

The Means of Grace

In the First Company of Christians

Acts 2:41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:41-47

The Times They Are A-Changin'

With the 80's anniversary of D-Day this week, it gets one thinking about the greatest or "silent" generation and all they did to save the world. As they returned home from the war, the Allies had won, peace was on the horizon, and prosperity—as TV would have you believe, it was almost a golden age, a time of wholesome family values, white lined

picket fences, perfectly groomed lawns, freshly painted homes, beautiful dresses, Rockabilly music, malt-shops, classic cars ... all the things people think of from those old days. As long ago as 1975, as the song of that title goes, people were already reminiscing. Recorded at the old Caribou Ranch up near Nederland, Chicago sang:

*Old days
Good times I remember
Fun days
Filled with simple pleasure
Drive-in movies
Comic books and blue jeans
Howdy Doody
Baseball cards and birthdays
Take me back
To the world gone away
Memories
Seem like yesterday¹*

Why the reminiscing? It's because by the mid 70s, that era was almost totally unrecognizable. The children who grew up in these days (including some of them), born between

¹ Chicago, "Old Days," *Chicago VIII*, Columbia (1975).

1946-64, would be called the Baby-boomers, reflecting the huge birthrate increase that came about after the War. But the mid-60s began to see [seismic shifts in culture](#). Peace was interrupted by the Vietnam War. Music was changing thanks to the Beatles. Hair grew longer (in men). Clothes became rattier. Bodies grew smellier. Drugs were introduced to the public at large. Assassinations of presidents and cultural icons. Social upheaval. Everything was changing. The Boomers seem to have been telling us that all was not quite what it seemed in the gilded-age of the 1950s. As a kind of anthem for the times, Bob Dylan concluded his masterpiece:

*The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'²*

² Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are a-Changin'," *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, Columbia (1965).

You'd better keep up with the times or you'll be swept away by them. "*You'd better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone,*" he said.

Whatever you make of the 60s and the now infamous (thanks to Gen Z) "Boomers," the one undeniable truth is that Dylan was right. **Everything was changing.** One hold-out in culture however didn't see much change, *yet*. The church. We will look at why in a moment. But first, let's learn the what. Everything began to change when a Baby-Boomer, growing up in the Christian Reformed Church in the mecca of the Reformed world—Kalamazoo, Michigan, a man named Bill Hybels, founded, in the same year Chicago released their song, what would become the largest church in America: **Willow Creek Community Church** in, curiously, Chicago (technically South Barrington, but close enough), Ill. At its height it had over 25,000 weekly attendance.

As the *Wiki* tells the story, he was involved in a very successful youth ministry, and he desperately wanted to start a church that "**used relevant biblical teaching, music, and drama.**"³ As a *CRI* article describes it, Willow's "**mission**

³ "[Willow Creek Community Church](#)," *Wikipedia*, last accessed June 4, 2024.

was to reach irreligious people and turn them into fully devoted followers of Christ. Its approach was to present an uncompromisingly biblical message in relevant terms that these people would understand.”⁴ This became known as the **Seeker Sensitive Movement**.

Now, this is important, because even though he meant well, **Hybels began to make changes in the church that had never been seen** in the 1900+ year existence of pretty much any church denomination that has ever existed. He was truly a child of his times, the religious embodiment of Dylan’s song. What he did spread like wildfire through nearly any Protestant denomination that was even remotely conservative. On the surface level, all people would notice is that **the worship service was changing**. Newer songs were brought in, the Supper was done away with (during the morning service). Prayers were found less and less. The kind of sermon that was preached was changed. The way the sermon was preached was changed. The building changed. The environment changed. The liturgy changed. **Everything was changed**.

Going deeper, you can see why. **Hybels was changing the very nature of the church**. That statement above says how.

⁴ **Mark Mittelberg**, “Seeker-Sensitive for the Sake of the Gospel,” *Christian Research Institute* (April 9, 2009).

He wanted the church to reach *irreligious* people. Seekers. The church became a place for those who were not Christians to (hopefully) hear the Gospel for the first time and get saved. Basically, he transformed church—and not just “Sunday morning,” but the very meaning of “church” into a Billy Graham crusade.

