

Membership: Participation in the Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me add to Fraser's welcome. Very good afternoon. Let's pray as we open up God's word together. Lord Jesus, we have already looked so much at what it means to be your church here.

And now as we open up your word, just make it real to each one of us, we ask. Speak to each of us. We need to hear your voice loud and clear through your word this morning. Amen.

Amen. Well, last week we looked at the foundation of the church. And Graham, our assistant pastor, spoke to us about the fact that at the very foundation of the church is the gospel, is the good news of Jesus Christ, his death, his resurrection, his ascension and flowing from that.

The fact that he calls all those who believe in him to automatically be part of his church. And today we're going to build on that by saying, OK, we've got that. We've got that as the foundations.

But now what does it look like to be part of this church? And what does involvement in the church look like? And I think you'll have got from the video clips and from some of what is said that you're going to hear about the fact that this is something that involves every single one of us who are here today and all those who, for whatever reason, are maybe out teaching kids or are just not able to be with us today.

[1 : 2 0] So that's where we're going to go. It strikes me that this morning's talk is going to be a little bit like a driving test in some respects. Now, I did my driving test 23 years ago.

I am horrified to acknowledge. And at that point, all you did was sit in the car and drive around. And then at the end, the guy said, right, look at some road signs. Do you know what that is?

Yeah, that's a stop sign. Do you know what that is? That's a giveaway sign. That's fine. You've passed your test. But nowadays, I believe it's much more difficult. Is anybody in the process of sitting a driving test just now or learning to drive?

None of you are learning to drive. Gosh. Okay, well, if you are going to be learning, you've got to get the theory bit right. And you've got a separate theory exam. And then you go and do the practical bit where you're actually driving around the road.

So we're going to have two aspects to the message. We're going to have some theory. And then we're going to have it. We're going to see what it looks like in real life. Okay, this whole thing about church. But it's going to be much better than a driving test.

[2 : 1 6] There's not going to be any failing at the end of the day. And it's going to be an awful lot more fun. Because this is a brilliant topic, I believe. The theory of what church is all about. And then we're going to look at a real life example of church actually living up to the theory.

And that's going to be in Romans chapter 16. But the theory, first of all, and really if you remember and can let four words sink in, then you'll pretty much have the theory.

Okay, although we're going to try and apply that theory a little bit over the next few minutes. So here are the four words which I think pretty much capture the theory that's in the New Testament about what the church is supposed to be.

Number one is a house or a home. I'm going to describe it as a home today. Number two is a body. Number three is a family. Number four is a community.

And I'd love it if by the time we go away we've got those four words sunk deep down and we can think through what that means in practice. A home, a body, a family and a community. Those four words used to describe the theory about church and involvement in church according to the New Testament.

[3 : 26] Let me start then with this word house or home. If you've got a Bible either in paper copy or on your phone or something like that, you might want to dot around with me because we're not having only one text.

We're looking at a few. And we'll start off in 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 4. 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 4. And here, check with me that I'm not getting the theory wrong.

I'm pretty sure if we're doing a theory exam and it was about what is church like, then we'd have to say, wait a minute, there's something around houses and homes. It's there in 1 Peter chapter 2. As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.

So this is a reference to Jesus. You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And then we'll dash on to verse 9. It says, You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

[4 : 46] Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So let's get our head around this idea of the church being a home. Well, we've sung already such a helpful song which helps us understand this. We've sung that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

And that's the idea in this passage here. That we can have in our minds the idea of the church as a building where Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. The stone that is absolutely essential in terms of holding the whole thing together.

But that every single one of us are also invited to take our place as stones in this building. But it's not just some kind of house where nothing's happening, which is why I'm describing it as a home.

Because we're described as living stones. And there's something that's not static, but that's really dynamic about this house. So it really is a home which God is building.

[5 : 50] And the key point I want to get across in relation to this first bit of theory about church is that it's somewhere where we all belong. Isn't that what we have in mind for many of us if we've had a happy background and we think about home?

It's a place of refuge. It's a place where we can return to. It's a place where regardless of what else has been happening, we all belong at home. And I want to say to each one of you coming into church today that I long and pray that you might feel that this place is home.

It's a place where Jesus Christ is the key cornerstone. But it's a place where each of us are invited to come and contribute to the overall building project that Jesus Christ is doing and that God is doing.

