

Church in the Raw

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you, Bridget and Katie. Good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether you're here in the church or on YouTube. I know we have a few visitors in the church this morning. You are particularly welcome as we now come to consider God's word.

The year is 1830. The city is Dublin. And in a small hall on the south side of the city, a group of Christians are meeting together for the first time. They previously met in homes and they're now meeting in a hall. Among them, there is one young man who has been refused communion at churches around the city because he wouldn't join their membership role.

There are others who are concerned about the established church and the dominance of the clergy, and in particular, that many churches will only allow communion if there are clergy, ordained clergy there to lead it. Others are looking for simplicity in their worship, to get back to how it was at the beginning in the New Testament. And so they meet and very simply, they pray together, they read from the Bible, and they take bread and wine to remember the Lord Jesus.

Now some of you will recognize that this is a description of one of the early groups of what later became known as the Brethren movement. There were others in Plymouth and Bristol and elsewhere.

My purpose is not to promote Brethren ideals, although I would happily do that, but rather choose as an example, and there are many, of a circumstance where there were people who felt there is a need to get back to the New Testament church and the way it did things. Traditions have grown up, and we want to strip these away and simply be obedient to what the Bible says. I could equally have used as my example the Reformation, or one or two of the splits after that, the formation of the Methodist Church, or the free churches in Scotland, or indeed some of the churches around our city that have sprang up in recent years. There has been many times a desire to get back to worshipping as the New Testament church did. And churches inevitably as they grow and as they become more organized, there is more tradition built up, and perhaps, perhaps we get away sometimes from the basic teaching of Scripture.

[2 : 3 6] Now, why is that that that happens? Well, I think it's quite simple. The New Testament doesn't set out to be a handbook on how we should do church in detail. We were looking recently at the book of Leviticus, and in Leviticus you get great detail about the sacrifices and offerings and the priests and the other things which were part of the Jewish faith. And they were prescribed, they were laid down in writing, this is how you will do it. There's very little of that in the New Testament about the church.

We get some teaching, usually when something's gone wrong, and Paul or someone else is trying to correct it. We get snippets here and there which give us an insight into church life, particularly in the book of Acts, and how the early Christians did things. But there are not generally prescriptive details of this is how you must do things as a church. And because of that, I would be hesitant to criticize others who do it differently from ourselves. If they are Bible-believing Christians seeking to follow the Lord Jesus and to be obedient to his word, the fact that they see things in terms of church and organization a little bit different from me doesn't necessarily mean that I'm right and they're wrong. On the other hand, we do need to use the New Testament as the basis for everything we do. This is the word of God that has been handed down to us.

And so it is good to look at what the New Testament says about church and to think, how does that apply to us today? Some things we can take directly and we can say we should do it the way the New Testament church did. Other things we might say, well, that is largely cultural or circumstances now are different.

And so we will do things a little bit differently. That is largely why differences spring up between churches. But if we're thinking about how we should be and what we should do as a church, our

starting point, I think, should be these verses that we've read in Acts chapter 2. This is what I've called church in the raw. It is the very beginnings of the Christians meeting together and sharing a common life together and seeking to worship and to glorify God. And it gives us lots of principles, I think, we can follow as we seek to obey the Lord and to live as his church in our time. So we're going to go through these verses and think about what they are to teach us about the church and the key things about it.

But before we do that, let's just take a second to orientate ourselves and remind ourselves where we are in the book of Acts. So over the last three weeks, we've looked at the ascension of the Lord Jesus, the choosing of an additional apostle, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and Peter's great sermon on the day of Pentecost. And then at the end of that, the Bible records that about 3,000 were added to the 120 existing Christians. So there was a great revival in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. And the question then is, well, what happens next? You've got all these new Christians. How do you organize yourselves? How do you help them to grow in their faith and in their knowledge of the Lord Jesus? And what happened next is what will occupy Luke from the end of chapter 2 through to the early verses of chapter 6. In the verses we're looking at today, we have, if you like, the basics of what the church did. And then in the remaining chapters, we have how it worked out in practice. Sometimes it worked well and the Holy Spirit really worked among them. Sometimes there were problems and the church had to deal with them and to make sure that it remained obedient to the

