

The Church's Design

by Stewart Ruch

Bishop Stewart Ruch's sermon emphasizes the Church's design as a call to active participation in community and faith.

Duration: 31:57

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding the commitment and actions required when following Jesus and being part of his church. The passage in Acts chapter two is seen as a blueprint for the architecture of the early church. The actions mentioned in the passage include devotion to teaching, breaking bread, and prayer. The speaker also highlights the transformative power of the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus, which led the early believers to participate in sacrificial acts, even in their finances. The sermon challenges the notion of church as mere entertainment and emphasizes the invitation for believers to fully participate in the life of the church.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruch and is part one of our Why Church? series. I too was once a Wheaton College graduating senior.

And actually my senior year at Wheaton College I had been a part of the theater program there for four years. It's in a group called Workout. And senior year we did a play that was a pretty sort of out-of-the-box play, although we did several plays like that in my years studying theater there.

And this play was set in a prison, and our director didn't want theater patrons just to come and sit in a theater and be entertained. He actually wanted people to be a part of the story. He had this intense desire for people to participate in the play in some way.

And he had been trained in a version of this called Guerrilla Theater in the 50s and 60s in New York City. And he kind of imported that to Wheaton. So as our senior year we're doing this play.

It's set in a prison. And the way that we're going to get folks kind of shook up is that we're going to actually check people into the prison. So if you're coming to see the play with your ticket, I guess you have to go through a long line first.

There's a metal table there. There's a person dressed up as a guard. They ask for your ID.

They make sure that you're good to go. Then they escort you into the prison. So by your senior year you've done a lot of these things for your director.

And you're really tired of it, and you're embarrassed, and you just want to act. But your freshman year you're really excited about this. So I'm a senior.

I have a lead role. But every other night I get to play this guard that sits out in the theater lobby and checks people in. So a freshman comes to me, and he's super excited.

His name is Ron. He's like, oh man, Stuart, this is amazing. Hey, I got a great idea.

How about I come in, and I'll seem like a normal theater patron. No one's going to know, but I'm going to have a weapon on me. And I'm going to somehow create a situation where you have to frisk me, and you're going to find a weapon on me, and everyone's going to freak out.

It's going to be awesome. The seasoned, cynical 22-year-old that I was. Oh, Ron, you know, that's really not worth it.

How about not? How about we not do that? Oh no, he said, it would just be so great. It would be so much fun. Just imagine how it will engage people in the story.

We're going to tell in the prison. So he wore me down. I said, okay, we'll do it.

You line up. I'll find a way. We'll frisk you.

You'll have a weapon. We'll figure this out. So sure enough, that night they're doing my job, and I've got all these patrons lined up.

Nice, sweet people going to see a play, and they've got to show their ID and everything else. And I see Ron about five people back, and I see he's already jumping. He's like this.

And some people are kind of worried about him because he seems to have some kind of condition. And he's jumping, and he gets right up to the table. Before I can even say anything like, may I see your ID, sir? He slams his hands on the metal desk, and he says, I'm not showing you my ID.

Well, please, sir, just as part of our protocol, if you could show me your ID. I'm not showing you my ID, and you'll never find the weapon that's hidden on me. So I stand up.

Okay, Ron, up against the wall. I've got to frisk you. So I start frisking him, and sure enough, in his back pocket, there's something there.

So I reach in the back pocket. I pull it out. And to my eternal embarrassment, he's got a butter knife from Saga.

And I look at it. A butter knife, Ron? A butter knife? What are you going to do? Spread us to death? Get out of here! Just get out of here! All right, so, here's what I like about Ron. And here's what I love about my theater director's vision.

If a play should be more than just entertaining, but actually engage you and invite you to participate in the story, how much more the Church of Jesus Christ. What I love about Ron is that he actually wanted to be a part of it. He wanted to be engaged in the story.

There was a kind of childlike wonder at being a part of a story being told. And he didn't want to sit on the sidelines. He wanted to be in it.

We're going to look at the design of the Church given us in the actions of the Apostles. The book of Acts. And what you will see is that one of the definitions given us in the Church is actually the participation.

That's what the Church is called in the book of Acts. The participation. And the message and the core reality of the Church.

And this is why it can be so confusing if you have Church background and perhaps you come up in a church where actually you came and you were entertained. You were entertained by a sermon. You were entertained by a certain kind of vibe in the room.

That actually the message was, you come in, we entertain you for 60 minutes, not longer. We give you the products you want for your children and your youth. You're good, we're good.

But that is not the Church. Indeed what we see in the book of Acts and the design of the Church is that the Church at her heart is an invitation to participate with everything that you have. I very consistently have this conversation with those who are new to Resurrection and have just attended a service.

