

# THE BIG JOURNEY

from Creation

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to New Creation



## fourteen ► God's New Humanity



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'Pastor Simon's flock'. A church group in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea, pose for the camera.

## Unity and community

As Christians, we're not isolated individuals in fellowship with God. We're part of God's family, the Church. Just as we're born into our natural family by physical birth, so we're born into God's family by spiritual birth.

John Stott said, "... *the church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God*". And being part of the Church is central to our own individual Christian lives - more significant for us even than our natural family ties (compare Matthew 12.46-50).

So what is the Church? And what does it mean to be part of it? These are the questions we'll try to answer in this session.

### A temple, a body, a household

The New Testament Greek word for 'church' is *ekklēsia*, meaning 'congregation' or 'assembly'. In New Testament times, *ekklēsia* meant a gathering of the citizens of a Greek city-state who assembled to make political and judicial decisions (see Acts 19.39). The underlying emphasis of *ekklēsia* is on meeting together. That's highly significant. It's as we *meet together* as God's people that the reality of being part of the Church can really come alive for us.

The Church is a *community*, a *society*. It's a company of people who love each other, support each other and share their lives with each other. And that's emphasised by three



ways in which the Church is pictured in the Bible. It's a **temple**, a **body**, and a **household**. Each implies an *integrated, interdependent community*. A **temple** is a single structure made up of many different components. A **body** is a single organism comprising an intricate assembly of cells, tissues and organs. A **household** is an economic and socially interdependent group of people who share a common life.

Why is there such emphasis on community and interdependence? Because that's how God made us. As we saw in Session 3, mankind isn't just a group of unrelated individuals. We're social beings. We're all connected. As Donald Macleod says: "*A life lived apart from community is a life that violates human nature*". Each of us is unique and responsible for our own personal destiny. Yet our individuality isn't developed in isolation - we discover it by interaction with others. Each of us is profoundly shaped by our involvement with our fellow humans.



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People – naturally social beings!

So when God speaks about the Church as a temple, a body, and a household, it isn't a completely new idea. He built the idea of community into human nature right from the beginning. The Church is God's new humanity. When people see a local church functioning as a community as God intended, they are seeing what it really means to be human. And who wouldn't be drawn to that?

## God's temple

The body of each child of God is a temple of God (1 Corinthians 6.19); God lives inside them (see John 14.23). The whole Church, too, is a temple (1 Corinthians 3.16-17, 2 Corinthians 6.16). In Ephesians 2.19-22, Paul describes the Church as a temple being built up and joined together to be God's home.

And Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is the temple's cornerstone (Ephesians 2.20). The cornerstone is the primary foundation stone at the corner of the building. A first-century architect used the cornerstone to fix a standard for the bearings of the whole building. Jesus is our Cornerstone and He sets the standard for the rest of the building.

Think back to the Old Testament Tabernacle. This - and the Temple that replaced it - was God's home in this sin-polluted world. Because He lived there, it was holy. Only holy people could enter it (see Psalm 24.3-4). The

innermost chamber was called 'the Most Holy Place', the Tabernacle and all its furniture were anointed with holy anointing oil (Exodus 30.22-29).

But God no longer lives in a Tabernacle or Temple, or in any other building. He lives in His people. We are God's earthly home. There are no sacred places or buildings now, just sacred people. And just as the Tabernacle and the Temple were holy, God's New Testament home - His Church - must be holy. And, individually, each one of us must keep the sanctuary of our bodies holy (see Romans 6.19 and 1 Corinthians 6.19-20), just as the Temple had to be kept holy.

### ❖ The Church and the church ❖

At this point, let's clarify what we mean by 'church'. This word 'church' can be used both of the worldwide Church and a local church. To distinguish them, we'll use a capital 'C' for the former and a small 'c' for the latter.

► **The worldwide Church:** This isn't the same as what we might call the 'visible' Church - the sum total of all the denominations, organisations and groups that call themselves Christian. The real worldwide Church includes all those throughout the Church age - from the Day of Pentecost to Jesus's return - who are born of God's Spirit. And it seems clear that the universal Church also includes, in Wayne Grudem's words, "all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers". We read about "*the spirits of the righteous made perfect*" in Hebrews 12.23. This doubtless includes all believers who have died, including those who lived in the ages before the Day of Pentecost. These Old Testament believers are made perfect by Jesus's sacrifice, which was effective for all time. His sacrifice gives to them, as well as to us, the privileges of membership in His body, the Church.

► **The local church:** This is the basic unit within the worldwide Church. There are larger divisions - associations of local churches united by geography, doctrinal emphasis or type of church government, etc. And there are smaller groupings within a local church - home groups, cell groups, groups for men or women, etc. **But the local church is God's basic unit of corporate life.**

## The body of Christ

The Church is a body - the Body of Christ. The human body is an unbelievably complex and intricate assembly of cells, health and function of the whole. And that's true of the tissues, vessels and organs. Each contributes its part to the Body of Christ, too. His Body has different organs - or "*members*", to use Paul's term (Romans 12.4-5, 1 Corinthians 12.12,27, Ephesians 5.29-30). Each member has a vital role in the health and function of the whole Body. Paul uses this analogy to teach us about the different functions that Christians have in the Church - something we'll look at later in this session.

Paul uses another analogy from the human body, too - the joints and ligaments that connect the different parts of the body together. He says: "*. . . the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God*" (Colossians 2.19). Joints and ligaments *connect* the organs of the body together. So it is within the Church. It's the *relationships* between the members of His Body that are so

crucial to its wellbeing - supporting, teaching and discipling each other. Above all, it's our love for one another that will make the Church grow and flourish (Ephesians 4.15-16).

The human body has a flexible, adaptable structure that facilitates **growth**, **movement** and **reproduction**. Similarly, local church and inter-church structures and procedures need to be flexible, so that those appropriate for one stage of development can readily be adapted or replaced to allow growth, accommodate new vision, and bring the church to maturity.



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The human body – an intricate assembly of tissues and organs making up a finely-tuned, powerful organism.

Jesus is the Head of the Body (Ephesians 4.15). What does this mean? Does it mean that Christ is Head and we are the rest of the body – the torso and limbs. Probably not. Elsewhere Paul talks about the body having eyes and ears – which are both parts of the head (1 Corinthians 12.16-17). Later in Ephesians Paul explains that Christ is Head of His Body in the sense that a husband is to his wife (Ephesians 5.23). So it seems that Christ is not pictured here as the chief organ in the Body. Rather, He is the Church's ruling authority Who loves her, provides for her, and nurtures and guides her.

And this naturally leads us on to another image of the Church. As Paul explains in Ephesians 5.23-32, Christ is the Husband of His Church. Individually, God's people are His sons; corporately, they are the Bride of Jesus Christ. God describes His relationship with us in terms of the two most intimate human relationships we can know. We'll be as closely related to Him as it is possible for any created being to be.

## God's household

And, finally, the Church is God's "*household*" (Ephesians 2.19, 1 Timothy 3.15). A New Testament household was typically larger than our nuclear family; it might include unattached relatives, slaves, hired workers, and perhaps lodgers and tenants. What bound them together was not firstly blood ties, but *interdependence*, a *common life*. Each member contributed to the domestic economy and reaped the benefits - security, food and lodging, companionship, a sense of identity and belonging.

## A royal priesthood, a prophetic people

As we saw in Session 3, God commissioned mankind to be His **priests**, **kings** and **prophets**. As **priests**, we were to live in His presence and serve Him there. As **kings**, we were to subdue the earth and build a rich and godly civilisation. As **prophets**, we were to be God's friends to whom He revealed His thoughts and plans – and to communicate them to others.

But Adam and Eve's sin sabotaged all this. They could no longer serve God as priests in His garden home. Their power to rule Earth was weakened; and what remained was hijacked by Satan. Their prophetic insight and understanding was warped; "*. . . their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*" (Romans 1.21 NIV).

So God worked to restore mankind's priestly, kingly and prophetic calling. Throughout the Bible we see Him doing this. For example, Noah offered sacrifices like a priest (Genesis 8.20); he ruled over the world that emerged from the Flood as father of the race; Genesis 9.25-27 records his prophecy. Aaron and his sons fathered a whole priestly order; David and his royal house ruled over Israel. Samuel, Elijah and Elisha and the writers of the last 16 Old Testament books – along with many others – spoke God's word as prophets.

Then God sent Jesus. He was our perfect Priest, King and Prophet in unique ways no mortal could ever fulfil.