[6:52] Lord and to his word. But the verses we have today are very much the foundation for what will follow in the next few chapters. This is how the early church met together and what they did. And then we get a few examples of how things worked out in the following chapters. Now our passage today divides very easily into two sections. The first section is a single verse. It's verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And I've called these the priorities of the church. These were the things which were fundamental that they were eager to follow. The word that's used in verse 42, they devoted themselves, is the same word that's used back in chapter 1, where it says that Christians were constantly in prayer to God. It was the thing they did. It was the things that they focused on. So we're going to look at these priorities. And then from verse 43 down to verse 47, we have their practices. So how did the priorities work out in their everyday life as a church? What did they actually do? So we'll take these two sections and let's start out with the priorities. Now as we do that, I want to give you a question to think about. If you were setting the priorities for church life today, is there anything that you would add that is missing from verse 42?

I'll leave you to think about that and we'll come back to it later. Is there any priority for church today that you don't find in verse 42 here? Well, let's look first at what we do find. And the first priority was the apostles' doctrine or the apostles' teaching. So you have new Christians. New Christians, probably all if not, or certainly most of them, who would have grown up in the Jewish faith. So they had the Old Testament background they would understand and would know, but they knew very little, most of them, about the Lord Jesus and what it really meant, this new faith that they had in him.

So a key priority for the apostles as they looked at this wonderful group of new Christians, so excited by those who had come to trust the Lord Jesus, a key priority was to make sure that they were taught well. And who better to teach them than the men who had been with Jesus for the three years of his ministry. Remember when they were choosing a new apostle, that was the key thing they required.

It needed to be someone who had been with Jesus. And as these apostles set about leading this new church, then they had this reserve of all the experiences that they had walking alongside Jesus, all they had heard from him. They had brought to their recollection by the Holy Spirit, the things that they had heard and seen.

[10:14] And the things that the Spirit passed on to them were what had been passed to the Spirit by the Lord Jesus. That's what the Lord Jesus says in John chapter 16. So this Spirit-filled, Spirit-controlled group of men were able to teach those who were new in the faith and with authority, with the authority of the Lord Jesus, to help them to understand the truth.

And the Christians were eager to hear it. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Now, we don't have the apostles in that sense today. We can't go to Philip and say, well, what did Jesus teach about this? We can't go to Matthew and say, well, what do you think Jesus would have done

in this situation? But we do have our Bible. And our Bible, our New Testament, is the written down doctrine that the apostles have passed on to us. The human writers of the New Testament were apostles, or those who were writing with apostolic authority, often with assistance from the apostles themselves. And of course, all of them were writing down as the Spirit led them and gave them the words. So when we think about the apostles' doctrine today, what we should think about is our relationship with the Bible. That we should spend our time, that we should devote ourselves to understanding what it is that the Bible says and teaches us, and being obedient to it.

That is fundamental to living as a Christian. It is fundamental to living as the church of the Lord Jesus, the apostles' doctrine.

The second thing that Luke tells us is that they devoted themselves to fellowship, or actually he says, the fellowship. One translation I quite like was the New English Bible, which talked about the common life.

And I think that gets across the meaning of the word that's used here. This was a group of people who did things together and who supported and encouraged one another.

[12:31] There was a love for the Lord Jesus first, but that was reflected too in a love for one another. And they spent time together. And when one was happy, all were happy.

When one was grieving, all would grieve with them. When one was suffering, all would suffer alongside them. They had things in common. They supported one another.

We'll come in a minute to the material side of things, which is covered later in the passage. But this was a group of people who were really committed to one another. They devoted themselves to the fellowship, to living together for the Lord Jesus.