Now think about this, especially from a biblical and Reformed point of view. **Seekers are by definition not Christians.** As people who are not Christians, they may indeed have a hole-shaped vacuum in their heart that they want to be filled. But they don't know what it is that they need. *Nor do they want that remedy*—until God changes their heart through the Gospel. Now, if everything prior to this about church was, ideally, there for people who are already Christians, why would a non-Christian want to participate in those things? They wouldn't. In fact, they couldn't. Thus, those things had to go. They weren't seeker friendly. Those things had to be put in other places at other times, times set aside for Christians to grow during the week. But your worship service, the main gathering of church for 2,000 years, had to now please the Seeker, or else the entire plan would fail.

In doing this, Hybels, whether intentionally or not, knowingly or not, **redefined church**. No longer was it the assembly of believers gathering together around the means of grace. Instead, it was the assembly of *non*-believers gathering, hopefully, to be converted. This is a 180° difference in the very nature of church and why we gather on the Lord's Day (in fact, that eventually had to go too, or at least give alternatives, because meeting on Sunday mornings wasn't very seeker friendly either, after all they had bicycling and lawn mowing and sleeping in to do). And this had never existed until that moment in all of world history *in* the church.

Three unfortunate things happened that I will mention here. **First**, pastors "leaders" of other churches who adopted this approach (and today, whether the Church Growth Movement or some descendant of it like the 2000s version called the Contemporary Church Movement or the Emerging Church) didn't understand what was happening, so they embraced it wholesale. It absolutely swept up the majority of the conservative Protestant world, so that what we do in our church today seems almost cultic to some people (in fact, I've heard at least one person call it that), even though we are actually the ones who haven't changed a bit.

Second, it didn't actually work. In 2007, Willow Creek itself conducted a major survey which revealed—surprisingly to them (Hybels called the results “earth-shaking,” and “ground-breaking”), not to me, that heavy involvement into programs and activities **did not necessarily translate into the discipleship** they were looking for. It caused the leadership to admit, “**We made a mistake.**” Chuck Colson actually wrote of it as he was very hopeful of their “repentance,” “**I am cheering Willow Creek on. Think what could happen if, instead of tickling ears, all the churches gave the people real meat. Then there might be hope for America after all, as serious disciples are equipped to defend their faith and take their places in our communities.**”⁵ But, of course, that never actually happened and if you watch one of their services today, they look just like they used to—only even more contemporary and flashy than ever.

Third, and most importantly, because they had to change the very nature of Church, no matter how much money they spent or cool they became, they and all those who followed, in fact **lost** (to a large degree) **the only actual power to truly change anyone's life**. What is that power?

⁵ Chuck Colson, “[Rethinking Church](#),” *The Christian Post* (Dec 5, 2007).

Where is that power to be found? That's what we will look at in our last sermon on Acts 2.

Acts 2 and the Church

As we've seen, [Acts 2:41-47](#) is a structure likely [centering](#) on the many wonders and signs being done through the apostles. This helps to establish [the foundation](#) of the NT church as being organized and led by those closest to Jesus—his friends and disciples. Here, they are the twelve and the others of the 120 souls that were present in the upper room on the day of Pentecost.

Last time, we focused on the profound connection Luke seems to be making with [the ideal city](#) as discussed in Plato's *Republic*. The ruling guardians were the foundation of the city, its leaders and teachers, who were not to take private property and they received only as a stipend their food and other needs as given voluntarily from the producing class. Likewise, the new “guardians” of this new Jerusalem city come down from heaven, are the apostolic leaders who are working powerfully by the Spirit who is creating before their eyes a marvelous new thing in the world of men.

Today I want to focus on this gathering of believers as the first “church” of the NT, a term that Luke will not use until **Acts 5:11**, but which certainly fits what is taking shape here at Pentecost and in its aftermath in Jerusalem. A word about this word is very important to understand.

“Church” in Greek is *ekklesia*. It’s the word Jesus used at the foot of Mt. Hermon at Caesarea Philippi when Peter made his great confession of Christ. “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (**Matt 16:18**). As you read your NT in order of books, other than a brief mention of discipline in the church in **Matthew 18:17**, this is all we know of such a thing until you get to Acts 5. But this doesn’t mean that’s all we know of such a thing from the rest of the Bible before it.

