

Day of Pentecost Part 3: The Church
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As we said last week, there's...sometimes you need to go back to the beginning to remember who you are and what you're about. You need to go back to the very start of things and get a grip, once again, on who you are and what you're about. For Christians, the book of Acts chapter 2 does that. It takes us back, as Christians, to the very beginning of the Church. Jesus had been crucified and buried, and then rose again from the grave. He met with His followers, and then He ascended into heaven. And He left this group, called the Church, behind Him. And in that chapter we see that Church beginning its ministry. We go back to the beginning and we see who we are and what we're about.

It's interesting that the Lord would have us there this year. We had this on our calendar as a study months ago, and said that's gonna be our study plan for the coming year. We had little idea that we would spend the first part of September answering interview questions about who we are and what we're about. I tell you, it was a great time to be in the book of Acts, and being reminded as we go through that material that we're not a political action committee, we're not a relief agency, we're not a community center, we're not even a school of theology. We are, very simply, a people who've been called to give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ. That's our calling...that's what we're about.

That chapter's so important to us, and that focus is so important, that we've spent three weeks looking at it. We've gone through it slower than we would other passages of scripture. We're gonna pick up the pace after this week. But we're in our third week in chapter two of the book of Acts. We started with the centerpiece of the chapter, which focuses on the witness given by that early church, when the Apostle Peter stood in Jerusalem and delivered the first sermon after Jesus departed, after He ascended to heaven. And that first sermon...the key line, the emphatic point of witness, is that found in verse 24 where Peter says 'God raised Him up again. He's crucified here, He was crucified here, He was buried here, but God raised Him up again.' He repeats that theme a little later in verse 32 when he says

"This Jesus God raised up again, to which we all..."

...speaking of the apostles and the others that were with them...

"...are witnesses."

'It is our testimony that He's alive.'

They present that witness against a backdrop of the reality of a eventual great and glorious day of the Lord, a day that is grim because it's a day of reckoning, and yet a day that is glorious in that that'll be the day that ushers in the eternal kingdom of God. And they present the news as they look at that great day of reckoning, that there is One named Jesus and that, responding to Him, we can face that Day of Judgment with confidence. And so they present it as good news.

Interesting as that message as presented is the dynamic of the response. Told that day three thousand people responded. In the very city where Jesus had been crucified, fifty days later people are stepping up by the thousands and saying, "We believe." The dynamic behind that is what the first part of the chapter is about, and that is God's Spirit coming upon His people was a promise that Jesus had made. He had told His disciples to wait there in Jerusalem until this happened; and in chapter two of Acts the very opening verses describe how the Spirit came upon God's people, upon that early church. And it's very dramatic in the beginning. It says a noise like a violent, rushing wind came into the room. And there was tongues, a visual of... that looked like fire, that distributed themselves upon the various people in that room, and they were all filled with the Spirit. The Spirit began to move in them, and through them, and they began to speak in other languages—languages they had never learned, they had never studied.

But people who knew those languages, had heard those languages from birth, could understand them! And as the pilgrims from various parts of the Roman Empire, that had gathered for that Jewish festival of Pentecost, heard these Galileans, untrained, speaking in their languages, they were amazed and they were astounded.

And then Peter steps forward. And he takes his stand with the eleven, the apostles; he raised his voice and he begins to declare that this is the Spirit at work. And then he goes forward to give witness to the reality of Jesus risen from the grave. His witness is as dramatic and as powerful, and as evident of the Spirit, as all the tongues that were spoken that day. Remember Peter as the one who denied Jesus three times on the night of His...on the day before His crucifixion. Peter is the one that was always sayin' the wrong thing at the wrong time. But this day, with the Spirit upon him, he says the right thing at the right time, in the right way.

That's the flow of the chapter. What we're gonna do today is we're gonna kinda bring closure to it. That's the way the narrative is written. And we're gonna...we're gonna look at the Church after this great event. At the end of that day what did things look like? And in the narrative flow, this is kind of a pause. And we'll get a look at this, and then we'll move on to more action as we go on into Acts. But this is kind of one of those moments...you just kinda sit back and say 'Boy, what were the results of that witness inspired by the Spirit?' We're gonna walk through the passage the way we have other parts of Acts so far. We're gonna read through it slowly, and then we're gonna come back and just reflect on it briefly at the end. So the focus today is gonna be reading through this passage and actually seeing the Church as it was described at that time.

Peter finishes his message to 'em and we're told that

So then, those who had received his word were baptized.