It starts with this question. They'll walk out to the guest center and they'll say to me because they're kind of stirred or something's rearranged in their mental furniture and they'll say to me, what just happened? And I say, Jesus' Church just happened. Now it's more than our service, but our service captures Jesus' Church.

Here at Resurrection, more and more trying to describe a phenomenon that we have now lived for a couple of decades, we talk about two conversions. They shouldn't be separated and they aren't always separated, but let me explain this to you. The first conversion is a conversion to Jesus.

It is an accepting of Jesus as Lord, Savior, the forgiver of our sins. But what we also see either in those who meet Christ and then immediately meet the Church or those who've had a personal relationship with Jesus is that they have a kind of second conversion where they realize Jesus has a body, the Church. Jesus has a bride, the Church, and they second convert.

They now realize, wait a second, I give my life to Jesus. I want to give my life to His Church. This second conversion is a lived experience.

It's an intellectual apprehending that the Church is a she and not an it. That we are supposed to have a relationship with her who is described in the Old and New Testaments for the people of God as the Bride of God. Indeed, we're going to have confirmation this morning where I will lay hands on adults who basically have said, I've had a second conversion.

I believe in Jesus. I've been baptized. But now I've come to believe in His Church and I'm going to commit myself to His local Church here.

Not as a theory of the Church, but as a participation. So we participate, laying our hands on them and praying for them to be filled with the Spirit for their mission in the Church and from the Church. The second conversion includes the revelation that our Christian lives are embodied and that we grow in God through bodily ways, like worship, which you just did.

You just did musical worship. You stood up with your body. Some of you opened your hands up with your body.

You engaged with your mind, which is part of your body. The embodiment of art, helping us connect and come close to Jesus. The beautiful depiction through our artistry and resurrection of who He is.

The embodiment of baptism and the waters of baptism and the very sound you can hear with your auditory ability that God has forgiven our sins and washed us clean. The embodiment of Holy Communion, Eucharist, which I'll talk about. The Church includes coming free from the aching desolation of living alone.

This is just like one of my major pastoral heartbreaks for so many of you. You've lived these really lonely lives. Lonely lives that so much of the world, in much greater deprivation, do not live.

That so many of us live here. And the Church says, no, no. You are not meant to live your life alone or as a separate family unit or however it manifests.

So what is this entity that we're second converting into? Again, let me be clear. There's one conversion. It's to the Lord Jesus Christ and His body.

But what's happened in a kind of cultural phenomenon in the American church scene is that the Church has become so disembodied. It's become so disconnected from the Lord Jesus and separated that now we see two things happening when really they're meant to be totally integrated as one. And for many of you, you've had that experience.

You'll say to me, I didn't know about the Church. I mean, I knew about it theoretically and intellectually, but I didn't know I could live my life in the Church. Well, the Book of Acts, and by the way, this book gets the most underappreciated title of the Bible, along with maybe Deuteronomy, which is a phenomenal title.

I'll tell you about it sometime. It's so underappreciated. It's the Book of Actions.

What it is saying is the Church is an embodied action reality. Not to say that it isn't contemplative and prayerful. Those are actions as well.

But the Church is on the move. The Church is a movement. So if you've experienced Church as stasis or Church as stuck or Church as rigid, that is completely antithetical to the way the Apostle Luke titled this book or those who came after him titled this book, which is the actions of the Church, the movement of the Church.

Even in Acts chapter 2, go there in your bulletin right now, please, and we'll look at this together. Even in Acts chapter 2, written by Luke, what we see is one action after another. Some of you are here, and you have not committed to Jesus or the Church.

You're not there yet. And indeed, you may not be there yet because you're skeptical about the Church. First, let me say that I know you're in the room, and I'm so glad you are.

Second, let me say that while this will have a certain sort of application for those who are following Jesus, this has a key application for you because you need to know what you'll be getting yourself into if you make a commitment to Jesus and His Church. You need to understand this. Look at the actions that line up just in these few verses in Acts chapter 2. By the way, here we get a picture.

Probably the scholars think first three to five years is what we're seeing here of the Church. This passage is so packed with actions, it actually creates a blueprint design of the architecture of the Church. Here are the actions that synthesize into a blueprint.

They're devoting themselves to teaching of the apostles. They are breaking bread. They are praying.

They are doing wonders and signs. They are living together. They are selling their belongings.

They are giving away their belongings. They are breaking bread in their homes, probably a distinct action from the breaking of bread. We'll talk about that.

