

A Healthy Church

- Acts 2:41-47
- A supply preacher for a small town Texas Church, came in early on Sundays, preached a sermon to the congregation, and then left after lunch. One Sunday he arrived early so he sat down at a local donut shop, opened his Bible and went over his sermon notes. A man sitting down the counter said, "You a preacher or something?" "Yes I preach at the Christian Church here in town." He got excited and said, "Hey, I'm a member of that church." The church was small and the supply preacher knew all the regulars so he said, "I've been preaching there for about three months and I've never seen you there." He looked at the man kinda' strange and said, "I said I was a member of that church. I never said that I was fanatical about it!"
- We are talking about the church for the next little while before we start 2 Timothy. The word for church, ekklesia, occurs over 100 times in the New Testament, and it never once refers to 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. You know the context. The day of Pentecost has just happened, the Spirit has come down and filled the 120 believers who were gathered in one place, and they spoke with tongues. People from all over the world heard the Christians speaking in their language and they marveled at it. Some mocked and said the disciples were drunk. Peter stood up and preached a sermon that tied OT prophecy to the events that had just occurred 40 days earlier, the crucifixion and burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And he closes the sermon in verse 36 with, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." The people were cut to the heart and asked what they must do. Peter tells them to repent and be baptized and their sins would be forgiven and they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then it happened that about three thousand gladly received the word and were baptized! That was the first day of the church. What a start!
- I see eight signs of health in this passage 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."
- They were saved. Who does the "they" in verse 42 refer to? Those who were included in verse 41. Those who gladly received the Word from Peter. The church continued to grow as we saw in verse 47, as "the Lord added to the church daily 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.
- 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 daily in the temple and they met from house to house. 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, and whew! I am tired. Do we HAVE to go to church tomorrow?! No! The church 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!

- They continued steadfastly in the Word. Verse 42, "the apostles' doctrine." The Word preached was what brought conviction, repentance, and salvation, as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23, "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the Word of God which lives and abides forever." 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, "As newborn babies, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." (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. Only the Word of God.
- They continued steadfastly in fellowship. You see this in verse 42 where the word is koinonia, and it means "to share all things in common." You see it 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 gladness and simplicity of heart. Note this: from house to house. 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? Start this summer, and set a goal to have a different family or single person over for a meal each month. If the budget would not allow that, just have them over for tea. Or coffee. Start with the people in the church you don't know very well or at all. Is once a month too often? Then set a goal for every other month. When we have a shared meal on the second Sunday every month, stay! Come to men's breakfasts and women's fellowships. Lean into steadfast commitment to fellowship.
- They worshiped. We see in verse 47 that the church was found "praising God." We were created for the purpose of worship. Paul says it in Ephesians 1:5-6, "having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the beloved." He says it again in verse 12, "that we who first trusted Christ should be to the praise of His glory." The history of God's people from the song of Moses and the song of Miriam after the parting of the Red Sea to the new song of the 24 elders around the throne of God in Revelation 5 is a history of worship. One of my favorite memories from the Together for the Gospel conference in April was watching CJ Mahaney worship the Lord...(I could see him from the side, he was on the front row with the other speakers, lunging/almost toward the screen). He was not on stage during the singing, but he WAS a worship leader. I was encouraged in my worship by watching him. You may not be on stage, but you are a worship leader, you're your family will be encouraged in their worship by watching you. So will others! Worship is much more than singing praises to God, but it is not less.
- 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. But a church does. The other element that is introduced by the Lord's Supper is church discipline. You see that in Paul's instructions in 1 Cor. 11:17-19. Paul is not surprised that there are divisions in the church because he has already called them immature and carnal in earlier passages. But there are also divisions because God is exposing those who are in sin and approving those who are the followers of Christ. Then he goes on to warn the body not to come to the table without self-examination. Some have gotten sick and some have died because they took the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. It is a tool of church discipline the Lord has blessed the church with. The Lord's Supper has also been historically denied to those who are under church discipline. Until there is repentance, they cannot take the table.

- They were led by godly and duly-appointed leaders. We have already seen that they devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine (not to the apostles!). But inherent is 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. You see God-ordained leadership on display in Peter and John's ministry to the lame beggar. Then in chapter 4 you see 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.
- They continued steadfastly in prayer. You see this in verse 42. 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." Remember the story we looked at two weeks ago in Mark 9 where a man brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples and they were not able to cast the demon out? Jesus told them later they could not do it because, "this kind comes out only by prayer. (or prayer and fasting)." But wait. Jesus didn't pray when He cast the demon out. Jesus didn't take a day and fast before He cast the demon out. So He was clearly not talking about an event that leads to a result. **He was talking about a LIFESTYLE that leads to results.** This is necessary for the church just as it is necessary for the individual members of the church. 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. Often we devote ourselves to talking to the group about our need for 5 minutes when a 20-second request and a 5 minute prayer would have been much more effective. When we gather our families, dads, in the family room and it is time for prayer, let's devote ourselves to prayer. And there are no limits as to how many prayer meetings in the church body you can organize and lead in, around a specific need, like the Kenya mission or for our men in uniform, or for revival in our nation or among the young people in this community. I love this quote by Andrew Murray: "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.