



Essential Services

Message by Pastor Andrew Kulasingham 26th July 2020

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:42-43

The early church vs The modern day church

→ The early church never met in buildings only met in homes

Not true. They met in the temple and house to house – but things would change once it became illegal to meet in public.

→ IT WAS ILLEGAL TO BE KNOWN AS A CHRISTIAN

True. Christianity was made illegal in many parts of the Roman Empire and Christians were persecuted. The church was not recognised as a legal entity and it had no political power. Things changed when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in AD313 which gave the church legal status and reprieve from persecution. Within 10 years Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. My concern is that the modern day church draws most of her ideas of doing church and having a relationship with God from the third century onwards.

→ THERE WAS ONLY ONE CHURCH

True. The early church saw itself as one universal church. They saw themselves as one body but they did not have organised power and control like the modern day church. We read Paul's letters and think they were laws that governed the church. They were actually not enforceable. These were teachings and shared values they embraced with the sole intention to become more like Jesus. They were governed by a decision to follow the life and teachings of Jesus.

>>> SO MANY THINGS THAT ARE DIFFERENT BETWEEN THE EARLY CHURCH AND MODERN DAY CHURCH

I'm suggesting that we return back to the 1st Century ideas of being and doing church. Can we go back to living like the early church? I don't think it is possible. Society has changed. I doubt anyone wants to give up their mobile phones and social media. This morning I'm not interested in recovering a way of living. What I want us to do is to look at the activities of the early church in order to recover the values they held. By looking at "why they did what they did?", I want to recover what really were the essentials of the early church.

What made the early church so effective as agents of change in their society? I want to challenge our ideas of church and strip away unhealthy concepts we hold on to that are hindering us from being the change agents God wants us to be.

JESUS' DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH

Matt 5:13, 14 (NKJV) - You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world.

Jesus called us salt and light. Salt and light are both agents of change. They change the environment they are in. Have we changed the world or has the world changed the us? It is time we went back to our original purpose. The church exists to transform society. Time we went back to the drawing board.

Acts 2:42-43 (NKJV)

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

FOUR DISTINCT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY CHURCH IN ACTS 2:42.

- The apostles doctrines, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers

1. THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE APOSTLES' TEACHING – A NEW FOUND LOVE FOR GOD'S WORD

The Apostles - lived 24/7 with Jesus for three and a half years. They now had a radically new way of reading and interpreting Scriptures which were influenced by the life and teachings of Jesus, His death, His resurrection, His ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The early Christians were learning to read the Scriptures the way the apostles were reading scriptures.

→ Holy Spirit directed interpretation

John 14:26 (NKJV)

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

→ Holy Spirit directed application

2 Tim 3:16-17 (NKJV)

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

They began to see the law and the prophets in a new light - through the lenses of Jesus the Messiah. They were taught how to interpret the Scriptures and apply the them in their daily lives. The first thing that we must recover is a love for the Scriptures. Not old and new testament divided into various genres and historical divisions in an attempt to make the Bible

relevant and applicable to modern day readers. While this may have its place but the early church was learning to read scriptures the way the apostles were reading scriptures. Through the lenses of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

2. THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE FELLOWSHIP – A NEW FOUND LOVE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

The word fellowship is the Greek word “*koinonia*”. It means partnership. The word includes ideas around communion, participation, agreement and unity. The Jewish community were a divided religious community during New Testament times. Among the many sects and religious orders 3 major sects polarised the Jews.

→ The Pharisees. They traditional, orthodox. But they became very legalistic and self righteous. They focused on the doing. Jesus was very critical of them.

Matthew 23:4 (NLT) They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

→ Sadducees. These were skeptical, rationalistic, and in the eyes of the other sects they were worldly-minded. Focused on the thinking and reasoning.

→ The Essenes – this group were the mystics and were ascetic. Lived monastic lifestyles. They focused on feelings (experience).

Churches and Christians are divided in those lines even today. The traditionalists or conservatives who focus on doing only and face the danger of legalism. The liberals who focus on thinking and reasoning only and face the danger of compromise and conforming to the worldly ideas and philosophies of men. The mystics who focus on feelings and experiences only facing the danger of shallow and wavering faith.

→ Paul addressed these tendency in the Corinthian church:

1 Corinthians 1:11-13 (NKJV)

... that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

→ The early church valued *koinonia*. They dedicated themselves to ensuring that division and disunity were eradicated through genuine love and care for one another. They devoted themselves not only to a partnership with God but also to one another.

WHY THE IMPORTANCE OF KOINONIA?

True Christian fellowship - a community in union and in partnership – creates an environment for transformation to occur:

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP PURIFIES OUR WALK

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

There's a life giving, Spirit cleansing experience that is accompanied by true Christian fellowship.

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP REFINES OUR INTIMACY WITH GOD

1 John 4:20-21 (NKJV) If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

True Christian fellowship strips away any residue of religious pretense when we approach God. We are instructed to love our neighbour as ourselves. We cannot love the world until we first learn to love each other in the Body of Christ. IF WE LEARN TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, WE WILL LEARN TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR.

The Second Thing That We Must Recover Is A Love For God's People. True Koinonia. True Partnership. True Unity.

3. THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE BREAKING OF BREAD - A NEW FOUND LOVE FOR GOD'S GRACE

The act of "breaking bread" together is not just a symbolic one. It's what our Latin fathers of the faith called *sacramentum* (sacrament). It is a visible sign of an invisible grace. C S Lewis described the taking of communion this way. *"Here a hand from the hidden country touches not only my soul but my body"*.

1 Cor 10:16-17

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

In this passage, Paul uses the word "communion" – same Greek word *koinonia* – as he describes the act of taking the Lord's Supper.

- One with His life-giving blood
- One with His resurrected body manifested in and through us

The Act Of Breaking Bread Reminds Us That Our Christian Faith Rests Totally On The Grace Of God.

4. THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO PRAYER - A NEW FOUND LOVE FOR GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Prayer is the most mentioned activity in the book of Acts (32 times). Prayer preceded nearly every significant event in the book of Acts. I want to look at Paul's letter to the Philippian church to gain some insight on how the early church viewed prayer.

Phil 4:6-7

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Paul, writing from prison, during a time of great persecution for the church, addresses a valid emotion Christians were experiencing – anxiety. Prayer is our garrison that protects us from fear and anxiety. Prayer (with a good dose of thanksgiving). Prayer isn't coming to God with a whole list of things you would like Him to do, as if He were a waiter taking our orders or a servant awaiting instructions. Prayer is me coming to Him in all my frailty, trusting He will reshape my thoughts and my feelings, subjecting it to His perfect will for my life. Prayer gives me an opportunity to see His thoughts and His will for my life and creates a desire for me to align myself to them.

We Need To Recover The Importance Of Prayer - A God Perspective – Helps Us See From His Vantage Point And It Produces The Peace That Guards Our Feelings And Our Thinking

The effects of recovering these 4 values – Scriptures, fellowship, communion and prayer.

Acts 2:42-43 (NKJV)

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

"Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."

These four essential acts the church participated in developed among them a healthy respect and awe for God. That reverence and fear allowed God to have free reign among them which resulted in signs and wonders following them wherever they went about preaching the Gospel.

THESE FOUR THINGS ARE THE ONLY ESSENTIALS WE NEED TO FUNCTION AS A CHURCH.

A LOVE FOR GOD'S WORD

A LOVE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

A LOVE FOR GOD'S WORK OF GRACE

A LOVE FOR GOD'S PERSPECTIVE THROUGH PRAYER

EVERYTHING ELSE ARE MERE ADD ONS