### ❖ Jesus – our Priest, King and Prophet ❖

► **Jesus is the great High Priest**, Who serves God in His heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 3.1, 8.1-2). He offered Himself as the final and perfect sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 7.27, 9.14,26 and see 1 John 1.7). He is our Mediator (1 Timothy 2.5), the Intermediary between us and God. He mediates God's New Covenant (Hebrews 8.6, 9.15, 12.24) – that is, it's through Him that we enter into relationship with God under this covenant. Through Him we have access to the Father (John 14.6, Ephesians 2.18, and see also Hebrews 10.19-22). And He now prays for us continually (Romans 8.34, Hebrews 7.25).

► **Jesus is the great King**, last and greatest of David's line (Luke 1.32). He is God Himself (see Isaiah 9.6-7, Hebrews 1.8-12). He is "*King of kings and Lord of lords*" (Revelation 19.16). Every knee in Heaven and on Earth will bow to Him (Philippians 2.10, and compare Matthew 28.18, Ephesians 1.20-22). His Kingdom will never end (Luke 1.33, Hebrews 1.8).

► **Jesus is the great Prophet** (see Deuteronomy 18.15-19, part of which is quoted in Acts 3.22-23; and compare John 6.14, 7.40). He not only spoke God's message (John 12.49-50) but was the very Word of God Himself (John 1.1-2, Hebrews 1.1-2).

Now God has made *us*, *the Church*, His **priests**, **kings** and **prophets** – what He had always intended mankind to be.



### God's holy priesthood

God's people are priests (1 Peter 2.5,9, Revelation 1.6). As priests, we're to live in His presence and serve Him there. In Old Testament times priests served God in His Tabernacle and in the Temples that replaced it. But God's New Testament priests don't serve Him in a Temple built of stone and wood - they *are* the Temple! His Spirit lives in us; we may live in His presence and serve Him all the time.

A key duty of the Old Testament priests was to offer sacrifices. And that's what we're to do as well (1 Peter 2.5). But we don't offer animal sacrifices or food or incense to God, like the priests of old. So what sacrifices do we offer? Jesus provides our answer. He offered His Father **obedience** - unhesitating, unstinting, heartfelt obedience (see Matthew 26.39, John 4.34, 6.38, 8.29) - an obedience crowned by His sacrificial death on the Cross (see Philippians 2.8). The writer to the Hebrews tells us: "... when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; . . . Then I said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, . . ."' " (Hebrews 10.5-7).

We're to offer God our obedience, too. We're to serve and glorify Him. That's the sacrifice we're to give Him. This can outwork in so many ways - for example, praise and thanksgiving to God (Hebrews 13.15); or *"to do good and to share"* (Hebrews 13.16, and compare Philippians 4.18). In fact, as J.G.D. Dunn observes, among God's people *"all ministry on behalf of others is priestly ministry . . ."*. Doubtless, our priestly role also includes our intercessions and prayers (see 1 Timothy 2.1), just as Jesus Himself intercedes for us.

And as God's holy priesthood, we're to bring His blessings to this broken world. God is blessing *"all the families of the earth"*, just as He promised Abraham (Genesis 12.3, and see Genesis 18.18, 22.18). That blessing is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3.14) - new birth into God's family. God is using the Church to bring His salvation to the remotest corners of the world.

### God's royal nation

Jesus our King opened His earthly ministry with these words: *"The time has come", . . . "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1.15, NIV). He demonstrated the Kingdom's arrival as He and his disciples vanquished disease, death and demonic oppression.



### Foot Note The Kingdom of God

What is the Kingdom of God? In Peter Leithart's words, this Kingdom is: "... the new world-order, in heaven and on earth, produced by the revolutionary changes brought about in Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Covenant in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension." It's a realm where God's will is done (see Matthew 6.10), where God rules as King. God's people are **citizens** of God's Kingdom (see Ephesians 2.19). They're the **community** of the Kingdom. They're **ambassadors** who represent God's government in an alienated world (see 2 Corinthians 5.20).

Finally, by His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered Satan and all the forces of darkness (see Colossians 2.15). He ascended to His Father and is now at His right hand in

heaven (Acts 5.31, Colossians 3.1, Hebrews 1.3, 8.1, 10.12-13, 12.2), enthroned in absolute authority over all creation - including Satan and all his forces of evil (see Matthew 28.18, Ephesians 1.20-22, 1 Peter 3.22, and see also Daniel 7.13-14).

A human being - the Man Christ Jesus - now sits on David's throne and rules over Heaven and Earth. The Son of God has ruled creation from when He first made it. But now He rules it as a Man, too. All God's enemies are now being subjugated to this Man (Psalm 110.1 - quoted in Matthew 22.44 and parallels in Mark and Luke, Acts 2.34-35 and Hebrews 1.13, and alluded to in a number of places, such as Hebrews 10.12-13). Satan's world-order is in retreat.

Remember that God appointed mankind to be His vice-regent - to rule the Earth on His behalf (Genesis 1.26,28; see Psalm 8.4-8). Jesus is the Second Adam, God's new Man. In Jesus, mankind's vice-regency is being restored (Hebrews 2.6-9, which includes a quotation from Psalm 8.4-6). A Man - Christ Jesus - is now seated at God's right hand: *"in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come"* (Ephesians 1.20-21). And we are seated with Him (Ephesians 2.6). Even now, God's new humanity shares His dominion over evil powers (see, for example, James 4.7, Ephesians 6.11-13).

One day, all God's enemies will be fully and finally subjugated to Christ. One day we will reign with Him in a New Heaven and Earth. Mankind, with Christ as our Head, will then rule the Earth just as God had always planned.



### Foot Note From glory to glory

Mankind's restoration as God's vice-regent isn't just a return to the original condition before mankind's Fall. God wanted His Kingdom to extend across the whole world and to become ever more magnificent and glorious. As it did so, mankind's role as vice-regent in His Kingdom would develop and grow, too. That's what God originally planned for Adam and his race - Adam's role in the garden was just the very beginning. When God's Kingdom is fully and finally established in all its glory, we, God's people, the Church, will rule the New Earth on His behalf. As the writer to the Hebrews says, *"it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come"* (Hebrews 2.5) - it was to mankind.



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Scene from the Kuman New Testament dedication in Kundiawa, Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea, on 27 June 2008. This is the first day these people could get a whole New Testament in their own language! Translation of the Bible into all the languages of the world is a key part of the extension of God's Kingdom. Of the world population of about 7 billion, at least 4.9 billion people have a Bible available in their first language. A further 595 million people have the New Testament (but only some, if any, of the Old Testament). Translation programmes are in progress in at least 2,075 languages; 1,967 languages (spoken by around 209 million people) may still need a translation project to begin.

Jesus said *“this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come”* (Matthew 24.14). That preaching began on the Day of Pentecost. From that day, preaching God's word was attended by His miraculous power (Acts 2.43, 3.1-10, 5.12,15-16, 6.8, 8.6-7, 9.32-34,36-41, 14.3,8-10, 16.16-18, 19.11-12, and see Acts 4.29-30, 15.12). On the Day of Pentecost, God opened a new phase in the establishment of His Kingdom on Earth. The blessings of His Kingdom began to reach out in earnest to all people. What Jesus began to do during His ministry on Earth, he now continued to do through His people (see Acts 3.16).

Jesus has enlisted us, the Church, to join Him in His final 'push' to total victory over all Satan's forces. We're fellow-workers for the Kingdom of God (Paul uses this phrase in Colossians 4.11). Through His Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered people, God's Kingdom is advancing powerfully across the globe, plundering Satan's domain, making disciples in every nation on Earth (see Matthew 28.19-20).

We're participating in the growth of God's Kingdom on Earth. And in so doing, we're exercising our God-given role as God's vice-regents, bearing responsibility in His kingdom, sharing His rule. As George Caird wrote, *“For the church has been appointed by Christ to be ‘a royal house of priests’ ([Revelation] 1.6, 5.10), to mediate his royal and priestly authority to the whole world. Through the church he is to exercise his sovereignty over the nations, smashing their resistance to his rule and releasing their subjects for a new and better loyalty. . . .”* The Church so often appears - by worldly standards - small and weak in the midst of powerful godless civilisations. Yet the Church, in Paul Billheimer's words: *“Through the use of her weapons of prayer and faith, . . . holds in this present moment the balance of power in world affairs”*.

And now God shares His secrets with us, His Church. Jesus said to His disciples: *“ . . . I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you”* (John 15.15). God's Holy Spirit teaches us (John 14.26, 16.13, 1 John 2.20,27, and see 1 Corinthians 2.11-12).



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Studying the Bible together. The Scriptures are foundational to the Spirit's work of teaching us. There can be tremendous blessing in studying it together and helping each other to understand it.