How important that is today as well. It's been a lot more difficult in some ways over the last year, when for long periods we haven't been able to meet together. And some people still don't feel able to come and meet at the church.

And yet there have been lots of phone calls and lots of expressions of interest among church members, lots of support being given. And that's absolutely right.

[13:39] We should at all times have the interests of our Christian brothers and sisters at heart and seek to support and build them up in their faith. We should devote ourselves to the fellowship.

Then the third thing that Luke lists is the breaking of bread against the breaking of the bread. It is the term that is used. Now there's some debate about what the breaking of bread might mean.

The term is used in two senses in the New Testament. One is what we might call communion or the Lord's Supper. Meeting together to break bread.

And the service that we'll be starting next Sunday morning, we tend to call the breaking of bread service because that is what we do. We meet to remember the Lord Jesus, to break bread and to drink the cup together.

And that's one meaning in the New Testament. The other meaning is simply meeting together for a meal. Because when the Jews would have a meal, one of the first things they would do is that someone, usually the host, would give thanks to God for the food and then would break bread and would pass it around as an expression of friendship and of fellowship.

[14:53] You may remember in Luke chapter 24, when the Lord Jesus meets the couple going to Emmaus and they come to the house and the Lord Jesus, they invite them in for a meal, and the Lord Jesus gives thanks and breaks bread.

And that's the point when they recognize him and realize who it is. Now there's no suggestion there that it's the Lord's Supper that's being celebrated at that point. It is simply they're having a meal and as part of that, bread is broken.

So what does it mean in this passage? This expression is used twice in verse 42 and then again in verse 46. Well, I think the difficulty we have with that and understanding it is maybe a difficulty the first century Christians wouldn't have had.

Because you met together for a meal and as part of that meal, you broke bread and you remembered the Lord Jesus. In the upper room with his disciples, as the Lord Jesus takes bread and breaks it, he's using something which was part of the Passover that they were celebrating at the time and he gives it a new spiritual significance.

So as the Christians meet and in their homes, as they break bread, they say, let's remember the Lord Jesus together in the breaking of the bread and as we drink from the cup, let's remember him.

[16:14] So the two things went together. You had the meal of fellowship and friendship together and within that meal was perfectly natural and normal to break bread to remember the Lord Jesus.

And of course, things changed as the church went on. And there was still a meal in the time of the Corinthians, but it was very much, I think, by that point that they met and they had the breaking of bread as a separate thing within the meal.

And of course, the meal gradually dropped off in terms of normal church practice. But in verse 42, I'm fairly sure that the specific reference from Luke is to remembering the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread, albeit as part of a meal.

And how important it is that we too continue to remember the Lord Jesus. The normal context now is within a church. In the book of Acts, there were 3,000 odd Christians.

They couldn't all meet together in one place, so they broke bread in homes. The normal context now would be we would come together in church to break bread. But of course, over the last period, when that's not always been possible, it's been good that some have been able to join over Zoom, as we've remembered the Lord and the church, and they have joined with us.

[17:29] And I think that's perfectly right and perfectly scriptural. We break bread. It is one of the priorities of the church. And those of us who are in the building later on, we won't break bread because there's no bread to break.

We'll be taking crackers and grape juice, and the breaking is only symbolic, but it will remind us of the death of the Lord Jesus and all that he has done for us. And then finally, in the priorities of the church, there is prayer.

Again, the original would say the prayers. So this isn't talking about the prayer, the prayer time that we have at home. It's the church meeting together to pray with one another.

Probably from later on in the chapter, it was often in the temple courts, a place where Jews would go to pray, the Christians would go to, and they would find an area there, and they would pray together.

But the communal prayer, the coming together to lay hold on the Lord, to bring their thanksgiving and their request to him, that was a core aspect of early church life.

[18:37] And similarly, it should be today. Praying together is the powerhouse of the church and is the way we together can approach God and be drawn closer to him and also drawn closer to one another.

