

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Let's Talk About the Church

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Acts 2:42-43 KJV And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

We live in a culture where “shopping” for a church has become like scrolling through a list of options on a web-site. You can literally find anything you are looking for! If you want a “traditional church” you can find one. A “contemporary church?” No problem. Churches bill themselves as “seeker sensitive” and “seeker friendly.” You can find those that focus on drama or music or youth programs or yoga or whatever your particular interest might be. I have heard that there is now even such a thing as “drive through churches!” It is all about the experience. It is all about the emotion. It is all about giving you what you want. It used to be that you kind of knew what to expect when you would go to church, but today there is no telling what you might encounter when you walk through the front door. Is this what God intended for His church? Is this how you “do church” these days? It seems to me that in many cases the effort to reach people (a noble effort indeed!), many have compromised their Biblical integrity and in doing so have dishonored the very Lord we worship! As we’ve all heard many times before, it’s not about US, it’s about HIM!

And that is why, I believe, that what we are seeing in our culture today are churches that, for the most part, are operating by the wisdom, programs, and efforts of man, while lacking the presence and power of God! It seems logical to me that if we are God’s church then wouldn’t we want to “do church” God’s way and not our own? A lost and dying world does not need to see what man has to offer. They need to hear about what God has to offer! The world does not need to see what man can do, but what God has done!

In Acts 2, Dr. Luke declared quite clearly when the church met, why the church met, and what happened when the church met. I know you’ve probably heard dozens of messages from this passage of Scripture, but I get from this that we, as Christians, are to consistently meet together to worship God through Biblical instruction, encouragement, and prayer. So my challenge is for us to return to doing church the way God intended! I believe that there is a lot that we can learn from the 1st century church! Vance Havner said, “Too many church services start at eleven o’clock sharp and end at twelve o’clock dull.” We do not want to start out right and end up wrong! So what can we learn about doing things God’s way?

First of all, concerning “when” the church met: “*And they continued steadfastly*” (Acts 2:42a). After Peter’s powerful message on the day of Pentecost three thousand souls were saved. Those who heard the word of God gladly received God’s word and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and that day they were baptized (Acts 2:41). After that great invitation the church had to do something with those who had just believed. And for centuries I believe that this is where the church has gone wrong. Great emphasis has been placed on getting people into the church, but very little emphasis on building people up in their faith. I’ve addressed this issue thoroughly on other occasions so I won’t get on my soapbox again here, but I believe that we all understand that evangelism, as important as that is, is not all that we are called to do. After evangelism comes discipleship. We are commanded to make disciples, baptize them, and then teach them all that the Lord has commanded! (Matthew 28:19-20). Eric Geiger has well said, and I agree, that

“a church can excel at anything and everything else, but if the church fails to make disciples, she has wandered from her fundamental reason for existence.”

These early believers met together! They continued steadfastly! The word denotes a steadfast and single-minded devotion to a certain course of action. In other words, their diligence in coming together! They were diligent in their assembling of themselves together so that they could worship together! Someone has said, “The great task of the church is not only to get sinners into heaven, but to get saints out of bed.” Too many Christians find too many excuses for not coming together on the Lord’s Day! Today’s Church looks for reasons to disassemble! Sometimes I think we do a better job of scattering than gathering! Are you consistent in your worship with God’s people? How is your church attendance? You would not like it very much if your heart beat one time and missed the next would you? Or if your watch ticked one time and missed the next? How about if your child missed every other day at school?

Irregularity in any area of life causes problems. It was said about the early Christians, “... *they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayer.*” If we are “on and off” in our church attendance, it hurts everybody. If we are going to have church the way God intends, then we have got to show up! The apostles didn’t have to beg the people to come to church! Their commitment was such that they wanted to be there. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “*And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*”

Then secondly, concerning “why” the church met, Acts 2 says that they met on purpose with purpose. They didn’t just meet for the sake of meeting. John Phillips writes about the focus of the churches meeting, “Four things marked the infant church. It was marked by the truth, the tie, the table, and the throne.” I like that! Allow me to use those four marks to make some observations.

1. The Preaching of the Truth: “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, ...*”

If our services are to be as God intended we must have preaching! You cannot have church without instruction from God’s word. The first century church continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine. That means that the apostles continually taught the people of God the word of God. The word “doctrine” (*didache*) means instruction (the act or the matter). Jesus taught the apostles and the apostles taught the people. In John 14:26 Jesus said, “*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.*”

The apostles spoke and taught with authority because they taught the Word of God. James Montgomery Boice wrote, “A Spirit-filled church always studies the apostolic teaching. It is a learning church that grounds its experiences in and tests those experiences by the Word of God.” The apostles taught the church the doctrines that we find in the New Testament Gospel and the epistles. I don’t have to tell you that in many churches today they do everything but preach and teach the Word of God! The message is so watered down that you leave asking yourself, “What did I just hear?” Nothing of substance is obtained. I believe that the Holy Spirit still uses the Scriptures to convince, exhort, rebuke, comfort, convict, and convert! God still uses the preaching of the word of God!

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 says, “*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where is the*

wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” The focus of the early church meeting was on the preaching of the word of God! We need to get our focus on the things of God and the word of God.

2. The Partnership of the Tie: *“and fellowship, ...”*

Not only did the early church meet together for instruction they also shared a partnership! They were in this together! There was a sense of unity and camaraderie. A little boy in Sunday School was asked by his teacher to define fellowship. He said, “I guess it is two fellows in a ship.” That is not a bad definition because when two fellows are in a ship together, they go up and down together, they face the storms and the winds together, they move forward at the same pace together, and they are together in a common purpose.