We don't all have the specific gift of prophecy as listed in Ephesians 4.11, Romans 12.6 and 1 Corinthians 12.10,28 - Paul himself implies this in 1 Corinthians 12.29. But we are *all* - individually and corporately - called to be prophets in the sense of standing in God's presence and hearing Him speak directly to us. God wants to take us into His confidence. He wants to share His secrets with us. He wants us all to *“be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”* (Colossians 1.9). He wants us to understand His ways, His plans and His purposes. We'll then be able to serve God with prophetic insight and direction.

And a key part of our service as prophetic people is *intercession*. As we saw in Session 6, Abraham became the friend and confidante of God (2 Chronicles 20.7, Isaiah 41.8, James 2.23); God called him a *prophet* (Genesis 20.7). We see this so clearly when God took him into His confidence and shared with him about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18.16-21). But Abraham didn't just hear what God shared with him; he *talked* to God about it. Abraham pleaded with God to save Sodom (Genesis 18.22-33). Abraham was here exercising his prophetic role. He was acting as privy counsellor to the King of creation - 'the king's friend' (compare 1 Kings 4.5 and 1 Chronicles 27.33). He not only heard what God shared with him, but *he responded by speaking to God about it*.

Moses was also a prophet (Deuteronomy 34.10), a man who knew God face to face. He, like Abraham, interceded with God. He prayed to God on behalf of God's wayward people (Exodus 32.11-14, 33.12-17).

We, too, are the King's friends. In Don Walker's words, *“The Church meets as the heavenly council before God's throne”*. And God calls us to act on what He reveals to us - to speak to Him and pray. We are called to be intercessors. In this way we become *partners* with God; He *involves* us in the unfolding of His purposes throughout this Church age. What an astonishing privilege and responsibility!

### Foot Note Mankind's victory over Satan

It was through mankind that Satan first gained a foothold on Earth. And it's through His new mankind - the Church with the Man Christ Jesus as its Head - that God will finally rid this planet and all creation of Satan and his dark kingdom.

### God's prophetic people

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared: *“ . . . this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.””* (Acts 2.16-18, quoting Joel 2.28-29). God makes His Church a *prophetic people*.

What do prophets do? As we saw in Session 3, they do more than just bring messages from God. Abraham Heschel explains that the prophet *“claims to be far more than a messenger. He is a person who stands in the presence of God (Jeremiah 15:19), who stands ‘in the council of the Lord’ (Jeremiah 23:18), . . .”* Amos says: *“For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets”* (Amos 3.7). God shares His secrets with His prophets.



## Spiritual gifts

As we've seen, three key images of the Church are the **temple**, the **body** and the **household**. All three images emphasise 'unity in diversity'. The parts of the temple, the organs of the body, the members of the household, all make their special contribution to the whole of which they are part. In the same way, the Church is blessed by a rich variety of gifts and ministries.

These gifts and ministries are listed in Romans 12.6-8, 1 Corinthians 12.8-10 and 28-30, and Ephesians 4.11. They're often called the gifts of the Spirit, but they're really the spiritual gifts of the Triune God. It's interesting that in 1 Corinthians 12.4-6, just before Paul lists some of the gifts, Paul names each of the three Members of the Godhead as sources of the gifts. **The Father** gives these gifts to His children, through **the Son** by the agency of **the Holy Spirit**.

The 20 gifts named in Paul's four lists seem to fall into three broad categories – (1) gifts of insight, inspired speech and teaching; (2) gifts of leadership and service, and (3) gifts of special power.

There are a number of important points to make about the gifts before we look at them individually:

► Firstly, we can't be too cut and dried about defining the gifts. There's clearly considerable overlap between many of them. For example, Ephesians 4.11 suggests a close link between pastors and teachers. Leadership and administrating are closely related, as are the messages of wisdom and knowledge. In addition, some gifts would be employed in a variety of ways, such as the gifts of serving and helps. It also seems clear that these lists are not exhaustive; the rich diversity in these lists (see 1 Corinthians 12.4-6) suggest there are many others not included.

► It's important to note that spiritual gifts are not essentially the same as natural talents or abilities, though there is doubtless a strong connection.

► Offices in the local church (eldership and serving as a deacon, which we'll look at further on) are not themselves spiritual gifts; but both elders and deacons will use their gifting in fulfilling their function of serving the church in those capacities.

► Some gifts (such as helping and contributing to the needs of others) are activities that we should all engage in as part of normal Christian service. But those who have the corresponding spiritual gift are specially endowed with ability in that area. For example, those with the gift of helping find themselves specially enabled by God's Spirit to help effectively, naturally and abundantly.

### Gifts of understanding and speech

#### Prophecy / prophets

Paul includes prophecy or prophets in all his lists (1 Corinthians 12.10, 28-29, Romans 12.6, Ephesians 4.11), and they're mentioned elsewhere a number of times (1 Corinthians 11.4-5, 13.2, 8-9, 14.1-6, 22-25, 29-32, 39, 1 Thessalonians 5.20, 1 Timothy 1.18, 4.14). Taken together, these Scriptures suggest that prophecy is a key gift. In fact, prophets are second only to apostles in founding and building up a local church (1 Corinthians 12.28).

What is prophecy? It's a Spirit-inspired, spontaneous, revelatory message for specific people (see Acts 21.10-11, 1 Timothy 1.18, 4.14) or for a local church or wider group. It's God's specific word for the time, perhaps to address a specific situation or circumstance. Through prophecy God may guide, give direction, encourage, challenge, instruct or bring understanding and wisdom. He may also sometimes warn or admonish. But true prophecy is never judgmental; it always builds up and strengthens. Prophecy may sometimes relate to the future (see Acts 11.28), but it isn't primarily predictive. And true prophecy is always in harmony with Scripture.

Prophecies should be weighed and judged (1 Corinthians 14.29) to discern if they're truly from God, and to assess their significance. So when prophecies are given in a meeting, there needs to be time afterwards to allow the hearers to evaluate them – and respond, where appropriate.

And a final point: prophecies may come in ways that we might not always label as 'prophecy'. For example, they may come whilst preaching. Don Carson comments: "We may happily agree that preaching cannot be identified with prophecy, but what preacher has not had the experience, after detailed preparation for public ministry, of being interrupted in the full flow of his delivery with a new thought, fresh and powerful, interrupting him and insinuating itself upon his mind, until he makes room for it and incorporates it into his message—only to find after the service that the insertion was the very bit that seemed to touch the most people, and meet their needs?"



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**The world of the early Church (1).** This remarkable view recaptures a typical first-century street scene of the kind that the first Christians would have been familiar with. It's a shopping street in Pompeii frozen in time in AD79, when the city was partially destroyed and buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. For comparison, Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome (around 150 miles north-west of Pompeii) in around AD 57. Who knows whether Christians would have been among those thronging these streets in the first century?

#### The messages of wisdom and knowledge

It's often thought that a word of knowledge is specific information that God reveals about someone or something. An example might be Peter's insight into Ananias and Sapphira's sin (Acts 5.3-4). However, insights like these seem to be a kind of prophetic revelation. The "message" (NIV) or "utterance" (ESV) of wisdom and of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12.8) seem, instead, to be insights into Biblical

truth that are brought spontaneously to someone's mind by the Spirit. This is suggested by the way Paul uses the terms "*wisdom*" and "*knows*" earlier in the same letter, and "*wisdom*" and "*knowledge*" in Romans 11.33, and Colossians 2.2-3.

► Paul speaks about "*wisdom*" in 1 Corinthians 1.22,24,30 and 2.6-7. The context here is God's plan of salvation. Paul writes "... *we preach Christ crucified, ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1.23-24). Christ "*has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption*" (1.30 NIV). God's wisdom here is revealed and expressed in His wonderful plan to redeem us through Christ's death on the Cross.

► In 1 Corinthians 2.11-12 Paul says (quoting from the NIV): "*For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is ... the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.*" The context here is knowing "*the things freely given us by God*" - salvation and the blessings of the new life in Christ.

► Paul uses "*wisdom*" and "*knowledge*" together in Romans 11.33 and Colossians 2.3. The context in Romans 11.33 is, again, God's great plan of salvation – in this case, how he saves both Gentiles and Jews. In Colossians 2.3, Paul is saying that all God's stores of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in Christ.

We should probably understand the messages of wisdom and of knowledge in light of these scriptures. But they're difficult to pin down more precisely. And they doubtless overlap to a greater or lesser extent. The "*message of wisdom*" may perhaps be insights into God's redemptive plan and purposes through Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 3.8-11). The "*message of knowledge*" may be understanding that God gives about His provision and blessings to us in Christ (for example, what Paul speaks about in Ephesians 1.18-19). Or it might more generally mean insight into the meaning of Scripture. Like prophecy, a true message of wisdom or knowledge will always harmonise with Scripture.

