

## **WE BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH (part 2)**

### **Acts 2:42-47**

Last week we began looking at what the Bible says about the church. The church is unique apart from all other organizations or societies, for it is the only one that has its origin in Heaven. Speaking of the universal church Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it". And the church is the only organization that has its purpose borne in Heaven. Jesus told the first church that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). And as much as the gates of Hell have tried, they have not stopped the flood tide of the church's witness as she continues to win millions and millions each year to faith in Christ.

But we need to understand that these millions and millions are won to Christ primarily through the ministry of the local church. Churches like Grant's Creek. Let me ask you a question this morning. If you are saved and you came to Christ through some ministry of a local church – a regular church service, a revival, a VBS, a youth retreat, someone from the church witnessing to you or something else – if you were saved through a ministry of a local church, please raise your hand. Now, if you were saved through the ministry of a television evangelist, not a television pastor such as Charles Stanley or Kevin Hamm, but a television evangelist such as Billy Graham or Pat Robertson – if you were saved through a TV evangelist or without the influence of a pastor or any other church member, would you please raise your hand?

Beloved, God has chosen to give the great joy and responsibility of being His co-laborer in spreading His gospel to the ends of the earth to His local churches. Even the Gideons require that before someone becomes a Gideon they must first be a member in good standing of a local church. But if we are to go to the ends of the earth with the good news of Jesus we must have a plan. And in Acts two we see God's great plan for His great church. And if any church dares to follow it, they have a 100% guarantee of success. So today we are going to conclude our look at this great plan.

Turn in your Bibles, please, to Acts 2:41-47. We saw three weeks ago from verse 40 that Peter called the congregation at Pentecost to be saved from the perversion of the Roman society in which they lived. They were called out of their sin into righteousness. And we must never forget that the call to salvation is still the same today. It is a call to holy living. It is absolutely critical that we understand this as a church AND as individual Christians. We will never make an impact on a world of darkness unless we walk as children of light (Eph. 5:8).

And we also saw from v. 41 that the first thing that the three thousand new believers at Pentecost did after they were saved was that they were baptized and joined the church. There were no Christian soldiers going out to battle all alone.

They knew the importance of being a part of an army, the army of God. And when they enlisted they immediately immersed themselves in four spiritual disciplines, those being the devotion to the apostle's doctrine, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Last week we talked briefly about the necessity of our devotion to the apostle's doctrine, or the Word of God. Psalm 165:160 says, "Great peace have they who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble". What a testimony as to the power of the Word! Let me give you another one today. Pvbs. 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint..." The word "vision" means a prophetic revelation, a word from God. And God says that without a word from God people cast off restraint and run wild, destroying themselves. The King James Version is more blunt. It reads, "Where there is no vision the people perish. And oh, is that not what we see happening in the world today? The world is perishing without the Word of God. And many of us were reminded of this so graphically as we watched Courageous yesterday. And even many churches have cast off the Word as their standard for faith and practice and are dying. And the starting place for any church to thrive for the glory of God is that it must revere the Word as the only authoritative message from God, it must know the Word, and it must obey the Word of God!

But the first church was not only faithful to the Word of God, they were also faithful to fellowship. Fellowship is sharing of our hearts and our 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 says in Proverbs. 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. We are to be kind one to another and we are to forgive one another, Eph. 4:32. 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 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 in the Sunday morning worship service. 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 there are other times when we learn of other ministry opportunities through fellowship. And if we do not engage in Christian fellowship, then a lot of the needs of God’s people we will be unmet. A lot of new believers fall by the wayside. 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? I have said it many times, and I say it once again. When newcomers come our way they are not looking for a friendly church, they are looking for a friend. And I promise you, if you will take the time to be a friend, someone will be blessed, whether they are a new member or an old member. And that’s what fellowship is all about.

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. When you walk into your Sunday School class room, don’t just plop down in your chair. Look around and see if you see a new face or if you see someone who’s been absent, and greet them with a smile. Be sensitive to someone who just doesn’t seem to be their normal self, and take the time to ask them how they are, and then take the time to really listen if they will tell you. Notice 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. If you see 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 to whom God would have you to reach out. That’s what the first church did.

