

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY CREATING A NEW COMMUNITY**

**Acts 2:42-47**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A number of years ago I was talking with a woman about her relationship to God. During the course of our conversation she explained to me why she was confident that she was a Christian and yet did not feel it was necessary to be involved in a local church. She told me that she had once heard a pastor say, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than entering a garage makes you a car." Her conclusion was that you can be a Christian without attending worship services or being connected to a local church. I was not shocked at her conclusion, I have heard many people say the same thing, however, I was shocked by her use of that illustration as I, along with many other Christian teachers have used it. I, and I am sure the pastor she heard use it, mean by the use of the illustration that religious activity does not make you a Christian, rather you become a Christian by the power of the HS giving you a heart that repents of your sins and trusts in Christ alone to save you from your sins.

However, what our text makes crystal clear today is that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord and thus is saved from this corrupt and condemned generation are joined to a local church. The last phrase of v. 41 and the last phrase of v. 47 tell us that everyone who was saved by the call of God through the preaching of Peter joined the visible company of the church as it existed in the city of Jerusalem. It is a lie of the devil that you can be a Christian, on your way to heaven and have no connection to a local church. This passage is one of the clearest statements of that fact. To be indifferent to and disconnected from the local church while professing to be a Christian is to believe a lie and to place yourself among that great company of people who will, at the last day, be told by Jesus that he never knew you.

This passage does not only tell us that everyone who is saved is also connected to a local church but also it tells us what that connection looks like. This text describes the community that God creates by his word and Spirit. I want to warn you not to listen to this sermon and use it like the consumer you are to decide whether or not our church or any other local church is measuring up but rather you should listen to this and evaluate whether or not your view of the church and your involvement in the church measures up. Now I agree with what John Calvin says about his text: If you are seeking to understand what the true church of Christ looks like, her image is clearly set forth to us in this place. However, I am persuaded that the main way that you and I should listen to the voice of Jesus in this text is as a critique of our own view of and participation in our local church. This description of the local church is viewed as the effect of which the gospel is the cause. So the question for each of us is this: do I see these effects in my life in this community of Christians?

## **MAIN POINT**

**God, by his word and Spirit, creates local churches that are filled with...**

### **I. The truth of Christ (42a)**

The first thing that Luke says about this local church, the First Church of Jerusalem, which is made up of 3120 Jewish converts is that it was devoted to or persisting in four activities. The word translated "devoted to" in the NIV indicates that these four things describe the way of life in this community. These are the things that the community as a whole continued to practice day after day. The way these four items are put together however lead us to see them as two pairs of related items. Literally it says, "they were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." It is not incidental that the teaching of the apostles comes first. This community came into existence by means of the teaching of the apostles through Peter's sermon and it is by means of the teaching of the apostles that the life of the church is maintained.

The teaching of the apostles refers to that body of truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ as the long awaited Messiah and Lord who makes all of God's promises come true for all of God's people. It is not merely a retelling of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus but the authoritative declaration of what those historical events mean, especially in light of God's revelation contained in the OT. We are going to see this repeatedly throughout the book of Acts. The church is described first and foremost as a community of people formed by and sustained by the good news about Jesus. Thus, the church is always a learning community. We are not first and foremost a community characterized by love for people or by our rousing worship. We are first and foremost a community of disciples, of learners of Jesus as he is revealed in the apostolic writings, that is, in the NT. It is more than possible to form a loving community or a community that has spine tingling worship that yet goes to hell because the teaching of the apostles is not at the heart of the community. Love and worship do not save. Christ alone saves and knowing him as he is revealed through the writings of the apostles is the focus and point of the church.

There is no other message by which you can be saved or which will sustain your faith than this one message. It is this message that we zealously study and talk about and think about and delight in. It is a source of continual amazement to me that people who profess to be Christians can invest massive amounts of time and money and energy into learning about hobbies or computers or video games or hunting or sports figures or music groups but have no time to be involved in a small group bible study or come to a class on systematic theology or read a significant book on doctrine or even come to church on a weekly basis. What excites your interest and occupies your attention is indicative of what you really admire, trust and love. So if you belong to Christ, then you are going to devote yourself to learning the apostles' teaching in and through a local church.

