

How church?

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How should we do church?

How did the church look in the 1st century?

How should church look in the 21st century?

And what about Randwick Presbyterian Church? How do we shape up? Is there anything we need to change? How do our views and practices line up with what the Bible says about church?

In the book of Acts we get a striking portrait of the early church. We need to hold it up next to RPC and consider: what can we learn from this portrait of the early church?

Phil Paul has been leading us through a series on Acts, and opening up for us this book where we see the beginnings of the church following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first believers. Acts is a great place to think about what it means to be a church today and how the church should really look. When we see the early church, we look back through two millennia of tradition to the

original core of what a church is and consider how we should be a church today.

We might think we can simply look at what the early church was doing and say, “That should be happening here!” But we must understand what these things meant in their **context**, the theological and cultural significance of what took place, and then apply these principles our **context**. This is called ‘**contextualisation**’. To illustrate, imagine a preacher claimed, “Because people in the early church spoke Greek and wore robes, we should too—that is how we must do church too, so to be a real church, everyone must learn Greek and get a robe.” I suspect you’d have a hunch he was missing the point.

This **contextualisation** is essential to communicating the gospel effectively across the barriers of language, ethnic, cultural, social, ideological and philosophical barriers. And this is essential if we are to fulfil the great commission of the Lord Jesus Christ:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore **go and make disciples***

of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:18-20)

If we are to reach **all nations**, we must cross every geographical, linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social, ideological and philosophical barrier in order to communicate the gospel. This means we need to understand not only what the early church did, but the principles behind what they did, and apply these principles today.

Start with what is going on in the Bible and do three basic steps:

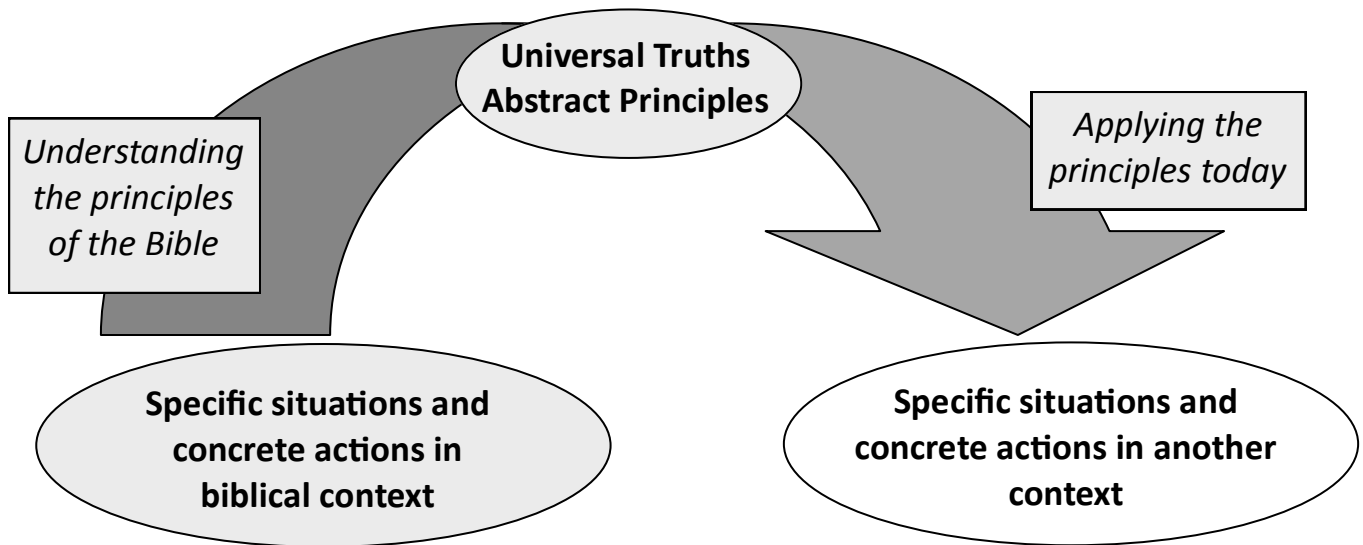
- Understand the significance of specific situations and actions in their context
- Identify the universal truths and principles that are true across all places, times, languages and cultures
- Apply these universal truths to specific situations and actions in your context

So how should we do church in Randwick today? I guess you could say I've avoided the question, but I like to think I've answered the real

question. There is no ONE way to do church, no sure-fire strategy. Church will be an expression of biblical principles applied in a given situation. This goes for evangelism and mission too. There is not a 'one size fits all' approach. Rather, it's about taking the universal, timeless truth of the Bible and expressing it to someone by timely means, in a way that **they get it**.

