

## Doing Church Right Acts 2: 36-47 (part #1)

There are many things about the church where Christians have room to differ, and do differ. If you surf the Christian channels on your TV or radio you can find some great preaching. Some of you might remember James Kennedy, who a few years ago was the pastor of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. He was a great preacher and God used Him to build a great church before he died. And many of you have seen and heard Kevin Hamm, pastor of First Baptist, Gardendale, who has preached here on two occasions. Gardendale is one the most on-fire churches in the SBC. Two great churches, two great preachers. But two preaching styles as different as the brightest noonday sun and the blackest midnight. Many loved Dr. Kennedy's stately demeanor and thought provoking, conversational delivery, and they would call Kevin Hamm a grandstander and an emotionalist. Others love Dr. Hamm's fire in the pulpit and would say that James Kennedy needed a good dose of the Holy Spirit's fire himself. The truth is, James Kennedy preached just like God wired him to preach, and likewise does Kevin Hamm. And James Kennedy had God's anointing on his preaching, and so does Kevin Hamm.

And what goes for preaching goes for music in the church, for missions in the church, and for ministry in the church. Each one of God's churches is unique, just like His children. The way in which we all do church will be different, some churches slightly different from others, some vastly different, but all different. But if we do church right, there will be two things that are exactly the same for every single church. Every church that is pleasing to God will preach the same **saving message** and it will have the same **sanctifying methods**. And today I want us to see from God's word just what these two things are. For I believe that many of us here today really want to do church right. And if we see some things that we need to fix to do church right, I pray that God will give us the grace to do it.

Now, let me share with you just why this is so important. First of all, if a church is not doing church right, it will be a church full of unsatisfied Christians. Oh, yes, many will still have their personal joy in the Lord that nothing can take away. And yet there is still a frustration that the Body of Christ to which they belong is anemic and powerless, just like a cripple man with a perfect mind, wanting to get up and walk and not able to. And many other Christians will cease to grow in their faith and live shriveled up, defeated lives. But all are unsatisfied, unfulfilled.

But secondly, when the church is not doing church right it fails to make an impact on an unsaved world around her. Souls are not saved through that church, lives are not changed through that church, and God is not glorified. And there is also chastisement coming to the church not doing it right. We read of several churches who were not doing church right in the book of Revelation. God told the church at

Ephesus that unless they started doing it right that He would come and remove their candlestick, that is, He would take away their witness completely. God told the church at Sardis that unless they started doing church right He would come upon them as a thief. Now, he left it up to them to decide what that meant, but you can be sure that it wouldn't be good. And God told the church at Laodicea that they made Him sick and unless they started doing church right that He would vomit them out of His mouth. Oh, beloved, it is imperative that we do church right!

So how does a church do it right? Well, as always, God has given us the perfect answer in His perfect Word. So let's see what it is. Turn in your Bibles to Acts 2: 36-47. We will begin reading at the conclusion of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Acts 2 tells us that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the 120 believers who were gathered together in one accord. And when the Spirit fell the believers all began to speak in tongues, glorifying God, and men from several different nations heard and understood their praises. And after the naysayers in the gathering accused the disciples of being drunk, Peter stepped up and delivered His great sermon. He began by explaining how the disciples were not drunk, but that what was happening was a fulfillment of Joel's prophesy of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the latter days. And then Peter shifted to the message that the congregation really needed to hear – just who Jesus of Nazareth really was and why He came.

Now, beloved, this is the starting place in doing church right – proclaiming boldly and plainly the message of Jesus that Peter preached at Pentecost. And Peter's message was this: "Jesus Christ was the Messiah that the Old Testament prophets foretold would come one day and save both Jew and Gentile from their sins. But when He came the Jews rejected their Messiah and crucified Him; however God raised Him up from the dead and has made Him both Lord and Christ – the One to be worshipped, the One to follow, and the One to trust alone for forgiveness and salvation". And when Peter preached this truth to the Pentecost congregation the Holy Spirit slew his listeners with conviction. They knew that they were guilty of rejecting Jesus. They knew that they were squarely under the cloud of God's judgment. And they cried out in anguish to Peter and the rest, "Tell us what to do!" And Peter quickly responded, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins".

Now, to repent means a change of mind that leads to a change of action. John the Baptist told the Pharisees who came for His baptism to bring works that were worthy of repentance, that is, "Show me that you mean business" (Luke 3:8). And to repent in this age of grace is to simply mean business, to be serious about turning from sin and following Jesus Christ as Savior, Master and Ruler of life.

So the first part of God's saving message is to repent, and then Peter said, "...and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins". Now, I do not have to tell how the theologians have debated this phrase now for two millennia. But let me give you just a brief but I believe sufficient explanation.