In fact, *ekklesia* is a rather common word in the LXX. It usually translates the Hebrew *qāhāl* which means “to assemble” or “to summon” or “to call.” It literally means “called-out ones” one from *ek* (“out of”) and *kaleō* (“to call”). It’s first use comes in **Deuteronomy 4:10**, “on the day of the *ekklesia*.”⁶ Here, God commanded Moses to “gather the people before me.” They were summoned. It is here that God covenanted

⁶ In what follows, I’m using the excellent short survey of all the uses of *ekklesia* in the LXX by Kyle Pope, “[The Use of the Word Ekklesia in the Greek Old Testament](#),” [olsenpark.com](#).

with Israel (5:2). Later, this day will simply be called “the day of the *ekklesia*” (9:10; 18:16). It was a day set apart for sacred assembly and worship and official business. It had rules about who could or could not attend, who was to do what, what was supposed to be done on it, and so on.

This continues with Joshua. When Joshua assembles the people on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to read the blessings and curses, it was done “in the hearing of all of the *ekklesia* of Israel.” From here on out, let’s substitute the word “church,” since that’s the English word we’ve used with Jesus and Peter. This will have a more profound impact on our hearing and thinking. In the days of the Judges, when the concubine was killed and all the Israelites gathered together to decide what to do, they were called “the church of the people of God” (Jdg 20:2). Anyone who would not come up to the church was to be put to death (Jdg 21:5).

When David speaks to Goliath, he declares that “all this church shall know ... that the battle is the Lord’s” (1Sam 17:47 [LXX 1Kgs 17:47]). Before David brings the ark from Kirjath-jearim, he speaks “to all the church of Israel” (1Chr 13:2, 4). When he announces that Solomon will build the temple, he does so “in the midst of the church” (1Chr 28:2). When Solomon finished building the temple, he blessed “the church”

(1Kg 8:14, 22, 55 [LXX 3Kg 18:14, 22]; 2Chr 6:3). On this day, *the church* feasted for seven days (1Kg 8:65 [LXX 3Kg 8:65]; 2Chr 7:8).

In the days of Jehoshaphat, he stands “in the *church* of Judah” in prayer to God (2Chr 20:5). When Hezekiah restores sound worship, *the church* laid their hands on the male goats of the sin offering (2Chr 29:23). When the prophet Joel urges Israel to repent, he tells them to consecrate *the church* (Joel 2:16). When Babylon conquers Jerusalem and the temple of destroyed, Jeremiah says that those whom God had commanded not to enter had come “into your [God’s] *church*” (Lam 1:10). Here, the term even seems to refer to the building.

We find *ekklesia* being used throughout the books of poetry. Job says, “I have stood in *the church* crying” (Job 30:28), which is very interesting, since he predates the nation of Israel. Perhaps the most important poetic use of the term is found in Psalm 22:22. “In the midst of the *church* I will praise you.” This is so important because Hebrews quotes this passage directly, right down to the term *ekklesia*. Amazingly, and bewilderingly to me, the Lexham English LXX and the older Brenton English LXX only translate *ekklesia* a single time as “church” between the two of them. It is here, in

Brenton’s translation of the Psalm. Perhaps even more **disconcerting**, almost all modern English translations of **Hebrews 2:12**, where this psalm is quoted, refuse to translate it as “church” as well.⁷ To get “church” as a translation, you have to go back to the Geneva Bible and KJV.

All of this helps to establish that the church of the NT is somehow organically related to that of the OT. In fact, including *ekklesia*, we have **at least a dozen phrases** the NT taken straight from the OT, which are used to describe the people of Israel, being applied by the Apostle’s to the church. They include the *circumcision*, *a kingdom of priests* and *a holy nation*, *Jews*, *the Israel of God*, *sons of Abraham*, *the vine*, *the chosen people*, *God’s temple*, *the tribes of Israel*, *the new Jerusalem*, and *the bride*.

Term or Phrase	OT	NT
<i>Ekklesia</i> (church)	Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2-4; 31:30; etc.	Matt 16:18; Rom 1:1; etc.
The circumcision	Gen 17:10	Php 3:3 ⁸
A kingdom of priests and a holy nation	Ex 19:6	Rev 1:6; 5:9-10; 1Pe 2:9 ⁹

⁷ This includes the ESV, NKJV, RSV, NAS, NIV, (“congregation”), YLT, ASV, NET, NLT (“assembly”).

⁸ “We are *the circumcision*, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

⁹ “You have made them *a kingdom and priests* to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10); “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1Pe 2:9); “You shall be to me *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exod 19:6).

