

We Believe – The Church



Acts 2:42-47

(Expanded Sermon Notes)

When I was a kid, there was this burger chain called Fuddruckers, and their tag line was, “World’s Greatest Hamburgers.” Nostalgia is a pretty powerful thing, and I do remember them being pretty good. What made the whole experience truly great was that you could build your own burger. That was their whole thing: your burger, your way, every time. Truly amazing! Everyone has a theory on the perfect cheeseburger. For some, it’s a smash burger—thin, crispy edges, American cheese, simple pickles. For others, it’s a half-pound steak burger on a brioche bun, stacked with caramelized onions, arugula, and truffle aioli. You can argue until you’re blue in the face about bacon or avocado, but at the end of the day, it’s all just a matter of personal taste. There is no “absolutely correct” way to build a burger.

Unfortunately, we often apply the same logic to our spiritual lives and our approach to the Church. In other words, we approach church like a custom menu. We treat our local fellowship like a consumer product, evaluating it based on whether the music fits our aesthetic, the programs meet our personal needs, or the preaching style aligns with our preferences. On their own, these aren’t wrong things. But, if we’re not careful, we start asking, “Does this church feel right to *me*?” instead of “Is this church being faithful to *Jesus and holding to God’s Word*?” Your perfect burger is a matter of preferences, but a healthy church is a matter of biblical priorities. In chapter two of the book of Acts, we get a glimpse of the church as it was beginning, and we see these priorities: teaching, fellowship, and service. At the heart of it all, we see that the church exists because of Jesus, and it exists to glorify Jesus. Let’s lean in and think about the church from the book of Acts.

Article #7 – The Church

“We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.”

1. An institution of grace.

- a. Creation flows from relationship.
 - i. The very creative act in Genesis flows out of a sense of relationship. (Gen. 1:26)
 - 1. We see that God himself exists in perfect relationship of himself... “Let us make man in our image and after our likeness.”
 - 2. Man is created to know God and enjoy God in the context of the relational union of the garden.
 - ii. **From the beginning, when God declared that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18), the divine design for human life included social relationships—a community that in some way reflected the triune love found within the Trinity.** Sin ruptured the relationship not only of man with God, but also between human beings. The image of God in the world was defaced.¹
 - iii. Even creation in its first and original design was a gift of grace.
 - 1. If God existed perfectly in relationship to and of himself (the Trinity), he did not need to create humanity to be in relationship with himself.
 - 2. The very action of creating was a gift of grace. --. Humanity didn’t deserve it, didn’t earn it, or convince God to do it.
 - 3. God did it out of an overflowing sense of love and a desire for others to rightly connect with and know him.
 - a. The design of the garden reflects this. → God creates a good place with everything needed for humanity to flourish and to trust him. In fact, even in the garden, God doesn’t ask for trust first and then provides. He provides and then asks for trust.
 - 4. God’s character is consistent through the creation process and in the response to man’s sin.
 - a. Creation was a gift of grace, and redemption seeks to restore the relationship of creation that was lost in humanity’s rebellion.
- b. **Redemption seeks to restore relationship.**
 - i. **But God in his grace has purposed to restore his fallen creation and to redeem a people for himself.** In Jesus Christ God has acted to rescue sinful human beings from his wrath and to reconcile them to himself. This work of Christ in his cross and resurrection is now applied to us by the Holy Spirit, who unites us with Christ so that what is true of him becomes true of us. And in uniting us with Christ, the Spirit also creates a new community we call the church. The church, as those saved by God’s grace and united with Christ by God’s Spirit, becomes the embodiment of the gospel in the world.²
 - 1. **We called this restored community, the church.** Why? Because that is what the NT calls it.
- c. **What is the nature of the Church?**³
 - i. More than one hundred different terms, metaphors and images are used in the NT to describe God’s people with whom he has entered into a saving relationship in Christ. In addition to these descriptions several activities are said to characterize Christian

¹ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 196). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

² EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 196). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

³ The English word “church” derives from the Greek word kuriakon, which means “pertaining to or belonging to the Lord.” This word was used of church buildings and developed into the English term which also referred to the community of people which met in those buildings. – via, EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 224). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

believers. Integral to Paul's teaching about the people of God is his use of the important word *ekklēsia*, a term meaning "congregation," "church," "gathering" or "assembly."⁴

- ii. **The Greek term *ekklēsia*, translated as "church," simply means "an assembly," but in the New Testament it is used with a particular theological meaning in two senses. It is important to distinguish between the two, but, as we shall see, they must not be separated.**⁵
 1. **The word *ekklēsia* is used around 110 times in the NT.** It is always used to describe in one way or another the redeemed people of God through their faith in Christ.
 - a. 19 times in the book of Acts.
- iii. Another word used to describe the church is, *Koinōnia*.
 1. The relationship of believers to one another in the common experience of salvation is chiefly presented in Paul by several Greek word groups (including *koinōneō* and its cognates, together with the verbs *metechō* and *merizō*), along with several words having the prefix *syn-* and a number of images (e.g., the body) which express the idea of common participation.⁶
- iv. What is made clear for us with these two Greek words, *ekklesia* and *koinonia*?
 1. The fundamental nature of the church is a restored and renewed community rooted in Christ, established by him as an act of grace through redemption.
 2. **This means that as a transformed and renewed community, we are to have a new ethic and perspective. That is, the ethic and perspective of Christ himself.**
 3. It also means that the church as an institution, is both local and global, and historic and present.

2. Local and Global

- a. What does it mean to be both local and global?
 - i. "All who have been justified... bound by the Holy Spirit."
 1. The key word here is "all."
 2. It is not that "some" belong. Or, those that have done the right things and have the right resume to belong. I.e., Think of an application process to an elite social club.
 - ii. **Local – Incarnational and communal**
 1. Connected into a local church.
 - a. Invest my time, talents, and treasure.
 2. United with other local churches.
 - a. Maintain the bond of peace and unity.
 - iii. **Global – From all peoples and in all places.**
 1. One of my favorite experiences is getting to worship with other believers in contexts that are different from mine, especially when there are distinct cultural and language barriers. Why? Because there is a profound sense of "oneness" and connectedness even when everything else is different.

⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, "Church," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 123.

⁵ EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (pp. 197-198). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Peter T. O'Brien, "Fellowship, Communion, Sharing," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 293.

2. We believe that the church is not limited to our local or regional expression of the church. It includes believers all over the world, right now.
- b. **We can believe without belonging, but we were never meant for that.**
 - i. **I.e., You cannot separate believing in Christ with belonging to the Church.**
 1. That is, to believe in Christ is to be part of his body. And to be part of his body, is to be part of the Church. Why? Because the true church includes all who have been redeemed by Christ.
 2. And if, by virtue of our union with Christ, we are a part of his body, **then we are fellow members of that body with every other person who is also in communion with Christ** (cf. **1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 12:27**). Therefore, we affirm that the true church comprises all those united by the Spirit into the body of Christ.⁷
 - ii. **Acts 2:42-47 is a beautiful picture of the reality of this incarnational (in the flesh) community.**
 1. Luke is careful to point out the **landmarks**. In fact, Acts 2:42 is often regarded as laying down ‘the four marks of the church’. The apostles’ teaching; the common life of those who believed; the breaking of bread; and the prayers. These four go together. **You can’t separate them, or leave one out, without damage to the whole thing.**
 2. Community life is summarized as involving four key areas: **apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread together, and prayer**. The newly formed community functions by the believers’ devoting themselves (ἡσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες, *ēsan de proskarterountes*) to these activities.⁸
- c. **Incarnational is key ... “They devoted themselves to...”**
 - i. The expression “devoting themselves” has the idea of persistence or persevering in something. The imperfect periphrastic construction speaks of the ongoing devotion that they have. Of its ten NT occurrences the verb appears six times in Acts (1:14; 2:42; 2:46; 6:4; 8:13; 10:7). It echoes the unity of mind Luke describes in Acts 1:14. In these four ongoing activities, much of the basic work of community appears.⁹
 1. **This is not something they gave up on lightly.** These were hallmarks of a transformed community. And powerfully, in the first-century their connection transcended blood-relative / family lines. This doesn’t seem profound to us today, but it absolutely was then.
 - ii. **What is my next intentional step in connecting with other believers?**
 1. Men’s or women’s group?
 2. Connect Group?
 3. Lead a group?
 4. Get around a table for an intentional meal of hospitality and connection?

