

WE BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH

Acts 2:36-47

The topic of my message this morning is, “We Believe in the Church”. It seems that each week of our series on these great doctrines we’ve been studying I stress to you the supreme importance of the one we study that day. Well, this one is no different. Imagine that you were terminally ill and were sitting down with your children, ages 8, 9, and 11, and you were giving them some final instructions before you went home to be with the Lord. You would begin by telling them to always make Jesus the very center of their every thought and word and action. That the only life that is successful is the life in which He is absolute Lord and Master. But if you were wise, you would give them a second word about their future. You would tell them that in order for this to happen, it is imperative that they pursue this Christ-centered life through their total involvement in Christ’s church. That next to their love for Christ and love for their own immediate family, they should love the church more than anything.

Now, I’m sure that none of you are thinking this but let me tell you what many Christians would think upon hearing what I just said. They would say, “Preacher that is exactly what I expected you to say. You work for the church. It’s your job to get people to come to church”. And they would not believe what I said was true. In fact, I could not tell you how many people have told me over the years that you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian. It is as if going to church is like a dose of castor oil. But beloved, with all of my heart I can assure you that the imperative nature of immersing yourself in the life of the church **is** true. And today I want you to know it is true, not because the preacher said it, but because God said it.

So turn in your Bibles, please, to Acts 2:36-47. The setting of our text is the Day of Pentecost. Peter is winding down his sermon with the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who will repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. And then he reveals to them the awesome means by which anyone comes to Christ. He told them that the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is equated with the gift of salvation – that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to all that the Lord God would call. Friends; salvation is a calling. The need to be saved just doesn’t pop into a lost person’s head out of the clear blue. If you are saved this morning it is because God called you to salvation and you heard and responded to His call.

But I want you to notice something here that is interesting. When you and I think of being saved, what’s the first thing that comes to mind? 95% of us at least would say, “Being saved means missing hell and gaining heaven”. And praise God;

that is certainly a part of what salvation means. But it means so much more than that!! In fact, in this great sermon when 3000 people were saved Peter mentions nothing of eternal punishment. What he said was, “Be saved from this perverse generation”, which means, “Be saved from the perverted, ungodly ways of the world”.

Beloved, I want you to know this morning that this is the primary purpose for which Jesus has saved you. Now, to be rescued from eternal punishment is for sure the greatest personal benefit to you and me. But from God’s perspective, He has saved us to restore us to the life of holiness that we were intended to live from the day that God created Adam and Eve. But as we know, sin entered by Adam’s fall and separated Adam from God, and ever since God has been in the business of calling men out of their lifestyle of sin and restoring them to that holiness and fellowship with Him that Adam once enjoyed.

Turn to 1 Peter 2:9. Here Peter uses this word “call” again. He says that we’ve been called out of darkness into His marvelous light. And here we see again that this calling is a call unto holiness. Peter says that we are a holy nation. The word “holy” in the Greek means that we are set apart for God, we are His special treasure. But it also means more than that. It means that we are pure and upright in conduct. Mark writes in Mark 6:20 that John the Baptist was a just and holy man – he was a righteous man. And as God’s people 2000 years later we are still set apart from the lost world to be different. We are called to **purity**.

But we have another calling according to Peter. Not only to **purity**; but also to **proclamation**. We are called to proclaim the praises of God, to exalt Him before a lost and dying world. So every day in every way our **lives** and our **lips** are to bring glory to God. And Peter hammers home this truth in the last words of his sermon as he said, “Be saved from this perverse generation”. And when the invitation was given, 3000 people responded to God’s call. Can you imagine! In the first service after the Holy Spirit descended upon the followers of Jesus, the number of believers grew from 120 to 3120. So here you have 3120 Christians. All of them are 3½ years old or less in the faith and 3000 of them are not yet a day old in the faith. They have all been given this calling to live a life of purity and proclamation of the gospel to the entire world. So how in the world are they going to go about doing it? Well, beloved, God gave them a perfect plan as to what to do. And the plan is still the perfect plan for His followers, and His plan can be stated in two words. And those words are, “the church”. The church is God’s plan for every believer to fulfill God’s purpose for him in this world. And I want us to take a close look at His plan right now.