Jews	Gen 29:35; Ezra 4:12	Rom 2:29 ¹⁰
The Israel of God	Gen 32:28; Ex 1:7	Rom 9:6, 26; Gal 6:16 ¹¹
Sons of Abraham	Gen 17:5	Rom 4:16 ¹²
The Vine	Hosea 10:1	Rom 11:13-17 ¹³
Chosen People	Isaiah 43:20	1Pe 1:9 ¹⁴
God's Temple	1Kg 12:27	1Pe 2:5; 1Co 3:16; Eph 2:21 ¹⁵
Tribes of Israel	Gen 49:28	Rev 7:4-8, 14:1-3 ¹⁶
The new Jerusalem	Ps 116:19	Rev 21:2 ¹⁷
The Bride	Jer 3:8; Song of Solomon	Eph 5:25; Rev 21:2 ¹⁸

¹⁰ “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise [a play on the name Judah] is not from man but from God” (Rom 2:29); “And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘This time I will praise the Lord.’ Therefore she called his name *Judah*” (Gen 29:35); “Be it known to the king that *the Jews* who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem” (Ezra 4:12).

¹¹ “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel*” (Gen 32:28); “But the people of *Israel* were fruitful and increased greatly” (Ex 1:7); “And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon *the Israel of God*” (Gal 6:16); “Not all who are descended from Israel are *Israel* .. Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people’” (Rom 9:6, 25).

¹² “... not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of *Abraham*, who is *the father* of us all” (Rom 4:16); “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:5).

¹³ “If some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree ...” (Rom 11:18); “Israel is a luxuriant vine” (Hos 10:1).

¹⁴ “You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession” (Deut 7:6); “I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Isa 43:20); “But you are a chosen race” (1Pe 2:9).

¹⁵ “If *this people* go up to offer sacrifices in *the temple* of the Lord at Jerusalem...” (1Kg 12:27). “Do you not know that you are *God's temple* and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” (1Co 3:16); “In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a *holy temple* in the Lord” (Eph 2:21); “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a *spiritual house*” (1Pe 2:5). It is this idea of God's temple that we then find several other statements in the NT about how we offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2; Heb 13:16), offer prayers on incense (Rev 5:8), drink the offerings of suffering (Php 2:17); offer fragrant offerings of money (2Cor 2:14-16); offer the fragrant aroma of the gospel ministry (2Cor 2:14-15); proclaim the priestly gospel (Rom 15:16), etc.

¹⁶ “And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed” (Rev 7:4-8); “Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth” (Rev 14:1-3). “All these are *the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Gen 49:28).

¹⁷ “And I saw the holy city, *new Jerusalem*, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2); “In the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, *O Jerusalem*. Praise the Lord!” (Ps 116:19).

¹⁸ “Prepared as a *bride* adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2); “This is profound, and I am saying that it [a husband and wife] refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32). “I had sent her away with a decree of *divorce*” (Jer 3:8; cf. Isa 50:1).

The Rise of the Synagogue

Let's stay in the OT to understand the **development of corporate worship**. Starting with the first mention in Deuteronomy 4, we see that God assembled the people at various places to worship him. Often, these were **mountains** (Sinai, Ebal-Gerizim, etc.). Eventually, this would be located on a national level in the temple, which would be placed on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. It was here at the temple that all Israelites had to come several times a year during the great feasts. This is in fact why there are so many Jews from all over the Roman Empire there in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

Interestingly, Luke is painting in Acts 1-2, through his language of the 120 and other connections, an idea that it isn't just meeting at the temple, but that the first Christians themselves *are* the temple of God in the NT, and this is seen in how they meet both at the temple and **in their homes**. In other words, the place of meeting becomes where they are present. The church is the temple.

In the OT, the temple was not only far away for most, it also concerned the very **specific kind of worship** that dealt with strict forgiveness and cleansing via the animal sacrificial

system. It was only here, at the temple in Jerusalem, that such things were allowed to occur. This created an **interesting dilemma** for the Jews: Sacrifices and basic worship could only happen in Jerusalem. So what about the rest of the year?

The problem was solved in various ways throughout Israel's history, sometimes in **good ways** and other times in **bad ways**. Two examples of the bad both take place in the far north, curiously very near to Caesarea Philippi in the city of Dan, literally only two miles to its west. We read in Judges that, “**The people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land**” (Jdg 18:30). Daniel Block explains the problem.