But the church is not the only place to have Christian fellowship. Verse 46 says that they were breaking bread and eating their meals together from house to house. They were in each other’s homes having fellowship. Beloved, there is no better place for fellowship with Christian friends than around the dining room table. Lazarus,

Mary, and Martha knew this, and how they were blessed by their fellowship with Jesus in their own home. And may I add there's no better place for ministry to those outside the church than around the dinner table. Listen to Luke 14:12-14. Beloved, I challenge you. Let God use your home as a place for grace!! Ask Him 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 do you think that every one of us comes to the Lord's table? If every time we partook of the Lord's table everyone of us really and truly went back to the cross and contemplated what Jesus did for us there, and then confessed our sins and were totally cleansed, 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:

Help me to walk so close to Thee  
 That those who know me best can 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. Beloved, real, mountain-moving prayer is indispensable to the work of the church. And the fact is mountain-moving prayer is hard work! The devil will fill your life with all kinds of leisure activities, supposed responsibilities, and Christian busy work to keep you from praying. And when you do begin to pray he will fill your mind with all kinds of distractions. And mountain-moving prayers are not the prayers you say two minutes before you cut your bedroom lamp off at night. They are the prayers that you leave your lamp on long into the night to pray. They are not the prayers you pray while brushing your teeth in the morning, they are they prayers you get up long before breakfast to pray, or the prayers in the unhurried time you've carved out during the day to pray. Now, by all means it is good to put up a quick prayer every spare minute of the day that you have. But mountain-moving prayers don't happen on the fly alone. And when you learn to pray with all of your focus on

God, in an unhurried way, listening to Him as well as asking from Him, your prayer time will become the sweetest time in your day! And you will look forward to that precious time you spend with Jesus day by day.

You say, “Preacher, how do I learn to pray mountain-moving prayers?” Just start out praying! Block out some unhurried time in the morning, or the evening before you get too tired, or during the day, open up your Bible and read briefly, and then start pouring your heart out to God. Sincerely ask Him to make you a prayer warrior, and He will!

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. They are the book ends of the four disciplines of the first church. The church their service to Christ by giving heed to the apostles’ doctrine – the Word of God, and they concluded with 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.

Now, 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 verse 43. “Then fear came upon every soul...” God’s people were fearful. The word fear in the original language means a holy terror because of the presence and actions of God. In Acts 5:11 we read that great fear came upon the church when Sapphira dropped dead in the midst of them for lying to God. I can understand that fear, can’t you? Luke 8:37 says that great fear seized the whole multitude of people in the region of Gadarenes when Jesus healed the demoniac and commanded the demons to go into a herd of swine. They were so afraid that they asked Jesus to leave. And the church in Jerusalem felt the awesome, holy presence of God among them so strongly that they feared. They did not fear hell, because they were His children. But they did fear offending Him by their casual, sinful conduct. And every earthly concern became as nothing compared to matters concerning their soul.

Almost 300 years ago America experienced a movement of God that was so real and life-altering in so many that it was named the Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards was a central figure in this awakening, and here is what he wrote concerning one particular town where God sent this great revival:

“There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.....This work of God....soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God”.

Now listen carefully to his last sentence: “It was never so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then”. That’s what the fear of God does. It fills the hearts of the saved with love and joy, and it fills the hearts of the lost with distress. And that was the atmosphere in the first church at Jerusalem.

But the church at Jerusalem was not only a fearful church; Luke writes that they were a powerful church. 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? Well, if you do, then begin to steadfastly commit yourself to the Word, to fellowship, to staying close to the cross, and to prayer. And by the grace of God in the days ahead your staff will be leading all of us to do this as never before. We will seek to cull away any activity that does not fit this holy purpose, and refuse to start anything new that does not enhance it. Because beloved, the time is just too short to be fiddling while Rome burns! Years ago some believer wrote these words: “A church that has to be supported by tea parties, ice cream socials and fried chicken is as weak as the tea, as cold as the ice cream and as dead as the chicken”.

