

Get Commissioned

Call to Worship

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Ps 51:10-12)

Worship in song: by Charles Wesley

1. What shall I do my God to love, my loving God to praise?
the length, and breadth, and height to prove, and depth of sovereign grace?
2. Your sovereign grace to all extends, immense and unconfined;
from age to age it never ends, it reaches all mankind.
3. Throughout the world its breadth is known, wide as infinity;
so wide it never passed by one, or it had passed by me.
4. My trespass was grown up to heaven; but far above the skies,
in Christ abundantly forgiven, I see your mercies rise.
5. The depth of all-redeeming love, what angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove the gift unspeakable.
6. Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take possession of your own;
my longing heart be pleased to make your everlasting throne.

Reading from the Psalms

- Psalm 34:11-18

Prayer of confession

Living God,

We rejoice that your love is eternally certain, but tremble at your holiness. We therefore know our need for repentance.

We confess our failure to trust your love, and for holding back from you in shame.

We confess our failure to trust your word, and for rewriting it to suit ourselves.

We confess our failure to trust your purpose and for choosing to live for ourselves.

We confess our failure to trust your future and allowing ourselves to be fearful and anxious.

We confess our failure to live by your Spirit and for living in our strength alone.

Loving Lord, please forgive.

Lift us up to be with you and see what you can see.

Lift us up to be with you and be what we can be.

Assurance of forgiveness

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn 1:9)

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Prayer of thanksgiving

Dear Father,

thank you for the gift of your Son, for his humble birth, as he came as one of us,
we give you thanks and praise.

For his steadfast courage in going to Jerusalem, for his endurance of anguish in the garden, for his suffering on the cross,
we give you thanks and praise.

For his resurrection from the dead, for his eternal intercession for us, for his promise to come again,
we give you thanks and praise.

For the outpouring of his Spirit on the church, for his commissioning of us to make disciples, for the hope he gives in bringing us his kingdom,
we give you thanks and praise.

Holy Communion:

There was day, once a year, when the entire Jewish nation held its breath as they asked themselves whether God could possibly forgive his people yet again?

It was the job of the High Priest to perform a ceremony that enabled the Jewish people to access the forgiveness of God. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, two goats were brought to the temple. One goat was sacrificed to symbolically pay the price for the sins of the people. The other goat stayed alive. The High Priest would place his hands on the head of the goat and symbolically transfer the sins of the people to the goat. This goat was then taken out of the city and set free in the wilderness. It became the scapegoat who symbolically took the sins of the people away.

The Day of Atonement was a vital day in the life of God's people. On this day, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificed goat (or lamb) in the Holy of Holies. This was a room in the heart of the temple that symbolised the very presence of God. The room was considered so holy that only the High Priest was allowed to go there once a year to perform this ritual.

As important as these rituals were, the Jews knew that no sacrifice of an animal could ever really take away the sins of the people. God required this ritual because he was making the point that sin could not be overlooked. It needed to be dealt with. God instituted this ritual because it foreshadowed a time in history when he would come to us as the man Christ Jesus. Jesus would allow himself to be sacrificed on a cross and shed his blood for your sins and mine. He did this to pay the price for our sins that would otherwise disqualify us from God's presence.

Before Jesus died, he asked us to remember his sacrifice by sharing bread and wine together. This we gladly do.

Thank you Lord Jesus for paying the price for our sins on the cross. We honour you as we share bread and wine together.

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The Bible Reading

- Hosea 10:12

The Message: **GET COMMISSIONED**

Nobody is commissioned by God until they have first surrendered to God.

The apostle Paul had to stop persecuting Christians and surrender to Jesus (Acts 26:14) before he was commissioned to be Christianity's greatest first century missionary.

The same is true for you and me. Once we surrender to Jesus, he commissions us to change people's history, not just in this world, but for eternity. You see: God has an idea, and he wants us to share in bringing it about.

Jesus died to make three things possible:

- to make intimacy with God possible (which is personal)
- to make the church possible (which is communal)
- to make God's idea for his kingdom possible (which is eternal)

Each stage leads to the next, because God is heading somewhere with his plan.

