

Ministry Year Overview  
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Wasilla Bible Church  
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What we call this service is our “Christ at Center,” and as I said earlier during the announcement time, this is the beginning of our start-up sequence for our ministry year as we head into the school year. And I, really...my responsibilities on this day are somewhat limited. There’s two main things that I try to do and that my target is when we come to this service, in terms of my role as a preacher. Number one is to give you a sense of direction as we head into the new school year and the ministry year for us, and give the congregation a sense of where we’re headed and what lies up in front of us. And then, number two is to give you a starting place—the right place to begin our school year. So those are the two things we’re gonna be doing today before we actually come to Communion.

The first part, giving you a sense of where we’re headed, is fairly easy. All I have to do is point at the book of Acts, that exciting book in the New Testament that comes right after you go through the gospels...Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...there comes the book of Acts. And it’s an exciting story. It’s an historical account, the record of how Christ’s followers—His first early followers—set out to extend God’s grace. And as they did so amazing things happened, and they began to take the grace of God beyond the little confines of Jerusalem and out into the region out around Jerusalem...Judea, and then to Samaria, and on into Antioch, and beyond into Asia Minor. And eventually they were speaking of Jesus in the great city of Rome! It’s an amazing story that not only goes across geographical boundaries and goes across regional districts, but goes across ethnics and class, and everything else. And it’s an amazing story of God’s grace spreading out through Christ’s followers, and doing it by the power of the Spirit of God.

That’s what makes the story so astounding. You see, Jesus spent four years with His disciples, and during that time they sought to minister with Him in extending God’s grace to people around Him. And then, when He’d finished the four years with them, and He told them “I’m going to leave,” and they were panicked and they wondered what would happen, He reassured them. And He said it’d be ok. And then He left; He departed. And after four years of ministering with Jesus right there among them...any question you had you could ask Him, any problem you couldn’t handle you could bring the situation right to Him. Any person that was in desperation beyond what you could handle, you brought it to Jesus and He took care of it. And after four years of that, suddenly they didn’t have Him; and an amazing thing occurred—they went out and they began to extend God’s grace. And as they did so, they were more confident and more effective than they’d ever been when Jesus was there among them. It was astounding!

I mean Jesus had told them, that last night that he was with them, that it was actually to their advantage for Him to leave. And they couldn’t comprehend that, they couldn’t understand it. He said, ‘Actually, it’s gonna be better for you if I’m not here physically with you. It’s better for Me to leave.’ And it turned out that that’s exactly what happened. When He left they were more confident, and they were more effective, than when He had been physically in their midst. And the explanation is very simple—He was now, by His Spirit, *in* them and working *through* them. It is an astounding, amazing story.

When we read it it’s not just to be amazed. Our desire is to study that work, that book, and not only come to understand that amazing thing that occurred after Jesus left and His Spirit was poured out into His people, that amazing thing; we don’t want to just understand that. We want to live it as a congregation, and to extend God’s grace as Christ’s followers through the power of His Spirit. And that’s the direction we’re headed this year. In terms of our approach to our school year, we’re gonna be studying the book of Acts on Sunday mornings. And every Sunday we’ll come together and our sermon time will focus on taking us through that book from start to finish. Now, there’s gonna be breaks in that sequence; there’s gonna be times when we take a look at another subject, another topic. But our goal is to start September 7<sup>th</sup> and finish by the end of May going through the entire book of Acts.

Now, we’re not going to go as quite as detailed as we did last year in the gospel of Mark, when we literally read every word out loud together. We won’t be doing that in Acts, but we’re going to start at the beginning and we’re going to work our way all the way through that book, with the goal that the truth that we read there will be a truth that changes us and shapes us, and carries us forward in God’s purposes for us as a people, individually and congregationally.

That's going to be the main part of what we're doing at the very heart of our congregation in terms of listening to God together, our first priority. We're going to be going through His word in the book of Acts. Now, because, when we talk about the Holy Spirit, it raises questions in people's minds and they wonder 'what all should I be expecting, and what all might happen, and what's it really all about,' and it raises a lot of questions, a lot of confusion, yet it is so prominent in the book of Acts and it should be prominent in our lives—the reality of the Spirit. And because it raises such confusion, we're gonna be adding some aspects to our approach this winter as we go through it as a congregation.

One is we're gonna provide what we call Theology Units. And these will be single-night sessions, and they'll be offered throughout the year; so if you can't hit it the first time we offer it, you can take it another time. There'll be a lot of opportunities to take these. And they're one-night classes when you'll be able to come and in an hour-and-a-half to two hours you'll be given an overview, a comprehensive and concise overview, of the reality as the scripture presents it, of the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal teaching—who the Holy Spirit is, how He relates to us, what we can expect of Him, and what He does, and how He fits in the big picture of things, and all that sort of thing. And it's going to be an hour-and-a-half to two hours of very comprehensive, concise theology. And we're gonna encourage everybody to take one of those theology units during the course of the year. And they'll be offered enough different times that you should be able to do that.