### Teaching / teachers

These are found in three of the four lists (1 Corinthians 12.28, Romans 12.7, Ephesians 4.11). Teaching is exposition and application of the Scriptures, both doctrinal and practical (for example, Acts 15.35 and compare Hebrews 5.12). Teaching is the fruit of prior study of and meditation on the Scriptures. But truths may also come spontaneously to the teacher's mind whilst speaking – these would, it seems, be messages of wisdom or of knowledge. There may also sometimes be a prophetic element in teaching, too.

Teaching in the New Testament was practical as well as doctrinal, instructing believers how they should conduct themselves in their daily lives (see, for example, Titus 2.1-10). Paul's own letters reflect this balance - notice how Paul precedes practical teaching with doctrinal truth in a number of his letters. Our daily life must be based on the objective truths of the gospel.

Aptitude for teaching is required for eldership (1 Timothy 3.2, Titus 1.9); elders must have a mature grasp of the Scriptural truth and be able to explain it to others. Teaching was to be a key part of Timothy's ministry as a church

leader (1 Timothy 4.11, 2 Timothy 4.2). And Paul advised him to teach faithful men so that they in turn could teach others and so develop and expand the teaching ministry of the church (2 Timothy 2.2). But the teaching gift is not limited to elders – others, too, may be gifted in this way.

### Evangelists

Evangelists (Ephesians 4.11) proclaim the gospel ('gospel' literally means 'good news'). Evangelism (in the Biblical sense) includes more than preaching to the unsaved; it's also proclaiming the whole gospel to challenge and build up believers, too. Paul tells Timothy to "*do the work of an evangelist*" (2 Timothy 4.5); in context, this implies proclaiming the whole counsel of God to believers and unbelievers alike within his local church.

### Encouraging

The gift of giving encouragement (NIV) or of exhortation (ESV) (Romans 12.8) is probably primarily a spoken gift, although the words flow from an encouraging heart and attitude. Encouragement is the Spirit-inspired ability to exhort believers, urging them to go on with God and live faithful, obedient and holy lives. Barnabas is our shining example – nicknamed the "*son of encouragement*" (Acts 4.36), we see him in action in Acts 11.23 encouraging the believers in Antioch to stay resolutely faithful to God.

### Discerning of spirits

The gift of discerning of spirits or distinguishing between spirits (1 Corinthians 12.10 NKJV and ESV respectively) is the gift of discerning whether something is from the Holy Spirit, or from a demonic spirit, or just has a human basis.

A key use for this gift of discernment is when assessing someone's prophecy – this seems to be the main context for this gift, in fact.

The gift doubtless includes a Spirit-given sensitivity to people's emotional or mental conditions and attitudes – enabling those with the gift to sense, for example, a heavy, fearful, proud or bitter spirit or, on the other hand, a humble or kind spirit.

It's also crucial when dealing with sickness, which may sometimes be caused by a wrong state of heart (such as an unforgiving spirit) rather than having a purely medical cause.

### Tongues and interpretation of tongues

Various kinds of tongues (1 Corinthians 12.10,28,30) are Spirit-inspired utterances that aren't intelligible to the speaker (see 1 Corinthians 14.14) or, in general, to the hearers (1 Corinthians 14.16). They're usually not known languages (such as English, French or Greek) – however, there may be times when somebody speaks in a known language, which someone else who is conversant with it would understand (as happened on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2.4-11).

When used publicly, tongues need to be interpreted for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14.13,27-28). Today, tongues are usually interpreted as messages from God to the assembly (rather like a prophecy). But it seems clear that Paul considers tongues to be basically directed **to** God (1 Corinthians 14.2) – and thus express prayer, praise and adoration.



### Foot Note The power of spoken ministry

God creates and sustains all things by his powerful word (Genesis 1.3,6,9 etc., Psalm 33.6, Hebrews 11.3). He made us in His image and has placed our chief power in our tongue. Accordingly, then, spoken gifts have a pivotal role in the spiritual growth of the Church. Eight of the gifts (if we include exhortation) are speech gifts - prophecy, teaching, the message of wisdom and message of knowledge, different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues, and evangelists. The most frequently mentioned gifts are all spoken gifts: prophecy/prophets (in all four lists), teaching/teachers and tongues (in three of the four lists).

So there was a wide variety of spoken ministry in the New Testament Church. Among them, teaching and prophecy are especially crucial.

## Gifts of serving

Included here are the leadership gifts. Godly leaders serve those they lead, rather than lording it over them (see 1 Peter 5.3). Jesus Himself, of course, is our example here (John 13.3-15, Mark 10.42-45, Luke 22.24-27).

### Apostles

Apostles are listed in 1 Corinthians 12.28 and Ephesians 4.11. The twelve disciples were a special group of apostles (Matthew 10.1-4, Mark 3.13-19, Luke 6.13-16). But there were others, such as Paul (for example, Romans 1.1) and Barnabas (Acts 14.4,14). We can probably also include Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16.7) among the apostles - the NIV translates "*They are outstanding among the apostles*". They were most likely a husband and wife team. James the Lord's brother was probably an apostle (Galatians 1.19); as perhaps was Silvanus (2 Corinthians 1.19, 1 Thessalonians 1.1, 2 Thessalonians 1.1, 1 Peter 5.12), almost certainly the same as Silas (named in, for example, Acts 15.22,40). Taken together, 1 Thessalonians 1.1 and 2.6 suggest that Silvanus was an apostle. And, doubtless, there were other early apostles not named in Scripture.

### Foot Note Paul – a pattern for leadership

Paul's letters reveal the passionate pastoral heart of an apostle. Those in the churches he cared for were his beloved children (1 Corinthians 4.14-15, Galatians 4.19); he was a nursing mother and a father to them (1 Thessalonians 2.7,11). They were in his thoughts and prayers day and night (2 Corinthians 11.28, and see 1 Thessalonians 3.10). Paul's pastoral care sets a pattern not just for apostolic ministry, but for any form of Christian leadership (compare 1 Thessalonians 3.12).

The word 'apostle' means 'someone who is sent' and can include the ideas of 'messenger', 'delegate', 'envoy'. As such, then, apostleship continues as a gift to this day – such as missionaries and church-planters in unevangelised regions.

Apostles are rooted in a particular local church, but have a wider ministry - they have, like Paul, a "*concern for all the churches*" (2 Corinthians 11.28 NIV). They may open up new territory for the gospel (see 2 Corinthians 10.16), or lay solid foundations in newly planted churches (see 1 Corinthians 3.10). They may also be needed to support and

guide established churches, especially through seasons of challenge or consolidation – for example, Paul sent Timothy and Titus to consolidate and strengthen the church in Ephesus (see 1 Timothy 1.3) and the churches in Crete (Titus 1.5) respectively. In fact, every local church needs occasional ministry from those with apostolic gifting. But such ministry will usually be inappropriate for a local church in the long term; it tends to eclipse the gifts of others in that church. Paul did not stay in any one place for more than two or three years.



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**The world of the early Church (2).** House of the Opus Craticium (also called the Casa a Graticcio) in Herculanum. This Roman city met the same fate as Pompeii in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. This is a two-storied timber-framed house built with a low-cost Roman wall construction method that used materials such as rubble and rocks packed and mortared into a framework of wood. Brick or blockwork piers added stability. This house was divided into at least two (perhaps as many as four) small apartments. You can see the first floor balcony onto the street here. Lower-income Christians may well have lived in houses of this kind.

### Pastors (shepherds)

The list of gifts in Ephesians 4.11 includes "*shepherds*" (ESV American edition) or "*pastors*" (ESV British edition). The term 'pastor' means 'shepherd'. For example the same Greek word is used of Jesus as the Shepherd (for example, John 10.11,14, Hebrews 13.20). Elders are to "*shepherd the flock of God*" (1 Peter 5.2, and see Acts 20.28). But there may well be others in a local church besides the elders who have pastoral gifting. Teaching is an important part of pastoral ministry – that's why pastors and teachers are closely linked in Ephesians 4.11.

### Leadership

The Greek word translated "*to lead*" or "*the one who leads*" (Romans 12.8 NIV and ESV respectively) is a noun derived from the verb *proistēmi*. This verb, as used here, may mean 'presiding' or 'leading'. Alternatively it may mean 'to come to the aid of others', 'to assist', 'to care for', 'to support', 'to protect', etc. Apart from Titus 3.8,14 (where it means 'to apply oneself to'), it's found in 1 Thessalonians 5.12 (speaking of "*those who . . . are over you in the Lord*"), in 1 Timothy 3.4-5,12 (in the context of 'managing' one's household and children) and in 1 Timothy 5.17 which speaks of "*the elders who rule well*". Its context in Romans 12.8 is interesting – it's sandwiched between "*the one who contributes*" (ESV) or "*giving*" (NIV) and "*the one who does acts of mercy*".