In other words, the people that heard him preaching that day were baptized as they accepted...when they believed, they got baptized. That's a big step for these people. For the Jews, being baptized meant that you were acknowledging you were a sinner and you were leaving the past behind to walk in righteousness. Baptism was something you asked a Gentile to do if they wanted to become and identify with the Jewish people. And they would go through baptism to leave their Gentile heritage behind and become a Jew. Baptism was something if you were a Jew you did it because you had done something so horrible, and it was a way to say 'I'm repentant and I'm coming back.' This was a major step to take. And it's not just leaving a past behind. It's a new identification...they were being baptized in the name of Jesus. They were stepping forward and saying, 'You know what? We're leaving our past behind to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ.' And it's a very public thing they were doing. This was a very, very demanding, public, costly step for them to take; and they were doing it.

And it wasn't just a few. The text goes on and says

That day there were added about three thousand souls.

We know there was about 100-120 Christians gathered together in Jerusalem at the start of that day. At the end we have three thousand added.

Now what happens in the text from here...it goes on and begins to give a description of this growing group of people and what they did—how they functioned, what they were like. And the first description kinda gives us the pattern of devotion, I call it, the pattern of things they were doing. And verse 47...excuse me, verse 42, will describe that. It says

They were continually devoting themselves...

This new group of believers that had vastly grown...they were committed to something. They were continually doing something, devoted to it, and it'll list four things. Number one, it says they were devoted to the apostles' teaching—very emphatic here. They were looking to the apostles, that authoritative group of twelve men who had seen Jesus from the very beginning when He was baptized, all the way to His ascension into heaven. That very group of people who had witnessed His crucifixion and had talked to Him after His resurrection—that group were the ones that were given the authoritative responsibility to give testimony to Jesus. They were the ones—if you wanted to know who Jesus is, what He said, what He did—they were the ones Jesus appointed to give the answers. And these people were sayin', 'Those are the ones we wanna listen to. We don't wanna hear somebody else's speculation. We don't wanna hear somebody else's ideas. We don't wanna hear somebody else talk religious philosophy. We want to hear the apostles.' And that was their commitment.

Secondly, it says they were committed...they were devoted to the 'fellowship.' And if you read in the English translations, most of 'em will just simply say 'to fellowship.' But literally in the Greek, the little article 'the' is there. It's pointing to a particular kind of fellowship. In other words, it's not just simply saying 'You know what? They were devoted to hangin' out together. They were devoted to just kinda bein' together.' The idea is they were devoted to this group. Literally, it would be they were devoted to the partnership. Think of Tolkien's books, ok? "The Fellowship of the Ring," ok? Committed to that. Well, these people were becoming part of the 'Christian Fellowship', those who are committed to Jesus, and they were committed to one another as they committed to Him. That's the idea here.

Then it goes on in the second phrase, and the translations...they just try to smooth this out a bit, but there's another 'the' left out. It says "...to the breaking of the bread..." If you leave that 'the' out there, you get the idea there it was just they were breaking bread and eatin' together. If you leave that article in there...and translators debate it; there's legitimate argument on both sides here. But if you leave the 'the', which is in the original Greek manuscript in there, the idea is very specifically a type of breaking of bread, and the reference is most likely to taking Communion together, stopping and breaking that bread, the remembrance of Jesus' body broken for us; and then drinking the cup, remembering His blood shed for us—that remembrance that Jesus taught us as a tradition to maintain, the taking of Communion together, remembering Jesus, the Crucified One.

The fourth and the last one put in this list is they were committed to the prayers. Again, we could simply say they were committed to prayer. But there is a little article there in the original, and scholars kinda wrestle...what exactly was that because it doesn't just say 'devoted to prayer', 'devoted to the prayers' as if there was particular prayers they were devoted to. I mean, were they working through the Psalms one by one and praying those? What were they doing? The best understanding of it is to understand that they had hours of prayer in the Jewish pattern of worship, and they were probably committed to those, keeping and maintaining those times of prayers. And yes, they probably went to the Psalms and other prayers as they did so.

So that's the basic patterns as the Church first came into existence and expanded so rapidly; that's the basic pattern of devotion. There's some other descriptions that begin to come in the verses that follow. And these are kind of intriguing because what happens now is we're gonna get a description of how things felt during that time. This is the pattern of devotion, but what was the atmosphere like? How were people feeling in the middle of this? What were kind of the intangibles that you couldn't mark on a chart, but you would sense if you were in the midst of all this? And there's a series of statements that are made.

