millennials are the least religious generation in North American history. She discusses this phenomenon at length and attempts to provide an explanation. When considering why that might be, says succinctly:

“In short, because it is not compatible with individualism – and individualism is Millennials’ core value above all else.”¹

That’s bad news – and the early data suggest that the situation is FAR WORSE among Gen Z, the generation coming up behind the Millennials. So we have a problem. There is a fundamental disconnect here and that fundamental disconnect is creating missiological challenges because even if you can get someone today to consider Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, you have this other challenge of explaining to them their need to be integrated into the larger house.

¹ Jean Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future*, (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 301.

According to the Bible, that's what Christians DO – that's what Christians are supposed to DO – it is all part of the plan – so why is that? To make sure we understand this ourselves and to make sure we can explain it to a new convert, let's slow down and work our way through this question:

Why Do Christians Go To Church?

I think the first part of the answer comes to us from the passage we just read in 1 Peter. Christians go to church, first and foremost, to worship God.

1. To worship God

Now, you might say, “wait a second, I can worship God on my own. I can listen to a Chris Tomlin album in my car and sing to my heart's content.”

That's true – and that is a very North American individualistic perspective – but that is not the perspective being assumed and commended in the Scriptures. The passage we just read says:

“you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4–5 ESV)

So, Peter doesn't say, “When you become a Christian, you can be your own little priest and conduct your own little services” – no he says, “When you become a Christian one piece of something larger than yourself. You are a stone in the wall. You are a member of the priesthood – offering spiritual sacrifices to the Lord.”

Worship in the New Testament is an explicitly communal affair. In Hebrews 12:22-24 for example it says:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22–24 ESV)

The Apostle to the Hebrews is saying something very similar; he is saying: “When you come to worship, you are not starting something, you are joining something. You are harmonizing with the angles and with the Old Testament saints and with the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”

Do you see that?

So yah – you can sing about Jesus in your car – but that’s not why God saved you. God saved you so that you could add your voice to the choir. Remember, grace is about restoring nature. Grace is about taking us back to the Garden, as it were – and in the Garden God said:

“It is not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

You were made for relationships – you were made for harmony. You were made to be a holy priesthood under God – singing his praises over all creation.

So come. Let yourself be built into who WE ARE.

Fundamentally, that’s why Christians come to church – to worship God as part of the larger choir.

But as we have seen in our journey thus far through the Book of Acts and as we notice in the letters of the Apostles, Christians also go to church:

2. To sit under biblical teaching

That adjective is important. It is not teaching per se, that we're looking for; it is not powerful rhetoric or inspirational reflections – what we're after here is preaching and teaching that is drawn from the whole counsel of God.

That's what we see all throughout the Book of Acts. That's actually the first that is said about the first people who were converted on the Day of Pentecost. Luke tells us that 3000 people got saved and were baptized and then in the very next verse, he says:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42 ESV)

As I said last week, the church is a WORD-Y, TEACH-Y, READ-Y kind of place. And it always has been.

So why is that?

Why is teaching such a big deal? And the answer is connected to what we believe about the Gospel. We believe that when human beings fell, they were fundamentally changed. They were deceived and diminished. That's the human condition after the fall. Jeremiah 17:9 says:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

Who even knows why people think the things they do? They're sick. They're deceived. They're not themselves. But when you come to Christ, you get a new heart and you get the gift of the Holy Spirit – and so now you are capable of becoming again who you were created and intended to be. You have NEW HARDWARE – but you still have to download the software – and you do that by regularly sitting under Biblical teaching.

The Bible is the TRUTH. It tells us the truth about who God is, who we are, and how God is saving and restoring us through the person and work of Christ. The more you hear of that, the

faster you change – so yah – Christians sit under a LOT OF TEACHING. That’s a huge part of why we come to church.

Now you might say, “But I could listen to Bible teaching in my car. I could download a sermon from the interweb and listen to it on my ear buds while I walk in the woods.”

Yes you could – but that wouldn’t solve the problem because, again:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

So left to your own devices you would accumulate teachers and teachings that confirm you in your own confusion. That’s what individuals do – and that’s what the internet facilitates. But CHURCH is a whole different thing. In a church the WORD comes at you from the outside. Somebody else chooses the topic and the content is policed by a plurality of elders – and that – over time – makes all the difference in the world.

Now, can you still listen to sermons on iTunes?

Sure you can – but that is no substitute for the corporate learning process. When we sit under the WORD TOGETHER – there is safety in that and there is accountability in that. We know what you’ve heard – and you know what we’ve heard, and that gives the opportunity to hold each other accountable on the matter of application.