It's difficult to decide between the two meanings 'to preside' or 'to aid'. Perhaps the idea of leadership is most



prominent here. But since a key part of leadership is caring for those you lead, the other meaning is surely involved here, too.

### Administration

The Greek word for *“administering”* (1 Corinthians 12.28) is from the same root as a word meaning ‘ship’s pilot’ or ‘steersman’ (as used in Acts 27.11 and Revelation 18.17). It carries the idea of ‘giving guidance’ or ‘wise counsel’, rather than what we’d normally associate with this word – i.e. administrative or clerical skills. David E. Garland says that it “refers to the gift of setting the direction and guiding a community”; he quotes another commentator who says this gift is “formulating church strategy so that it heads in the right direction”.

### Helping

Helping (1 Corinthians 12.28) may include all kinds of assistance, but perhaps especially, though not exclusively, to those who are weak or disadvantaged.

### Serving

The Greek word translated *“service”* (Romans 12.7) is *diakonia*, and means practical service – for example, the sort that a deacon might be involved in (we discuss the function of deacons below).

### Contributing to the needs of others

The gift of *“giving”* (Romans 12.8 NIV), or being *“one who contributes”* (ESV) means ‘sharing’, most likely one’s own goods and possessions with others, especially the poor.

### Acts of mercy

Doing *“acts of mercy”* (Romans 12.8) probably covers a range of things, including providing for the poor, visiting the sick, and caring for the elderly or disabled.

## Gifts of special power

### Faith

Faith is listed as a gift in 1 Corinthians 12.9. We are all to live a life of faith – trusting God and depending on Him for everything. The gift of faith, in contrast, is a special God-given certainty and conviction that He will exercise His power in some specific way.

### Gifts of healings

The phrase *“gifts of healings”* (1 Corinthians 12.9,28 NKJV) is plural in the Greek, and this may suggest a variety of healing gifts. It may also suggest that each instance of healing is a gift in its own right (rather than a more permanent gift of a ‘healing ministry’). For example, Paul healed the lame man at Lystra (Acts 14.8-10) and Publius’s father and others on Malta (Acts 28.8-9). But not all were healed. Paul reported that he’d *“left Trophimus sick in Miletus”* (2 Timothy 4.20 NIV) and advised Timothy about his *“frequent ailments”* (1 Timothy 5.23).

### Working of miracles

This gift is listed as *“the working of miracles”* in 1 Corinthians 12.10 and *“miracles”* in 1 Corinthians 12.28. The Greek word for *“miracles”* covers any occasion where God’s power is exercised in supernatural ways – for

example, deliverance from imprisonment (see Acts 5.19-20, 12.6-11), danger, or demonic oppression or possession (as in Acts 16.18). *“Working”* and *“miracles”* in 1 Corinthians 12.10 are both plural in the Greek, and (as with *“gifts of healings”*) this may suggest a variety of manifestations of God’s power. It may also suggest that each miracle is a gift in its own right (rather than a more permanent gift of a ‘miracle ministry’).



### Foot Note A foretaste of eternity

The gifts of the Spirit are also our foretaste of the age to come. He gives us messages of wisdom and knowledge and prophetic revelations. But *“we know in part and we prophesy in part”* (1 Corinthians 13.9), *“we see in a mirror dimly”* (1 Corinthians 13.12). But in the world to come we’ll see God *“face to face”* (1 Corinthians 13.12); our understanding will be transformed. Now God grants His people gifts of healings. But one day our bodies will be perfectly healthy – there’ll be no more pain, no more disease, no more death.



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**The world of the early Church (3).** These highly decorated upper class homes at the site of ancient Ephesus give us a striking insight into the lives of the urban well-to-do in Roman times. They date mainly to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, and so to the period of the early church in Ephesus. These houses had windowless rooms accessed and lit from a central open courtyard. All the houses had running water, with fountains either built into the courtyard wall or free-standing. A system, similar to those used for public baths, was used to provide under-floor heating. They were mostly two-storeyed; the upper storeys have collapsed.

## Using God's gifts

The gifts are vital for Church life. We see this in the amount of space that Paul gives to them in his letters. We learn some important things from the various lists of gifts:

► **Every kind of gift is a spiritual gift** Notice how what appear to be mundane functions (such as helps and serving) are as much spiritual gifts – and as dependent on the Spirit for their function – as the more ‘supernatural’ gifts (such as tongues and miracles).

► **We are all gifted** God doesn’t give gifts only to a ‘spiritual elite’, to those who have ‘made the grade’ or have attained a certain level of maturity. He gives spiritual gifts to every believer (see 1 Corinthians 12.7,11).

So we *all* have a significant part to play in our local church. Every single member is vital (see 1 Corinthians 12.21-22); the presence of a single non-functioning member in a local church will weaken it.

► **The gifts are for the body** All four lists are set in the

context of the body of Christ (Romans 12.4-5, 1 Corinthians 12.12-27, Ephesians 4.12,15-16). The Church is a body. A human body has organs; each plays its essential part in keeping the body healthy and active. The body of Christ, too, has organs – *we* are its organs. And like our own body's organs, we must all play our part in the body of Christ. Only then will it function properly and grow to maturity.

Our gifts aren't primarily for our blessing (though we'll certainly be blessed when we use them properly). They're to build up and strengthen the whole community of God's people. They enable the Church to fulfil its role as God's priests, kings and prophets on Earth.

► **We are stewards of our gifts** God gave us our gifts, and He holds us accountable for their use; we are *stewards* of our gifts (1 Peter 4.10). God also holds us accountable for maintaining our walk with Him to ensure that our gifts and ministry develop and mature.

► **Five gifts are especially vital for church life** Paul ranks three of the gifts – "*first apostles, second prophets, third teachers*" (1 Corinthians 12.28). In Ephesians 4.11, Paul lists these three along with **evangelists** and **shepherds** (**pastors**). This suggests that these are the five key gifts for building up the Church. Jesus gives apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors to equip believers to serve God with *their* own gifts, too. In this way, everyone is using their gifting to build up the body "*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and*

*become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4.13 NIV). So you can see how vital these five gifts are!

► **Most of all – we must love one another with our gifts** The gifts are to be used as expressions of love (see 1 Corinthians 13.1-13) – not so we can puff ourselves up or serve our own ends. Even if I were the most gifted member of the body, without love I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13.2).



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The world of the early Church (4). Room constructed and furnished in the style of a Roman dining room. It's in the interpretive centre called 'Domus' at the ruins of the Roman town of Juliobriga in northern Spain. This pictures the kind of setting in which some early Christians might have gathered and celebrated the Lord's Supper, if hosted by a well-to-do household.

## Servants of God's people

### Elders

Elders have oversight of the *whole local church*. Eldership is not a gift of the Spirit; rather, elders are servants of a local church who are publicly recognised as fulfilling a leadership role. They will use a variety of gifts to fulfil that function. For example, they will need - at least in some measure - gifts of teaching and 'administration' (i.e. the gift of giving guidance or wise counsel).

The word *elder* in Greek is *presbuteros* - it means 'older man'. In practice some may be comparatively young, e.g. Timothy (see 1 Timothy 4.12); but they should never be new Christians (1 Timothy 3.6). Elders are also called 'overseers' (Acts 20.28, 1 Timothy 3.1-2 NIV, Titus 1.7 NIV, Philippians 1.1).

Eldership demands godliness, maturity, wisdom and strength of character to nurture, guide and, when necessary, discipline. Paul and Peter specify what's required of these leaders in 1 Timothy 3.1-7, Titus 1.5-9, and 1 Peter 5.1-4. They are to be role models in the church (1 Peter 5.3; compare 1 Timothy 4.12 and Titus 2.7).

Elders shepherd (the Greek verb *poimainō*) God's flock (Acts 20.28, 1 Peter 5.1-2). The Greek word for 'pastor' (one of the gifts in Ephesians 4.11) is the closely related noun 'shepherd' (in Greek, *poimēn*). All elders should have a pastoral heart, but others besides the elders may be gifted in this way, too.