During the years Jane and I worked for Campus Crusade for Christ we spent many summers in Ft. Collins, CO. Every summer we were there we made at least one trip up into Rocky Mountain National Park. We would drive through the park, up the switchback road that climbs up into the mountains above timberline to the top of the pass that is in the park and then return. We stopped at many of the turn offs and would get out and gaze upon the majestic vistas of valleys and mountains spread before us. The sense I always had as we viewed the beauty was that there was so much more beauty to be discovered and viewed than we could possibly take in on this four hour drive into the mountains. I longed to be able to hike through the mountains in order to discover and delight in more of the beauty. We are not devoted to the apostles' teaching because we're trying to be smarter sinners or because we're trying to impress God with how spiritual we are. Rather we have seen and rejoiced in the beauty of Christ and his salvation through the Scriptures and now we want to discover more of his beauty.

They were devoted not only to the apostles teaching but also to "the fellowship." I want you to turn over to 1 John as I'm pretty sure that what Luke is referring to here is described by John in greater detail. Read 1 John 1:1-4. Notice that John is describing the message that he and the other apostles are proclaiming as the Word of Life which he and they saw, heard and touched. In other words, what he and the other apostles taught was Jesus. But now notice what he says in v. 3: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." He and the other apostles teach the message of Christ and about Christ so that those who belong to the church may have fellowship with the apostles. If you have fellowship with the apostles then you also have fellowship with the Father and the Son. Do you see what he is saying? The church is that community of people who agree with and delight in and hold fast to the message of Christ as taught by the apostles. By means of our fellowship with the apostles we have fellowship with God himself. Then notice down in v. 7 that as we walk in the light of the apostles teaching we have fellowship with one another. Our relationship with one another is due to our fellowship with the gospel as taught by the apostles and through it God himself.

To be devoted to the fellowship is to pursue fellowship with God through the teaching of the apostles and then relationships with others who are also fellowshiping with God through the gospel. We don't associate with people in the church because they are like us racially or socially or economically or politically or musically or generationally. The fellowship we are devoted to is the community of people who have fellowship with God through the gospel as it is recorded in the Bible. What defines me first and foremost is that I am a Christian and

my allegiance and love is first and foremost given to God in and through the Scriptures and then to other Christians regardless of their parenting style or marital status or age or occupation or race. It is an error of the highest order and a great dishonor to Christ when we devote ourselves to fellowshiping with those who are like us sociologically but do not devote ourselves to fellowshiping with those who share the teaching of the apostles in common with us. We pursue relationships with one another because we share in common the most important thing in the universe, we are loved by God and saved through Christ and we delight in him above all else.

*God, by his word and Spirit, creates local churches that are filled with...*

- *The truth of Christ*
- *And with...*

## **II. The worship of Christ (42b & 46a, 47a)**

The second pair of words in 42 refer to celebration of the Lord's supper and the prayers of the gathered church. Being together with God's people to remember and rejoice in the saving work of Christ through communion is a persistent practice of every true Christian. As I have grown in my understanding of the gospel, the importance of celebrating communion with God's people has grown. It is God's appointed means of our remembering and rejoicing together in the great saving work of Christ on our behalf. I trust you make it a priority to be here the third Sunday of each month to join in this celebration of Christ.

The prayers we participate in are the corporate prayers of the church. Like most modern American Christians I've always considered my personal prayers to be of far greater importance than my participation in the corporate prayer life of the church. I've also considered "spontaneous" prayers to be of more value than "rote" or "formal, written" prayers. However, I've come to view both of these prejudices as an error born out of the highly individualistic, anti-communal culture of these United States and our pietistic forbearers. I agree with Pastor Eugene Peterson who says that we learn to pray in the company of the church, not by ourselves. He uses the analogy of a child learning to speak. Babies learn to speak by being in the company of adults. In the same way we learn to pray as we join in and listen to the prayers of the church. Frankly, this is one of the reasons that we need to use the prayers written by Christians throughout the centuries during our worship services and in other public gatherings. We belong to a community that has existed through time. The church did not come into existence with our conversion. Therefore we should learn from and use the forms and prayers of the past so that we learn the full vocabulary of prayer and are not confined to the "baby talk" that is most modern prayer.

