**Unrestricted Church**

**Why not just be an online church?**

**Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22**

Today we are looking at the question: Why not just be an online church?

* So much of our society is changing and many have seen the benefits of being online.
* Many work-places are moving permanently to be less in-person and more online
* Shopping is more convenient online
* So shouldn’t church also go online? – it’s more convenient, more comfortable and more modern.
* But before we sell our buildings or convert them into studios we need to ask what the church is.
* We are going to think about 3 images the Bible uses to describe the church.

1. **Family**

The language used when speaking about relationships between Christians, throughout the New Testament, is that of family.

* In Ephesians 2:19 ‘members of God’s household’
* When we believe in Jesus we become children of God (John 1:12)
  + So we are only family through Jesus
  + We will see that Jesus is central to all 3 images.
* New Testament writers consistently call believers brothers – often legitimately translated ‘brothers and sisters’.
* When Paul instructs Timothy in church leadership he tells him to relate to church members as family: older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters. 1Tim5:1-2

Be aware: being family together is an objective fact not an aspiration.

* A warning from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:
  + *‘Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.’ (Life Together)*
* Get rid of dreams along the lines of: ‘If we were really a church family…’ or ‘a real church family would…’ – they will kill community.
* We are a family already – so the right response is to come into the community not as ‘demanders but as thankful recipients’.

So what about online church?

* Many things work well online – but not close relationships.
* I know of no family that has decided they relate better online – all are longing to be with each other.
* So too with us, we are a family and we need to relate in person.

1. **A Body**

* See this in Ephesians 2:15-16
* Also in Eph 4:14-16
* Again – the image shows the church depends on Jesus, he is the head.
* But the body image is used also to show how we are to relate to one another – we are to build each other up as each part does its work.
* Paul develops the imagery of the body in 1Corinthians 12 showing every part of the body is **needed** in building each other up. You can’t say:
  + ‘You don’t need me.’ (1Cor 12:15-20)
  + ‘I don’t need you.’ (1Cor 12:21-22)
* But online church by its nature makes many seem unnecessary in church life.
* It encourages me to view church as a customer: it is for me, for what I get out of it. rather than encouraging me to think how I can build up others
  + After all, what will determine when you come back to being in the building? What does your answer say about whether you are viewing church as a customer or a body builder?
* But if we are in church in person we can be on the lookout for others – those who are struggling, those who need a listening ear, those who are lonely.
* It’s not that we can’t build one another up at all while being online but we are seriously hampered – like going to the gym without all our body parts!

1. **A Building**

Our buildings are not the church – but church (the people) is described as a building, but not just any building…

* See Ephesians 2:19-22
* Notice again the place Jesus has – he is the chief cornerstone
  + **In him** the building is joined together.
* The building is the temple – in which God lives by his Spirit.
* While all Christians individually are temples of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19), we are also being joined together to become a temple.
* So why come to church? As we gather together we meet with God who is in us by his Spirit
* What does this look like? The gifts God gives his church being used to build up one another and Christians living out the gospel in their relationships (see the rest of Ephesians).
* This has evangelistic significance – 1Cor 14:24
* Could this happen online? Would an unbeliever come to an online service and declare ‘God is really among you’?

**Conclusion**

So we see 3 images the Bible uses in describing the church

* All depend on Jesus.
* None can be achieved properly online (for some who cannot get to the church building, online may be a wonderful blessing – though even then they will surely long to be present in person)
* Being the church means we should be eager to meet together
  + To be with your family
  + To build up the body
  + Being joined together as a temple in which God lives by his Spirit.