

Acts 2:1-8,38-47 “The Church in Every Age” 5/19/24 Pentecost Sunday

Today is Pentecost Sunday, a day that is often called the birthday of the Church - Some might argue that the Church began on the day that Jesus called the first disciples to follow Him - But if you define the Church as an organization empowered by the Holy Spirit, this is the day

A quick search of the word “Church” in an electronic concordance reveals that the word occurs 113 times in the ESV - And 77 times in the King James Bible - Somehow in the updating of that version to the New King James, we lost a few Churches - Because the New King James Version has only 74

In the English language, we often use the word “Church” to refer to a building - But the Scriptures always use it to refer to the people who make up the Church

In recent years, Church growth has become a hot topic - But sadly the Church growth experts are usually focusing on getting more people to come to Church - Than with the people of the Church growing in salvation, grace, mission work, and the study of God’s Word

Today’s passage in Acts is in fact one of those places where the number of people is mentioned - The 2nd chapter of Acts speaks about Pentecost and the ministry of the early Church - Before concluding with, “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”¹

Before I leave you with the impression that the Church growth experts are barking up the wrong tree, there have been some excellent ideas that have come out of these movements

The late Bishop Ruben Job encouraged us to go back to our roots and follow John Wesley’s three simple rules: Do no harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God

¹ Acts 2:47b - Scripture quoted has been taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version,
© 1979, 1980, 1982, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

Robert Schnase, also a United Methodist Bishop, wrote an excellent book called “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” - Those practices include Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity

Today the United Methodist Church is excited about Churches being Vital Congregations - Which focus on many of the same goals that Bishop Schnase wrote about more than a decade ago

Numbers do have some importance - But surely not the importance that humankind places on them - As the Church, we are to be doing what God has called us to do - And, as our Acts passage implies, leave the numbers up to God

There are places where the Church is growing in today’s world - And when you look at those places of growth - Some of them do indeed have the splashy superstar type pastor - But the majority of growing Churches are just faithfully following God’s call to be the Church in this world

The early Church was very effective in fulfilling this Mission - And our Acts reading today gives us an interesting picture of this Church from its earliest days

You may already be familiar with the events leading up to this passage - Jesus had risen from the dead on that first Easter Sunday - Then He spent several weeks with His disciples

Early in the book, Acts 1:3 tells us, “He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”

The next verse records that, “He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father”² - That Promise was the Holy Spirit - And after Jesus was taken up to Heaven - The Holy Spirit fell with great power on those first followers

² from Acts 1:4

It happened on the day of Pentecost - A day when the early Church grew from about 120 people - To over 3,000 people

Speaking of this early Church, Acts 2:42 says, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

"Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" was listening to the Word of God - I am not sure who has the advantage in this department - The Church today, or the early Church

Today we have both the Old and New Testaments - And Bibles are produced cheaply enough for everyone to have a copy - In fact, if you would like a paperback Bible, I would be glad to give you one

However, in the very first days of our Church the New Testament had not yet been written - What they did have were many people who remembered Jesus - Those who had followed Him - Walked with Him - Listened to Him - And watched Him do miraculous things

They also had the apostles, men who spent years with Jesus - Being taught by our Lord all of the standards and doctrines that would be so important to the Church - We have the New Testament today - But the early Church had its writers

Obviously continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine was something the Church could do then, and can do now - Spending hours learning about Jesus - Hearing of the wonderful things He did - And living the way of life He taught

Verse 42 does not just mention studying the Scriptures - But also fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer

When we hear of fellowship, we often think of those times when we gather for something good to eat - Yet, as nice as those times of sharing food with friends is - True biblical fellowship goes beyond that to a discipline of our Faith

In the Church, it is very important that we care - That we have a genuine concern for each other - Sharing each other's pain and burdens - As well as sharing our fellow believer's joys - This is the true meaning of fellowship

In the breaking of bread there was also fellowship - The believers spoken about in Acts chapter 2 were mostly Jewish converts - They were still worshipping God at the Temple in Jerusalem