Sitting under the Word, as a group, in church, is something we do because of who we are and who we are becoming.

Thirdly, Christians go to church:

3. To encourage and support one another

We've seen that principle illustrated numerous times already in our walk through Acts and we see that principle commended very strongly in the epistles as well. In Hebrews 10:24-25 the Apostle says:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV)

So Christians go to church to support other believers in good works and to encourage one another to carry on in the faith.

That's important for us to see. The assumption in the New Testament is that BEING a Christian and DOING Christian things requires COMMUNITY. This is not a SOLO LIFT. This is not an individual project.

When you buy something from Ikea that requires assembly – which is pretty much everything from Ikea – when you open the instructions one of the first things they tell you is whether or not this is a solo build. A small thing – like a side table – might be a solo build – but a big thing, like a bed or a kitchen table or a credenza is a TEAM BUILD – you have to have a partner for that – or you have to have a team – well, so it is in the Christian life.

Everything we were told to do – is A TEAM BUILD, right? Jesus told us to go into the world and make disciples – do you think you can do that on your own? Good luck with that. That's a TEAM BUILD. We saw that in Acts 13 – when an entire church decided to plant other churches. That was not a 1-person job – that was a WHOLE church supporting a multi-person team.

We can't do Christian things unless we build and support Christian communities. And we can't live the Christian life without being plugged in to a Christian community. Life is hard – it comes with ups and downs – it comes with highs and lows - and so the purpose of a church is to provide a place where people in the ups and highs can support those in the downs and lows.

Understanding that over the course of an entire Christian life your position in that process will change multiple times as you pass through these various seasons.

PARENTING, of course, is one of those VARIOUS SEASONS, isn't it? Raising kids in this culture is a high stress event – it is a definite TEAM BUILD – which is why we had a young family today coming before us with their precious little one. They get it. They know that they need our help and support to raise up their child in the word and ways of Christ – will you help them with that? To state the obvious, you can only do that if you are here.

That's why Christians come to church – to support and encourage one another.

And then fourthly Christians come to church:

4. To provide a compelling witness to the world

In the sermon on the Mount Jesus talked about the expected influence of the Christian in the world. He said:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13–16 ESV)

Now, we tend to think that we're going to exercise influence in the world either individually or politically but Jesus here is talking about the POWER, the ATTRACTIVENESS and the WITNESS of DISTINCTIVE COMMUNITY. The metaphors of SALT and LIGHT are both about CONTRAST, obviously, so Jesus is saying: if you want to change the world then build and maintain a distinctive community. Be a city on a hill and shine a light into the dark and lost people will see you and they will come.

Can I tell you something friends? That's how we're going to reach the people of Orillia! That's how we're going to reach the people of the world – by building a community of CONTRAST!!

The world out there is fracturing and coming apart at the seams. You know it. You see it every day. That is the air we breath now. The air of decline, deception and death. I mentioned Jean Twenge's research a few moments ago, in the same book she notes that:

“The teen suicide rate nearly doubled between 2007 and 2019”².

People are hurting out there and they are feeling completely disoriented. Did you know that 1 in 7 high school students now identifies as something other than straight?³ Our kids are lost and confused about the most basic realities in life. And they don't know realize that now – but they will in 10-15 years. In 15 years they are all going to be waking up alone, middle-aged, scared and disillusioned – and on that day if we could be shining our light – if we could be looking healthy, stable, happy and alive – if we could be that city on a hill – then we're not going to need STRATEGIES and GIMMICKS and INCENTIVES – all we're going to need is an open door and a welcoming heart.

‘Influence and outreach’ for us has always been intended as a TEAM BUILD. You can't make disciples on your own. You can't reach a lost generation on your own. But by the grace of God – we can. Jesus said we could – and he believed we would. He said:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

Hallelujah!

² Ibid., 398.

³ Ibid., 365.

Now, in the time we have left, I want to point you in the direction of appropriate application. The goal when we come together and sit under teaching is not for us to be informed or entertained it is for us to be changed. Bible TRUTH is supposed to result in LIFE APPLICATION. Spiritual CALL is supposed to result in personal COMMITMENT, so I want to end today by asking this very practical question:

How Can You Contribute To This Project?

We want to build a community of contrast. We want to be a spiritual house. We want to function as a holy priesthood – so what do we need from you to make that happen?

Well first of all, we need you to come.

