



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 2:42-47
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Don't Go To Church!

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

All of us were saddened this week to hear of the tragic death of James Kim. After seven days of being lost in the Oregon wilderness with his family in their car, the San Francisco man set out on foot to try to find help. If you've followed the story you know that two days later his family was rescued. By all accounts, his efforts were courageous and heroic and we do pray for that family.

On Thursday I was in the waiting room of a doctor when an elderly lady walked in, sat in a chair and blurted out as if I had known her for years, "They found his body. If he just hadn't have left his family, he would still be alive." At the time, I was reading a book about the church, and it hit me how this story is something of a metaphor for the relationship followers of Christ have with the church. What was true of James Kim could also be said of many believers: if he hadn't left his church family, he would still be alive. I wonder how many Christians have launched out from the church for what they thought were good reasons to find that the very thing they were looking for could only be found in the place they left.

Still, so many people who claim to follow Christ live separately from the church. One of the problems that causes people to stay away or leave is the amount of hypocrisy that can be found here. And it's true that the church has always had its share of racism and immorality and greed and every other sin in the book. Some have even been personally burned or betrayed by a church experience or leader. So they stay away.

For some people the problem is not the hypocrisy around them but just the boredom. I mean, who wants to sit for 40 minutes and listen to a lecture from a book written several thousand years ago? And then there is the unvarying routine, its repetitiveness: week after week, the crowded parking lot, the same songs, the same

announcements (turn off your cell phones, move in, greet one another), the same faces. And I should add that you all sit in the same seats!

The question is, how could something so benign be absolutely essential for our spiritual survival? Maybe part of the problem is that we misunderstand the nature of the church. Our language is a dead give away. We talk about "going to church" the same way we talk about "going to the market" or "going to the mall." "Where do you go to church?" we ask. "Well, I go to CPC. Where do you go?" It's more of a place we go and a place we leave than a reality that we live every day.

The early Christians didn't talk about going to church; they lived the church. They were the church. And nowhere is this more apparent than in Acts 2:42-47. Remember last week we saw Peter preach a sermon on the day of Pentecost. Luke reports in v.41, "**and that day there were added about 3,000 souls.**" That's an amazing harvest! But what we need to realize is that conversion was not the end of the story, it was only the beginning. In the very next verse Luke says, "**They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer**" (v.42). Notice those words: "They (that is all those who had received salvation) were continually devoting themselves..." You can see here that they didn't "go to church" but rather they lived in continual devotion to certain things. As a matter of fact, the word "church" doesn't even show up in this book until chapter 5! Instead of being a weekly snack to boost their spiritual energy, it was intravenous flow of spiritual life. They didn't go home that day after receiving salvation and then decide whether or not they wanted to join the church. It was more like a package deal; by getting saved they were

automatically plugged into the body of Christ.

Look at the rest of the passage.

“Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (vv.43–47).

Four things are mentioned in v.42, each of which are spelled out more descriptively in vv.43-47. Each of these things make the church not just something you go to, but something you live.

I. They were a learning church.

The first thing we see here is that they were a learning church. Luke says they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. You might say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem on that day. Its teachers were the apostles who we've already learned were eyewitnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. And its students were these 3,000 kindergartners who had just been enrolled!

It might have been a temptation for the early believers to look back to Pentecost and recall the way the Holy Spirit had worked in such dramatic ways and think, “Learn? We don't need to learn. We just need more of the Spirit. And why do we need the apostles when we have the Spirit to teach us? Didn't you see all those cool things the Spirit did at Pentecost? That's what we need.” It's interesting that when the Holy Spirit came to dwell in these 3,000 it says nothing about wind or fire or tongues. It says they

became learners. They sat at the apostles' feet, hungry for instruction. When the Spirit of God invades our lives, that's what he does. He makes us hungry for God's truth.

Notice with this that the teaching authority of the apostles was authenticated by many miracles. Verse 43 says, **“And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.”** They were in awe because of the miracles that the apostles performed. That in turn caused them to be even more devoted to the apostles' teaching. If you saw me heal a blind man this morning, you would then listen to what I had to say. I promise that none of you would fall asleep on me! That's why these miracles were so prevalent, because God designed them to authenticate the apostles' teaching. Today we have that teaching in what we call the New Testament. So when we study the Scriptures here and at home with an eye to obeying them, we're being devoted to the apostles' teaching.

