

What is the Church for?

What's the purpose of the church? We need to move beyond any idea of the church being merely:

- A spiritual filling station where those interested fill up on liturgy, teaching, and bread and wine.
- A spiritual surgery where people come to have their needs met.
- A spiritual kindergarten where people can only do simple (though valued) things like make the coffee, clean the building, arrange the flowers, and the more advanced can read the lesson, sing in the choir, serve at Communion, go on the PCC or lead the intercessions.

In Acts 2: 42-47 we have a wonderful description of the church as it should be: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Firstly,

They were devoted to the apostles' teaching

The early Christians understood just how important the teaching of the Bible is. They didn't just read it or listen to it. They were devoted to it.

The Psalmist shows a similar attitude in Psalm 119: "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long I hate double-minded people, but I love your law ... All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross therefore I love your statutes. ... Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold See how I love your precepts; preserve my life, LORD, in accordance with your love ... I hate and detest falsehood but I love your law ... Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly. (verses 97, 113, 119, 127, 159, 163, 165, 167)

We have to encourage people to love God's word, to whet their appetite and urge them to read it for themselves regularly and in as much depth as they are capable of.

The church is about being devoted to the Bible's teaching.

Secondly,

They were devoted to the fellowship

The New Testament has a deep concept of fellowship which can only be fully brought about by prayer and the Holy Spirit:

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (verse 44-45).

"All the believers were *one in heart and mind*. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but *they shared* everything they had" (Acts 4:32).

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. *Honour one another above yourselves*. Share with God's people who are in need. *Practice hospitality*"(Rom 12:10, 13).

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17). [Obviously, this includes wider than local concern but "charity begins at home"].

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Php 2:3-4)

"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and *always keep on praying for all the saints*” (Eph 6:18).

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and *each member belongs to all the others*” (Rom 12:4-5).

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, *as each part does its work*” (Eph 4:16).

“Therefore *encourage one another and build each other up*” (1 Thess 5:11).

“And let us consider how we may *spur one another on toward love and good deeds*” (Heb 10:24).

Fellowship doesn't just mean a cup of tea at the back of church! It is far deeper than that. It isn't just a group of people meeting for a study group or a discussion.

It is a gathering of people who are really committed to each other in Christian love. It is a group of people who care for each other. We may not work this out in the same way as the early church – selling our goods and giving all we can to the poor. But to care for one another in practical ways is an excellent indication of real caring: churchmembers ensuring that a fellow member who is in real financial need is given practical help. That is real fellowship.

The church is also a gathering of people who encourage each other. That includes:

- Sharing positive news,
- Taking an interest in how people really feel,
- Offering to pray for them,
- Seeing if there is any practical help that can be given.
- Discerning what gifts people have then encouraging and helping them to use them (Rom 12:5-8, 1 Cor 12).
 - Sharing a prophetic word of encouragement
 - Sharing a message of wisdom,
 - Sharing a message of knowledge
 - Exercising and stimulating faith and vision
 - Teaching
 - Helping
 - Administration
 - Serving
 - Contributing to the needs of others,
 - Giving generously;
 - Showing mercy.
 - Music
 - Art
 - Etc., etc.

The church is also a gathering of people who advise one another. That includes:

- sharing experience and wisdom
- sharing relevant teaching from Scripture.

This is just a brief outline of what fellowship means, and the early church was devoted to it.

Thirdly,

They were devoted to breaking of bread

“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (verse 47). This may not always have included Communion but I suspect it frequently did. When they ate bread and drank wine they probably didn't just “say grace” as we do, but they ate and drank in remembrance of Jesus.

Clearly Communion began in the context of the Passover meal. Jesus took some of the Matzah biscuits they were eating throughout the meal and he took the third of four glasses of wine they always had at Passover and he gave them profound new meaning.

The early church had fellowship meals or agape meals (“love feasts”) and would include Communion. They would have had relaxed times of enjoying one another’s company (an important part of fellowship) and getting to know one another.

The early church were devoted to breaking bread together.

Finally,

They were devoted to prayer

This included “praising God” (verse 47) and worshiping God, adoring him and thanking him are very important aspects of prayer. But it also includes praying earnestly about every aspect of the church, for the world, for individuals in need etc.

The early church were devoted to prayer. Corporate and individual prayer is of incalculable value and importance for the church. We need to get more people to pray together, e.g. in the housegroups.

But we also need to urge and encourage members to pray in increasing depth privately.

The early church were devoted to the Bible’s teaching, to caring fellowship, to breaking bread together and to prayer.

Little wonder: “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (verse 47). But I would want to add:

They were devoted to witnessing

Jesus commissioned the whole church, saying: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20).

Every Christians has a part to play in this great mission to the world by witnessing to his/her neighbour and telling (teaching) them the message of the gospel.

This is to be done in the power of the Holy Spirit: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

Our witnessing will include reaching out to the vulnerable: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE PROGRESS IN BEING THIS SORT OF CHURCH? IT CAN BE DONE.

Ideas on leading a church to be a New Testament fellowship

Obviously, it is more than “servicing” a congregation, i.e. leading the worship, preaching, visiting the sick etc.

Rather it is accepting responsibility for growth in united fellowship and every member ministry, witness and intercession. This will involve:

1. Teaching about it

This will include sermons. But it also means discussing it (and its practical implications) and praying together about it.

2. Exemplifying it

Sharing and praying, honouring people, empathising with them, encouraging them.

3. Facilitating it

- a. Sharing answers to prayer and encouragements.
- b. Encouraging ministry to and prayer for one another.
- c. Ensuring any relationship difficulties are constructively removed.
- d. Encouraging corporate prayer together:
 - e.g. for 15 minutes in a housegroup.
 - An hour of prayer, e.g. on a Saturday morning.
 - making it clear individuals are not obliged to pray aloud.
 - praying for the church and for neighbours outside the congregations.
- e. Encouraging serving one another including with practical help.
- f. Discerning, training and using the gifts of members.
- g. Training people as to how to witness to their faith, what to say etc..
- h. Organising people to reach out pastorally to those outside the congregations.
- i. Having an informal housegroup Communion (led by one of the clergy) perhaps in the context of a simple meal etc.
- j. Inviting those who don't attend church to a housegroup open evening, which could be a social evening or with someone giving a suitable (Christian) talk.
- k. Encourage people to offer hospitality.

Appendix: Leading more open worship

- Relate effectively to children as well as adults.
- Look through the eyes of newcomers not used to church or Anglicanism but rather are threatened by it.
- Blend informality and humour with a sense of reverence and worship.
- Be creative in the use of visual and digital aids to worship and teaching.
- Blend the "poetry" of liturgy with more spontaneous aspects.
- Facilitate and allow for a sense of praise or adoration knowing how to adapt the liturgy appropriately and spontaneously.
- Be really sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit.
- Promote a sense of community through continuity in leadership and core weekly congregation.

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