They established Dan as a primary cult center. Without any concern for “the place which the Lord would choose” (cf. Deuteronomy 12) and in overt violation of the ban on images (Deut 27:15), this event ... is presented as a purely **human affair**—human in its origin, design, and intention. This action involved the erection “for themselves” of the image

they had stolen from Micah and the installation of the Levite who had come with them as their own priest.¹⁹

Take note of this idea of a “**purely human affair**,” because it’s essentially what Willow Creek engaged in as they sought to create a church the way they *felt* they were *being led* to do it, with no regard for whether they *should* or whether God would actually want them to. And understand, what while the author of Judges clearly puts this in a negative light, the people of Dan did not think it was so. Indeed, a descendant of Moses himself was in on it. How *couldn’t* it have the blessing of God?

A **second story** is like it. It is found immediately after Solomon—the builder of the temple—dies and the kingdom of Israel is sharply divided into North and South. While his son Rehoboam would rule from Jerusalem, one of his former servants, a man named **Jeroboam** the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite, would rule from the north. Jeroboam initially found himself in the good graces of Solomon who would make him a powerful politician in his court (**1Kg 11:28**). But he eventually opposed Solomon’s policies and rebelled. He fled to Egypt to escape the king’s wrath and remained there until he

¹⁹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 511.

died. He then returned home and was quickly elevated to the kingship by the 10 tribes of the north.

For our purposes, having now become king of most of the tribes of Israel, and yet cut off from the temple in Jerusalem, which was ruled by the son of Solomon, some **very practical problems** immediately showed themselves. The most obvious is how could these people now worship God without going to Jerusalem, which was now politically impossible (as he put it, “If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah” (1Kg 12:27)? So **Jeroboam got clever**.

He decided to make **two golden calves**, and in a statement *identical* to Aaron’s (Ex 32:4, 8) said, “Behold *your God*, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1Kg 12:28). I give you the minority translation here, which usually says, “Behold *your gods...*” Why the difference? Two reasons. First, *elohim* is a **plural noun** in form, but it can be plural or singular in meaning (like “sheep”), depending on the context. The plural seems to make sense in Kings, because there are **two** of them. However, the plural doesn’t

make much sense at all in Exodus, as Aaron quickly says, “Tomorrow is a feast to Yahweh” (Ex 32:6). Aaron isn’t that dumb that after seeing all the things he has just witnessed that he suddenly thinks he should worship other gods! Second, the golden calf is a representation, or better, a house for Yahweh. So it really should be translated as “God.”²⁰

In copying Aaron’s language, it seems that Jeroboam is also making calves of *Yahweh* (Bull El), not that it is two different gods, but that it is *two places or houses* in which he thinks he can cause God to reside, just as he resides in the temple in Jerusalem. Think about it. If a pagan had *ten idols to Zeus* scattered around in various places, they would not think there are ten Zeus’, but rather ten *places* where his worship should be centered. So “gods” actually reflects a terrible theology of what an idol actually is. At any rate, he puts one in Bethel in the far south of his new northern kingdom and one in Dan at the far north, thereby making it very convenient for the people to go and worship the LORD without having to go to Jerusalem.

²⁰ The handbook on Exodus says, “It is not certain, however, whether the singular or plural meaning is intended, so translations are divided. However, it is recommended that translators use the singular here; for example, ‘This is your [plural] god [singular].’” Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 751–752.

But this new proud king was not finished. He would make **temples** on high places, following the practices of the nations to which he “**appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites**” (30). Then he appointed a feast like the feast in Judah where he would offer sacrifices on an altar (31-32). In all, he would bring great **new religious innovations** to the northern kingdom unheard of in all of history, making church much more seeker friendly if you will. New places of sacrifice, new temples, new ways of worshiping through idols, a new priesthood, and a new religious calendar.

But there were *good* innovations that happened in Israel’s worship as well. One of these was the creation of **the synagogue**. A post-exilic innovation, the Jews had learned their lessons about bad worship the hard way. God had sent them into captivity precisely because none of the kings of the north repented of Jeroboam’s innovations and returned the north back to the biblically prescribed worship of the Torah. This is why nearly every king of the north is likened to this man with the language, “**walking in the sins of Jeroboam.**”

When they returned, they of course found that their temple was destroyed, so they had to rebuild it. This combined with the previous problems brought about a reform that Jesus was clearly comfortable with. Synagogues began to spring up all around Israel. Unlike Jeroboam's actions, these were **not meant to be rivals of the temple**. No sacrifices were ever offered in them. The people still had to go to Jerusalem for the feasts. The synagogues were not convenient replacements for the temple.