If any religious group or institution is not in synch with God's plan, that group invariably dies off until God brings reform, and people again surrender to God's purposes.

How will you die?

So, here's a sobering question: How do you want to die? How do you want the religious institution you are in, to die?

You see: every organisation carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Every organisation has a cycle of birth, maturity, corruption and death.

The question is, how much do you want to control it?

I would urge caution before you protest that it will never die. Whilst Jesus promised that his church would never cease to exist; no such assurance is given for denominational institutions. The Pentecostal church in the third century AD had its equivalent in the Montanists. Although Montanists began as a Christian sect, they eventually spiralled away from central apostolic and biblical truth until they were declared heretical. The movement petered out early in the sixth century.

All Christian movements have a lifecycle.

The church was born at Pentecost with the power of the Holy Spirit. It was new, vibrant, and soon engaged in mission and in preserving the words of Christ in scripture. Then it became institutionalised. It took its eyes off Jesus and wandered off from biblical principles.¹

¹ The Roman Catholic Church has continued to be a significant entity through history because is allowed reformations of its own, most notably the first: The Counter Reformation of the sixteenth century. I submit that it is time for another.

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It was protested against when Holy Spirit renewal broke out during the Reformation and the Protestant church was born.² This returned the church to a love of scripture, a love of Jesus and a love of mission. But then it too became institutionalised and lost its edge. New revivals and renewal movements (including the Methodists led by John Wesley) protested against the Protestant church and reignited a love of Jesus, a love of scripture and a love of mission. But the Methodist church has now had its edge blunted by liberalism, formalism and institutional folly. It was one of a number of denominations protested against when Holy Spirit brought the charismatic renewal – and gave birth to the Pentecostal church.

...and so it goes on.

What will be your story?

The date of our religious institution's death and the manner of its death is entirely in our hands. So, may I encourage us to write large on history's page. But to do so, we will need to stay faithful to scripture and foster a love of Jesus, because that is where the Holy Spirit never fails to return the church each time it bring renewal.

Fellow ambassadors, let's de-professionalise the church

When the Holy Spirit renews the church, he intentionally returns the ministry of the church to lay people. I have to say, that one of the reasons the church has been so emasculated in recent history is because it has believed the fiction that only the ordained clergy are gifted and trained for ministry.

The Greek New Testament word for 'church' is *ekklesia*. This was not a religious word; it simply meant a group of people called out of the general population for a special work.

The people of the early Christian *ekklesia* typically met in each other's houses and displayed a level of unity and generosity that was amazing (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). Incongruously for the time, slaves, masters, gentiles, Jews, men and woman sat round tables and shared a meal together, at which they remembered the sacrifice of Jesus. That was church. It was a group of people 'called out' to belong to Christ, who were bound together in Christ, who were called to be like Christ and to engage in the work of Christ.

Church never was a big crowd of people gathered in an auditorium listening to specialist clerics do their stuff. This distortion came into being after Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire 313AD. He turned the church into a religious version of hierarchical state governance, with its own version of princes (bishops) and officials (priests).

This professionalization of ministry developed even further in the Middle Ages. People, would come to the churches as spectators and watch the priests do their thing. In some traditions, services did not require a congregation at all. The priests simply prayed on behalf of the people – whether they were present or not.

² The term 'Protestantism' is used here in the broadest sense to mean those churches protesting against Roman Catholic authority.

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The difference between professional laity and ordinary church goers got so bad that 17th century French society was scandalised at the idea that anyone other than nuns and monks had to actually live holy and spiritual lives. Those who suggested otherwise were mockingly called 'the spirituals'.³

Similarly, lay people who shared their faith with others in 18th century England were derided as 'enthusiasts'.

The institutional church in the West became perilously emasculated and enfeebled. The people of God, the *laos*, that mighty army of God, chosen by God to represent him and prefigure his kingdom, had simply become relegated to the side-lines as passive observers, bit players at best in the church's mission to the world.