II. They were a loving church.

The next thing we see about them is that they were a loving church. Luke says they were devoted to “fellowship.” That word is kind of overused in Christian circles, like soggy toast. We use it so much we hardly remember what it means. The original word in the Greek was koinonia, which means to hold something in common, or to share something. As believers, there are things we share IN. 1 Jn 1:3 says **“our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”** The most precious thing we share IN together is our connection with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When you share together in him, all the other differences you hold really ought to melt away. That's why the church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. And so today there ought to be the rich and the poor, white collar and blue collar, healthy and unhealthy, young and old, black and white, and everything else.

This has always been a great hallmark of this church. Where else can you find so many different kinds of

people caring for one another and enjoying each other? Church ought to look like the DMV. You go to the DMV and you're immediately confronted with an immense cross section of people. Where else can you go and find the owner of brand new Mercedes renewing his registration right along side a rather disheveled person who hasn't used deodorant for a week? Does this ever bother you when you come to church? Sometimes we're not sure we like this, but when people with every reason to divide end up loving one another you know that there is something powerful at work.

But there is also a practical outworking of this. We share IN something, but we also share OUT something. This is what Luke describes down in vv.44–45. The believers were selling their property and possessions and using the proceeds to help those in need. Down through the ages some Christians have said that this was an early form of communism and that today we should enforce the same lifestyle on the church. Should we follow their example? The answer to that is “yes” and “no.” Let me start with the “no” part. “No” because Jesus and the apostles never directly forbade private ownership, rather they assumed it. “No” because even right here in Acts we see the church meeting in private homes, which we can assume were still owned by believers. “No” because it's clear here in Acts that this was a voluntary thing. Later when Peter confronts Ananias and Saphira who pretended to give away all the proceeds of their land, he said, “Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?” (5:4).

But, having said that, the answer is also “yes.” “Yes” because when the Spirit of God enters a person's life, this is the kind of thing you'll see happen. All of a sudden, you realize that money and possessions don't define you. All of a sudden you want to respond to those in need. We mustn't evade the challenge of these verses. The apostle John wrote, “**Whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?**” (1Jn 3:17). That is such a troubling verse, especially in a world where we have so much exposure to people in need. This is also

something for us to think about as we do our Christmas shopping, isn't it? Some of us will spend more at Christmas than we gave to those in need the entire year. I mean, how much more do we really need? At the risk of sounding really trite, maybe it's good to ask, “What *would* Jesus do?” I think Jesus would participate in giving and receiving gifts. It's really normal and healthy for people who love each other to express that in giving and receiving gifts. But when does that become just a pretext for greed and materialism? I don't think Jesus would have been a slave to technology. Every year new stuff comes out with better technology—computers, plasma TVs, IPODS, cell phones, video consuls, Blackberrys, electric shavers. And we're always made to feel like if we don't have it we're missing out. When does it stop? Why not take the money you were going to spend on an upgrade and use it to sponsor a child through World Vision this year?

III. They were a worshipping church.

So they were a learning church and a loving church. The third thing we see is that they were a worshipping church. They were devoted to the breaking of bread and to prayer (literally “the prayers”). When he says “the breaking of bread” he's talking about what we call Communion or the Lord's Supper, which they celebrated in the context of a meal which they called a love feast. And when he talks about “the prayers” he's not talking about private prayer but corporate prayer; the prayers of God's people together. These two things defined their worship.

And notice if you look down to v.46 you can see that there was a balance in how they did this. “**...they continued with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house...**” They still met in the temple, or in its courtyard. You can skip ahead to 3:1 and see that “**Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.**” They continued to attend the formal worship services in the Jewish temple, consisting of sacrifices, prayers and

blessings offered by the priests. There was this formal time they met together, much like we meet here on Sunday mornings. But there was also informal meetings that took place in homes. Notice how it says “they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” They were both joyful and genuine.