What they did was serve **the regular sabbath function** as local places where the people could gather together and offer **prayers**, sing **psalms**, hear the **Law** read, and be taught through **preaching**. The word literally means “**a bringing together**,” from *synagin* (“to gather, bring together, assemble”) and *agein* (“put in motion, move”). A typical synagogue service in Jesus' day would take place on the Sabbath and would include a liturgy of benedictions, eulogies, and congregational response, recitation of the Shema (the creed), various prayers which were often sung, the reading of some part of our Old Testament, and a sermon—appointed from the congregation by the local ruler of that synagogue.²¹

²¹ For a 17 part liturgy see **Ernest De Witt Burton**, “[The Ancient Synagogue Service](#),” *The Biblical World* 8.2 (Aug 1896): 148.

Acts 2 and the Ordinary Means of Grace

It is into this that you can now understand properly what is happening in Acts 2 as it regards worship. We see it in **two parallel verses**. First, “**And they devoted themselves to the *apostle’s teaching* and the *fellowship*, to the *breaking of bread* and the *prayers*” (Acts 2:42). Second, “**And day by day, attending the temple together and *breaking bread* in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, *praising God* and having favor with all the people” (46-47a).****

The first is describing something very close to the **normal synagogue service**. Hence, “the prayers,” that is specific prayers they were already accustomed to praying and singing. **The differences** are **first**, that rather than mentioning the Torah, the focus is on the *apostolic* teaching. Now, this is very important. From what we’ve seen of their theology at the end of Luke and beginning of Acts, the apostolic teaching *is* the OT. But it is the OT as understood **in light of the Christ-event**. This is a significant difference between these Christians and the synagogues, which were still Jewish in the

old covenant sense, awaiting the coming of Messiah whom the Christians said had just come.

The **second** is that they were *breaking bread*. This likely refers to **the Lord's Supper**, which makes sense in light of the Apostolic teaching (the second reference is likely daily meals, but Luke doesn't distinguish the two, as they are viewed, ideally, as a unity). Third, there is the *koinonia*, the fellowship, which I think is inherent in the word "synagogue," but is not mentioned as a aspect of the liturgy. As these are mostly Jews who converted at Pentecost, it makes sense that they would continue with the same kind of synagogue-like worship they were already doing, but in light of Jesus' coming as taught to them by the apostles who witnessed it all.

Taking This as Command?

Before continuing on, I want to address a question that some of you might already be wondering. I'm about to argue that Acts is setting up to some degree what will become **the regular worship of God** for the NT church. And yet, haven't we said on more than one occasion already that Acts is

a history book, not a law-book? Are we receiving commandments here that this is how we should do it? Or is Luke merely telling us what happened? If it is only the latter, on what basis would be right to use this text as a marker for worship today? It's a good question.

Let's look at [the parallel](#) to begin to derive an answer. It says that "[day by day they were attending the temple together.](#)" This clearly puts us in an historical context that doesn't exist today. These people had not returned to their homes back in the larger Roman Empire. They were staying in Jerusalem. They were going to the temple. And yet, they were doing things differently now than others, especially other Jews. This helps us understand that [they were being grounded 24-7 in the apostolic teaching.](#) This is the context into which we find them sharing everything together. They were that eager to learn what was happening.

There are obviously certain things here that we [couldn't duplicate](#) even if we wanted to. There is no temple anymore. Nor are we in Jerusalem. But there is a general principle that can be gleaned from the history that seems timeless. That's why it's not wrong to look at what they did and see if any of these things might be good for us to do today. But that's

a question we must ask, not just automatically do simply because its “in the Bible.” As we saw last time, David slept with Bathsheba and committed adultery in the Bible. We are not to go and do that!

The Ordinary Means of Grace

This takes me back then to **vs. 42**, the real focus of our time today. We’ve already seen that this verse has laid out certain **elements of worship** that these first Christians were practicing, but that were themselves rooted in things that **came before it**—namely, the synagogue. Yes, there are changes, and those are to be considered. But the bigger point is that the history is resting on something else—the actual worship that Jews were engaging in after the exile up to the time of Jesus. This takes us out of a purely historical box and puts us into the larger context of worship as a whole. And this leads to the main lesson today.