They are attending the temple. They are praising God. You put all of these actions together and many other actions together, and you get a design that can be summarized as the 5S architecture of the Church, as laid out there in your outline, in your sermon notes.

They are fully scriptural, first and foremost, and that is first and foremost. They are fully sacramental. I'll define that word in a moment.

They are full. I think your outline has fully. I messed that up.

They are full of the Spirit. They are free to sacrifice. They are focused on the salvation of others, scriptural, sacramental, Spirit, sacrifice, salvation.

Here you have a design, a picture of the Church, and not just the Anglican Church, our particular custom. I deeply, firmly, and insanely believe this is the design for every church, the Roman Church, the Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church, the Pentecostal Church, that this is the Church. And then different customs will manifest and work this out in different ways, different cultures, different contexts.

Fully scriptural. Verse 42A. Get to our verb there first.

So find your verb there first. They devoted. So start with devoted.

Extremely important word. Very, very rich biblical word that Luke is using. Not as rich in our English language as it would have been in this particular application of the word devoted.

Here devoted, it means single-minded focus. I think the closest we can get to an American vernacular would be obsession, which we use here. She's obsessed with that.

He's obsessed with that. But people would see these people and go, they're obsessed with the Apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, the prayers, the fellowship. It's a kind of holy obsession.

You don't do other things because you're doing this. You forget about other things because you're remembering about this. You're moving other things out of your life so you can have more and more of this in your life.

Indeed, this design, this piece of architecture begins with an invitation to you as a reader, as a seeker, as a Christian, to you as well being devoted, obsessed with these things. So let me give you an application from the beginning. As you walk through these S's, which of the five S's does your heart just go to, does your mind just connect with? You say, yes, I am devoted to that S. And which S might the Lord call you to greater devotion? Awkwardness, devotion.

Not natural obsession. I need to be really clear. Not one of these S's is optional.

This is not Chipotle where you say, I'll have the cornbread, not the sour cream. This is not Chipotle. I know that's disappointing for you.

This is the whole enchilada. I'm sorry. But this is the whole thing.

This is a blueprint. So like any excellent architectural blueprint, you don't say, I don't like the pillars. It falls apart.

So you need to look at your S's. We need to be clear about our S's and where we're devoted and where we're not. The Word of God, the apostles' teaching, asks for their submission and our submission.

What is the apostles' teaching? They were taking the Hebrew Scriptures that many of them have memorized or knew very well, and they were now in a creative, oh, to have heard even more of those sermons. And we see some of them in Acts 2 earlier. They are integrating the Hebrew teaching of Yahweh and the people of God into the revelation that Jesus is fully God, the Son of God, and has died and resurrected, and they're integrating that.

That's the apostles' teaching. They're teaching on the descent of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That's the apostles' teaching.

And they are setting up the authority system for the church. It will be first and foremost the teaching of the Scriptures that the apostles themselves will also be under. They're coming out of a Jewish community, which is a community of profound learning and study, a love for the Scriptures, a focus and passion on the Scriptures.

It was part of the Jewish community. There's a wonderful quote from a Jewish rabbi of that era. The more study of the Scriptures, the more life.

Now, we not only submit to God's Word, but as we see here, we submit to God's Word as the church has taught God's Word. It started that way. So it wasn't just that they had an abstract relationship with God's Word, which isn't to say that you shouldn't be reading your Bible regularly as an individual.

You absolutely should be. But when you're reading your Bible as an individual, you're actually reading it with the church. So we have the authority of God's Word first and foremost, but now the church is teaching God's Word, and so we ourselves also submit to God's Word as the church has received God's Word, as the church has submitted to God's Word.

We look for places where God's Word has been taught consistently across traditions. And there are many places and many teachings where it has been, across diverse traditions. So there's a kind of learning of God's Word over the centuries.

One Christian thinker called the democracy of the dead. The idea that over the centuries, there has been a vote on what these passages mean, which means we do not read them alone. But not only do we go this way, but then we go this way globally.

So we also read God's Word across cultures, which is why it's so important that you're exposed to other global Christians who are teaching, studying, and reading God's Word, so that they can shake you up as an American Christian, and you can do them the same favor and shake them up as a Nigerian Christian.

And my Nigerian friends and I shake each other up all the time because I have certain ways of reading the Bible that are culturally conditioned, and so do they. So then you mix it up.

I'm so excited to have a Brazilian bishop preaching here last Sunday of June and a Nigerian bishop, Archbishop Nkwasi, preaching here first Sunday of July, where we get to experience this in real time, this Word of God authority, fully scriptural. This is so important, and it relates to the importance of how leaders lead in our Christian movement. If they lead from the authority of the Word of God, if a leader abdicates the authority of the Word of God, so she or he abdicates their authority and leadership as well, which is why in our symbolism, one of the symbols of a bishop is the mitre, what I've called to you guys before the unusual hat.