The second thing—and this is gonna be unusual, and we're gonna encourage everyone to go through one of these—gonna call 'em application groups. These are gonna be small groups, most often in a home, led by one of our elders, or one of our pastors, or some other people that we'll train; and we will take you in small groups of four to five couples or singles. And we'll take you through an application-oriented class that...actually, I'm not even gonna call it a class. I'm just gonna call it an application group. We are going to practice together and work with you and coach you in terms of 'how do you recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit in your life.' It's one of the most confusing things I find that people struggle with. And we wanna get behind makin' this an academic exercise. We wanna make this something that we, on a practical level, experience, understand, and enjoy. And so different times through the year we're gonna be offering these application groups, and we're gonna encourage people to take them, go through them. They're not gonna be academic; they're gonna be very, very practical. And we're gonna help you recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit in your life.

The third and last appli...implement, or element, in what we're gonna be doin' with the book of Acts is what I call "exploratories." And we're gonna do this after January. We're gonna be able to come back and we're gonna look at some of the areas that, when people talk about the Holy Spirit, they get most confused about. You know, those things that 'if the Holy Spirit's moving, what will happen? Am I gonna do strange things or am I not? Are there gonna be miracles happening or not?' And all those kind of things that people get really confused about; they wanna debate, they wanna discuss, in some cases they even wanna argue about—we're gonna handle those in what we call exploratories. These are specific classes that we'll start offering in January that people can take. And our requirement is gonna be, a prerequisite is you get that doctrinal base in a theology unit first, you practice recognizing and responding to the Holy Spirit in your life, and then we'll look through these exploratories together.

I'm excited about it! It's probably one of the most exciting study years I've ever seen laid out in front of me. Part of it, it's a natural progression, if you think about it. Two years ago we made a commitment as a congregation that we wanted to be a people that extended God's grace one conversation at a time; that anywhere, anytime, people who spoke with us, we would speak words back that edified—no unwholesome word, and we would give grace to those that hear. We saw last year that ultimately, if we're going to do that, if we're really going to extend grace in our conversations and the way we speak, we need to be able to speak of Jesus clearly and accurately. So we went through the gospel of Mark. But we've also discovered that it isn't good enough simply to have good intentions and to have a lot of information about Jesus. We need something more. We need the Holy Spirit working in us and through us to speak of Jesus not only clearly, not only accurately, but effectively, extending His grace. So I'm excited about it.

A little cautious—a little cautious because one, this is an area where, man, denominations have divided, churches have divided, and families have divided, debating what the Spirit could do, is doing, shouldn't do, could be doing—all that sort of thing. And I'm a little cautious. I'm not real panicked or concerned; we've dealt with this subject before and we've always seemed as a congregation to grow and develop through that, and gain ground in that, so I'm not panicked about that but I am cautious. We need to handle it with care because there is a history of debate and conflict in the church throughout the past...oh...thirty years in this particular area.

But I'm not so much concerned about division. What I'm really concerned about is distraction. See, when you start talkin' about the Holy Spirit it's very easy for us to become self-absorbed and want experiential spirituality. We wanna experience more and more of the mystical, and the spiritual, and the dynamic, and the unexplainable. And that's a legitimate desire, that's a legitimate hunger of the soul that God responds to. But we can't be absorbed in that. We can't be people who simply enjoy God's grace and never extend it. And I'm concerned that we do that. We not only enjoy God's Spirit to the fullest, we also extend it to the farthest; we not only respond to what the Spirit is doing in us, but we move forward with what the Spirit wants to do through us.

So I'm excited about the year ahead. A little cautious, but I'm excited. The most important thing with that caution, that little bit of concern, is to make sure we start right, that we begin at the right place. And that's what we're about; that's what we're going to be doin' today. We're going to be doing that with Communion.

Communion is that ancient tradition that Jesus gave us at the very last night with His disciple, that communion, that tradition that puts Christ right at the center of our thinking, puts Christ right at the center of our congregational life. When you take of that bread and you drink of the cup and you remember Jesus, the One who died for us, you remember that His body was broken for us, you remember that His blood was shed for us, and you remember that because of His death the gates of eternity have been opened wide for us—we remember Him just the way He asked us to remember Him...as the One who died for us. That's the place to begin. That's the place to start this coming year as we get ready to explore the wonder, and the glory, and the mystery of His Spirit within us.

We do something when we take Communion, and I want you to be clear about that as we take it today. We actually preach something. When you take Communion you are saying something, not with words—with symbols. The Apostle Paul, when he explains Communion, he says,

*As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*

You are preaching something. You are saying something. You're saying Jesus died. When you come forward and take Communion you're saying "I believe Jesus died for me." Another way to think of it, another way to phrase it, is when you take Communion you're saying, "I'm a sinner who has found in Jesus the crucified One, the Savior. I'm a sinner." That's emphatic and implicit in taking Communion. You're saying, "I am a sinner." And not just in a general, abstract sense; the Bible lists many different sins. Ok? There's no ultimate, comprehensive list. The church has traditionally, over the centuries isolated and identified seven that they call the 'seven deadly sins': pride, envy, greed, wrath, lust, and then the two that they usually put on their list that we don't talk about a lot—gluttony and sloth. Gluttony is taking too much in, and sloth is putting too much...little...out. And those things that are just sins that have been identified. And there's others that we could add to that list, all of 'em symptoms of a rebellion against God, a determination to do things our way—a self-absorption.