Let’s return to those “**bad**” **innovations** of the Jews prior to the exile. What did they consist of? They violated very specific commandments of God. Yet, they were done out of expedience, need, and what those involved in all believed

were good motives. But God saw them as gross violations of his worship. On the other hand, while there was expedience, need, and good motives with the innovation of the synagogue, God did not view it as a violation of anything.

In the Christian church for 2,000 years, there seems to have been **two main principles** that have guided worship. One has been called **the Normative Principle**. It states that you can **do whatever you want in Scripture so long as it hasn't been forbidden**. The other is called the **Regulative Principle**. It states that **you should only do in corporate worship what the Scripture has commanded**. The latter is the principle used in Reformed worship as understood in our London Baptist Confession,

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

(LBC 22.1; cf. WCF 21.1)

Perhaps the best single scriptural support for it is found in **Deuteronomy 12:32**, “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” While many other texts have been used, some of these aren’t really very good and don’t seem to prove what people think they do.²²

The reality is, the principle is here to help **guard our worship** and protect us from ourselves. Furthermore, it is a logical deduction of *Sola Scriptura*. Why? Consider what the confession says on it:

The whole counsel of God *concerning all things necessary* for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and

²² I first stumbled upon the Regulative Principle in the mid 90s when I found **Kevin Reed**'s *Biblical Worship*, a helpful defense of the view. Reed is a covenanter, and so he applies the principle differently than I do, but I have continued to find it a helpful document.

Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

(LBC 1.6)²³

Sola Scriptura—Scriptura Alone—is a foundational principle for us. It isn't the idea that the Bible says everything about everything, or that it is the only book that gives truth, but that what it says is sufficient for everything we need for salvation, faith, and life (i.e. obedience to God). God has not left a single thing out. You can see that this paragraph speaks directly to **worship**. In doing so, it speaks of “**circumstances concerning worship**.” What are those?

As John Frame puts it, “**Circumstances are those things we must do in order to perform the elements**.” That of course begs the question. What are the elements of worship? “**Elements are those aspects of worship that Scripture commands**.”²⁴ And you can hear in this the idea of something needing to be commanded rather than just not “forbidden.”

Circumstances would be things like the **time of day** that you meet for worship, the **place you meet in**, **how long the**

²³ This is also identical to the Westminster Confession, save for the “good and necessary consequence” clause which the Baptists took out, because this was the way the paedobaptists justified infant baptism.

²⁴ **John M. Frame**, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 467.

service will be, and so on. There are some differences of opinion over these amongst the Reformed. For example, some people will put what kinds of songs you sing in the category of circumstances while others will put them into the category of elements. Those who do the latter will usually say that you must not sing uninspired songs in worship, and thus they will only sing from the Psalter in corporate worship. But I think this belongs to the category of elements, just like what words should be said in prayer, how long a prayer should be, etc.

Elements are must more important. And the point is, the Bible speaks directly to them, **commanding that we have them in our public worship**. More than that, the point is that these are all that we need, because they are sufficient for everything we need for our salvation, faith, and life. And that's why we do them.

It should be noted here that **worship is not just for us**. It is, in some sense, for us, in that God created us to worship and as we worship, we are fulfilling the reason for which we are created. We were created to **“Glorify God and enjoy him forever.”** Worship fills us, gives us hope, and changes us into the likeness of Christ. But first and foremost, worship is not

for us, it is for God. He is the audience, not us. Worship is literally **the ascribing of worth to someone**. We are not supposed to be ascribing worth to ourselves in worship—that’s a fundamental violation of the First Commandment. Sadly, I think too many Christians have failed to understand that the second you changed the nature of the church to the assembly of non-believers, this is the second you necessarily have changed the point of worship. For non-believers cannot worship God, nor do they want to. Therefore, by definition, at its foundational root, seeker worship must of necessity no longer be about ascribing worth to God. And this is why it always degenerates more and more as time goes on into stranger, weirder, wilder, more “culturally relevant,” more self-centered, and less objectively Christian things. That ranges from **the style** to **the content** to **architecture** to **those who actually come together** in the gathering.