I think over the last year or so, when we've had the Zoom prayer meetings, many of us have found them really helpful in just getting together to pray and a very simple way to bring our requests to the Lord Jesus.

I would encourage you, if you're able to, join us on the Monday evenings in May for our prayer times. We're not having Thursday ones in May, just on Monday. Once a week, let as many of us as possible get together to pray and to bring our thanksgiving and our requests to the Lord.

So four priorities of the church. The apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.

And these very much should be four priorities of every church today. Then what about the practices? If these are the principles, how did they work out in practice?

[19:47] And that's what verses 43 to 47 are all about. And the first thing we see in verse 43 is power. God is at work.

And God is very evidently at work. Everyone was filled with awe, it says, at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

Different between wonders and signs, I think with wonders, you ask how did that happen? With signs, you ask, why did that happen? Signs are God speaking in a way that will teach us more about himself.

But one way or another, the apostles were doing wonderful things. We see a bit of that in chapter three, when there's a lame man in the temple and Peter, through the Spirit, is able to perform a miracle of healing on him.

And that apparently was not a one-off event. That was something that happened very regularly in the early church. We might then ask, well, is that something that we should be looking for in our churches today?

[20:58] And this is where we get into questions about what is relevant today and what is different today. Our God hasn't changed. Our God is still powerful and is in control of all things and can do whatever he chooses to do.

And yet in many of our churches, in our day, we don't see miraculous signs in the sense that Luke is talking about here.

I think as we look through Scripture, as we look through the Bible, there were particular periods when signs and wonders were quite common. So we look at the time of Moses, for example, and the Israelites going through the wilderness and quite a number of miraculous things happening then.

We look at the time of Elijah and Elisha. And again, in a national crisis, when the nation of Israel had gone as low as it possibly could under Ahab and Jezebel, God worked in miraculous ways to demonstrate his power.

And we have it again in the New Testament, both with the apostles here and later on with Paul. And I think, and I'm not going to say this too firmly, but I think that it is right to say that through history, there have been times when there have been a great deal of miracles.

[22 : 23] God has been working miraculous ways at key points in human history and the plan of salvation. And there have been other times when miraculous things have been at least less common.

And perhaps we're in one of these less common times just now. But if you want to discuss math with me later, I'll be very happy to. But the key thing, I think the key lesson from it is, what the apostles were doing with their wonders and signs was validating to people the reality of their message.

They could say, here is God working with power among us. This is the evidence that what we are doing is from God. Now listen to our message and change your ways and come to put your trust in the Lord Jesus.

And I think that is why the apostles mentioned in verse 42 in terms of their teaching, verse 43 in terms of their power, the one helped to validate the other.

Let's move on though and talk about what I've called provision. So verses 44 and 45 say, all the believers were together and had everything in common.

[23 : 36] They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. The believers had everything in common.

Now there's something again that's different from how we would see things as a church. We don't have all things in common. By and large, we live our own lives and we are responsible for our own finances.

So is that wrong? Should we be going back to what the early Christians did? I don't believe so. I think this was something that was specifically relevant and important in the very early days of the church.

And we don't see it happening, I don't think, as the church progresses. In Paul's epistles, for instance, the church would certainly support one another, but it wasn't that they had everything in common.

However, I think perhaps we have got away from some of the underlying significance of these verses. Because we do tend to treat each other as being financially independent.

[24 : 52] And some of us are well off in material terms. Some of us are less so. And there are many Christians around the world who are in real poverty and who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

And perhaps we have too much of a mindset that what I have, what I've earned through my work or whatever, that is mine. I will give some of it to the Lord's work.

But essentially, that's my income and it's mine to do what I want to with it. have we lost that sense of if someone's in need and I'm able to meet that need, then my duty before the Lord is to do it.

If I see someone who is struggling financially for reasons that are beyond their control, is it not my duty to help them in any way that I can?

Perhaps these days we're too private, we're too proud to ask for help. And maybe many of us are too greedy to offer that help when we should.