3. Historic and Present

- a. Every church has a past to honor and a future to nurture.
 - i. One can speak of the church as a body known only to God, for in an ultimate sense only God can know who are truly his. But generally in the New Testament, the church refers

⁷ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 202). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 149–150.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 149–150.

to a community visible in the world. And though the term can refer to the community of Christians within a large geographical area, it more commonly denotes a local gathering of believers in one place. **Here in this local network of relationships the gospel is embodied in the world and worked out in our lives.**¹⁰

- ii. A second reality to the church is that it is both historic, in that it includes all believers (saints) that have ever lived. It also includes all the believers (saints) who are currently alive.
 - 1. With that, these realities are true both globally and locally.
 - 2. Locally- This means that a church is not just what it is doing or what it will do. But a local church is both historic and present.
 - a. Too often we treat the spiritual life with a “what have you done for me lately” attitude. → We also treat God in this way, don’t we?
 - b. The honest reality is that we live so much of our lives in spaces that are demanding that very same thing from us. We are as valuable as the last productive offering. → This is not healthy for us to treat the church this way or our relationship with God.
 - 3. We resist the “what have you done lately” syndrome two ways:
 - a. We actively remember and celebrate the past.
 - b. We utilize our gifts to serve.
 - i. There is something interesting to the reality of serving when you don’t feel like it and how that transforms your attitude and perspective.
- b. You have a gift to offer the local body. → This is not optional.
 - i. Rom. 12:1-8
 - 1. **I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.**
 - ii. Paul is clear in order for the church to accomplish its larger mission (the great commission) it needs each member operating within their own gifting.
 - 1. Paul exhorts believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices (12:1). Paul has already urged believers to “present” their bodies as slaves to God, obedience and righteousness (6:13, 16, 19). **He has also warned against self-centered use of the body, without the rule of a mind enabled by the Spirit** (1:24; 6:6, 12; 7:24; 8:13).

¹⁰ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 203). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

2. **Now he will show that believers can choose in their minds to present their bodies for the service of a greater “body,”** the body of Christ with whom they have been united.
 - a. And, when believers offer themselves as sacrifices, they imitate Jesus, whose death Paul has already presented as a bloody sacrifice (3:25; 5:9; 8:3)¹¹
3. **Do you remember the consecration language of Nehemiah? They were preparing something sacred and holy, and they themselves were part of something sacred and holy.**
 - a. Paul now uses that same language for us as Christians!
- iii. Our holy offering is joining in on the work!
 1. Believers’ renewed minds discern God’s will about how to devote their bodies to God’s service by building up Christ’s body in the various ways that God has made each one capable (12:6–8).¹²
 2. **Paul’s central point, however, is that each believer has something to contribute to the proper functioning of Christ’s body.** From this observation it seems not too much to infer that the body would often fail to function properly when individual members fail to recognize their value and contribute their gift, or when other members try to usurp roles not suited for their particular grace or faith.¹³
- iv. What gifts do I possess, and am I using them?
 1. **Prophecy (preaching)** – It denotes not one who predicts the future, but one who speaks in God’s name and probes the secrets of hearts.¹⁴
 2. **Service** – Someone who is more at home behind the scenes.
 3. **Teaching** – The ability to unpack instruction and ideas in a way that people easily understand and can apply them to their lives. (Teaching sound doctrine.)
 4. **Exhortation** – Mentoring, encouraging, and spurring another on in the faith.
 5. **Generosity** – God gives some the gift of contributing significantly to the work.
 - a. We are all called to give and to be generous.
 6. **Mercy** – The disposition of compassionate care.
- v. If you do not know your gifts:
 1. Ask someone who knows you well and get feedback from them.
 2. Take a gifts inventory.
- c. **We have individual gifts... so which one is the greatest? → All**
 - i. In another passage on gifts (1 Cor. 12), Paul reminds us that all of the gifts are needed.
 1. **¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make**