One...beginning at verse 43 to verse 47 it'll discuss this...number one, it says

...everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.

And we wanna underscore the word 'everyone' here, because we're not talking just about Christians at this point. It'll become evident as we go on through this passage—he's talking about everybody in Jerusalem at this point. Everybody...were feeling a sense of awe, and the term almost has the sense—and can have the sense—of fear. There was a sense of 'something really big is going on, and we don't control it.' That's kinda the idea here. Now, the 'something big' is indicated in the next line.

...and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

You had twelve men doing things nobody else had ever done, save Jesus. And there were things happening—miracles were taking place that nobody had ever seen before—by ordinary men. And there was a sense of awe coming over the city at this point. As the story goes on in Acts, you'll find that there wasn't a debate as to whether these miracles were taking place. There was a fear about it—what's the power behind this? And how do you control this? So, there's definitely across the city a sense of 'something really big's going on.'

Those who believed...and now we're going to have descriptions of not just everyone, but particularly those who believed the message, who were committed to Jesus; and there'll be some statements with respect to them. And we're told, first of all, that "*they were together*"...they were together. They spent time together. We'll get into more of that in just a moment. But they were together, we're told. We're also told that they "*had all things in common.*" They had all things in common. And we wonder, ok, they all signed over the title to their chariot, or what, you know. It's described in the next lines. It goes on that they were selling their properties and their possessions, and they were sharing with one another as each had need.

Now, they didn't go into communal living at all at this point. They still maintained their homes. But there was a generosity that just overwhelmed that group of people. And they were selling things...possessions and properties...and they were giving to anybody in their fellowship that had need. Interesting time...tremendous time of generosity just exploding in this group of people.

And then it goes on, and it'll say in verse 46—and this one I kinda wanna read for you. Listen; if you have your Bibles open you can follow along. It'll go like this. It says

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple...

In other words, each day they were gathering together in the temple as a large group. And they were doing this with a unity of mind, a sameness of purpose. And then it goes on and says

...and breaking bread from house to house...

And here it doesn't say 'breaking the bread' like they were taking Communion. Here's the idea more that they were just...they were just eating in house to house. So they're meeting in a large group in the temple, and they're gathering and meeting in homes in various places. And then it goes on

...they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart...

And as they were also doing this, it goes on, they were

...praising God, and having favor with all the people.

Ok, I want you to look at that verse again. Just kinda look at it. And I'm gonna give you a little grammatical thing that you don't see if you look at the English translations. There's verbs in there, verbal forms. There's...it talks about meeting in the temple; it talks about going from house to house; it talks about praising God; it talks about having favor with people. The lead verb, the dominant one grammatically in the Greek, the one that really is the one that all...it's kind of the 'mothership' of the verse...and all the others kind of connect to it, is this one—they were taking their meals together, and they were doing it (excuse me) with gladness and sincerity of heart. Interesting...what the writer wants you to sense when you go through here is, yeah, all these things were going on; all things...all these things were happening; but you know what? If you want to get a sense of these people, you wanna get a feel for the atmosphere and what it was like at that time, man, they were sittin' down and they were eating meals together, and they were doing it glad to be with each other, and with a sincerity, a simplicity of just simply enjoying God and enjoying each other. It's a beautiful picture. All the other aspects are there, but that should be your dominant one. These were not people caught up in a frenzied hysteria. These were not a people panicked, thinking the world was gonna collapse. These were a people that were enjoying each other around table and fellowship, with a simplicity and a joy that was honoring God.

That's the picture of the setting. There's one last footnote to the section. It says

And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The group kept growing as God kept working.

That's our description. That's our review of the particular passage. We see the pattern of what that church was like, and the pattern of devotion; and then we kinda see the dynamics, the energy, the atmosphere that was goin' on as they were going through that pattern.

We need to get reflective now. Got about twelve minutes here; we need to get reflective with that. Because the question that comes when we read that description...probably the foremost question that comes to our mind, that we wrestle with and think about, is this: Is that what we're supposed to look like? Is that what we're supposed to look like? And are those the dynamics...is that the atmosphere that should be around us if we're really the Church?

You know, there's some who would look at this passage and they'll say, "Absolutely. Yes. That is us, and we'd better get there." And they strive to duplicate those verses in the life of the church. And they try to make it happen, and they try to make it look just like that. And they're never satisfied unless the Church looks just like these verses. That becomes the template. That becomes the list...the to-do list.