Elders must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3.2, Titus 1.9). They may not necessarily be skilled public preachers or teachers and not all are gifted in teaching to the same

extent. In 1 Timothy 5.17 Paul mentions elders "*who labour in preaching and teaching*". It's likely that Paul is speaking about a subgroup of the eldership here who are specially gifted in preaching and teaching. But all elders must have a firm grasp of the Scriptures, have mature understanding, and at least be able to teach and train people in more informal settings, or one-to-one.

Eldership is always spoken of in the plural (Acts 14.23, 20.17, Philippians 1.1); elders should typically function in teams, even though it's probably normal for one elder to preside over the team. And that means they have to *share* leadership. That's something that strong leaders may well find difficult. But elders are set in teams to model the relationships with each other that provide a pattern for the whole church.

### Deacons

In 1 Timothy 3.8-13, Paul lays out the qualifications for deacons. Paul also mentions deacons in Philippians 1.1. The word 'deacon' comes from the Greek *diakonos*, and simply means 'servant'. It may have simply been a function or ministry rather than a publicly recognised position within a local church. Deacons are servants who take responsibility for specific functions - organising, communicating, co-ordinating, overseeing particular activities within the church.

Like eldership, being a deacon is not a gift of the Spirit as such. But deacons will need gifts to fulfil their roles – such as helps, serving, contributing to others' needs, and showing mercy.



## The local church in action

The New Testament Church gathered often to worship, pray and study. They spent lots of time together, sharing their lives, encouraging and supporting each other, expressing in day-to-day reality the unity and mutual love of the Body of Christ. We see in the pages of the New Testament, to borrow Donald Macleod's words: "a degree of commitment, concern, involvement and intimacy far beyond what we usually find in churches today".

### 'One another'

You only have to count the number of times that 'one another' and 'each other' occur in the New Testament epistles to see how fundamental it is to share our lives. We're to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another (James 5.16); we're to bear with and forgive one another (Colossians 3.13); we're to teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3.16), encourage and build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5.11), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6.2); and love one another - something God repeats time and again (for example, Romans 13.8, 1 Peter 1.22, 1 John 4.7).

And we're to be humble towards each other (see Philippians 2.3, 1 Peter 5.5 and compare John 13.1-15). We're to look out for others' interests (Philippians 2.4) and serve one another in love (Galatians 5.13). That's one of the most difficult commands of all, especially when you consider humanity's history of self-will that began at the Fall - and our own personal history of self-will that began in infancy! Such submission is a true sign of the Spirit at work in us.

#### ❖ Coming to maturity together ❖

God wants us to grow to maturity as Christians; Paul said, "until we all . . . become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4.13, NIV). But we can't do this in isolation. We can't become mature alone. The local church is, in T. Austin-Spark's words, our "spiritual training-ground". It's there, rubbing up against our fellow Christians in daily life, that we grow.

### House to house

The first-century Church met in private homes. Brad Blue writes: "early Christianity expanded throughout the Empire house by house". Priscilla and Aquila were a prominent

couple who had a church in their home. Paul stayed with them in Corinth (Acts 18.2-3), and they moved to Ephesus with him and started a house church there (Acts 18.18-19, 1 Corinthians 16.19). Others who hosted churches included Nympha (Colossians 4.15), Philemon (Philemon 2), and also Gaius (Romans 16.23) if we understand "the whole church" to mean the local church in Corinth. Victor Branick comments: "The practical necessity of meeting in private homes clearly blended with Paul's theological understanding of the Christian community."

As churches met in private homes, hospitality was basic to church life. Appropriately, a requirement for eldership is to be hospitable (1 Timothy 3.2, Titus 1.8).



**The world of the early Church (5).** This fresco, now in the Naples National Archaeological Museum, was found in a building in Pompeii. It's held to be a portrait of a man called Terentius Neo and his wife. The two are portrayed as a well-to-do and cultured couple, but they may well have had a more humble origin. It's a realistic depiction of a Roman couple, and brings to mind Priscilla and Aquila, Paul's hosts in Corinth and hosts of the church in Ephesus. The woman has the hairstyle typical of the period of the emperor Nero (AD 54-68), and holds a hinged writing tablet and stylus. The man wears a toga, indicating the status of a Roman citizen and further, perhaps, a rank of magistrate. He holds a rotulus, a roll for writing on.

## "Whenever you come together . . ."

### How the first-century church met

As we noted above, the New Testament word for 'church' is *ekklesia*. The underlying emphasis of this word is on meeting together. It's the single most important activity of a local church. As we *gather together* as a local church, in smaller or larger groups, or just in twos and threes, the reality of being in the Body of Christ can come alive for us in a wonderful way.

The Lord is present in a special way in the midst of His people when they meet together (compare Matthew 18.20), and many of His gifts, particularly the spoken ones, will be

used during these times. For example, Gordon Fee notes that those gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12.8-10 are the "different ways the Spirit shows himself when the community is gathered together".

### "Let all things be done for edification"

Why do we meet together? Today, the main church gatherings on Sundays are generally said to be for 'worship'. But it's interesting that the New Testament doesn't say that we meet together *primarily* to worship. I. Howard Marshall observes: ". . . our examination of the NT evidence has shown quite conclusively that worship strictly

so called was only one feature of the Christian meeting. While it is true in the broad sense that everything which the Christian does will be ultimately directed to the glory of God, it is simply not the case that the purpose of Christian meetings was understood as being primarily and directly worship, homage and adoration addressed to God."

What does it mean to worship God? It's to honour and serve Him. We don't honour and serve God only when we meet together – we're to worship Him *all the time and in all we do* (see Hebrews 12.28, Philippians 3.3). Paul said: *"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."* (Romans 12.1). So, as Robert Banks puts it: "Since all places and times have now become the venue for worship, Paul cannot speak of Christians assembling in church *distinctively* for this purpose."

So why specifically *do* we meet? In David Peterson's words: "Paul's emphasis is on coming together to participate in the edification of the church". We meet together so that God can strengthen and build up His people (see 1 Corinthians 14.5,12,26). God does this through each member of the body, with the gifts He has given to them.

And our praise and adoration in our meetings, too, must edify. Those who speak to God in tongues must be interpreted, so that the whole church is edified (1 Corinthians 14.12-13). Our songs of praise and worship are to edify; we're to let Christ's word live in us richly as we *.. . teach and admonish one another in all wisdom by means of Spirit-inspired psalms, hymns and songs . . ."* (Colossians 3.16, Peter T. O'Brien's translation). Through song we teach and edify each other. And this calls for words that are Spirit-inspired, melodies that allow those words to express worship effectively, and (where they're used) instrumental accompaniments that help us to sing from our hearts.

### ❖ "Let us not give up meeting together" ❖

The writer to the Hebrews wrote, *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"* (Hebrews 10.24-25). The writer also exhorts us to *"encourage one another daily"* (Hebrews 3.13 NIV). Our meetings are places where we encourage each other and build each other up. So we're never to give up meeting together – we put ourselves in grave danger if we don't gather together with God's people regularly and frequently.

### "Each one has . . ."

So the key reason we meet together as a church is to allow God to teach and build up His people through different members as they use God's gifts.

How does this work out in practice? The New Testament lays down only general principles. We can glean something of what happened in early church gatherings from such passages as Acts 20.7-12 (when Paul was at Troas), and 1 Corinthians 11.17-34 and 14.1-40. Doubtless there was considerable diversity in practice. But Acts 2.42 seems to provide a basic pattern for our meetings - **teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.**

### Foot Note Koinonia

The word "*fellowship*" here in Acts 2.42 translates the Greek word *koinōnia* - a significant term that describes our fellowship as Christians. It means more than just enjoying friendship with fellow-believers. Ralph Martin defines the root idea of this word as: "taking part in something with someone"; or as another writer puts it: "fellowship, in the sense of partnership or joint participation in a common enterprise". As members of Christ's body, we all participate in a shared life because the same Spirit - God's Holy Spirit - lives in every one who is born of God's Spirit (see John 14.16-17,23, John 15.4-5, Galatians 4.6, 1 John 3.24).



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**The world of the early Church (6).** House of Paquius Proculus in Pompeii – a remarkably preserved Roman house. The room in the foreground is the main hall or 'atrium'; the pool in the centre is the 'impluvium' which collects rainwater from an opening in the roof. Beyond, and through another room, you can see part of the 'peristyle' or cloister – an open courtyard or garden surrounded by a covered colonnade. If a larger group of Christians met in such a house, the spacious and airy atrium is likely to have been the room chosen for the gathering.

The most detailed instruction about how we should meet together comes from Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. He says, *"When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation"* (1 Corinthians 14.26 NIV). Gordon Fee tells us: "Perhaps most noteworthy from the available evidence is the free, spontaneous nature of worship in Paul's churches, apparently orchestrated by the Spirit himself. Worship is expressed in a variety of ways and with the (potential) participation of everyone (1 Corinthians 14.26). There is no hint of a worship leader, although that must not be ruled out on the basis of silence. But neither is chaos permitted."