And why do I say I think the key thing is to understand that in this home we all belong? Well, let me refer again to verses 9 and 10. Because it's very easy to think, oh, do you know, I'm not sure that I, that me, I've really got an entitlement to play an integral part in this home.

I reckon that there's others around me that probably play a part in the home. But I'm not sure. I've done too much in the past. I've had too many regrets. I've got too many failures. I'm too old.

[7 : 10] I'm too young. I'm too inexperienced to really play an integral part. Well, the apostle Peter tackles that here. He says, yes, once you were not a people in verse 10, once you had no place in this home, once you weren't part of it at all, but now through Jesus Christ, through that wonderful foundation of the gospel that we learned about last Sunday, once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

Once you had not received mercy. It's true. You've not been part of this all your life, but now you have received mercy. We were in Disney for our first time ever over the summer and we found it somewhat corny, but in some ways slightly comforting that every single time we went back into the particular hotel that we were going to, the people said two words to us and it was in an accent, which I'm tempted to imitate, but I'll get it wrong.

They said, welcome home. Every single time. I'd like to say that today genuinely to all those of you who form a part of Brunsfield, whether this is just your first or second time or you've been here a hundred times or a thousand times, welcome home.

Let's remember that Jesus Christ is the absolute center and cornerstone and he wants us to feel that this is part of the house, the building, the home that he is building.

It's a home. It's also a body. And here I'm going to turn you to Romans chapter 12 and verse 4. Again, if you want to turn to it, that would be great.

[8 : 43] If you'd rather just listen, that's fine. There's various passages which I could turn to in the New Testament where the church is compared not as a house or a home, but the church is compared to a body, a single body.

We could look at Ephesians chapter 4, but for today we're going to look at Romans chapter 12. So listen to this. Romans chapter 12, verse 4. For 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, though many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve.

If it is teaching, then teach. If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

So it couldn't be clearer, could it, that God says that the church that he established, built on the foundation of the gospel, is intended to be like a body.

[9 : 54] Well, to understand this more fully, I have had to have recourse to some of the doctor friends who are in the church today. Now, folks, for those of you who don't know, we're spoiled for choice at the moment. We are blessed to have many doctors among us.

This is a brilliant place to fall ill. So, you know, if you're not feeling great any Sunday, don't worry, come along, because if something goes wrong, there'll be people running towards you, ready to help, thanks to all the doctor friends.

Then again, maybe some of you are actually thinking, don't say that, I'm off duty, and I've been working hard. But anyway, one particular doctor friend who is serving in other ways, David, who's at the back, told me a little bit about how the body works.

He said this, if a part of the body is injured, e.g. muscle strain, this puts more work onto the opposite leg to compensate for and support the injured leg.

This reflects in the church. We have a role to support injured or weaker parts of the church, even if this means more work for ourselves.

[10 : 52] I think David put that in a beautifully positive way, because we could be really negative and say, are you causing the rest of the body to limp along? But we're not going to say that today at all, okay? We're going to look at it positively, and we're going to say that each one of us has an essential part to play in order that this body, the church at Bruntsfield, or any other churches that you're represented, in order that this body functions really well.

It's intended to be a body that's full of energy, that's full of vitality, that's able to run, that's able to do incredibly powerful things, and for that to happen, each one of us has got a key part to play in the body.

But we recognize that sometimes, bits of the body won't be working well. Sometimes bits of the body just can't perform their full function.

And isn't it beautiful that in the human body, what happens is that other bits of the body kick in to compensate for and really help make up for what is lacking in the bits that are sick or struggling.

And I think that's a lovely image which we could try and take, because I can look around, and I can say that I know there are some people who have been performing an incredibly active role in the body for many, many, many years.

[12 : 03] But maybe the time has come and actually they're struggling or they're unwell, and they can no longer play that part. And my hope is, my belief is, that as God brings others into the body here, he encourages every one of us to play the part that we can.

In Romans 12, we read about the whole variety of gifts which he gives to every one of us. Every one of you, you are here with God-given gifts. And in this church, the theory says, at least, that we will be able to use those gifts in order to ensure that that body is healthy and growing and full of life and vitality.