But it's so important. This signifies the flame of the Holy Spirit that came upon the apostles, but here to my point, these two very unusual tails signify the Old and New Testament under which I do my ministry and its authority. Symbolically speaking, you could all wear mitres, but then it would be really weird here.

Fully sacramental. What is sacrament? Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and visible reality. The power of God, the ministry of the cross, the glory of the resurrection, inward spiritual realities that are captured in outward visible ways.

Sacramental means that matter matters. What's the first sacramental thing we see? The fellowship. The ground of understanding things sacramentally, of understanding that matter matters, is the fellowship, which is to say what? The church, which is to say, that word literally means the participation, which is why we engage in prayers together, and you don't just sit there.

Which is why you get up and sit down. You don't just sit there. When people get up and receive Holy Communion, they get up and get prayer.

They're moving all around. Because you are participating. But not just here, of course.

When you're released into the marketplace, you're released into your homes and your neighborhoods, your schools, you're participating there. That's the definition of the church given to us, among other important definitions, like the bride and the body. That's the grounding of what it means to be fully sacramental.

But there's more. There's definite articles used for each of these, which is to say these are each a thing. The fellowship.

Then the breaking of bread. Scholars debate this, but the preponderance of perspective is that this is a early Eucharist, a early Holy Communion, an early living out of what Jesus said to them to live out on the night before He died, which was, break my bread. Take my blood.

I will be present with you. The promise of being fully sacramental is the promise that we are never, ever, ever alone in a real way with Jesus. And the ministry of His real presence says He is really here and He will really abide with us sacramentally.

And then there are the prayers, a definite article again, which probably means two things. One is they were liturgical prayers. So for those of you that kind of only experience liturgy at Rez, it's not just a Rez thing.

We're a little teeny tiny dot on the liturgical spectrum. This is how the early church worshiped together. Extemporaneous prayer as well.

We see it throughout the book of Acts, and we see liturgical prayer. They're doing both. But it's the life of prayer.

It's a sacramental reality. I will never forget when I began my second conversion. It happened kind of mystically.

I had been backpacking in Ireland as a recent college graduate. I had been hitchhiking all day. It had been a long day.

I hadn't gotten good rides. I kind of walked the last five miles to get to a youth hostel. But God wanted to show me something.

I was far from God at that time. I would describe myself as probably a follower of Jesus. I had no interest, no conviction, no trust in the church.

I'm rounding a corner to go to my hostel, and there in the light as dusk is coming is this old abandoned Irish stone church. And something just happened. It was the Spirit.

He spoke to me. I didn't know what He was saying. I asked Him, My heart wanted to be in that church.

Which is to say, in the church, which a year later happened here at resurrection. We read then as they're devoting themselves that awe, a kind of moment where we lose control, awe, right? When we have an awe moment, like, whoa! I'm kind of, whoa, just a moment, out of myself. Whoa, beautiful sunset.

Just popped out of myself for a moment. Awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done to the apostles, and they'll be done for many other followers of Jesus as well. The fullness of the Spirit.

This happens first in Joel. You see this in Acts 2. Joel, an Old Testament prophet, speaks of this. Then Jesus is doing wonders and signs.

The exact phrase is used. And then the people of God. What this means is that the Holy Spirit is overseeing and running your life, and He's overseeing and running His church, and He's overseeing and actually moving all of history toward a culmination when Jesus will return and establish the new heavens and the new earth.

He is utterly and completely and radically in control, and we are utterly and completely and radically out of control. One of my favorite Anglican thinkers is an early 20th century missiologist. This guy thought about mission.

Roland Allen. He says this. By the growth of the church, I mean something we cannot control.

By the growth of the church, I mean something that we cannot control. Control is way overrated, brothers and sisters. Your dependency on your control, your illusion that somehow you can control your medical life, your financial life, your family life, your career life, it's way overrated.

And some of you have come to that heartbreaking but actually potentially ultimately freeing conclusion. The church is full of the Spirit, under the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit. Church cannot be controlled.

She's different than any other entity. That doesn't mean we can't learn from other entities. We can't learn from marketplace, government, not-for-profit, profit, educational institutions.

We can learn. But I got to be really clear with you, pastor to you all, it's so different than anything else. And I know that maybe some of you think that I'm in control over what happens at Rez.