There are others that take a different approach to this passage, and they say, “No, that is a unique time, a unique event, a unique situation; and it isn’t the details for us. We couldn’t duplicate that if we wanted to, and we probably shouldn’t,” some would say. Because there are some that look at this and say, “You know what? We’re seein’ some people that were pilgrims from across the Roman Empire; they were gathered at Pentecost. They didn’t have homes there. They needed somebody to help ‘em out. And also we got Peter talking about the end times, and we probably see some end times fanaticism goin’ on here, and they’re just sellin’ to get rid of everything because tomorrow Jesus is coming. And so we shouldn’t look at this passage and say that’s what we oughta look at. This is a unique event.”

So the question becomes ‘is this the pattern of what we should be?’ Should we take this and turn it into a to-do list and say that’s what we’re gonna do? Or do we look at it and say ‘that’s a unique event in history; we can read it and then let’s move on.’ This is a really appropriate time, as we work through Acts, to talk about “How do you read the book of Acts?” I kinda planned this pause moment, because we’re gonna go through a lot in the book of Acts, and we need to be clear about how we read the book of Acts.

Think of it this way: the first books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) cover a period of about thirty-some years—Christ’s ministry, His life, His words, His works, from birth to the cross to resurrection—about thirty years. The book of Acts follows up with that and gives a story of the next thirty years after Christ had ascended to heaven—what the Church did; what happened as those apostles went forward, gave witness to Jesus, the Church took root and grew. Which means when we’re in the book of Acts we’re in narrative literature; we’re in descriptive, historic literature. It’s telling us what happened. It is not focusing on telling us what to do—very important description. When you read the book of Acts you are reading about what happened. You are not reading about what we’re supposed to do, necessarily. There are some sections that will get directive, but for the most part the book of Acts is descriptive. It’s looking at events and saying, ‘This is what happened.’ So we’ve gotta be careful when we move into the book of Acts and say we’re finding direction here, specific direction—gotta be cautious there.

You say, ‘Well, where do we find more specific direction?’ As the book of Acts unfolds, as those events took place, there were letters of instruction written by the apostles to churches they started. And these letters of instruction give direction for the Church—what we should be doing and how we should be doing it. You have, for example, the book of Thessalonians, the first letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a church he started. And he was only able to stay there...Acts records how he was only able to stay there about three months time at the most. And when he left he was concerned that he wasn’t able to give that church much instruction. So he wrote two letters to help them understand what they should be doing as a church, and how to do it.

And then you have the book of Galatians, written to another church early in Paul’s career, about halfway through the book of Acts where he’s dealing with a church that got all confused in Asia Minor about “Boy, what are the rules we’re supposed to follow?” And he comes back and says, ‘Throw out the rules! Follow Jesus, ok?’

And then he goes on, and we have the book of Corinthians. Later in the book of Acts he deals with a church...we have the story of how he comes to a metropolitan city that was just as foul as could be. And he started a church there. And later he writes to that church, and we have two letters of instruction that he wrote to that church.

Near the end of Acts we have the Apostle Paul on his way to Rome. We have the letter he wrote before he went to Rome. And when he was finally imprisoned, at the end of the book of Acts, we have a collection of three letters...or actually there’s four...but three main ones that are written from that prison cell when he describes what a church should be doing, and what the churches are about.

So we’ve got plenty of direction to go along with the description. We have to pay attention to both. So the question comes back—“Ok, Larry, when you look at the direction as well as the description, are there things in this pattern of devotion that should be maintained, that we should look at and say ‘Yeah, we should be doing those things?’”

Absolutely. Absolutely. You look at the directives and the letters that the apostles gave to the churches and you’ll find that the highest priority is “Pay attention to the apostles’ teachings.” We are not...we are not called to be religious philosophers. We are not called to be speculators. Our calling is to be true to the testimony of the apostles and to hand it down from generation to generation to generation. We are to be devoted to the apostles’ teachings. That is a directive that you’ll find in the letters that follow, that go along with the description.

We are to be devoted to the fellowship, the Church. We are to gather, not...in fact, they're very specific. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together. They call us repeatedly to practice the 'one-anothers'—pray for one another, admonish one another, encourage one another...it just goes on and on. We are called, in the directions that go with the descriptions, to be devoted to one another. We are called to the breaking of bread, to continuing to take Communion. And we are called to prayer.