If any believer is going to fulfill God’s call upon his life he must begin with square one, and that is he must be baptized. Look at v. 41. Someone asked me just

this week if you had to be baptized to be saved. And I told them no, you don't. Salvation has nothing to do with baptism. As we studied last week and as we all know, we are saved when we turn from our sins and trust Christ by faith alone to be our Savior and our Master. We are saved at a definite place on a definite time. I was saved in July of 1973 when I asked Christ into my life kneeling by the front pew of the First Baptist Church of Reform. I knew a teenage girl who was saved riding on a ski lift. I know a man who pulled off of the road while riding to work one morning and was saved sitting in his car. Some of you were saved in your homes. At least one of you I know was saved at work. You can be saved anywhere, anytime the Holy Spirit of God convicts you and you ask Jesus to save you. And when you get saved, you are as sure to make it to heaven at that moment as if you were already there.

Having said that let me say this. The New Testament knows nothing of a believer who refuses to be baptized. Jesus Himself was baptized as our example, and He told His followers that it was necessary to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). He told His disciples to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There's just no question where Jesus stood on the matter of baptism. Jesus said, if you follow Me; then follow Me in baptism. And we also need to know that in the NT there was only one mode of baptism, and that was total immersion. And that's why we are Baptists. We practice total immersion because that's the way Jesus, the disciples, and all the rest were baptized.

Let me give you a one word definition of baptism. It is the word "identification". In baptism, the believer in Christ identifies with Christ. He puts on the colors of Christ. He stands up and tells the world, "I am a Christian and I am not ashamed of it". Now, symbolically, baptism pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and it also pictures the same for the believer. Romans six says that just as Jesus died, was buried, and rose from the grave, so those who trust Him also died, were buried, and rose with Him. And when you are baptized you picture Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and yours. But the point is, in the early church everyone who was saved was baptized. 3000 were baptized at Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized, Paul was baptized, Cornelius and his household were baptized, Lydia and her household were baptized, and the Philippian jailer and his household were baptized. Friend, if you are a true, born-again Christian, to refuse to be baptized is to live in clear disobedience to Jesus' command. And you will never grow as a Christian and your life will never glorify God in the way it should until you take this initial step in your Christian walk.

And notice in v. 41 what happened when they were baptized. They were added to the church. They joined the church. Friend, church membership is not man's idea, it is God's. God knows the great value of believer's yoking up with one another in

their effort to honor Him with their lives. Some of you perhaps have heard this story about the Canadian geese. The Canadian geese will begin to migrate soon from their summer home in Canada to their winter home in parts of the southern United States, a flight of hundreds and hundreds of miles. And you know that they don't just fly as a wad in the sky, they fly in a V formation. Well, a number of years ago some scientists set out to figure out why they do this, and their findings were amazing. They discovered that the geese could fly much further using the same amount of energy than if they simply flied at random. It all has to do with wind resistance, and flying in formation cuts it down 70%! Think of it. They get 70% more work done when working together.

But not only that, when the geese are flying in V formation, every one of them except the lead goose can see at least two other geese. And if something happens to a fellow goose while in flight and that goose has to drop out of formation, two other geese will drop out with him to help care for his needs, or just to stay with him until he dies, and then they will rejoin the rest of the group. And did you know that our military jets often fly in this same V formation, for the Air Force has learned the value of pilots seeing one another in working together to accomplish their mission.