We know that Peter cannot be teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation. If this were true then this verse would be in direct conflict with many other verses that plainly teach that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. Let me just share a few: John 3:16, 36; Acts 16:31; Romans 4:5, “But to Him who does not work, but believes on Him Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”; Galatians 3:26. Every one of these verses are crystal clear in saying that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. Even Peter writes in his first epistle: “Though now you do not see Him (Jesus), yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9).

We also know that baptism is not a part of salvation by Paul’s statement to the Corinthian church, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel...” (1 Corinthians 1:17). Surely Paul would never have said that he did not come to baptize if it were necessary for salvation.

But perhaps the most solid counter to the baptismal regeneration argument comes from the meaning of that little preposition “for”. Peter says to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. The Greek meaning of “for” is often “for the purpose of”, but it also can mean, “because of”, as it does in Matthew 12:41, where it says that the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. The word “at” is the same Greek word as the word “for” in Acts 2:38, and the meaning is clearly that the men of Nineveh repented “because of” Jonah’s preaching. Well, the same meaning holds true in Peter’s sermon. He called men to be baptized in the name of Jesus “because of” their remission of sins. Peter says, “Repent and believe in Jesus, then be baptized because of your remission of sins. Stand up and declare publically what Christ has done for you”.

I want to ask each of you this morning, have you repented? Is there a new direction in your life since the day that you confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? I had a funeral with a pastor of another denomination a couple of years ago and he told me he believed that his denomination was full of lost people. In his opinion they had never repented. Now, why would he make that judgment call? Because most of them are nowhere to be found! There has been no outward difference at all since they claimed to have the King of the Universe come into their lives. They are still living totally for themselves, presuming on dangerous grace that we talked about two weeks ago.

But friends, when you repent there will be a difference! You’ll begin to love your neighbor as yourself, and that includes your wife and kids. And you will have a love for Jesus that you never had before. You will love Him for all that He has done to provide for your salvation. Let me tell you another sign that you’ve repented. If you’ve truly repented and have been saved, you’ll keep on repenting. You’ll have a hatred for the sin that is still in your life, and you’ll be convicted when you sin and cry out to God for forgiveness. Because deep, deep down in your heart, even though

you fail Him time and time again, you have a desire to honor Him in your life. Have you truly repented?

Well, the churches that do church right all proclaim the same saving message that Jesus Christ died for sinners and that faith in Him is the only way of salvation.

But now I want us to look at the other foundation stone of Christ-honoring churches. They not only have the same **saving message**, but they all have the same **sanctifying methods**. Look again at verse 42. In this verse we see the four methods that God has laid out for His church in doing church right. And I want us to look briefly at each one. First of all, the young church at Jerusalem continued steadfastly in **the apostle's doctrine**. That is, they were serious students of the Word of God.

Now, beloved, none of you can remember how many times you've heard preachers, including this one, say to you the importance of reading, meditating upon, and even memorizing the Word of God. We know that David said, "Your Word have I hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Psalm 119:11). The Word keeps us from sin. And you've probably heard David's words, "The entrance of your Word gives light. It gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130). The Word gives understanding in all the great issues of life. And I love this verse, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble". What a promise! Psalm one promises us that if we meditate on the law of the Lord day and night, in whatever we do we will prosper. There's no better guarantee for success in life than that!

Let me give you just one example. If you are married and still in your right mind, you want your marriage to be a success. Well, let me give you a tip as to what can help. Doctor George Crane, a clinical columnist in a number of newspapers a few years ago, calculated that when a married couple is active together in the same church they have about a 50 times greater chance of avoiding divorce; and that only one in 500 marriages breaks up where there is a family altar. Friends, that's the power of God's Word!

But I want you to think about the importance of the Word from another perspective for a moment. Think with me what happens when you don't make God's Word a priority in your life. And for a good example, there's no better place to look than at Israel. When you read the book of Judges you are amazed at Israel's wicked ways. After all that God had done for them in delivering them from bondage and leading them to the Promised Land. And how they suffered for their sin! Time and time again they were conquered by neighboring nations, and time and time again they cried out for deliverance, and God delivered them each time. But there is a very enlightening verse in 1 Samuel 3 that gives us some insight into the reason or penchant for sin. 1 Samuel 3:1 says, "And the Word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation". Friends, where there is no Word of God,

there is trouble. And the preaching and teaching of the Word is the first method for the church that does it right.

I heard a humorous story about something that happened at a Catholic school that illustrates the bad theology that children can learn unless the Word of God is taught correctly. A group of children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large tray of apples. The nun made a note, and posted on the apple tray: "Take only ONE. God is watching." Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. A child had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples." Beloved, let us continue steadfastly in the teaching of the Word.