So this takes us to the **elements**. The Confession has done a wonderful job helping us know what these are. It starts off, “**Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one part of natural worship, is by God required of all men**” (LBC 22.3). The point here is that God commands all men to pray, but he obviously wants Christians to. “**Pray without ceasing,**” the apostle says

(1Th 5:17). Throughout the Psalter we find and examples of people praying together in the OT church. They started doing it in the synagogues because of it. And this is precisely why they were praying in Acts 2.

The Confession tells us to pray “for things lawful, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter” (LBC 22.4), as it gives a little instruction on how to pray. One of the famous acronyms in our day actually ACTS. That is, we make prayers of Adoration to God, Confession of sin, Thanksgiving to God, and Supplication for others.

It goes further, telling us, “The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord’s supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear” (22.5). Of course, we’ve actually seen literally all of these in one way or another present there in those four things they were doing in Acts 2. The only one not here is baptism, but that’s just a couple of verses prior.

When it says, “parts” of religious worship, this is the Confession’s way of talking about *the elements* of worship. These are those few things that God wants us and so commands us to engage in when we worship together. We call them the “*means of grace*,” or perhaps in some instances, the “means of discipleship.”

Technically, a *means of grace* as it has been used in the Reformed world has referred to the *preaching of the Gospel* and *the sacraments*—because those are the gospel in visible form (both pictures of the death and resurrection of Christ). The Confession refers to them as “*ordinary*” (see 1.7). That is, they are *common*, not miracles, not signs and wonders, but things we can do every time we come together. If the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (**Rom 1:16**), and the gospel alone, and if salvation is the chief grace of God to us, then the way we receive the gospel is a means of grace and God has chosen to use them for our benefit when we do them together as his church.

Means of discipleship might more technically be used for things like *fellowship and prayer and fasting and thanksgiving days*, though prayer, with certain songs, can also be very much the gospel if we are praying and singing of the Gospel.

But the point is again that these are the things God has commanded us to do in his holy Word, because he knows what's best for us. He not only knows that he approves of them as ways that he has sanctioned as approaching and worshiping him (when done rightly, of course), but that they are of that great benefit to us for everything we need for salvation, faith, and life.

This is why, while I'm using [Acts 2:42](#) as a way to teach us what to do when we worship together. I'm not resting the point on this passage, as it is in fact a history book. Yet, that history was [deeply rooted](#) not in the miracles and one-off event of Pentecost, as if this is the first time in history these things were ever done, but in the centuries long tradition of the corporate local worship outside of the temple that Jesus himself participated in every Sabbath day. And that in turn came from Scripture.

And let's notice what the very last verse of this last section of Acts 2 tells us. "[And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved](#)" ([Acts 2:47](#)). This is precisely the point I'm making. What were they engaging in? The ordinary common means of grace. Yes, they did it in their own circumstance in an unusual time in history at

the temple every day. But it's the same stuff we believe God wants us to do in our church today.

In fact, I believe this is **the only remedy** to a sickly church that is so infatuated by the world in how it wants to do church that it actually makes Liberals look like the Reformers! It's rather stunning to me that many liberal churches actually retained their liturgies (although increasingly, they have gutted them, like their "sermons" of any biblical content). They don't even use the regulative principle, but you can still go into the Church of England and at least you will still hear the prayers, be able to participate in the Supper, and understand the transcendence they once-upon-a-time had. But go into many modern Evangelical churches and you wouldn't even know you were in a church. Most importantly here, the content is so watered down that it is basically impossible to grow—as Willow Creek itself proved to us.

Instead of clamoring for worldly things, we ought to be **content** with what God has given us. But doing this means we **must believe** that those elements of worship that are on display here in Acts are actually the things God uses to save and to sanctify his people—invisibly, sometimes without

their even realizing it is happening. Even if it is common, ordinary, and sometimes boring. While the times are always a changin', and while certain circumstantial aspects of how the church worships will of necessity change too, how we conduct ourselves when we come together—as God's called-out people, and not as a group of unbelievers—**must never change**. Because the Gospel never changes. And the God we worship does not change either.

Understanding these things will help you learn how to live in fluctuating times that constantly change, by knowing that you, Christian, are **rooted in a Rock** that is solid and immutable, a God who does not change like shifting shadows, a church that reflects this as his very body on earth, and worship that is focused not on self, but on the Triune God who alone is worthy of it. He has told you, O man, what he requires. The first converts under the new covenant learned the great joy that it brings and the transforming power that it gives.

All that's left is for you, me, and all God's churches today to believe it once more.

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