Notice in this text that this church of 3000 people were gathering together both as a large group in the temple and also in small groups in peoples homes. But as v. 47 says, wherever they were meeting they were praising God. This is not hard to understand. When we made our trips up into the Rocky Mountains and stopped to look at the beauty, what did we say? We would exclaim at the beauty and the majesty. We would express how terrifying the dropoffs appeared to us. We would verbally praise the beauty we beheld. Praise is the spontaneous verbal expression of what delights and ravishes our hearts. The church sees the greatness and the glory of Christ in the gospel and so we praise him. There is here a clear example to us that we need to be with God's people in family and in small groups and in large groups for the purpose of praise and prayer. We are to be a God centered and a God dependent community. We show both of these by our praise and our prayer. So let me urge you, especially if you feel that you do not know how to pray, to show up for corporate prayer. Pay attention to the prayers that are offered on Sunday mornings. Buy a copy of "The Valley of Vision", which is a collection of Puritan prayers or the Anglican "Book of Common Prayer" which contains lots of ancient prayers of the church. Be sure to pray in your families and in your small groups. Join me and Jo Y and Jeff H on Wednesday mornings at 6:15am here at the church for prayer. Join with Joanie and Mel and the other women who gather the second Thursday each month at noon at the church to pray for our missionaries. Come to the quarterly prayer and praise gatherings. Join Dave and Peggy Morton for pre-service prayer. Volunteer to help Mike Joos create other opportunities for us to join together in the prayers of the gathered church. The church is a community of worshipping, praying people. We rejoice in God's saving work and we know we cannot do

anything apart from him and so we continually cry out to him, together so that he will continue his saving work in us and through us.

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### **III. The love of Christ (44, 45, 46b)**

The fellowship to which the church is committed, while it is the fellowship of those who are learning together of the glory of Christ, it is not like a group of students sitting in a classroom learning. Rather, our common affection for Jesus and delight in him that is shown in our mutual learning breaks out into real love and care for one another. These three thousand people, most of whom were total strangers to one another prior to their association with the church, demonstrated their love for each other in very tangible ways. First they were together. As we noted, they were together in a large group in the temple and they were together in each other's homes eating meals together, studying together, praying together and praising God together. The reality of your faith in Christ is shown by your enthusiasm for being together with God's people. Take a risk and sign up for the Sunday Socials so you can be together with someone in the church you have not met yet. Get involved in one of our small groups so you can be together with other Christians. Show up at the church wide socials and other gatherings so you can be together with your family. I've said this before, you don't come to social events because you like the activity but because you want to be with other believers. Take the initiative to invite another family to your house for lunch. This isn't rocket science. If you are taken up with the glory of Christ in the gospel than you love to be together with other Christians in large and small groups. Don't sit around and wait for someone to call you, you make the call.

Notice also that these Christians, we are told, held everything in common. They sold their property and possessions and distributed the proceeds of those sales to any member of the community that had a need. They not only spent time together but they also cared for the practical needs of one another. Does this passage teach that Christians should not have private property but that we should live in communes, that is, that all our property should belong to the whole community, not to individuals? Over the course of church history various groups have used vv. 44-45 to teach this. However, it is clear both from v. 45 and from what we see in Acts 4:36-5:11 that Christians held private property and they were not required to sell that property. The idea of holding all things in common does not mean there was no private property but rather that the mindset of the people was that each person used their property to meet the needs of those among them who had need. Luke is simply recording for us the practical outworking of Jesus' "new commandment" that we are to love one another as he has loved us. People who are loved by Christ and who are rejoicing in that salvation in the company of God's people are generous with their time, money and possessions so that the needs of those within the community are being met.