They didn’t go to church, they lived it. They did these things “day by day.” It was part of their everyday lives. You know, there is nothing like being in a home with other believers and having a meal together—laughing, praying, crying, talking, sharing. I have a group of six guys I am meeting with every other week. We’ve been taking turns hosting the group in each of our homes for dinner. And it’s reminded me that there is something about being in someone’s home. You see that person in a new light. There is a kind of vulnerability that is created and a kind of healthy pride. “This is my home. This is where I live.” If this kind of thing is not a part of your church experience, you’re missing out. If all you do is come to church but you’re not meeting with a small group in a home, your church experience is like a couple who gets married but never moves in together! You’re missing out on some real good stuff! That’s why we hammer away at the need for all of us to be in some kind of small group, and the best place to do that is in homes.

IV. They were a growing church.

So they were a learning church, a loving church, and a worshipping church. The fourth thing doesn’t show up until v.47. It says they were “**...having favor with all the people, and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.**” So they were also a growing church.

Do you know how big the average church in America is? The average church in America has about 90 people in it. It’s worth asking the question, how does a church grow? Why does a church grow? It

seems to me part of it is what Luke says right here—a church grows by having favor with all the people. That means that these early believers were still rubbing shoulders with people in their community. They didn’t sever all relationships with unbelievers. That also means they tried to meet needs outside of the church fellowship as well as within it. One of the things we’ve tried to do at this church is let our community know that we’re for them; and to try to express that in practical ways. So we open this building up all the time to the community. We get involved in things like the Chamber of Commerce. We try to be sensitive to our neighbors when it comes to parking and noise. We try to operate with integrity in how we handle our finances. I actually think we could do more. That’s part of being a growing church.

But notice that there is something else at work. Luke is very careful to say that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Ultimately, it’s the Lord’s job to save people, and he’s at work among us to do exactly that. Last Sunday I invited people to raise their hands as an indication that they wanted to trust Christ as their Lord and Savior. We had 40–50 people raise their hands. Why did they do that? Because of my preaching? Because of the music? Because of the coffee? No! It was because the Lord was at work in their hearts, drawing them near. He may have used some of those other things, but without him no one would believe.

And he does that in ways that sometimes we don’t expect. Last Sunday after our NightLife service a young man approached me. He asked me to explain more to him about what this invitation to receive Christ was all about. I knew that only one person had raised her hand in that service and it wasn’t him. Now I had had a long day and the last thing I wanted was to get into a long conversation, but something told me this guy was sincere. And the more we talked the more I realized that he actually had received salvation that night, even though he hadn’t raised his hand. We had a great time talking about ways for him to begin to grow in his faith. The Lord did that. It was his work. What’s great about this is that it takes all the pressure off of us. We

just show up and try to be sensitive to what God is doing in people's hearts and how he wants us to participate in that. It's not all up to us. He's always there before we are.

CONCLUSION

Don't go to church! Live the church. Be the church. I was reading Philip Yancey's book this week called *The Church: Why Bother?* After years of cynicism about the church, Yancey says that he finally found that the key was not finding the right church, but rather the key was his own way of seeing. He said he learned to look inward, look around, look upward and look outward. This is really what we see in this passage.

When we're devoted to the apostles' teaching we look inward. We come to grips with what God is saying to us through his word. We come to grips with our need for grace and his own willingness to provide it.

When we look outward we express our devotion to fellowship. We see people very different from us but we experience a unique kinship with them because of what we share in. And we also see people in need, whose need we can meet.

When we look upward we're expressing our devotion to worship through the breaking of bread and the prayers, in both formal and informal settings. This is not a spectator sport where we can sit back and rate the performance of those up on the stage. We're the ones giving the performance and we do so before an audience of just one.

And finally, when we look outward, we're seeing the Lord work in people's hearts to draw them to himself in faith. We try to participate in that in any way we can. And we rejoice as he adds to our number day by day those who are being saved.

You know what struck me about all of this? This is the perfect Christmas. What we see the church doing here is what we all want for our Christmas. We want a sense of awe at the reality of God's presence. We want joyful means and meaningful worship.

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