The New Testament pattern, then, seems to require sufficient space to allow contribution from a variety of people, and flexibility to allow the Holy Spirit to direct the meeting, whilst maintaining order (1 Corinthians 14.26,40).

Some contributions will be spontaneous; others will be prepared beforehand (especially, for example, much of the teaching). Each contribution may spark others to contribute, as seems apparent from 1 Corinthians 14.29-31; for example, a prophecy may inspire another to prophesy or



bring a message of wisdom or a word of encouragement or a song - like a wonderful Spirit-led chain reaction. When we give God's Spirit liberty, He will guide and lead our meetings in wonderful ways.

Such participation helps the church grow strong and mature – not just to increase in numerical size, or develop individuals' spiritual lives, but also *to grow as a whole body together*. And such meetings – where there is Spirit-gifted and Spirit-led participation by many - will draw unbelievers and speak powerfully to them, as 1 Corinthians 14.24-25 suggests.

But such meetings, though apparently normal in New Testament times, are uncommon today. Even where prayer books and written orders of service aren't used, there's usually little, if any, space for individuals to bring teachings, prophecy, messages of wisdom and knowledge, prayers and testimonies, as led by the Spirit. In the next session, we'll look more closely at why this has come about.

### Foot Note "Each one has . . ."

The meetings are a key place where the gifts of the Spirit are exercised. Paul said, *"When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation"* (1 Corinthians 14.26 NIV). Many gifts clearly find a place outside the gatherings of the church – such as helps and showing mercy. But the Lord is present in a special way in the midst of His people when they meet together (compare Matthew 18.20). And that's the key forum for many of the gifts, especially the spoken ones. To quote Gordon Fee again, the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12.8-10 "are called 'manifestations of the Spirit', which in context means, 'different ways the Spirit shows himself when the community is gathered together'".

## What should we do when we meet?

In general, our meetings will include the following elements (though not all will necessarily occur in every meeting, of course).

### Teaching

Teaching is crucial. In the early Church it would probably have taken a number of forms. It's highly likely that two or more people might teach at each gathering (rather than just one). It probably, at least sometimes, involved discussion or debate (see Acts 19.9) as well as exposition of the Scriptures. Teachers who are especially gifted need special opportunity to exercise their ministry – perhaps in teaching meetings rather than in the regular gatherings where more time for open participation is appropriate.

### Public reading of Scripture

Paul tells Timothy: *"devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, . . ."* (1 Timothy 4.13). Public reading of the Scriptures was especially important in a society where most people didn't have ready access to the Scriptures. But it's still vital today. To have portions of the Scripture read out regularly and clearly in our meetings has great spiritual benefit. Allen Ross comments: *"When the reading of Scripture is with clarity, conviction, and power, it sets the Word of God before the people in a way that demonstrates its authority and demands a response. The reading of Scripture should be one of the most powerful parts of worship - . . ."*

## ❖ From Sabbath to Lord's Day ❖

As Christians, we're free not to observe the Sabbath (Colossians 2.16). The early Church seems to have met regularly on the Lord's Day (Sunday), in fact, rather than the Sabbath (Saturday). But keeping the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments; violation was a capital offence (Numbers 15.32-36). So how come we're now free from this obligation?

On the seventh day, after He had created everything, God rested (Genesis 2.2-3, Exodus 20.11). This rest wasn't just relaxation after work; it was, in William L. Lane's words, a "state of completion and harmony". Everything was just as God wanted it. Adam and Eve enjoyed fellowship with God and each other and harmony with the natural world. And God intended that rest to last for ever.

But the Fall shattered that rest. It fractured relationships; it inflicted torment, toil, pain and frustration. So God appointed the Sabbath as a regular release from the effects of the curse. Once a week, man and beast rested; people had time for restoration, recreation, and fellowship with God and with each other. He also instituted the Sabbath year - when the land, too, enjoyed rest - and the Jubilee, called in Ezekiel 46.17 *"the year of liberty"*.

But the Sabbaths were only partial releases. They pointed forward to the day when the curse would be broken. That day came when Jesus died and rose again.

Through Jesus, God is giving people true rest in their innermost beings (compare Matthew 11.28-30 and Hebrews 4.3,9-11). Our rest isn't just once a week, as it was in Old Testament times; it's something we can enjoy all the time. So we, as New Covenant believers, enjoy God's rest all week, every week throughout our lives.

And that's why we no longer observe the Sabbath. Rather than ending a week of toil with a day of rest, Christians have from earliest times celebrated the first day of the week as the Lord's Day. We begin the week in God's presence together to symbolise that we may now enjoy rest - fellowship with God and harmony with our brothers and sisters - the whole week through.



This is believed to be the earliest fragment of the New Testament yet found. It's called the Rylands Library Papyrus P52, and also known as the St. John Fragment. It is a fragment from a papyrus codex (a papyrus manuscript in the form of a book, rather than a scroll), and was originally discovered in Egypt. It's held at The John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester, England, and is on public display. John probably wrote his Gospel around AD 80-95, and this fragment is dated with some confidence to the first half of the second century AD. So it's possible that this manuscript was written only a decade or two after John wrote his Gospel. This image is of the front (called the 'recto'), which contains parts of seven lines from the Gospel of John 18.31-33 in Greek. The back ('verso') contains parts of seven lines from verses 37-38. The size of the Greek letters suggests that the manuscript, of which this fragment was part, was intended for public reading.

### Using other spoken gifts

There may be other spoken gifts - such as prophecy, messages of wisdom or knowledge, words of encouragement, testimonies, tongues and interpretation.

### Prayer – including petition, praise and thanksgiving

Acts 12.12, 1 Corinthians 11.4 and almost certainly 1 Timothy 2.1-2,8 refer to prayer in the meetings. It's appropriate, for example, to pray corporately during our meetings for individuals' particular needs - such as healing, or release from demonic oppression. It's at these moments that God may grant gifts of healings or miracles.

### Praise, thanksgiving and adoration

This is what many people today would call 'worship'. Today, churches typically praise and adore God corporately through a preselected programme of songs. But the New Testament pattern suggests greater variety.

Some praise and adoration was through song (see Ephesians 5.19, Colossians 3.16, and 1 Corinthians 14.15,26), although it's doubtful that music occupied as dominant a role in the meetings as it typically does today. Some singing may have been corporate – indeed, some passages of the New Testament (such as Colossians 1.15-18, 1 Timothy 3.16, and Philippians 2.6-11) may well incorporate songs of the early Church. The New Testament pattern (as 1 Corinthians 14.26 suggests) seems to allow opportunity for anyone, where appropriate, to choose or start the songs. And as well as congregational singing, individuals may have sung a solo (perhaps a spontaneous Spirit-inspired song, or a previously composed song that the Spirit prompted them to bring).

Others might have offered spoken prayers of praise and adoration, or praised God in tongues, followed by an interpretation.

### Breaking of bread

Breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper) was undoubtedly central to the first century Church's life, and we'll look at this in greater detail in the next section.

### ❖ Holy places, holy people, holy times ❖

Under the Old Covenant, there was a holy place (the Tabernacle), holy people (priests and Levites), and holy times (the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath year and the festivals). But under the New Covenant, those distinctions have been abolished. ● There is now no Temple; the whole Church is God's Temple. ● The whole Church is God's priesthood; we're all priests. ● And there are no sacred times – all time is sacred. Sabbath observance is not binding on us any more (see Colossians 2.16). Now, through His Spirit, God is giving people true rest in their innermost beings.



Image © - Carsten - / Carsten : Flickr.com  
**The world of the early Church (7).** Roman buildings at Trajan's Market in Rome – the Via Biberatica. Trajan's Market was originally built probably around 100-110 AD, around 40-50 years after Paul was in Rome under house arrest for two years (Acts 28.16,30). Although modified in later years and restored more recently, this scene is one of the closest we get today of a downtown urban view of Rome during the years of the early Church.

## The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was central to first century local church life. It's pretty certain that the first Christians typically ate the Lord's Supper as part of a full meal. That seems clear from 1 Corinthians 11.20-34 – Paul's purpose here is to bring order and decorum to the communal meal, not to forbid them to eat a full meal together. The 'breaking bread' of Acts 2.42,46 and 20.7,11, too, seems to refer to an ordinary meal rather than a ritual meal comprising a piece of bread and a sip of wine.