What is your part in the body at Bruntsfield here? Maybe as you look through the gifts, you think, oh, I'm not sure. Well, maybe try out some opportunities.

Later on today and over lunch, we'll be making known some of the opportunities that there are. But equally, it's not all about joining rotas. Look at some of this. It might be giving. If I can refer to Fraser's very gentle and subtle plug about giving to the church potentially through wills.

Maybe it's leading. Maybe it's showing mercy. And we'll come on to an example of that in just a minute or two. So there's a theory number one. The body is a home. Sorry, the church is a home. Number two, it's a body.

[13 : 20] Number three, it's a family. Now, we could look at so many different passages here. I'm not going to turn to them all, but there are many passages where what is referred to or how the apostles and the writers of the New Testament refer to the other Christians is in the following terms, brothers and sisters.

Brothers and sisters. The language that we use for family. Very briefly, if you want to look at it, Hebrews 2.19, you are not foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household.

We're all part of God's family. And therefore, in this household, we are brothers and sisters with one another. 1 Peter 2.17 says this, love the family of believers.

And a minute or two, we'll read together Romans chapter 16, where we'll see so many references to our sisters, Phoebe, the brothers and sisters with them. I wonder if we truly see each other as part of a family.

I kind of feel for me when I was younger in a much smaller church, people were referred to as brother, as sister, as for the kids, as a child, I knew others as auntie and uncle.

[14 : 38] And there was that real sense of family. And my prayer, perhaps my challenge, would be that we try to possibly recapture the sense of Brunsfield as family.

It doesn't matter whether you've been here for a long time or a short time. And maybe the particular responsibilities and those of us who've been here for quite a long time to be sufficiently welcoming of others so that we recognize that we're not only a house and a home, we're not only a single body, we're also family.

And the people sitting next to you, behind you, in front of you, in Christ Jesus, are brothers and sisters. Isn't that great? We don't need to feel alone. We don't need to be isolated because you're not sitting next to a group of strangers.

In Christ, you're sitting next to brothers and sisters. Here's my challenge. Could you manage, after church, at some point today, to refer to somebody else as brother or as sister and really mean it because that's what we are in Christ.

Finally, community. In so many passages of the New Testament, we hear the word fellowship and literally the word is *koinonia*, linked to the words common, sharing and participation.

[15 : 54] We're in community with God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit and we're in community with each other. And I think the key verse that gets that is that one that I read from Romans chapter 12, which I think really, really challenges the kind of predominant individualistic tone of our society.

Romans 12, verse 4, each of us has one body with many members and these members do not all have the same function. So in Christ, we, though many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others.

Each member belongs to all the others. There's this real sense of closeness. There's this real sense of interdependence. There's this real sense of support for one another.

I think that's some of the sense of community or the fellowship that we are intended to have. I've been reading a great book this week called *Total Church* by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis.

And they say this, by becoming a Christian, I belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters. It's not that I belong to God and then make a decision to join a church.

[17 : 14] My being in Christ means being in Christ with others who are in church. This is my identity. This is our identity.

And they go on to provide what I found quite a helpful illustration where they say that so many of us can feel that in life we're kind of juggling lots of balls and we're there on our own trying to just keep all these balls in the air.

Yeah? Does that feel familiar to some? And we've got family and we've got work and we've got studies and church is one of the balls that sometimes we feel we need to try and keep in the air and sometimes it drops because there's so many other things.

And the challenge from the theory part which is coming to an end now is not to see church as just one of the balls that's up in the air but to see what God is doing to us through Christ is meaning that I'm not standing on my own juggling balls at all.

Actually, I'm in a fellowship. I belong to others and at the very heart of me is my relationship with Jesus Christ and my relationship with those around us. So we together belong to one another and it's we together who are at the centre perhaps juggling lots of balls all around us but let's not see church as just one of them.

[18 : 24] It's much more integral. It's much more central. And I think that's absolutely clear through these four phrases. Home. Body.

Family. Community. But what does it look like in practice? I want to take you in our last 10 minutes or so 10-15 minutes to a beautiful example of the practical reality of church as it's really intended to be by God.

Can you come with me to Romans chapter 16 and we'll look at some of these examples of people. Context here is the Apostle Paul is writing a letter to the church in Rome. He longs to be with them but he can't be with them for various reasons.