Beloved, what I am saying about flying together, about teamwork, is a principle that applies to more than just things that move about in the sky. It applies to businesses, it applies to athletics, it applies to civic organizations, and it applies to churches. But let me tell you the difference between churches and all the rest. God's church has a purpose for working together that towers over all other purposes as Mt. Everest towers over an ant hill. Our purpose is to make Christ known to a world that is perishing without Him. And that is precisely why no matter what other organization or group you may belong to, whether it is the fire department or the library board or the PTA or the hospital volunteers association, or even an organization like the Gideons, nothing will be as important as your being an active, excited member of a church! Listen to what David Platt wrote about the church in his book entitled Radical Together:

If you and I want our lives to count for God's purpose in the world, we need to begin with a commitment to God's people in the church. God has called us to lock arms with one another in single –minded, death-defying obedience to one objective; the declaration of his gospel for the demonstration of his glory to all nations”.

So what was God's plan for His church in the first century, and what is it today? We begin to see it unfolding in verse 42. Luke tells us here that the new church continued steadfastly in four things. Those words mean that they gave constant attention to these things; they were faithful to these things. And beloved, I declare to

you that any church that makes up its mind to be faithful to these four things will be a Christ-honoring church. Let's look at them briefly.

First, they were faithful in the **apostle's doctrine**. This means they were faithful to the teaching of the Word of God. We have talked much about the Word of God in recent weeks. And today I say it again – the Word is our very source of spiritual life. Without the Word we would have never been saved. And without the Word we will never grow. Peter says that we are to desire the sincere milk of the Word that we may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2). Jeremiah said, "Your words were found, and I did eat them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart". Jeremiah devoured God's Word as a hungry man devours food, and the Word brought joy to his soul. But David gives us perhaps the fullest benefit of God's Word in Ps. 119:165 when he says, "Great peace have they that love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble". We could go on and on but time will not permit. But the church that magnifies the Word of God will have members who have a mature walk with God and a mighty witness for God.

But the first church was not only faithful to the Word of God, they were also faithful to **fellowship**. **Fellowship** is sharing of hearts, of souls, sharing our burdens and cares and joys with one another. And oh, how we need more true biblical fellowship! Fellowship comforts us when we are broken-hearted or lonely, and encourages us when we are discouraged or tired. God's says in Pvbs. 27:27 that as iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. And that's what true fellowship does. It sharpens our countenance, that is, over time fellowship makes our personality more pleasant, more winsome, and it makes us a better tool in God's tool box to work with.

Author Gene Getz states that not counting the gospels, 58 times in the NT we read the little phrase "one another". That's 58 times God tells us that we need to have fellowship, for that's what fellowship is – a "one another" encounter. Loving one another heads the list. 11 times the Bible tells us to love one another. But there are other "one another" exhortations as well. We are to be devoted to one another and honor one another, Romans 12:10. We are to be of the same mind toward one another, Romans 12:16. We are to accept one another, Romans 15:7. We are to greet one another, Romans 16:13. And these are not all. But beloved, fellowship is such a vital ministry in the church!! For there is not a one of us that does not need the comfort and strength from time to time if we are to remain faithful in our walk and in our witness for Jesus. And God has chosen to use fellowship as a major way for us to receive it.

But beloved, most Christians that I know anything about have a dearth of fellowship. The extent of their fellowship with believers who are not already close friends or family is the shake-hands song on Sunday morning. And it is lickity split to their car after the last “amen”, as if they are a NASCAR driver who’s afraid he will miss the starting gun of a race. There’s never a conversation any deeper than the weather or the football game. And there’s no desire to participate in fellowship meals at church and mix and mingle with God’s people where the conversations might get a little deeper. Many if not most Christians are satisfied to keep at arm’s length with most of the people they worship with every week. Do these things describe you? Beloved, let me share my heart with you this morning!! Every truly saved person in our church is a minister!! We are all called to minister. And much of the time we minister in the context of fellowship! And if we do not engage in Christian fellowship, then a lot of the needs of God’s people will be unmet. And whether you attend every fellowship meal or not is not the point. The point is; are you willing to take the time and effort to reach out to your brothers and sisters around you and have fellowship with them in Jesus’ name?