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 142-143.

¹² Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 145.

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 146.

¹⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 647.

it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

- ii. This leads us to another remarkable reality in Nehemiah's wall project, they worked in unity!

d. Fellowship & Breaking of Bread → Incarnational Life

- i. Where people ignore the common life of the Christian family (the technical term often used is '**fellowship**', which is more than friendship but not less), they become isolated, and often find it difficult to sustain a living **faith**.

1. This is why we believe in the power of Connect Groups.

- a. We are to be spurred on to love and good works. (**Heb. 10:24-25**)
- b. We are to remind each other of the power of the resurrection in our lives.
- c. We are to pray for one another and bear each other's burdens. (Gal. 6:2)

2. The key ingredient to our ability to experience gracious and loving fellowship is not anything to do with us as individuals... It is Jesus.

- a. This is why we can have community with a multitude of people across cultures and perspectives. → We share Jesus.
- b. In fact, this is powerfully different from the world around us. We have community by uniting in our commonalities. I.e., As long as we agree we can coexist. → This is not diversity or inclusion at all.

i. In Jesus, we have true diversity of community and include all.

- ii. Where people no longer share regularly in 'the breaking of bread' (the early Christian term for the simple meal that took them back to the Upper Room 'in remembrance of Jesus'), they are failing to raise the flag which says 'Jesus' death and resurrection are the center of everything' (see 1 Corinthians 11:26).

1. This is why we celebrate communion monthly.

- a. Again, we are not a book club or social group that likes to sing.
- b. We are a community that has been profoundly changed by Jesus in the power of his resurrection.**

e. Sharing what they had.

- i. And whenever people do all these things but neglect prayer, they are quite simply forgetting that Christians are supposed to be **heaven-and-earth** people. Prayer makes no sense whatever—unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that already.¹⁵

- ii. This shared life quickly developed in one particular direction, which is both fascinating and controversial. **The earliest Christians lived as a single family.**¹⁶

1. Question: Do I see other brothers and sisters as one single-family?

- a. When Paul tells the Thessalonians that, since they already love one another, they must do so more and more, he doesn't primarily mean that since they already have warm feelings for one another, they must have even warmer ones.

¹⁵ Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 44–45.

¹⁶ Tom Wright, [Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 45–46.

- b. He means that, since they already care practically for one another, they must work at making that more and more of a reality (**1 Thessalonians 4:9–12**). The challenge remains for every generation in the church, especially now that Jesus' followers number several million all around the world.¹⁷
 - c. ⁹ **Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,** ¹⁰ **for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,** ¹¹ **and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,** ¹² **so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.**
 - iii. Am I living a radically generous life?
 - 1. Am I generous with **gentleness** in a world of outrage?
 - 2. Am I generous with **presence** in a world of seclusion?
 - 3. Am I generous with **wealth** in a world of greed?
 - 4. Am I generous with **hope** in a world of fear?
 - 5. Am I generous with **personhood** in a world that dehumanizes the person?
 - 6. Am I generous with **grace** in a world of retribution?
 - iv. **We experience the fullness of God's radical generosity in Jesus.**
 - 1. We are called to live in community that is marked by that generosity.
 - 2. **Lasting community is only possible through the power of God's Spirit.**

¹⁷ Tom Wright, [*Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 46–47.