But as he writes this letter he speaks about the people in the church and he gives us a beautiful insight of how that church was functioning. And I think that church was functioning as both body, building, family and community.

Come with me and let's look in on this church. Verse 1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe a deacon of the church in Centuria. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need for you for she has been the benefactor of many people including me.

[19 : 39] Verse 3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila my fellow workers in Christ Jesus they risked their lives for me not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful for them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet Mary who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me.

They are outstanding among the apostles and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampelatus my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus our fellow worker in Christ and my dear friend Stachys Greet Apelles whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodian my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Triphina and Triphosa those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus chosen in the Lord and his mother who has been a mother to me too. Greet Assyntricus Philegon Hermes Patrobus Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

[20 : 50] Greet Philogius Julia Nerus and his sister and Olympus and all the Lord's people who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

Verse 21 Timothy my co-worker sends his greetings to you as do Lucius Jason and Sosipater my fellow Jews. I Tertius who wrote down this letter greet you in the Lord.

Gaius whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy send you his greetings. Erastus who is the city's director of public works and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.

Bit of a whistle stop tour through an awful lot of names. I probably didn't do justice to many of those names and I want to just focus in in this last few minutes on some of them.

Because I think if we look at some of them we get a beautiful picture of the theory being translated into action and I pray that we might see some of that here among us. Phoebe at the start.

[21 : 47] There she is Phoebe our sister I commend to you Phoebe our sister a deacon in the church and she's been the benefactor of many people. I learned from looking at this this week that it seems almost certain that Phoebe who was with Paul is the woman who was entrusted by Paul to take the only copy of Romans and to travel with it over land and across sea and to take it to the church in Rome.

What an incredible responsibility was given to Phoebe. It also seems from the passage and from what else we can learn that Phoebe was a very well off woman possibly a business woman in the day and Paul says Phoebe has been a great help to me.

She's probably met some of Paul's financial needs and in other ways has come alongside. Literally what she's described as is one who has stood by in times of need.

One who's stuck close to Paul when the going has got tough and Paul says greet Phoebe. I commend to you Phoebe. She's travelling with this precious letter. Welcome her because she's been a great help to me.

I look out and I recognise that some of you are probably closer to Phoebe than you even imagine. Some of you have stood by and helped others in times of need and that's one of the ways in which the theory of the church is brought out in practice.

[23 : 13] Look around. There are others in need today and the challenge is where are the other Phoebes who will stand by in times of need and where are those like Phoebe who can contribute practically and at times financially to the work of God here.

Maybe you're a Phoebe. He goes on to say greet Priscilla and Aquila my fellow workers in Christ Jesus they risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful for them.

Priscilla and Aquila are an amazing couple. There are seven references to Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament. Interestingly most of the times five of them the woman is mentioned first.

Twice Aquila the guy is mentioned first. They are never mentioned apart and here I want to look out at some of the couples who are working together for God.

Some of the Priscillas and Aquilas where together you are able to do tremendous things for God and for his glory in this place. Greet Priscilla and Aquila.

[24 : 20] One of the most beautiful things that I've enjoyed this week about Priscilla and Aquila let me tell you a wee story about them in Acts chapter 18. This great scholar called Apollos comes along and he was one of Paul's right hand men later on.

He was a big guy big teacher well learned brilliant preacher and he comes along and he starts to preach and Priscilla and Aquila are there and they recognise that actually Apollos has got some stuff wrong.

He's got a pretty mixed up on the whole thing about baptism. So what do they do? What would we do if we think there's people where we just know they're wrong? We know they are wrong. What did Priscilla and Aquila do?

Did they stand up and say sorry we have to say that's wrong? No. What they did and we read it in Acts 17 you can look at it they said do you want to come round for a meal Apollos? Come round let's share an evening together let's have some food and over a meal we read that they gently explained to Apollos the word of God more accurately and Apollos went on to be an absolute giant of the faith who stood by Paul in times of need all because Priscilla and Aquila or maybe at least in part because Priscilla and Aquila had taken the time as that couple to invite him round for a meal and to say let's have a chat about what God's really up to and let me explain to you one or two things that might not yet be clear to you.

