

What is Church?

CALL	reminds us we are	CHOSEN
CONFESSION	renews us as God's	REDEEMED
CONSECRATION	grows us as	HOLY DISCIPLES
COMMUNION	unites us as	JOYFUL FAMILY
COMMISSION	sends us as	SERVANT MISSIONARIES

PART THREE: HOLY DISCIPLES

JESUS IS GOOD NEWS

Jesus is the Word of God. We use words to communicate, to express ourselves, to build connections. So Jesus is God communicating with us. He shows us and tells us what God is like. We see in Jesus that God wants to be our God, and we his people.

We can go further. In the famous opening to John's gospel, John goes back to creation. God spoke and the world came into being. God acts by speaking. Jesus is the light of God shining in the darkness. He is the life of God poured out for us.

The Bible is the Word of God. The Holy Spirit gave us this book so that, through the words of Scripture, we might know Jesus the Word who leads us to the Father. We are not left in the darkness trying to come up with clever ideas about ultimate reality. The one who is Ultimate Reality has come to us. He has spoken.

Preaching is the Word of God when the preacher opens up the Bible, shows us what is written and point us to Jesus on every page. Jesus Christ said that all the Scriptures are about him. Before he returned to heaven he told his disciples that the way they could continue meeting with him was through the Word and at the Table (see Luke 24). So preaching is not simply a transfer of information, or an attempt to stir up enthusiasm. The preaching of the Word of God is God speaking to us.

In the beginning, humanity was made to know God and to start maturing. The speaking God would shine light and give life, and humanity would mature through trusting the Lord, believing his words and acting on his commands. But sin entered the world when Adam and Eve rejected the words of their loving Creator. Jesus Christ is a second Adam, the faithful Son of God who always trusted, believed and obeyed. By his death our sin is removed. In the resurrection new life is given to us. God's plan is to mature us, to grow us to become more like Jesus and to build his church into a people of light and life and love.

We are disciples – learners and apprentices of Jesus Christ. We are holy and we are being made holy. *Holiness* is a status. Church is God's Holy People, set apart from the world to belong to God. *Holiness* is also a goal; having been redeemed by Jesus we want to grow to become like Jesus, the Holy One. *Consecration* is the act of being set apart to be God's Holy People. *Sanctification* can mean the same, and it can also mean the process of growing: learning to die to our sinful nature, learning to turn away from the ways of the world, learning to grow in newness of life. This new life of the Spirit is wholehearted joy in God through Christ, a love and delight to do every kind of good work according to the will of God. Through the Word of God we mature to become what humanity was always intended to be.

PREPARATION: LUKE CHAPTER 8

As you read the passage, consider these questions:

- What do these different incidents in Jesus' life teach us about the importance of his words and teaching?
- How should we respond to God's word?
- How do we see Jesus' words changing peoples' lives?
- How does he drive back darkness, chaos and evil?

WHO ARE WE: HOLY DISCIPLES

Ephesians 4:11-24

- Christ has given to the church various gifts of people who proclaim and speak God's word (v11). Why is their work so important?
- Look at verses 17-24 and notice how many words have to do with the mind and thinking. What is the change that *has* happened, and what is the change that *is* happening?
- What vision for church is expressed in these verses?

WORSHIP AND IDENTITY: CONSECRATION – God speaks and transforms us

The Word of God, read and proclaimed, cuts us up and transforms us to be like Christ. "Consecration" means being set apart for God; it is becoming God's Holy People and it is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make our lives holy and wholly devoted to God.

Through God's Word we:

- **LISTEN** as our Father speaks to us
- **LOOK** to Jesus, the centre of all the Scriptures
- learn how to **LIVE** in step with the Holy Spirit

BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER: PSALM 19

Meditating on the Bible is about careful reading and reflection on a Bible passage, chewing it in your mind, then responding with prayer to your heavenly Father.

First: read the Psalm a few times. Think about what the Psalm is saying – what it teaches about God, about the LORD Jesus, about the world, about the church.

Second: Pray with thanksgiving to God. Praise him. Marvel at what he has revealed, acknowledge the wonder that God has spoken to you in this passage of the Bible.

Third: Confess your sins to God. The passage may reveal your sin and failure, or expose the shortcomings of the church (local, denominational, national, etc).

Fourth: Make your requests to God. What do you need to ask for? How do you need to change? Perhaps the passage prompts you to pray for other people or churches.

This Psalm marvels at the way creation proclaims God's glory. Yet we must engage with the Bible to know what God is like. How does God's word change people? How might the words of this Psalm shape your prayers?

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The flow of the Lord's Prayer takes us through the shape of the Worship service.

"Your will be done, on earth as in heaven"

- Christians are "citizens of heaven" (Philippians 3:20) and our lives are to reflect and portray the values and priorities of heaven
- We should expect a constant battle between God's perfect will and our own imperfect will. We pray for the Spirit's help to follow God's will
- In worship picture yourself ascending into heaven, receiving God's teaching, then being sent back down into the world to put that teaching into practice

TRUTH IN PRACTICE

There are many implications of the wonderful reality that we are HOLY DISCIPLES. We are focusing on these three areas (Family, Money, Mission) because these are parts of church life that need strengthening at this time.

