

A Healthy Church

- Acts 2:40-47
- I was at the Y one day this week and I heard 4 older men, even older than I, having a conversation as they got dressed after a workout. One said to another, “Ralph, you got your shirt on backwards.” A second man said, “Ralph if you wear your shirt like that, you’ll have to walk out the Y backwards.” Ralph said, “Is it really backwards?” A third man said, “Yeah, just slip it off and turn it around.” This conversation went on until I heard them say, “There you go, Ralph. You’re good to go, now.” I loved that scene, and quickly checked my own shirt. You see, there is a standard that is pretty clear with most clothing, that it works to wear it one way, but it doesn’t work to put it on backwards or sideways. And it made me think about the church and how we are to care for one another. Sometimes we need to say, “Hey, Ralph, I’m not sure you’re thinking about this the right way. Think about it this other way. Let’s look at the Bible and see what it says about that.”
- We are talking about the church for the next several weeks before we finish the Gospel of Mark. The word for church, ekklesia, occurs over 100 times in the New Testament, and it never once refers to a single family, a place or a building. It always refers to an assembly, a gathering of people. In addition, 95% of the references to the church in the NT are references to local assemblies. Only 5% of the time is the word used to describe the universal church. So clearly the emphasis of the teaching about church in the NT is for the local body of believers. Last week we looked at our namesake, the church at Antioch from which Paul and Barnabas were called out by the Holy Spirit and sent out for the missionary work God had prepared for them. Today, let’s see what God says to us from this passage in Acts 2.
- I see eight signs of health in the passage that Jon just read, as it describes the first church in Jerusalem. I know this is Father’s Day, and I want to ask the men and young men to pay special attention today. These eight signs of health also apply to a family, and I am convinced that if a man is practicing these things in his own life and in his own home, his family will be greatly blessed, as Psalm 128:1 says: “Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.”
- **1. They were saved.** Who does the “they” in verse 42 refer to? Those who were included in verse 41. Those who received the Word from Peter. The church continued to grow as we saw in verse 47, as “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” I quoted last week from John Stott who said the NT knew nothing of an “unchurched believer.” Neither does the NT know anything of a “churched unbeliever.” There may be unbelievers who come to a building and participate in church activities, but they are not in the church. There is no scaffolding in the church. Just living stones. There are no prosthetic limbs in the church. Just living, organic body parts! So, sign #1 for a healthy church, a healthy father, a healthy family...is salvation.
- **2. They assembled faithfully and regularly.** That’s what this whole passage clearly points to, that the brand new body of believers had been knit together by the Holy Spirit and they could not get enough of being together and loving the Lord together. Notice in

verse 46 that they met in the temple and they met in their homes. Nothing was more important to them than the Lord and His church. They didn't try somehow to fit the church in with their schedule: you know, chariot-racing practice on Monday nights and Javelin-throwing practice on Tuesday nights, and classes in masonry and ceramics for me and the wife at the local community college on Thursday nights, and mud-baths with the girls for my wife's complexion every Friday and I go out with my buddies bow-hunting every Saturday morning, if the fam didn't go to the lake house, and whew! I am tired. Do we HAVE to go to church tomorrow?! No! The believers fit everything else they did around their devotion to the Lord and the church. Did it last? Hebrews was written about 30 years after Acts 2 happened. Look at the warning in **Hebrews 10:24-25**. You see? Our tendency is to move away from faithfulness, not toward it. That's why we need reminders, and encouragement from the pulpit AND from the pews! This past year has shaken the foundations in lots of areas, including the church. Millions of people stopped attending church every Sunday because they had to, and many of them streamed the services from their homes. Now those churches that were shut down, for the most part are back open. But there are still many believers who are still at home. What was done out of necessity is now being done out of habit. Because it is easier. More convenient. But make no mistake, saints. Your physical presence is needed when the church gathers, for your sake and for ours. I wrote this in a column recently: "Come to church with the expectation that the body needs you. The Bible says the body of Christ grows "when each part is working properly." The lady sitting in front of you needs to hear you sing with all your might because she's just not feeling it this morning. The young man in the parking lot who is questioning his faith may just tell you the truth if you ask how he's doing. The family behind you has suffered a tremendous loss and they need to know you care. The truth is, you and I have work to do at church that often makes our day-jobs pale in comparison.

- **3. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Word.** Verse 42, "the apostles' teaching." The Word preached was what brought conviction, repentance, and salvation, as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23, "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God." When the Holy Spirit comes in and fills a new believer, He gives them a hunger for the Word. Peter said just a few verses later, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation." (1 Peter 2:2). Anyone who has been at Antioch for more than a few weeks knows by now that we place great importance on the Word of God. It is the standard by which we rule our lives and by which the Lord leads this church. There is no other standard necessary or sufficient, as we are learning in our Christian Beliefs class on Sunday mornings at 8:45. Last week Janet used the acronym SCAN to teach that the Bible is Sufficient, Clear, Authoritative, and Necessary. Only the Word of God is all four of those and only the Bible is able to make the man and woman of God "complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:17)
- **4. They devoted themselves to fellowship.** The word there for devoted means to "tarry, to remain somewhere." It refers to those who cleave faithfully to the Word, as we just talked about, or, in this case, to the other members of the church. Why would we

hold close to one another even when we disagree, even when we hurt each other, even when we sometimes cannot stand to be in the same room with someone in the church? Because that is precisely what Jesus modeled for us with his disciples, and it is precisely what Jesus does with each of us every day. He loves you. Period. He loves me. Period. And he calls us to love each other. Period.