When Paul was in that prison cell in Rome he wrote one of my favorite little letters. It's called the book of Colossians. In that letter he describes some theological issues that needed to be dealt with. He describes it to that church and then he closes that letter...and it has just always stuck with me...he closes that letter and he says "*Be devoted to prayer.*" It's the only thing in the whole letter he says be devoted to. And it's almost like he's sayin', 'Be obsessed with it. Never let up on it.'

So yes, that pattern of devotion—it remains. The description we're seein' here—it's somethin' we should be following.

But the next question comes, "Well, what about the dynamics that go on here? What about the things that follow in those last verses? Should we expect [talks in aside to computer tech]..."

You know, I just had this flash thought. You know people listen to our sermons on the 'net, and they're gonna be hearing that "Hannah, help me!" And they're gonna have no idea what that's about... ☺

Ok. What about the atmosphere? What about the electricity of that moment? What about the intensity of it? Should we see those kinds of things? And my answer is...I'll qualify it. For example, those twelve apostles were unique. There has never been a group like that. They were unique in the signs and wonders that came with their ministry. Now, there are others, as we go on through the book of Acts, that we'll find had dramatic works of God. And throughout church history you're gonna find miracles that take place, and you're gonna find workings of the Spirit that are amazing and astounding. And you're gonna find things that have no other explanation other than "God did that!" And it will create a sense of awe, especially among God's people as we're around it, or those that are close to the situation. But I don't look back and say we're gonna see an entire city in fear and awe like Jerusalem was when the apostles were loose within its walls. Those apostles, we have to maintain, they had a very distinctive ministry, and gifting, and working. And it's gonna be problematic if we try to say we're them.

Likewise, if you look in that description of how things were, it says that "*they were praising God and finding favor with all.*" That didn't last very long in Jerusalem. They were eventually chased out of that city. And you city after city where the gospel went, and the Church began, and yeah, some cities they were welcome. Other cities—riots broke out. And to say that 'ok, if the Spirit's really moving and we are really witnessing well, and we are really the Church, everybody's gonna like us'—it ain't gonna happen. It's not. In fact, 'let me try to kill ya'...they did in the book of Acts.

Well, what about that special unity within the body, that oneness of mind, that generosity that overflowed, and that sense of having real fellowship with each other, kinda one-for-all-and-all-for-one, enjoying it? Yeah, I believe that should be part of what happens. You see that as you go on through the letters of the New Testament; in fact, we're called to do it. Now, we're not specifically called to eat together, ok. But if you look at the long history of the Church you'll find that the very first non-Christian description we have of the early church service says they met early in the morning, took a vow to Jesus as to God, and then they left and gathered for a meal...but it was ordinary and harmless food. Ok? Right up to the modern-day potluck of ordinary and harmless food. That is something that you see in the Church.

A bigger question that we have when we work with this, though, and we look at it, is "Ok, how do we...how do we make sure we follow that pattern of devotion in our culture and our setting, in ways that fit us? How do we make sure that we follow that pattern of devotion and we experience the dynamics and the things that happen with it, however they happen?"

And here we need to step back and remember this book, this chapter, and see the flow of causation that takes place. It's a big-picture thing, but we need to back up and see. This passage moves in a very definite sequence. The Spirit of God works among the people of God. They give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord of all. And the Church becomes what it is. The pattern of devotion flows out of that. The dynamics come with it. And it's that sequence, emphatically.

I'm intrigued by the Apostle Paul working with the Corinthian church; and they were all excited about doing really dramatic stuff. And then they were all excited about being very learned when they explained Christianity. It's just one of my favorite passages. Paul looks at this church and he says, 'Listen, listen. The Jews want signs. They want dramatic miracles. The Greeks, the Gentiles...they want wisdom. We talk about Jesus. It's the stumbling block to those who want the dramatic. You're just talking about Jesus. It's foolishness to those who want wisdom. You're just talkin' about Jesus.' Yes—we just talk about Jesus; because it isn't about what we do. It isn't about the great things we accomplish.

The end of this passage has an all-important note. It's more than a footnote. It says "*...the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*" It's God who did this. It's Jesus who poured out His Spirit on His people, moved them to give witness to His reality, pierced the hearts of those who had even crucified Him, and they responded in faith. And this new community kept growing.

So what do we do? We just keep responding to Jesus as He works and moves among us. We give witness to His reality, and then we respond to His reality in our midst. And the rest will come.

Let's stand.

We'll close with our usual song of blessing on one another, as we go out to enjoy our Lord Jesus Christ working in us and among us and through us.

[Congregation sings song of blessing]