Last *Chronicle*, in 'Why Church?' we saw that church is at the heart of God's mission in the world. Church is at the heart of mission and mission is at the heart of church. Church is God building a people for himself, and he hasn't given us a book 'The formula of how to do church in Randwick in 2012'. He's given us the Holy Spirit and the Bible. We should be cautious of 'How To...' books, which claim to give us the 'sure-fire' way to do church, or evangelism, or mission, or parenting, or life, or whatever. They may be helpful, but they might not deal rightly with the Bible, and they aren't tailored to our specific situation. We need to go back to the Bible, and see what God has to say about things, and apply it to our own particular situation for ourselves.

The Bridge of Contextualisation



The biblical history in Acts

Time: 1st Century
Place: Around the Mediterranean
Language: Greek
Culture: Hellenistic Greek, Jewish, religious, philosophical

Contemporary life in Randwick

Time: 21st Century
Place: Sydney, Australia
Language: English
Culture: Postmodern, multicultural, materialistic, individualistic

Church SWOT Analysis: 1st Century

Strengths: Great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, passionate, believers have first-hand experience of seeing Jesus died and risen, Urgency of spreading the gospel, ready to die for the truth of Jesus, the Lord, Church rapidly growing

Weaknesses: Small, vulnerable, few members, marginal to society, misunderstood, unresolved theological issues, hostile divisions

Opportunities: Roman empire providing relative peace, stability, and roads to travel and spread the gospel, common Greek language facilitating communication, most have not heard the gospel and are interested in this new teaching

Threats: The 'Fires' of persecution, pressure to deny faith, martyrdoms, violent uprisings and fervent opposition, false teachers

Church SWOT Analysis: 21st Century

Strengths: Access to written Scripture, many believers raised as Christians, have a lifetime of learning God's word, many theological issues resolved, 2000 years of Christian heritage to learn from, great resources for Christian living, evangelism, etc.

Weaknesses: Not living up to what Christ taught, too busy for God, focused on money and self improvement, materialistic, coldness, complacency

Opportunities: Australia providing peace, English a common language, Travel and communication facilitates mission (visitors here and overseas work), many still don't know the gospel, freedom from persecution, can openly share Christ's truth & love

Threats: The 'Freeze' of cold, hard-heartedness to the gospel, spiritual blindness and apathy, antagonism toward 'established religion'

Your task

Let's have a go at crossing this 'bridge' together. Below are some principles (STEP 2 OF CONTEXTUALISATION) from our study of Acts this year. You have two jobs: (STEP 1 and STEP 3):

STEP 1: Check them

Do these principles rightly understand the specific situations and actions in the Bible?

STEP 3: Apply them

What do the principles look like in specific situations at RPC, and in your life.

The Principles

At the beginning, Jesus gives the church its mission

(This is also our mission at RPC today)

- Being Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:1-11)
 - Being Christ's witnesses to Christ (Acts 1:8) means with our words and all of life
 - Taking the gospel out to the unreached – local, regional, global (1:8)

Then we see how the church began fulfilling this mission

(If we've got the principles right, this should also be how we do church today. I've tried to find what is the essential principle behind what took place, and thus what is prescriptive or

at least a good model to follow, and not draw application from aspects that are descriptive of the time but don't apply today)

- Depending on the Lord (1:12-26)
 - Being obedient to his commands (1:12, cf. 1:4)
 - Being prepared to wait for the Lord's directions (1:13 cf. 1:4-5)
- Praying Expectantly (1:14-26)
 - Being persistent in prayer (1:14)
 - Praying in unity with other believers (1:14)
 - Relying on the Lord for the outcome to prayer (1:24)
- Being filled with the Holy Spirit to proclaim God's truth to all nations (2:1-13)
 - Experiencing the power and indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2:1-4)
 - Seeing the power of the Holy Spirit at work to bring the gospel to all nations (2:1-13)
- Speaking God's true gospel in the power of the Spirit (2:14-40)
 - Centred on Christ in preaching and ministry (2:14-36)
 - Serving the word in a way that targets the heart (2:37-39)
- Devotion to teaching, fellowship, worship, and outreach (Acts 2:41-47)
- Praising the Lord for his work in growing the church (Acts 2:47)

- Witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit (3:1-26)
- Convicting others of who Jesus is and their need to respond rightly to him (3:11-26)
- Continuing to proclaim the truth about Jesus despite opposition (4:1-11)
- Continuing in Prayer (4:23-30)
- Being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking God's word boldly (4:31)
- Taking sin seriously, not tolerating sin in our lives or the church (5:1-11)
- Continuing in the power of the Spirit and seeing the church grow despite opposition (5:12-42)
- Overcoming difficulties in the church through wise administration to maintain unity, care for the needs of all in the church and allow leaders to focus on the priorities of prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:1-7)
- Faithful ministry and witness in the power of the Spirit despite opposition (6:8-15)
- Self-Sacrifice for Jesus, proclaiming the gospel boldly (6:8-7:60)
- Taking the gospel out to the region and the nations (8:1-40)☞