The sale of property and the distribution of those proceeds was a very organized part of the community's life. That is clearly the emphasis of the last clause of v. 45 which literally says, "...they were distributing to anyone according as they had need." They had a way of identifying need and then a way of distributing aid to those in need. We will see examples of how this worked in chapters 5 and 6. This is the function of our Emergency Relief Fund. These funds are under the control of the elders and are meant for us to use to help those in our midst that need financial help. We, as a church, have been helping two of our families this last year who have been struck by financial need. We continue to help them as they get back on their feet. I would encourage you to continue to give to that fund so we can finish helping them and be prepared to help others who find themselves in need. If you are in need or know of others in need please talk with an elder so we can use these funds to help.

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#### **IV. The power of Christ (43 & 47)**

Verses 43 and 47 describe the impact that the church had on the surrounding culture. There were two basic emotional responses within the broader society. First, in v. 43 those outside the church are described as being filled with fear (NIV = “awe”). Then in v. 47 those outside the church are said to view the church with favor. As we are going to find out in the next chapter, not every single person feared and appreciated the church but Luke is speaking generally. The general response of the Jewish population of Jerusalem was that they feared and appreciated the church.

The fear that people felt is connected to the amazement of the crowds that Luke describes back in v. 12 and the “cut to the heart” experience of so many when they realized that they had murdered the Messiah through the preaching of Peter. The fear is caused by both the supernatural “signs and wonders” and the message of the gospel that Jesus is the Messiah. By using this phrase “signs and wonders” Luke is calling attention to the prophecy of Joel that Peter quoted as he began his sermon back in 2:19-20 and to the fact that Peter said in v. 22 that Jesus was shown to be the Messiah by his performing signs and wonders. In the OT the phrase, “signs and wonders”, is almost a technical term for the plagues God sent on Egypt and the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. Signs and wonders are viewed in the OT as the mark of God's coming into the world and setting his people free from their slavery. So the “last days”, the time of God's final visiting the earth to set his people free are viewed in Joel's prophecy as being marked by signs and wonders. The fact that Jesus' ministry was marked by signs and wonders and now the ministry of the apostles is marked by signs and wonders shows that God is now present setting his people free from their slavery through Jesus. The coming of Jesus into the world and now the sending of the HS by Jesus to form and sustain the church are viewed as the beginning of the “last days” which will culminate in the Messiah's final return to destroy his enemies and take his people to live with him in his “Father's house.”

Regularly in the OT those who witnessed or who heard about those signs and wonders God performed in Egypt are said to be filled with fear. Rahab confesses that the hearts of the people of Jericho have melted because they have heard of the signs and wonders God did against Egypt. So the association of these two concepts, “signs and wonders” and people filled with fear remind us of God's work in saving Israel and of how he restrained the enemies of Israel by fear. By putting these two things together Luke is helping us to see that the OT deliverance of Israel was a foreshadowing of his much greater deliverance of his people by Christ from sin and death. Just as God restrained the enemies of his people by creating fear through his signs and wonders, so here God restrains the enemies of his people by fear. Calvin points out how easily the church could have been destroyed if not for the fact that God restrained the hands of its enemies by this fear. The church is protected by the exercise of Christ's power through the apostles performing signs and wonders.

But then also notice that most of the people, upon witnessing the joyful, generous love of the Christians for one another and their devotion to the apostle's teaching and their joyful worship look with favor upon them. This respect for and appreciation of the church is again caused by God as he works in his church. This can be clearly seen in how v. 47 ends. The Lord, each and every day was adding to the church more people who were being saved. Each day more and more people who were seeing how the church lived and hearing the gospel preached, were being cut to the heart by it, repenting of their sins and trusting in Christ and then submitting to water baptism. Again, people are not deciding to belong to the church, rather the Lord of the church is deciding who will belong. He is adding them to the church, they are not adding themselves. The power of Christ is being manifest primarily in his saving people from their sins. It is this power of Christ to give new hearts to hardened

sinner that is characteristic of the church. The signs and wonders restrain the enemies but the grace of Christ in the gospel turns enemies into friends. As the church lives like the church, devoted to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship it creates, worshipping Christ in communion and depending on him in prayer and so loving one another and doing this publicly Jesus adds to his church those who are being saved.

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