What the church should be, of course, is very different. Every Christian is called to be God's ambassador (2 Cor 5:13-21; Eph 6:19-20). An ambassador carries the authority of the kingdom they represent. In a very real way, they represent the values, culture, ideals and interests of their home kingdom. As ambassadors of Christ, every Christian is called to do the same. We are the ones who embody Christ's values, articulate his message and who carry his authority. Let me read from Luke, chapter 9:

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Lk 9:1-2).

So, let's train and release our people so that they become chaplains to their families, their work places, the bus queue, and the people living in their street. Let's train them to open the door to their homes (and their fridges) to those who need to hear and experience the gospel.

Let's close the gap

As Christ's ambassadors, we need to close the gap.

If you ask people in the streets what the reputation of the Christian church is, you will hear them speak of the church being: hypocritical, money-grabbing, morally flawed and irrelevant.

If you ask the same people what the reputation of Jesus is, they will say Jesus had integrity, cared for the poor, was morally good and that his principles are relevant for today.

There's a huge gap between the reputation of the church and the reputation of Jesus. We need to close the gap between the actions of Jesus and the actions of his church. We need to be seen to be a community that has integrity and which is *good* for society.

Whatever else the gospel is, if it is not good news for society, particularly the poor, it is not the gospel. So, take responsibility for:

- your personal transformation,
- your local church's transformation, and
- your society's transformation.

³ A group of Catholic laity, led by Madam Guyon and Miguel de Molinos, believed anyone could live holy and spiritual lives, not just monks and nuns. These were those who came to be known as 'the Spirituals.'

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Keep sowing

Let me end by urging you to keep sowing. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Gal 6:9).

Will you keep the faith, and finish your mission?

Hymn: (MHB 677) by William Bullock

1. We love the place, O God, wherein thine honour dwells;
the joy of thine abode all earthly joy excels.
2. We love the house of prayer, wherein thy servants meet;
and thou, O Lord, art there thy chosen flock to greet.
3. We love the word of life, the word that tells of peace,
of comfort in the strife, and joys that never cease.
4. We love to sing below for mercies freely given;
but O we long to know the triumph-song of heaven.
5. Lord Jesus, give us grace on earth to love thee more,
in heaven to see thy face, and with thy saints adore.

Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

Benediction

He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. (1 Cor 1:8-9)

This service was prepared by Rev Dr Nick Hawkes.

What angers God?

Romans 1:18-32

You will need:

- 1) A mixing bowl
- 2) One cup of flour
- 3) Some salt
- 4) 30 g (1 oz) butter
- 5) Half a cup of milk
- 6) Some sultanas
- 7) A collection of old leaves, snails, rusty nuts and bolts or anything else that should not be eaten.

Share with the children your love of good food and say that you are wanting to prepare something really tasty that they all eat afterwards. What you are going to make today is scones - which will taste fantastic with lots of jam and cream.

Take the flour and tip it into the mixing bowl. Ask one of the children to scrape the butter into the bowl. Another child can add the salt.

Rub in the butter whilst talking excitedly about how much you like good food. Perhaps you can ask the children what their favourite food is.

Go on to say that you want to make these scones a bit special, so you are going to add a handful of sultanas. Put in the sultanas.

Mention to the children that you had planned to add a few extra things which would make the scones even more interesting but that you couldn't get them. You have, however managed to get some other things which might be added instead.

At this point, tip in your old leaves (swept up from the driveway); a few snails and a collection of rusty nuts and bolts. Make a well in the centre of the flour mixture (giving a running commentary as you do) and pour in the milk, saying that all you need to do now is mix it up, cook it and eat them. Ask the children if they are looking forward to eating it.

There should be quite a reaction.

When the fuss has died down. Explain that God wants each of us to be lovely people unspoilt by selfishness, jealousy or cruelty. (Bad things certainly spoil this scone mixture!) Each of us then need to be careful about the sorts of thinking we learn to do. Let's keep out the bad thinking away and only learn good thinking so that we are not spoiled but become the beautiful people God wants us to be.

Read and talk about Romans 1:18-32.

Close with prayer.