

First Church

Text:

Acts 2:37 – 47

Now when they heard *this*, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men *and* brethren, what shall we do? 38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. 39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call. 40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. 41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Introduction:

These verses first describe the reaction to Peter's sermon, then describe in general terms the actions of this first group of Christians in Jerusalem. The great value of this passage is that it gives us a part of the answer to a highly important question: "what is the church?" Jesus had said during his ministry: "I will build my church." As stated previously during his ministry he had gathered and taught its

first leaders; by his sacrifice at Calvary and his resurrection he had redeemed his church; now on Pentecost he had sent the Holy Spirit to empower them to bear witness to him. They have now borne witness and others have believed that witness and joined with them. The Church that Jesus had said he would build is now fully under construction.

Our interest in the question that this passage helps answer lies in the fact that we are a part of the Church that begun on the day of Pentecost. In describing it in the way that he does here, Luke isn't just telling us what the church looked like in its beginning; he is painting a portrait of what it should always look like. Two thousand years after the fact, what can we learn from this passage that still instructs us. Living as we do in a different place, in a much different cultural setting, in a world that has radically changed is there any link between this first church and our church? I propose that there is. As we examine this passage we will learn that this first church establishes a pattern for us first in its founding principles, then in its habitual practices, and finally in its spirit and impact.

I. Founding Principles

The beginning of the passage describes the reaction of the crowd to Peter's message. Peter had just told them that the same Jesus whom they had seen crucified a few weeks earlier God had raised from the dead and exalted to his own right hand, and that God by raising him and exalting him had openly declared him to be both Messiah and Lord. The crowd is smitten with conviction and implores Peter to tell them what they must do. Peter tells them that they must "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ. He say if they do they will receive the gifts of the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, that the promises of God are for them and their children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call. We are then told that 3,000 individuals gladly received his word and were baptized in the name of Jesus this identifying themselves with Christ and his followers.

The way we become a part of Christ's church has not changed. We must first hear the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, how that he died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Like these first believers on the Day of Pentecost we must acknowledge our sin, the wrong that we have done. We may not have actively participated in the crucifixion as some of them did, but we all have a part in Christ's death, because his death was on the behalf of sinners and we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness, and the new life that only he can give. The other side of repentance is faith. We must believe in Jesus Christ. It is through faith in him that we are saved, and only through faith in him. The Apostle Paul says if salvation could come by the law, that is by our doing good things, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification (Romans 4:25) because that is the only way we could be saved. The Christian life begins with this first act of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

There is a third thing in this passage. Peter doesn't just tell them to repent and to believe, he also tells them to be baptized in the name of Jesus. In doing this he is not implying that the waters of baptism will wash away our sins. Only the blood of Christ, his sacrifice for sins can do that. What he is implying is that if we are truly convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, and that it is only through him that we have the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life, then we should identify openly and publicly with him by being baptized. Baptism identifies us openly with Christ and with his followers, that is, his church. It is the door by which we enter into the church. It is the initiatory act of the Christian life in the Church.

II. Habitual Practices

These three things: repentance, faith, baptism are one time acts that bring us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and make us a part of his Church. Once we are in the Church and become active participants in the life of the Church we begin to engage in the habitual practices of the church. Verse 42 of our text

describes the original church as being engaged in four such practices. They are described as “the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Others could be added to the list, but these four are essential. Wherever the church exists, and whatever it does these four things should always be present and actively practiced.

First there is teaching. Not just any teaching, but what is described here as the Apostle's doctrine. The Apostles were Jesus' spokesmen. Jesus had commissioned them to make disciples of all nations; to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, then to “teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” To be a disciple of Jesus is first to believe in him and to be baptized in his name, but beyond this it is to follow his teachings. Christ came both to give us life and to teach us the way of life. We cannot follow his way of life unless we have his life in us, but having that life, we then must learn to walk in his ways. Obedient churches make instruction in the Faith, the teaching of the truth of Christ, the truth of the Scriptures central in all that they do.

The second habitual practice of the early church was fellowship. This is a word that Christians like to use, and we use it to refer to more than one thing. The root idea of the word is sharing. It is perhaps best summarized in Paul's command in Galatians 6:2 to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. The church is a family, a family where members look after one another. As we make our way through the book of Acts we will see various examples of this fellowship, but in general it is the care that we exercise for one another. It is taking the needs of our fellow believers whether those needs be material or spiritual in nature seriously.

Thirdly, we are told that these first Christians continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread. This is Luke's preferred way of speaking of what we call Communion or the Lord's Supper. Sometimes in the early Church it was taken in the course of a meal. Christ instituted this practice while eating the Passover meal with his disciples on the night of his arrest. He specifically commanded them to continue to break the bread in remembrance of his body broken for us

and to share the cup in remembrance of his blood, shed for us. Frequent participation at the Lord's Table serves to remind us who we are and that our existence is founded in the truth of the Gospel. We gain strength by being reminded of our weakness, and of the work of Christ on our behalf. Communion constantly calls us back to the truth of the saving death and life of Christ.

The final habitual practice is prayer. We have already emphasized that the gospel advances in Acts by prayer. God is at work, and his work advances as his people pray. We will have many opportunities to observe this as we journey through Acts, but for the present we will simply state that one thing the Church must always do is to pray.

III. Attitudes and Impact

The final part of this passage paints a portrait of the spirit that existed in this early church and the impact that it was having on the world around it. In so doing it completes our reflection on what the Church should look like. We cannot, and probably should not try to reproduce everything in these verses. It seems, for example, that the practice of the early Christians to have all things in common was short lived, and historically attempts to do this have failed. What we can learn from this practice is that generosity reigned among these first Christians, and that has not changed. Where Christ is truly present, where God's people are being led by the Spirit and are seriously following Jesus there will be great generosity.

We are also told that there was a great sense of God's presence and action. Again we may not see the kind of miracles that the Apostles were performing, but we should be aware of the power and presence of God. There should be great awe of God among us as there was among these early believers.

In addition to this we are told that there was unity, singleness of heart. When God is truly at work, it unites his people. Most of our divisions come from too

much focus on ourselves. But when we are focused on God and the work that he is doing it is not hard to be united.

There was also great joy. God had acted in might to bring salvation. They were witnessing an eruption of God's salvation in human history. How could they not rejoice? As noted earlier Luke emphasizes joy both in his Gospel and in Acts, and the joy that he emphasizes is the joy of salvation. When we understand that God has not abandoned us; that he is at work in the world saving the world we are filled with joy. This joy was expressed in praise to God. We read that they were praising God.

Finally, notice the impact of this church. Verse 47 says they were "Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. First, their impact on those around them, who were not a part of them, was positive. A healthy, biblical church where Christ is preached and obeyed will have a positive impact on the community in which it exists. It will be known for the good it does. Not everyone will agree with us, not everyone will become a part of us, but everyone should acknowledge our positive impact. The final thing we see is that the Lord was daily adding to their numbers. They were growing and the growth was a result of the work of God in their midst.