But notice the second sanctifying method for that first church in Jerusalem. Verse 42 says that they also gave attention to fellowship. Now, the word fellowship means "partnership", or "sharing". Beloved, God created us as social beings, and we just don't function well without interaction with others. God Himself said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2: 18), and He gave Adam a wife. And just as marriage is the ideal for most people, so is fellowship the ideal for every Christian. But I will go a step further than that. Fellowship is **essential** for every Christian.

Friends, there is not a one of us who is so strong in our faith that we don't need a comforting word from time to time. This old world is not kind to anyone, and it is not kind especially to Christians. Twice this week I have read something concerning our country for the very first time. Twice I've read that we are now living in post-Christian America. We've read about post-Christian Europe for years. But now writers are saying that America is no longer a nation where Christian principles are honored and Christians are respected. And they are right, and you can be sure that if you take a stand for your faith in Jesus you are going to be persecuted like never before in the days ahead. This world is not kind to us, but we also struggle with the cares of life, period. Bills, sickness, fractured relationships, broken hearts, death. And most people just claw through one day to the next.

But God has given us an oasis of relief from these monsters that suck all the joy out of life. And that is fellowship! That's the reason that Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. That's the reason that Proverbs 15:23 says, "...a word spoken in due season, how good it is." I'll tell you how good a word spoken in due season is – you remember it for years. You remember that kind word that someone spoke to you when you were at your lowest point, or that big, warm hug, or that radiant smile. You remember that compliment for a job well done, and it blesses you long after it was first given.

But not only do we need comfort from time to time, but there is not a one of us who doesn't need a loving kick in the seat of the pants from time to time either, because Satan tempts every one of us to be a slacker, to get just a little lazy in our commitment to Christ. That's why Hebrews 10:24 says that we should stir up one

another to love and good works. And you see, here's the way fellowship works. Sometimes we receive God's comfort and encouragement through others, and sometimes we give God's comfort and encouragement to someone else. But either way, fellowship is crucial! If I miss it I may miss receiving God's strength, or someone else may miss God's strength that God would have given them through me.

But there are two essential keys to fellowship that we must all seize and use if it is to work for us. And that is **love**. Jesus said to His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 3:34). John writes in his first epistle, "Beloved, let us love one another" (1 John 4:7). Beloved, we'll not be comforting one another and exhorting one another unless we love one another, because we won't care. We'll be wrapped up in our own world and we just won't make the time. And I can't preach love for your brothers and sisters into you. God has to give it to you. But if you don't have it, I pray that God gives it to you today.

Beloved, I long for the day when all of God's people will see the need for fellowship on Sundays, and at other times as well! To make church attendance a priority and not feel-good fix when you need it or when nothing else comes up. What a difference it would make in the life of any church! And if you sense in your heart that fellowship is not that important to you, I plead with you to pray for God to give it to you today. For it is an essential method for doing church right.

We need to quickly look at two other methods for doing church right before we close. Verse 42 says that the first church was dedicated to the Word of God, to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread, which was the observance of the Lord's Supper. We do not know how often they observed the Lord's Supper, but we do know that it meant something to them when they did. They took seriously God's command to purify themselves from sin and eat and drink in a worthy manner. And because of this the church remained strong in their faith and witness.

Let me share with you what we do when we receive the elements of the Lord's Supper. When we drink the juice and when we eat the cracker, we are saying to Jesus, "I receive the sacrifice of your blood and your body as my only hope of salvation. It is precious to me, it is holy to me, and I do not want to trample upon it with flagrant unconfessed sin. Thank you for giving Your blood and Your body for me". And beloved, if every one of us would come to the Lord's table with that attitude, with clean hands and a pure heart, oh, how God would be pleased with Grant's Creek Baptist Church!

Let us look at the last sanctifying method for the church that does church right. Not only does it make the Word of God priority, and also fellowship, and the Lord's Supper, but it is also a church of prayer. We could certainly spend another hour talking about prayer. But let me just share one key to answered prayer – and that is **helplessness**. When you and I get to the point where there is no other answer, there is no other hope than God, and then we cry out to Him, we can know that He is going

to answer our prayer. It may or may not be the way we choose, but it will be the way that is best. Peter was helpless when he was sinking on the Sea of Galilee and cried, "Lord, save me!", and Jesus heard and answered. Ole Hallesby – "Prayer and helplessness are truly inseparable. Only those who are helpless can truly pray. Your helplessness is your best prayer". May God bring us to the point of such helplessness in our prayers.

Beloved, God has guaranteed that He will bless any church that rightly proclaims His **saving message** and practices His **sanctifying methods**. And next week we are going to see how God blessed the first church at Jerusalem for doing these things.