1. Come

Church is not something you can do online. We found that out over COVID didn't we? In fact, I think that was part of God's purpose for COVID. During the pandemic we all experienced first-hand how important it is for us to be together. Online church during the lockdown was like an IV – it kept us alive but it wasn't enough. You can't live on that for very long. We need to be together.

Here.

In this place.

With one another.

Now, we'll keep doing the livestream and using the internet because it is helpful for people who are sick, people who are travelling and for shut ins – but it is not intended as a substitute for LIVE ENGAGEMENT.

So come – the entire project depends upon you being here. When you sing at home – you do not add to the harmony here. When you listen at home – you can't apply what you heard in the fellowship time here after the service. When you engage from home – you can't serve in the nursery, you can't help out with Jr. High, you can't sign up for VBS – so in what sense can you keep the pledge we just made together earlier in this service? You can't. Not in any real or meaningful way. The entire project depends on you being here.

So come.

And more than that – JOIN.

2. Join

In the Book of Acts a distinction seems to be made between THE CROWD and THE CONGREGATION. For example, in Acts 5:12-13 Luke says:

And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women (Acts 5:12–14 ESV)

So you've got a congregation meeting in a certain place and you've got a penumbra of people around that – admiring the group but not DARING TO JOIN. Whereas others are taking the plunge. They were being ADDED – they were signing on the dotted line – they were standing up to be counted – multitudes of both men and women.

One of the things we realize as we read through the New Testament is that the crowd is basically IRRELEVANT. Jesus never counted on the crowds – in fact he often HID FROM THE CROWDS – but he bled and died for the congregation.

They were his people – that’s why it says, “they were added to the LORD” in Acts 5:14 – Luke is equating those realities. For Luke, to join the church was to be added to the Lord – and vice versa. Like husband and wife – they came as a package deal.

So come – join HER and join HIM. Make the commitment. Make it today. You can talk to our Pastoral Intern Scott Hogeveen after the service about what is involved in doing that. He’ll walk you through all of that. If you believe in what we’re doing here and if the Holy Spirit has been speaking to you, then maybe today is the day for you to move from the crowd into the congregation.

And then thirdly, if you want to be part of all this, then GIVE.

3. Give

It does not feel awkward AT ALL for me to say that – because I was a Bible reader long before I became a pastor and absolutely EVERYTHING the church does in the Book of Acts took people and money – and so it is today.

Do you want to support widows?

Then we’re going to need people and money – as per Acts 5 and 6.

Do you want to plant churches?

Then we’re going to need people and money – as per Acts 13 and 14.

There is nothing we do as a church that does not require people and money – so we need you to tithe your time and your treasure. We need you to give 5-7 hours a week – some of that to worship, some of that to serve. And we need you to tithe of your treasure. Because we do stuff here that costs money.

But giving money has always been a way of demonstrating faith and commitment to the project. And not giving money has always been a way of communicating a lack of faith and commitment to the project. Jesus said that to his disciples when he first sent them out in Matthew 10. He told them NOT to be self-supporting. He said:

Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. (Matthew 10:9–10 ESV)

Make them support the work, Jesus say, it will tell you whether or not they believe in the project.

Friends, like it or not, money tells the truth. And time tells the truth. So if you want to contribute to this project; if you want to see it move forward, then tithe of both.

And then lastly – but by no means “leastly” – if you want to contribute to this project, then:

4. Pray

If the Book of Acts has shown us anything it has shown us the power of corporate prayer. Do you remember when Peter was in prison? Luke said something remarkable there, he said:

“but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Something POWERFUL happens when earnest prayer is made for specific needs to God BY THE CHURCH. Corporate prayer is the slender nerve that moves the mighty hand of God⁴.

That’s not my opinion – that’s Revelation 5:8-10:

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of

⁴ HT Charles Spurgeon who said: “Prayer is the slender nerve that moveth the muscles of omnipotence.”

incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:8–10 ESV)

Are you seeing that? In those bowls the elders in heaven are collecting and storing the PRAYERS of the BLOOD BOUGHT PRIESTHOOD.

That’s how the world changes! Their prayers go up and Providence comes down.

I know for a FACT that most of the people in this room believe that – but I’m asking you today whether you are PRACTICING THAT. We have 9 functioning prayer groups in this church – are you associated with one? Mine meets on Thursday morning at 7 am in the pavilion at Couchiching Park. Come on out – or find another one that better suits your schedule.

This is what it means to be a holy priesthood. Priests speak to people on behalf of God and to God on behalf of people – that’s who we were in the beginning and because of the person and work of Jesus Christ that is who we are again; thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.