Priscilla and Aquila are you out there? I know you are. Can you be the couples who really stand strong for God who help us who show such hospitality and of course crucially Priscilla and Aquila host a church in their house.

[25 : 58] We're all encouraged to go and get that sheet with our name on it which says that we belong to a home group and thank you to those who are choosing to host house groups over this next season.

If any of you don't have your name there because you haven't signed up yet it's not too late speak to Graham or I we'd be delighted to get you as part of one of these house groups. Priscilla and Aquila marvellous couple.

Verse 5 Epenetus my dear friend who's described as the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. And then verse 7 Andronicus and Junia my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me outstanding among the apostles and wearing Christ before I was.

What point do I want to make from Epenetus and Andronicus and Junia? Well it's there in the passage. Here we have the experienced men and women of the faith.

Here we have the people who have been disciples of Jesus long before the apostle Paul was and Paul says I want to greet you Epenetus I want to greet you Andronicus and Junia you're the guys that have been at it for so much longer than I have and you're still going on you're still encouraging the newer brothers and sisters in Jesus.

[27 : 08] Epenetus Andronicus Junia you don't have those names but you're here today. You're the ones who are long in the faith please feel part of the body for as long as God gives you strength to breathe and to sing his praises and please encourage those who have not been part of the body for so long those who might be new in the faith those who might not yet even have taken their first steps in the faith.

Paul looked at that church he gave thanks for the older believers and we need you older believers we need the Epenetuses and we need the Andronicus and the Junias Verse 6 Mary what she commended for Mary is the hard worker and then verse 12 Tryphena and Tryphosa those women who work hard in the Lord and then Persis another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord it almost goes without saying we saw it beautifully in one of Fraser's videos that what we also need for this church to function properly is the hard workers they've been there today already the ones who serve coffee the ones who are preparing lunch the ones who are teaching the children the ones who have been rehearsing like mad in order to bring us great music this morning the hard workers thank you to all those who are taking a stand like Mary like Persis like Tryphena and like Tryphosa there's one lovely little bit about some of those names I just want to bring to you

I understand that Tryphena and Tryphosa were the names that would be given to the real elite in the day in Rome right those were not the names that just anybody had Tryphena and Tryphosa oh posh names suggesting that the parents were you know had high expectations and were probably from the kind of ruling class but then you come on to a name like Persis which in those days was the type of name that a slave would have and what we see beautifully in the church here is people from all backgrounds all classes all walks of life but they're not distinguished they're just here as people who are working hard in the Lord and it's great that in Christ our barriers our backgrounds are broken down because we are here united under Christ and his lordship and those backgrounds are just not important may we take care that we don't make them something important we could go on but time is gone so I'll only mention in verse 8

Ampelatus who had been a dear friend Urbanus who had been a fellow worker I can't finish without mentioning the mother of Mary sorry the mother of Rufus verse 13 have a quick look verse 13 greet Rufus chosen in the Lord and his mother who has been a mother to me too look out at the women and ask whether you might be mothers to some of the younger women in the church look out at the men might some of us be fathers to some of the younger men in the church how are we getting on with mentoring remember delve maybe that's a practical way in which we can offer a bit of mothering or fathering to others it was happening in the church of Rome in practice God would want it to happen among us here verse 21 we go on to read about those who were working alongside Paul he wasn't doing it alone it was not a one man band and although we are blessed to have a pastor assistant pastor youth pastor team of elders please let's not think that this church thing is something that is just for one or two

I want to finish with one more quote from that book Total Church if you warm to this vision of Christian community then start where you are sell the vision by modelling the vision don't become a pain to your congregation telling them that everything they are doing is wrong become a blessing by offering hospitality showing practical care dropping in on people create around you a group of Christians who will share their lives and encourage one another in the faith you might start with your home group you don't have to start a campaign for change just get on with it and make your community better let's pray thank you thank you for this church Lord Jesus thank you for all that you're doing among us and thank you for all that you have yet to do among us we stand amazed we stand amazed we stand amazed to be part of a family a body a community a home and may we glorify you in this place by reflecting just to at least some extent what you would call the church to be pray that everyone here who's been listening today might feel part of this home and able to do what you call us to do and to receive the love and support that is here for us in this place

[32 : 34] Amen