I know you do, and I just need to tell you, I'm not. You know how you all talk like, I'm so frustrated about this at Rez. I talk about things at Rez that I'm frustrated with.

I don't get to manage this whole thing. It doesn't work that way. Kenneth Stephen Gautier, the smartest guy in the room, he doesn't get to run this stuff.

You've got to learn that about the church. Because it's okay to be disappointed with aspects of the human realities of the church. But don't be disappointed that you can't control her.

Don't be disappointed she doesn't run like other things. The church must be ordered, but not controlled. She must be in order, but not controlled.

She must be stable, but not status quo. Listen to this testimony from a 20-something here at Resurrection who came up to pray at the cross, which is a tradition we have. Put this cross on the floor, people come and pray.

Listen to this testimony of the power of the Spirit. On the Good Friday service, I wanted to be restored and healed from my apathy, my lack of participation, and my lustful addiction. But I didn't realize that I really didn't believe in the Holy Spirit's power anymore.

But as soon as I touched the cross, my body began to shake, and I found myself just weeping uncontrollably. I began to realize my sinfulness before the Lord, and I repented, and then I heard in my heart, from the Lord, you are healed. You're made whole again.

Then I stood up, and then, Stuart, you came over and prayed for me. And when you prayed for me, I again felt my body just losing control, but in so much peace. I found myself speaking in tongues, and I'd received that gift, but hadn't used it for a long time.

During this time, I was lying down. They weren't fully aware, but they actually just, they went fully limp. They lost control of their muscle function momentarily, and they were just gently laid out here on the chancel so they could rest in the Lord and pray.

They lost control. I felt my heart being restored, and my first love with God renewed. I have not felt the same passion and love for Jesus since the night I gave my life to Him.

Full of the Spirit, who gets to control our lives and our church. These three S's are beautiful. They're often described as the three streams that kind of intertwine.

People say, oh, it's the evangelical, it's the charismatic, it's the liturgical, or however it's defined. That's not a bad way to come at it, but it's super insufficient biblically. It almost begins to feel a bit like a brand, like, oh, they're the three-stream church.

If you say that, I will not get mad at you, but I will internally kind of, you know. Why? Because I'm not interested in being the three-stream church. I'm interested in being the church.

And I'm interested in seeing the three streams, these beautiful participatory realities, pushes toward the fourth S, which is the freedom to sacrifice your life. What happened when they were having these experiences with Scripture and the sacrament and the Spirit? What happened to them? What happened to them? Is it the cross of Jesus and His willingness to give up His life for the sake of the world, and the love of the Father who gave up His Son for the sake of the world totally affected them? And now they were participating in Jesus' sacrifice. And they started doing insane things.

Their financial advisors are calling them, saying, why did you just sell that piece of land it was going to appreciate so beautifully in ten years? I don't know. I've got to sell this stuff. I've got to give this stuff away.

I've got to give my life away. Do you understand that I'm obsessed with Jesus and His church? I'm obsessed with the Kingdom of God. They were free to sacrifice their lives, their financial resources, their relational resources, their energy strength resources.

They were going all in. They look just like Jesus, don't they? It's so inspiring. They were so kingdom responsive, they become utterly worldly irresponsible.

Oh, to be given that insult in my life. Stuart, you're so kingdom responsive, you would appear worldly irresponsible. What a relief, if others might think that about us.

Look at how their hospitality, now they're breaking bread, probably not in a sacramental capacity, we see in verse 46, but they're bringing others into their homes. They're sharing meals. Here's the deal in America.

Our hospitality bar has become so low, it's like a sure win. You just do a little hospitality, you will shock people from our own country and others. So the gift is, we've become not very good at hospitality in America, so the bar is really low, you can kill it.

Alright? You can absolutely kill it. So give your life away, sacrifice your life, by having people into your home, by having people for meals, by sacrificing everything. Which leads then to the final piece, which is they were focused on the salvation of others, as the Lord, and it's His sovereign work, added to their numbers daily.

It's sacrifice that leads to salvation for others. Let's be clear. What's our work? Our work is sacrifice.

Our work is rearranging the calendar to have time with an unchurched family member or friend. Our work is giving for the work of mission and evangelism. Our work is participating.

Our work is dependent, though, on the sovereign move of God, who adds to our numbers. One of the great evangelists of our day has said, the reason our numbers, where he is ministering, have been so high, is that we were ready for those who were far from God. We were ready to disciple, ready to teach them the Bible, ready to invite them into our homes.

We were ready, and the Lord adds to our numbers. It's the picture we're given it. Fully scriptural.

Fully sacramental. Full of the Spirit. Free to sacrifice.

Focused on the salvation of others. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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