As Christians, they needed more than the Jewish Sabbath, so they would gather at their fellow believer's homes - For fellowship and to break bread - Here they would share a meal with other believers - Share the apostles' teaching - And commune with Jesus through the Lord's Supper

In prayer, we find the very life of the church - This was dramatically illustrated for me on a vacation, 30 years ago, in the summer of 1994 - My family and I toured northwestern New Jersey

We visited the outlet shops in Flemington - And then traveled north through the historic sites along the Delaware River - We explored several different Warren County attractions

That vacation Sunday, my family and I went to a United Methodist Church - The building was beautiful - With spectacular stained glass, a spacious sanctuary, and many Sunday School rooms

It was congregation that is rich in history - Bishop Francis Asbury, a prolific Church planter, one of Methodism's first two Bishops here in the United States, had started that Church over 200 years ago

Unfortunately, that Church was in big trouble in 1994 - The Methodist class meeting that Bishop Asbury started in the late 1700's grew to a congregation that built that spectacular church building in 1913

Today, that Church is still open, but like us, their worship attendance is about 15 - On that summer morning in 1994 there were 19 people there - And 9 of us were visitors - They thought that was quite a crowd because their membership had dwindled to about a dozen people

A seminary student, who never went on to become a pastor, led us in worship for about 20 minutes - And except for an opening prayer printed in the bulletin, we did not pray - I could not help wondering if this lack of prayer - Was the cause of the lack of vitality in that congregation

It is critical that the Church stays close to God - And the best way to do that is through prayer - We should pray for each other - For the ministries of our Church - For our leaders and for our pastor - Keeping ourselves close to God in prayer so that the LORD's will might be done in our lives

Have you spotted something all four of these things have in common? - Study, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer - It is relationships - They all bring us close to someone else

Our relationship with God is strengthened when we study God's Word - Fellowship gives us the opportunity to share the love of Christ with others - Breaking bread allows us to commune with Jesus - And prayer brings us to the throne of God - Our relationships with other believers are also strengthened when we practice these disciplines together

Acts 2:44-45 are sometimes misunderstood - These verses say, "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need."

The misunderstanding comes from the part about "had all things in common" - Some would have us believe that this is communism - But that is an error, because in communism even the means of production are supposed to be held communally - And that is not supported anywhere in the Scriptures

Adam Clarke points out that this idea of all things in common was not new with the Church - Because Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish faith, it would often see the influx of tens of thousands of visitors

Reverend Clarke writes, "At all the public religious feasts in Jerusalem, there was a sort of community of goods."

No one at such times hired houses or beds in Jerusalem; all were lent gratis by the owners. Therefore, a sort of community of goods was no strange thing at Jerusalem, at such times as these.”³

In our passage in Acts, perhaps a consequence of the incredible outpouring of the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost meant that people stayed in Jerusalem longer than they had originally planned - So they had a communal sharing of resources, for the time being, so that none would be without food or shelter

What is important, is that the Church responds to needs - That we have a heart for missions - Even if it takes selling our possessions - We are going to give to those persons who have needs

In conclusion, notice that the things we see in the early Church - Are still very important in the Church today: the word of God, fellowship, communing with Jesus, prayer, reaching out to others in need, gathering together to worship God, praising the Lord, and loving our neighbors are all as critical today as they were then

These things make a vital Church, not some formula developed by a denomination - In the early Church, there was a dramatic result - Our passage tells us that, “. . . And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”⁴

Today, this passage calls us to be sure that these things are a part of our future - Today, our Church is a place where people are touched by the Holy Spirit - A place where the Lord is adding to the number of those being saved - We are alive with our Savior’s presence - And we are a Church that obviously loves the LORD

This Christ centered place of ministry is something I am sure each one of us wants to pass along to the next generation - But we will only do that as long as we keep following the biblical mandates the LORD has given us in God’s Word

³ Adam Clarke (1760-1832), Clarke's Commentary, electronic edition © 1996, (Biblesoft, Seattle, WA)

⁴ from Acts 2:47