But we see other good things about the Jerusalem church. It was also a charitable church. Verses 44-45 tells us that they shared with one another as each other had need and even sold their goods to do it if necessary. They had generous hearts to give to the work of God. Beloved, may I say to you that being a generous, cheerful giver is one of the most telling signs that you have been touched and changed by the grace of God. We read in 1 Corinthians 16:1 that the early Christians gave every week to the Lord, and we read in 2 Corinthians 8 that the Macedonian Christians gave with great joy out of their deep poverty. They didn’t have it to give but they gladly gave anyway.

Some of you may be thinking, “How did they do that?” Because through the Word, and fellowship, and communion and prayer they had come to love God with all of their heart, and beloved, when God gets ahold of your heart, He will always get ahold of your pocketbook! You will want to give back to God as much as you can out of all He has given to you; out of your deep gratitude for all that He has done for you. And if you have too many bills to give off the top of your paycheck to God, you need to ask yourself, “Are all of these payments on things that I really need, or things that I really want?” For the Bible says in Philippians 4:19, “For my God will supply all of your needs through Jesus Christ our Lord.” God is going to supply your needs, beloved. His Word guarantees it. So if you have too many expenses to give to regularly and liberally to God, there is only one reason. You are spending God’s part of your income on something that you don’t really need. Oh, there are so many believers who need to repent and ask God to forgive them in this area of their Christian lives, and cut back wherever it takes to honor Him with their giving.

But the first church was not only **charitable**, they were **indivisible**. Look at verse 46. “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple...” Beloved, God has placed a high premium on unity in the church! The Psalmist said, “How good and

how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity”. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they should endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:3). Peter exhorted his readers to love one another fervently with a pure heart (1 Peter 1:22). John wrote, “Beloved let us love one another” (1 John 4:7), and he went on to write, “If someone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother he is a liar...” (1 John 4:20). And the first church was a group of saints who loved one another and let their love cover a multitude of sins, and they were unified.

Because of they were faithful to the Word, fellowship, communion, and prayer, the church was also **joyful**. Verses 46-47 says that they ate their food together with gladness and that they were continually praising God. Oh, one of the greatest lies that Satan has ever perpetrated on poor, lost souls is that serving Jesus Christ takes all the joy out of life. That in pure misery going to church ranks right up there with a root canal. But listen to what David said, “In Your presence is fullness of joy” (Psalms 16:11). Friend, when you have a life changing experience with Jesus Christ and you get in a church full of people who’ve had the same life changing experience, there’s nothing this side of Heaven that can compare to the joy!! In fact, it was so good in the Jerusalem that they were having church every day (v. 46a).

So we have seen numerous characteristics of the first Christian church. They were **fearful, powerful, charitable, indivisible, and joyful**. But I want to take you to one verse in the Bible that sums up what the church is all about, and interestingly, it is in the Old Testament. Look at 1 Chronicles 16:35; David is the writer here, and he says, “Save us, O God!” That’s how you enter God’s universal church. By trusting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Then he says, “Gather us together”. That’s talking about the local church. “Bring Your people together as one people”. And then when you do, Lord, deliver us from the Gentiles. Separate us from their ungodly ways. Make us a holy people. Deliver us from their perversion. And Lord, when you do, we will give thanks to You and praise Your holy name. Beloved, that’s what the church is all about!

But we must see one more truth about this church before we close. 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.

I want to ask you two questions as we close, and I want you to stay with me. First of all, if you belong to Jesus Christ today, if you are saved, does your Christian life reflect the same characteristics as the Jerusalem Christians? Do you really fear God as they did? Does the power of God flow from you to others? Are you charitable, do you seek unity in the church, are you joyful? By God’s grace, when

God's people of any church reflect these things, they will advance His kingdom in a great way and bring great glory to Him.

The other question: Do you know for certain that you are a part of God's church? You become a part of God's church when God the Holy Spirit convicts you of your sin and brings you to the place where you know that you need a Savior.....