[26 : 05] So let's take the challenge. If there are people we're aware of who are in physical need, what can I do, what can we as a church do to be able to help them and to give them the physical support that they need.

The believers had everything in common. They sold and gave to anyone who had need. We'll come back to that again in later chapters of Acts.

I won't say any more just now. Then the third thing that they did I've called participation. This is verse 46.

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. Every day they continued to meet together.

We may wonder why they still went to the temple or the temple was the place where Jews went to worship. And I'm sure the early Christians were thinking well as the Jews see us, those who are not yet Christians see us and we can explain to them more about what the Lord Jesus has done, perhaps they too will come to know him.

[27 : 15] It was a natural place to go but equally there were times when it was better to meet in homes, to share a meal together, to share the Lord's Supper and to enjoy fellowship with one another.

But the point is they were all participating in each other's lives. There were no hangers-on. There were no people who said well I'll come to church on a Sunday but that's all I'm going to do. The rest of the week is mine and I'm not going to have any contact with my Christian brothers and sisters. And how important it is if we are part of a church that we are active participants in it. That we're not just those who turn up and go away and perhaps you almost wouldn't notice if we weren't there. That we're engaged in the life, the fellowship, the service, the witness of the church. And we're engaged in the lives of others that we have opportunities to meet with them, to serve, to support and to encourage them.

[28 : 18] Again, the last year has made that very difficult in many ways. And perhaps there are some who have almost dropped off from church. You may be watching this morning but actually you've had very little contact with the church and very little involvement over the last year.

Please consider what your participation in church should be. What you can do to enjoy fellowship with others and to build them up as you build yourself up and to serve the Lord Jesus.

We have scope now to have more people at our services. Great to have some extras this morning from what we've had in the past. There is still room for more if you would like to come. Please consider getting more involved in the church if you have largely dropped off in recent months.

And then the last thing under practice is that the church was praising God. It was a joyful church. Now we have two things to balance things here.

Verse 43 it says they were filled with awe. So on the one hand there was a great awe. There wasn't a flippancy about church. There was a recognition of what a great God we have and how a great privilege it is to be able to approach Him.

[29 : 35] But on the other hand there were glad and sincere hearts and there was praising God. Being a Christian and knowing the Lord Jesus should be a joyful experience for us.

Yes there are bumps in the road. Yes there are times when life is really difficult. But we should if we know the Lord Jesus we should be reflecting on all the great blessings that we have in Him and the great future that He has planned for us.

And we should be rejoicing in Him. Praise should be very much a feature of our times together. And praise is partly music.

Music can really help us in praise. But it is also just appreciating together all that the Lord Jesus has done for us and all that He continues to do for us.

So we have power, provision, participation, praise. Let's come back to the question that I asked you earlier.

[30 : 42] Is there a priority missing in verse 42? We have for those who are interested in becoming members of the church here, we do have membership though everyone is welcome to join the communion if they love the Lord Jesus.

But we have a membership booklet and within that there's a little bit about the history of the church. I actually wrote that because I've been here forever so I know what's been going on. And within that I write something about the heritage which is still important for us in church today.

So I say as part of that in accordance with Acts 2.42 we give priority to Bible teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, communion, and prayer. They are the priorities that are listed here.

I then have another bullet that says we also give priority to personal witness, corporate evangelism, and mission both local and worldwide.

And I hope you would agree that reaching out to others should be a priority of the church. So why then is it not listed in Acts 2? Why doesn't Luke have a fifth thing that says they sought to reach out

to others?

[31 : 57] I think the answer to that is probably that they didn't need to be doing anything special to reach out. It wasn't something they said we really need to have an evangelistic effort.

We need to have a gospel meeting or an evangelistic campaign or Christianity Explored or whatever so that we can help people to become Christians. Now all these things are good. I'm not knocking them.

They're good and they're in many ways necessary in our time. But for the early Christians it was simply the case as they lived as Christians people could see that their lives were different and they were able to use opportunities to explain to them why their lives were different.