David Peterson writes: "The reality of Christian fellowship was expressed from the earliest times, as Jesus intended it, in the ordinary activity of eating together." He observes that: "Taking bread, giving thanks to God, breaking and distributing it, was the normal method of saying grace and beginning a meal in Jewish culture. Similarly, a host would indicate the formal end of a meal together by taking a cup of wine, giving thanks to God and sharing it with all present. These were not new customs introduced by Jesus . . ."

So Jesus was not instituting a ritual, but giving ordinary meals that Christians enjoyed together a new and profound significance. These communal meals (which would typically, it seems, have been at least weekly) were doubtless accompanied by prayers, praise or teaching, perhaps focusing especially on Jesus's person and work and reminding those gathered round the table of His sacrificial death that enabled them to enjoy fellowship with God and each other. The meal may have opened with the breaking and distribution of the bread, while a cup of wine may have been passed around at the end.

The Lord's Supper, then, is a shared meal. That's highly significant. We've seen people eating together before – for example, eating the Passover meal, and feasting with God on Mount Sinai. The fellowship offering was a meal shared by the offerer and his family and friends.

So why is eating together so important?



## Feasting with friends

In the world of the Bible, sharing a meal is far more than filling stomachs to stay alive. It's a time of fellowship. Douglas Stuart tells us: "In the ancient world (and many places in the modern world) people would not eat together if they were not somehow allies or family." Joachim Jeremias writes: "For the oriental every table fellowship is a guarantee of peace, of trust, of brotherhood."

That's why the Jewish religious leaders were so angry with Jesus for eating with "sinners" (Matthew 9.11, Luke 15.2). By eating with them, He was receiving them as His friends and companions. In fact, the very word 'companion' is derived from the Latin *cum* (meaning 'with') and *panis* (meaning 'bread') – i.e. someone you ate bread with.

Scott Bartchy writes: "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy and unity. Thus betrayal or unfaithfulness toward anyone with whom one had shared the table was viewed as particularly reprehensible. On the other hand, when persons were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation."

And because you were expressing friendship with those you ate with, it meant you were committing yourself to the obligations of friendship - to the point where you'd give your life for them, if it came to it. Derek Prince tells us: "Amongst the peoples of the Middle East for many, many centuries it's been understood that to eat bread with a man and to share the same cup were to make a very solemn and sacred commitment to him."

William Barclay provides a wonderful illustration of this as he unpacks Psalm 23.5 for us. David writes: "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*". Barclay comments: "The picture is that of a man fleeing across the desert with his enemies hot on his heels. He arrives at an encampment where the family are at a meal. He stands before the open tent . . . If the man in the tent stretches out his hand and offers him food, bread and salt, he is safe, for he will be accepted into the encampment and, if need be, defended to the last. But if the man in the tent turns away and refuses, the fugitive is left to face his enemies alone." He continues: "The giving and the sharing of the meal is the mark of committed friendship. Those who sit at a meal are committed to each other, and committed to their host, and their host is committed to them."

And to betray someone you eat with was unthinkable. That's why Judas' treachery was so unspeakably vile. He betrayed a Man he had eaten with for years (see Matthew 26.23; John 13.18, where Jesus quotes Psalm 41.9).

Even in Western society today, sharing a meal together still has significance beyond the physical act. Alexander Shmemann comments: "Centuries of secularism have failed to transform eating into something strictly utilitarian. Food is still treated with reverence. A meal is still a rite – the last 'natural sacrament' of family and friendship, . . ."



### Foot Note Food - a shared source of life

Why does eating together signify committed fellowship? The reason is doubtless this: food sustains life. What we eat becomes part of us. So when we eat together, we're all being nourished by the same source of life; the same food is becoming part of everyone around the table. It is, symbolically, bringing the participants into unity.

So sharing food symbolises unity. We are united together as one body because we share a single source of nourishment. Paul may be picking up this symbolism when he says (in relation to the Lord's Supper): "*Because there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*" (1 Corinthians 10.17). We who eat together are companions who share a common source of life – eternal life through Jesus Christ.



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Eating together: a church in Papua New Guinea shares a meal together after a baptism service. In the first-century church, it seems certain the Lord's Supper would have been combined with a communal meal.

## Dining with God

Eating with someone is an act of committed fellowship with them; eating in God's presence is an act of committed fellowship with Him.

God wants to be in devoted, loyal fellowship with mankind. He wants us to be part of His family. So right at the beginning He invited mankind to dine at His table – symbolising that relationship. He offered Adam and Eve the fruit of the Tree of Life (Genesis 2.9,16-17). But they ate from another tree; they refused fellowship with God.

From that moment, God wanted to bring mankind back to His table – back into fellowship with Him. So in Old Testament times people enjoyed meals in God's presence. He was their Host; they feasted on food that He had provided:

► **Passover** God's redeemed people feasted on the sacrificial Lamb, under God's protection and ready to go with Him to the Promised Land (Exodus 12.1-13).

► **The covenant meal on Mount Sinai** Moses, Aaron and two of his sons, and 70 representatives of Israel banqueted with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24.9-11).

► **The fellowship offering (also called the peace offering)** is described in Leviticus 3.1-17, 7.11-36, 19.5-8, 22.21-24,29-30. Most of this sacrifice was eaten in God's presence by the one who offered it, with his family and friends.

► **The showbread (NKJV) or bread of the Presence (NIV)** was laid before God each week in the Tabernacle (accompanied, presumably, by wine); then eaten by the

priests (Exodus 25.23-30, Leviticus 24.5-9, Numbers 4.7).

All these Old Testament meals point forward to another meal – the Lord's Supper (Luke 22.14-20 and parallels in Matthew and Mark), and see 1 Corinthians 10.15-17, 11.23-26).

### Eating together with Jesus

As William Barclay said: "Those who sit at a meal are committed to each other, and committed to their host, and their host is committed to them." Eating the Lord's Supper is an act of committed fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters who eat with us. This meal is often called 'Holy Communion'. And that's exactly what it is. It's a holy time of communion with Jesus and with each other.



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A simple meal that includes bread and wine.

► **A time of fellowship with God** Those who eat this meal dine at God's table. God Himself, in Christ, is present at the meal as Host. In Gordon Fee's words: "Not only did Jesus himself host the first of such meals, but the early church understood him to be present by the Spirit in their gatherings . . ." When we eat the Lord's Supper, we enjoy a special time of fellowship with Him. In fact, Jesus Himself pictures fellowship with Him as a shared meal: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me*" (Revelation 3.20).

► **A time of fellowship with each other** Those who eat at Jesus's table are united in fellowship with Him – and so they're united with each other, too. They're one body (1 Corinthians 10.17).

And our fellowship with God and His people is *committed*

fellowship. Those who eat the Lord's Supper are bound together by the **New Covenant** – 'covenant' means 'solemn promise' or 'binding agreement'. Through this covenant God unites believers with Himself – and each other – in a sacred bond of loyal friendship and fellowship. We have become members of God's family – with all the mutual love and loyalty that family ties imply. God has adopted us as His children, and we are now brothers and sisters.

All this was made possible by Jesus's sacrificial death. So when we eat the Lord's Supper, we eat bread and drink wine to symbolise Jesus's body and blood given for us in death. We remember that it was His death that purchased our fellowship with God and each other and made us part of God's family.

And our eternal fellowship with God in the new heaven and Earth are pictured by a banquet (Luke 14.15-24, see Luke 22.29-30 and compare Isaiah 25.6). When His Kingdom arrives in its final glory, God's people will enjoy "*the marriage supper of the Lamb*" (Revelation 19.9). They will feast with Jesus for eternity. The Lord's Supper, in fact, is a foretaste of that banquet.

### ❖ Jesus, our Bread of Life ❖

And what is the food that God offers us? It's Jesus Himself. He is our food (see John 6.32-33,35,48-51,53-58). He is the Bread of Life Whom our Father provides for us. As Don Carson comments, "Jesus' flesh and blood really are food and drink – they are really what food and drink should be in an ideal, archetypal sense . . . They provide eternal life." Our daily food and drink gives us physical life; Jesus is our food and drink Who gives us spiritual life. Whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood (that is, whoever believes in Jesus and receives Him into their innermost being) has eternal life (John 6.54), abundant life, life in fellowship with God (see John 17.3). They are "*one with [Christ] in spirit*" (1 Corinthians 6.17 NIV).

### ► Next Session The Clash of the Kingdoms

Satan was defeated on the Cross, yet for the moment he continues a fierce rearguard action against God and His people. We are at war. And we see the Church persecuted, torn apart by division and beset by heresy and corruption. We follow the growth of the Church beyond apostolic times, and review her conflict with Satan's kingdom against the backdrop of world history.

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