FAMILY AND CHILDREN

God expects children and adults alike to be present when the church gathers. In Ephesians 6:1, for example, the apostle Paul expects that the children are listening as his message is read to the church in Ephesus. Then he tells parents (and fathers in particular) that they have the responsibility to bring up their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord”.

The reading of the Bible, and the sermon, are much more than the passing on of information. God is speaking and his word brings life. So, as much as possible, we want children to be present so that they may know the life of God. They may need help as they learn. Children may benefit from colouring sheets to give them an activity to do as they listen (e.g. drawing pictures of what is being spoken about), and very little children might be encouraged to be present with the use of quiet toys or something like a box of raisins. Churches that encourage children to remain in the whole service often find that children are taking in much more than adults imagine. Family conversation before and after worship sets the tone: anticipation that God will speak, and discussion about what was said.

In the home, parents are responsible to help their children grow in faith and knowledge. Parents are told to talk about Jesus and his teachings in ordinary life, whether sitting at home or travelling together (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). You might look at flowers or trees and marvel with your children that God made such beauty. You could think about a Christian perspective on what is happening in the world. There are lots of resources available to help families grow in faith.

The sermon is often followed by prayers of intercession. This too is part of God transforming us to become more like Jesus. Simple prayers before a meal, or prayer before bedtime (TSP - Thank you, Sorry, Please – is a good model) are the sort of activities that grow families as holy disciples of Jesus.

MONEY

The Bible shows us several occasions when the church showed amazing generosity as people gave generously to God's work. When Moses built the tabernacle (Exodus 35), when David gathered materials for Solomon's temple (1 Chronicles 29) and when the new temple was built (Ezra 2-3). We no longer have a physical temple, because the church IS the temple, yet the Bible records great generosity in the building up of this final temple (Acts 2:44-45, Acts 4:32-37). If God's great purpose is to build the church as the temple of the Spirit, we have the privilege of joining his purpose through the giving of our money, possessions and time.

In particular, Christians give money so that some people are enabled to give their time to leading, teaching and shepherding the church. If God meets us through his Word, if the preaching of the Bible is how the Spirit builds up and equips God's people, then Christians who want to grow will be Christians who give to enable Elders/Pastors/Ministers/Presbyters (various words are used) to fulfil their role. "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14).

MISSION

If mission is doing God's will, on earth as in heaven, then engaging with God's Word is how we discover his heavenly will. If mission is flowing out to the world with the life-giving water of the gospel (see the back page), then the sermon is how we receive that water of life for ourselves and for others. The church is the prophetic people of God; in worship we receive our message from the Bible and then are sent to speak that word to the nations.

Church is the family of God. We are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Here is an image that speaks of the extraordinary love that our Father has shown us. It speaks of the privilege and dignity we receive in adoption. In the Bible, another aspect of being 'sons of God' (a concept that includes both male and female) is that we are engaged in the Father's business. We bear his name, acting and speaking in his name. Jesus, as Son of God, does the will of his Father; he represents the Father, trusting and obeying the one who sent him.

Our mission in God's world is to live as sons of God: representing the Father, trusting and obeying the one who sends us, working and living as those who bear his name. But first we must spend time with our Father, hearing his voice, receiving his instructions and knowing his purposes. This comes through the Word of God.

UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP: THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

The Bible contains a surprising number of significant mountains! Right at the beginning, the Garden in Eden is on a mountain (“the mount of God” Ezekiel 28:13-14), with a river running through it then dividing and flowing to the distant lands. Moses went up Mount Sinai, received the Law of God, and was told to build the tabernacle (a portable temple) as an earthly copy of a heavenly reality. The most famous sermon by Jesus is ‘The Sermon on the Mount’.

Symbolically, mountains reach high into heaven. People go up the mountain, see a glimpse of heaven, then go back down the mountain so they can put that vision into practice here on earth. “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” we pray.

Imagine receiving an invitation to ascend God’s mountain. You approach the foot of the mountain and find a watery barrier. The water swallows up God’s enemies but divides to let through those whose sins have been dealt with. You ascend the mountain, singing songs of praise with your fellow travellers. At the top God speaks to you, then spreads a feast and invites you to eat with him. Finally he sends you into the world and like a life-giving stream you flow down the mountain and out to the nations.

This is what happens in worship. The CALL is our invitation, and CONFESSION gives us safe passage through the waters. With songs of praise we ascend the mountain, following the path of our Lord who has already ascended into heaven for us. At the top God speaks – CONSECRATION – and says about Jesus “This is my Son, whom I love, listen to him!” In COMMUNION we sit and eat with the Lord. Then with the COMMISSION we are sent to obey God’s will, on earth as in heaven, knowing that this is how the life of God flows to the world.

Traditional church design has the baptism font near the entrance, for it is in baptism that we enter God’s church. The next significant piece of furniture is the pulpit, where God speaks through the mouth of his ministers as they open up the Bible. Finally we proceed to the Communion table, which is often positioned up a number of steps to symbolise the ascent.

Each service is, therefore, an ascent into heaven by the Holy Spirit, in and through Jesus Christ our ascended Lord. At the end we are sent to bless the world with the life we have received from God in Christ. In a week’s time we will do it all again.