So we have again examples in the following chapters particularly as Peter gets the opportunity after the healing of the lame man to talk about the power that he has through the Lord Jesus and to present the gospel through that.

The early Christians it is the natural thing to do was to talk about their faith and to share it with others and to be very visible in the way that they did it.

[33 : 07] And it was effective. They didn't need an evangelistic campaign because it says in verse 47 the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Wouldn't be wonderful if we could say the Lord is adding to our number daily even weekly those who are being saved. I think that's a reminder to all of us that witness is something that should come naturally to us.

I say naturally with some hesitancy because many of us find it very difficult but our relationship with the Lord Jesus should be something that we're happy to talk about and to share with others and to explain to them what it is that he has done for us.

And yes evangelism is a priority. Reaching us to church is a priority. Great we've got a Christianity explored course. Please do consider who you could invite to that. But it's also the case that people should just be able to look at us and listen to us in a natural course of conversation and learn something about the Lord Jesus and faith in him.

We need to be witnesses to him alongside the priorities that Luke lists. Now I started by talking about a group that separated from the established church.

[34 : 25] I want to end with someone who didn't separate from the established church. If you have the monthly newsletter or the paper copies in the church or it's online, you'll see that in his article Graham has reminded us that it would have been John Stott's 100th birthday last week.

John Stott throughout his life was an Anglican, an Anglican bicker, and came under pressure a lot of times to move from the church and people saying, well, how can you stay in the church of England?

John Stott was very convinced that was what God had called him to do. One of his last books is called The Living Church. The subtitle is Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor.

And then as you see John Stott sharing something of what he's learned over many years of Christian ministry about what it is to be the church and to serve the Lord Jesus in it.

If you're interested, he also includes the reasons why he has stayed within the Church of England. But I want to just finish by reading what he says in summary about these verses we've been looking at from Acts.

[35 : 34] So John Stott says, looking back over the essential marks of a living church, it is apparent that they all have to do with the believers' relationships.

First, they were related to the apostles. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. A living church is an apostolic church.

Second, they were related to each other. They loved each other. A living church is a caring and sharing church. Thirdly, they were related to God.

They worshipped God in the breaking of bread and in prayers with joy and with reverence. A living church is a worshipping church. Fourthly, they were related to the world outside.

They reached out and witnessed a living church is an evangelizing church. John Todd has followed the order of Acts 2. I might be tempted to slightly change the order as we think about our priorities.

[36 : 41] Because the first thing we need to have is the relationship with God. If we don't have that relationship, then we're not part of the church at all.

So all of us need to have our trust in the Lord Jesus, the one who died for us, and you can bring us forgiveness for all the wrong that we've done in our lives. That is the starting point, and then our

lives should be an ongoing building of that relationship with God.

And then we can move on. We have the relationship with Scripture next, perhaps, as we seek to learn more about what God wants to teach us and what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. We have the relationship with one another, the fellowship that we enjoy as we support each other, and then we have the relationship with those who are not yet Christians as we would seek to witness to them.

Let's all challenge ourselves on these four relationships as individuals, as a church. Have we got them all right? Our relationship with God, our relationship with Scripture, our relationship with one another, our relationship with those outside the church.

[37 : 53] And if we find we're lacking in any of these priorities, let's resolve to put it right and through with God's help to be more like the church that he intends us to be. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning. We thank you for this great passage that reminds us of what the early church did, of what its priorities were, what its practices were.

Help us to get our priorities right, that we may have a living relationship with you, a real relationship with your word, strong relations with one another and a desire to reach others for the Lord Jesus.

And help each of us to grow in our faith and our knowledge of the Lord Jesus and to support one another as a church as we do that. We pray you'll be with us now as we move on, that you'll be with those who are leaving us now, who have been with us on YouTube, that your blessing will be with them over the coming week.

And be with those of us in the church now as we move on to remember the Lord Jesus together.

We give you our thanks in his name. Amen.