Let me give you a pointer or two as to how we can improve our fellowship at Grant’s Creek. First of all, pray and ask God to give you the grace to come to church with spiritual eyes. Come looking for someone to have fellowship with. Someone who is hurting. Someone who is sitting alone in the worship service. The Holy Spirit just might nudge you to ask them to sit with you, or at least go over and converse with them for a few moments. And when you are at a fellowship meal, remember that it’s a fellowship meal. Is someone sitting alone, especially a newer member or a guest in our church? Then don’t just go to another table and sit down by yourself. Go and sit with them and enjoy their fellowship. Just be aware at all times who God would have you to reach out to. That’s what the first church did. Verse 46 says that daily they were breaking bread together from house to house. They were in each other’s homes having fellowship. I urge you this morning, ask God to give you a passion for fellowship!

But there is something else that the first church was faithful to do. Not only were they faithful to the **Word of God** and to **fellowship**, but they were also faithful to the **breaking of bread**. And this is simply another expression for the Lord’s Supper. They were faithful to take communion. They were faithful to go back to the cross through the symbols of the Lord’s Supper and remember what Jesus did for them. And this kept their hearts warm and passionate for the Son and the Father. And in this way they also kept their sin accounts short with God. For as they saw Jesus’ blood being shed for them through the fruit of the vine and His body being broken through the bread, out of a heart of gratitude it drove them to confess and turn from their sins.

Let me ask you a question. How seriously does every one of us come to the Lord's table? If everyone of us confessed our sins and were totally cleansed every time we partook of the Lord's table, how much of the glory of God do you think would descend among us? And just as sincerely as we pray for a passion for fellowship, let us pray for a passion for purity. I came across a little prayer a few months ago that expresses this sentiment:

Oh may I live so close to Thee
That those who know me best may see
I live as godly as I pray
And Christ is real from day to day

I can only briefly speak to the fourth thing that the first church was faithful to observe. And that is **prayer**. Think of the church in this manner. Think of the church's foundation as being a large perfectly flat stone. That stone is our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). But then think of two huge, round pillars that rest on that stone, 50' in diameter and 2' high. And upon these pillars the frame of the church is built. And these two pillars are the Word of God and prayer. What did the apostles say was the reason for selecting the first deacons just four chapters over in Acts 6? So they could devote themselves to the Word of God and prayer. Beloved, prayer changes things! Prayer moves mountains! Prayer breaks the hardest hearts! If you would do mighty works for God, be mighty in prayer!

Our time is almost gone. But before we go I want you to see the tremendous blessings that God gives to any church that will be faithful to the Word, to fellowship, to communion, and to prayer. Look with me beginning in v. 43. "Then fear came upon every soul..." God's people were **fearful**. They had a reverence for God that led them to exalt Him in holy living. But they were not only fearful, they were **powerful**. Look at the last part of the verse. "...and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles". Do you want to see the power of God fall on Grant's Creek? Being faithful to these four things will make it happen. But God's people were also **charitable**. Verses 44-45 tells us that they shared with one another as each other had need and even sold their goods to do so if necessary. They were not only charitable, they were **indivisible**. Look at verse 46. "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple..." They were brothers and sisters who loved one another and let their love cover a multitude of sins, and they were unified. They believed the Psalmist when he said, "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity".

Because they were faithful to the Word, fellowship, communion, and prayer, the church was also **joyful**. Verses 46-47 says they ate their food together with gladness

and that they were continually praising God. And do you know the result of all of these things? Verse 47 says that they were a **favorable** church. They had favor with all the people. The unsaved world around them, even though many of them were hostile to Christ, looked at their holy living and their benevolence toward one another and their unity and their joy and they said, "I like that! There must be something to this gospel of Jesus they've been preaching". And in verse 47 Luke writes that every day someone new was being saved.