The word “fellowship” (*koinonia*) literally means partnership, or participation. The early believers continued steadfastly in fellowship! They had a common purpose and a common passion. John MacArthur wrote, “For a Christian to fail to participate in the life of a local church is inexcusable. In fact, those who choose to isolate themselves are disobedient to the direct command of Scripture The Bible does not envision the Christian life as one lived apart from other believers. All members of the universal church, the body of Christ, are to be actively and intimately involved in local assemblies.” We need the fellowship of the saints for encouragement, support, inspiration, friendship, and challenge. We are partners in serving Jesus in this world! We need one another! God does not call us to be “loner” Christians doing our own thing! We need the help, support, and encouragement to keep living for Jesus in this world!

During Vacation Bible School one year, a pastor’s wife had an experience with her primary class that can teach us all a great lesson. About an hour before dismissal one evening, a new student was brought into the room. The little boy had one arm missing, and since the class was almost over, the teacher had no opportunity to learn the details of his situation, but she was nervous that one of the other children would say something insensitive to him, so she proceeded cautiously with the lesson. As the class time came to a close, she asked the children to join her in their usual closing ceremony. “Let’s make our churches,” she said, putting her hands together to form the “church.” “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple, open the doors and” Suddenly the awful truth struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, “Josh, let’s make the church together.” That’s what fellowship and partnership is all about – making the church together!

3. The Partaking Together of the Table: *“and in breaking of bread, ...”*

As the early church came together they were instructed in the word, encouraged in their daily walk, and worshiped the Lord together at His table. They often broke bread together! Does that mean that they had a lot of fellowship meals? It could mean that, but most scholars believe that this referred to the church partaking of the Lord’s Supper. They worshipped as they remembered what the Lord had done for them at Calvary! 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 says, *“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and*

one body; for we all partake of that one bread.” They partook of the bread together which strengthened their faith, their friendship, and their focus on the Lord and His work. David Jeremiah wrote, “Communion is an opportunity to look back at what Christ has done, forward to His return, and inward to the spiritual condition of our own lives. Communion should be offered and received regularly by churches and their members.”

4. The Prayers before the Throne: “*and in prayers.*”

The early church met to pray earnestly together. They continued steadfast in prayers. Colossians 4:2 says, “*Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.*” The word “prayers” (*proseuche*) by implication, an earnest oratory, is in the plural which magnifies the when and how of their prayers. They prayed often! Every time they came together they were praying! They prayed with all kinds of requests!

You are probably familiar with the acrostic for prayer based on the Book of Acts.

- A: Adoration
- C: Confession
- T: Thanksgiving
- S: Supplication

In Adoration we adore God and magnify Christ and tell Him how much we love Him. When we practice Confession we confess our sins (of commission and omission), our dependency on the Lord, and our enthronement of Him as our Master, Lord, and Savior! In Thanksgiving we thank Him from our hearts for His presence in our lives, His protection over us, His provision for us. We thank Him for salvation, life, strength, food, shelter, etc. ... the list is endless. And in Supplication we pray to God on behalf of others that are lost, those that are wayward, those that are sick, those that are in need. We bring the needs of other people before the Lord’s throne of grace in supplication.

The early church prayed often and earnestly together. H.A Ironside said, “Prayer is an expression of dependence, and when the people of God really feel their need you will find them flocking together to pray. A neglected prayer meeting indicates very little recognition of one’s true need.” Do we pray earnestly to God? Are we doing church the way God intended?

Finally, “What” happened when the church met?” “*Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles*” (Acts 2:43).

As a result of their being together a genuine and healthy fear of the Lord fell upon them. The word “fear” (*phobos*) means to be put in fear; alarm or fright; to be afraid, and exceedingly so; to be in terror. This word refers to the fear the people had because of the sense of God’s divine presence and because of an attitude of reverence. This is a type of fear that today’s church knows nothing of. In fact, every effort is made to bring a High and Holy God down to man’s level. He is often referred to as “the man upstairs,” or His Name is flippantly used and abused. Even the way many dress in His presence is an indication of the fact that they do not understand how High and Lifted Up He is. We do not sense a real awe and fear of Almighty God in the church today! What happens when someone really comes before God with a holy fear of Who He really is and is changed by God?

Take Isaiah as an example. Isaiah 6:1-8 says, “*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone!*

Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged." Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah had a holy encounter with God and it changed his life! The first century church had a life changing encounter with Christ and they were changed by Him! The fear of the Lord was upon the people of God and society took notice! What does society see when they look at us? The Bible says that fear came upon every soul! Not one was left out! God had His hands upon His church and He worked through His apostles and did many signs and wonders to confirm His presence among His people. They did not have the completed Canon of Scripture, but they did have the anointing of the Holy Spirit. God used them to accomplish works that pointed others to Jesus. The early church bore fruit when they met together! People actually got right with God!

People were being instructed in the word of God, they had a sense of unity as they worked together, they worshiped God together, they served God together, and they feared God together! And God did mighty works in and through His people because they were submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ! I wonder, are we "doing church" the way God intended? What is our focus? Are we bearing fruit for the kingdom of God? What happens when we meet together as a church? I've heard a lot of things named as the "root cause" of the problem. But could the answer be as simple as getting back to doing things the way God intended?