When you take Communion you are saying that if someone were to examine your history, they would find those things, and things like them; that if they were to study your life and its past they would find those things, specific examples 'em; maybe not all of 'em, but some of 'em. And not only that...if they were to look at your life in the present they would find the taint of those things right now in your life. And if they were to look at your life tomorrow they would find that you're still struggling with some of those things.

When you take Communion you're saying, "I am a sinner." Do not come to this table if you're unwilling to admit and acknowledge and confess that. "I'm a sinner. But oh, the glory and the wonder—I'm a sinner who's found in Jesus the crucified One, the Savior, the One who covers my sin, who because of His death has made up for all the wrong I've ever committed or could ever commit—He did something so right that day, when He obeyed the Father and died, that He's covered every wrong I've ever committed or could ever commit. And not only that, not only is He One who covers my sin; He's One who in the present addresses my sin. He won't let me keep sinning. He challenges me. He confronts me in the battle with sin. He encourages me and He comforts me as I wrestle against it."

And above all wonders, He answers every promise sin makes; and oh, sin makes promises. He answers every promise sin makes with a promise of the glory, the wonder, and the grace of our God. He addresses sin. And He addresses it friend to friend. And in the ultimate end, the great and glorious ultimate end, He removes sin. His promise is that when He is done working with you and I on that great and final day, there will not be the slightest taint of sin. You won't have the tiniest twinge of pride, envy, arrogance, wrath, lust, gluttony, sloth—you will not. You'll be totally, completely, absolutely free of all of that. You will stand before the holy God of the universe and you will not be ashamed in any way. That's what you say when you take Communion.

You look at it and you say, ‘...kind of a simple statement.’ That is our witness. Generation by generation, by generation, by generation, that has been the witness and the testimony of God’s people. That is our witness to this generation. And that witness, given in the gathering of His people around the table of Communion, is powerful. It strengthens our faith in Jesus, it renews our hope in Him, and it engages our heart to care for Him and all He’s about. And it is that witness, that simple truth—“I am a sinner who has found in Jesus the crucified One, the Savior”—that witness is the truth through which the Holy Spirit extends His grace out into this community and beyond.

That is our witness. And by the power, and the glory, and the wonder of the Holy Spirit, it is the single most powerful thing we ever do. “I’m a sinner who’s found in Jesus the crucified One, the Savior.”

The mechanics of doing that in Communion are very simple. I’m gonna ask the servers to come up and take their places at the tables. And I’ll just explain the mechanics very simply. In just a moment I’ll lead us in a word of prayer, and I’ll read a passage of scripture. And when we’re done with that our musicians will begin to play; and they’ll play some instrumental music. And then after a while they’ll lead us in some songs that will actually have the words up on the overhead with. And it’s just a time of us being quiet and the music will play. But as that music is playing, eventually as we join together in singing, we invite you—if you desire to—to come forward and take Communion. We’ve done this before, and you’ll remember how the system flows, and it’ll come back to you if you haven’t been in one of these in a while. But as the music plays we just invite you to come forward.

It works best if you...as you come forward...you just kinda wait at the front of the aisle until the people in front of you are served so you don’t crowd anybody at the table. And then as people are served you come up, you come to the servers, and they’ll say simply...they’ll give you the bread and they’ll say, “Take this in remembrance of Jesus.” They’ll give you the cup and they’ll say, “Take this in remembrance of Him.” And at that time you can take that bread and eat it and drink that cup. If you desire to take it back to your seat you’re welcome to do that, if you want to be quiet in your seat for a while and then eat it and drink it. You’re welcome to do that. But if you wanna come up here and just take your time this is not a hurried thing. Ok? Just come up and be served. And after...if you wanna bring your family, if your whole family wants to gather around the table to be served, you’re welcome to do that. If you have a close friend that wants to come with you, we invite you to do that. But we wanna make this a time when we’re unhurried, we have music, and we put Christ at center.

The thing to remember as we do it, and as we take part today, is that you are making a testimony as you come forward. And you wanna do that with integrity. You wanna express this as an expression of your faith and your heart. You wanna say, with integrity, “I am a sinner, and in Jesus I’ve found the Savior.” So we invite you to do that. There’s no need to build a huge line in the aisle. Just wait, and as there’s opportunity move forward.

I’m gonna start by reading a passage of scripture where the Apostle Paul explains Communion. And he does so in these words. He says, in 1 Corinthians 11, he says [*boy, I need to get under a light!*]...he says:

*I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and He said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”*

*In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”*

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.*

Let us pray.

*Our Father in heaven,*

*As we approach this table we recognize and we acknowledge that Jesus died for us. And in that You demonstrated Your love for us. But Father, we recognize that just seeing that fact doesn’t necessarily help us to feel it, to grip it with our heart. And so we pray, as we go through this Communion service, that You would touch us with Your Spirit, and You would pour out Your love within us, that we would know the reality of Your love, even as we remember it.*

*In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.*