- The word for fellowship in verse 42 is *koinonia*, and it means “to share all things in common.” You see that spelled out in verse 44. And again in verse 45. They were family and they loved each other in tangible ways. When one had a need, the others who were able shared with that one. We have seen that many times in the church and it is one of the ways Jesus said our witness to Him speaks. “They will know you are My disciples by your love.” We see it also in verse 46: they ate together with glad and generous hearts. Note this: in their homes. This is one way the whole body can minister to one another, through eating together in our homes. May I present a challenge to you all? First, have a family or single from the church over this summer for a meal, someone you don’t know very well. Second, when we have a shared meal on the second Sunday every month, stay! Third, come to men’s breakfasts and women’s fellowships and sit next to someone you would like to get to know better. In other words, take practical steps to lean into a steadfast commitment to fellowship.
- **5. They worshiped.** We see in verse 47 that the church was found “praising God.” As I said last week, we were created for the purpose of worship. Hebrews 12:22-24 gives us a greater understanding of our worship! Megan Hill writes in her book about the church, *A Place to Belong*, “Worship with the church brings us into heaven itself,” and ...”the church can rightly be called a colony of heaven.” She also writes, “Worship brings us into glorious company,” (people who may look ordinary on the outside, but their names are written in heaven). And not only the ones we can see, when we worship together we are joined to the whole host of heaven, to “innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...to God...to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus.” In other words, whether this place is full or only a handful show up, we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses “who ceaselessly worship God before His face.” Megan Hill writes, “Dear Christian, in light of these glorious realities, don’t forsake the church’s assembly. Be there, like Christ himself, when you are facing great trials. Be there when you are tired and when you are doubting. Listen to God’s word read and preached, sing the songs that God’s people have always sung, join your hearts in prayer that ascend to God’s throne, take the bread and wine and witness the water of baptism. There is nowhere else on earth that you will be nearer to heaven.”
- **6. They observed the sacraments.** We have already seen in verse 41 that three thousand people received God’s Word and were baptized on the day of Pentecost. Now we see that they also devoted themselves to “the breaking of bread” in verse 42. These are the two sacraments of the evangelical church. Jesus commanded us to remember Him in observing the Lord’s Supper when He took the bread and the cup and shared it with His disciples in the upper room. Then in the Great Commission He commanded us to make disciples of all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the

Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matt. 28:19) A home Bible Study or a parachurch does not practice these sacraments. We will talk more about these two important practices of the church family in another sermon.

- **7. They were led by godly and duly-appointed leaders.** We have already seen that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (not to the apostles!). But inherent in that relationship is one of submission to God-ordained authority. Look at the passage before this one and you will see God-ordained leadership displayed in Peter as he stood and preached a sermon on the day of Pentecost. Look at the passage after this one, beginning with chapter 3, and you will see God-ordained leadership on display in Peter and John’s ministry to the lame beggar. See in chapter 4 that Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities because they were teaching the people about Jesus and His resurrection! The apostles were clearly the leaders of the early church. Who appointed them? Jesus did. Who appointed the leaders in the churches that Paul and Barnabas planted? Paul and Barnabas did. Where did the elders come from on the island of Crete, according to Titus 1? Titus appointed them. Are there any self-appointed leaders in the churches of the New Testament? No. Biblical church leaders are godly men who are duly-appointed. More on that in a later sermon.
- **8. They devoted themselves to prayer.** We saw this in Jesus’ ministry with His disciples. They watched Him pray and saw His passion for the father and His compassion for the people and they came to Him and said, “Teach us to pray.” Prayer is the most powerful tool we have alongside of the Word of God. When we gather for prayer as we do at the end of the service, let’s devote ourselves to prayer. When we gather for prayer as we do in our home groups, let’s devote ourselves to prayer. When we gather our families, dads, in the family room and it is time for prayer, let’s devote ourselves to prayer. Andrew Murray said, “Our true aim must not be to work a great deal and pray just enough to keep the work right. We should pray a great deal and work enough so that the power and blessing obtained through prayer may flow through us to men and women.”
- Amen! So, what are the eight signs of a healthy and growing church? People saved by Jesus Christ, assembling together regularly, for the Word, fellowship, worship, the sacraments, and prayer, under the leadership of godly, duly-appointed leaders.
- Prayer
- Greet One Another!