



The Church ... As It Was Meant to Be

Acts 2:42-47

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
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One of America's greatest structures is the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. When we lived there, I would occasionally take a day and wander around the cathedral and find a quiet place to pray. National Cathedral is the 6th largest cathedral in the world. Its central tower is over 300' tall. The largest bell weighs 24,000 pounds and there are more than 10,000 pipes in the great organ. It is adorned with 320 angels and 215 stained-glass windows. National Cathedral was meant to be a place where America could call upon God during times of national emergency or national mourning. The cornerstone was laid in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt, and it took 83 years and 4 architects to complete it.

There is a theology of cathedral architecture that goes back a thousand years. The footprint of the cathedral was usually in the form of a cross. The cornerstone of the foundation represented Christ as the cornerstone of the faith. The stained-glass windows told the Christian story with pictures. The columns represented saints who held up the faith. The ceilings and arches were given great height and breadth to represent the transcendence of God. As the cathedral bell rang out, it would remind people of the presence of God in their community. The spires of cathedral rose above the trees and could be seen for miles, always there to help people find their way to God.

As grand as the cathedrals of the world may be, what's most important is not the size or the architecture of the building. What's most important in a church is the heart of the people. And we see the spirit and heart of the first Christians in Acts 2.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. They heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed He was the Son of God. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand.

Yet sadly, the American church has lost much of that passion and influence. Over the last forty years, the church has tried so many things to be attractive and relevant that we've created a culture of consumers. Instead of leaving church with a greater burden for our lost neighbor, too often people leave saying, "I didn't like that song we sang this morning." And if we don't like the preaching or the music in one church, we can go to another one down the street or just stay at home and watch some popular church online. Too often, the church in America has become a church of personal preferences. When Christians from other parts of the world visit America, they don't recognize our version of the church. They see little brokenness for sin, little reverence for the holiness of God, and little zeal for sharing the Gospel.

I'm not overstating it when I say the church in America needs to repent and return to the New Testament definition of a church. What is that definition? What is the church supposed to look like?

As I've said each week, studying the book of Acts is like holding up a mirror and honestly asking, "Do we live like they lived? Does our church look anything like their church?"¹

Acts 2 is a portrait of the church, a beautiful portrait of the bride of Christ. Acts 2 describes the habits and priorities and strategy of the church. We can read Acts 2 strategically and list the purposes of the church – worship, discipleship, fellowship, evangelism, and prayer. We could even grade ourselves on how well we’re doing strategically. But instead of using Acts 2 to grade us, it’s better to let it inspire us. Acts 2 describes a way of life, a way of learning, a way of loving, a way of worshiping, a way of sharing the Gospel.² The better approach is to focus on the spirit and the heart of the people that was so attractive and compelling that others wanted to know more about Jesus.

This summer, we’re going to start the expansion of our church. A building with wood, concrete, and drywall. We’re investing in this because our church is growing and because we believe God is leading us to do it. But there’s something more important we should be building. And that’s the spirit and the heart of the church. What’s most important is what we’re building on the inside, inside us.

So this morning, I want to take the five priorities we see in Acts 2 and turn them into five prayers for our church. Here is Luke’s description of the first church.

“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common, and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, and praising God. And having favor with all the people, the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47, NAS).

That’s what a church is supposed to look like. That’s the kind of church I want to be a part of, and I hope you do as well. So, let’s turn Acts 2 into a prayer for our church.

HUNGRY

To be an Acts 2 church, we must pray, ***“Lord, make us hungry for You.”***

Luke was the author of the Acts and described the hunger of the first Christians. “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NAS). They listened to the apostles’ teaching as they told stories about Jesus, as they taught what He had taught them.³ They spent time together and talked about their problems and encouraged each other. They shared meals together, which often included Communion, the Lord’s Supper, remembering the sacrifice of Jesus. They prayed together, and they prayed for each other. This was not a strategy list. It was simply what they did when they got together, and it describes the spirit and the heart of the Acts 2 church.

Together they had a hunger for God. “They were continually devoting themselves.” I love the word devotion because it’s the combination of two ideas – commitment and love. Devotion is more than athletic discipline, it’s more what we see in a marriage. The first Christians were devoted to Jesus, lovingly committed to Jesus Christ. After Peter’s sermon, the group of 120 grew to 3,000. And they were hungry and thirsty to know more about Jesus.

King David had that thirst. “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1-2, NAS). The prophet Jeremiah knew that hunger. “When I discovered your words, I devoured them. They are my joy and my heart’s delight” (Jeremiah 15:16, NLT). Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6, NAS).

“They were continually devoting themselves.” To be an Acts 2 church, to be the church Jesus wants us to be, we must pray, “***Lord, make us hungry for You.***”

AWE

To be an Acts 2 church, we must pray, “***Lord, let us see Your power.***” “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles” (Acts 2:43, NAS). They were experiencing the presence and power of God. They went to bed at night saying to each other, “Can you believe what God did today?” Later in Acts, Luke writes, “The hand of the Lord was with them” (Acts 11:21, NAS).

Why were they experiencing the presence and power of God? Because “they were continually devoting themselves ... to prayer.” We see it several times in Acts. Acts 1 says, “With one mind they were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14, NAS). Acts 4 says, “They lifted their voices to God with one accord ... and when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken” (Acts 4:24, 31, NAS). Acts 12 describes the fervent prayers of the church.

And what is prayer? It’s seeking God. It’s talking to God. It’s asking of God. It’s acknowledging our dependence on God. It’s confessing to God. It’s praising God. Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God. And that’s why they were experiencing “wonders and signs.” That’s why they were experiencing the presence and power of God.

Jesus promised His disciples, a promise is still valid for us, and said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works ... You can ask for anything in My name, and I will do it” (John 14:12-13, NLT). We believe in prayer, but we do not pray often enough, boldly enough, or big enough.

Prayer was a way of life for them. Prayer was like breathing for them. British historian Michael Green, from his study of the church in Acts, gives us this warning. “If we do not make prayer a top priority as the early Christians did, we will reap the consequences of our neglect.”⁴ In America, we say “you get what you ***pay*** for.” In the New Testament, “you get what you ***pray*** for.”

The Acts 2 church saw God work because they prayed. To be an Acts 2 church, we must pray, ***“Lord, make us hungry for You ... let us see Your power.”***

LOVE

To be an Acts 2 church, we must pray, ***“Lord, fill our hearts with love for each other.”*** The most attractive feature of the early church was how they loved each other. Historians wrote about how unusual it was.⁵ “All those who had believed were together and had all things in common, and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:44-45, NAS).

Notice it says, “All those who believed were together.” What brought them together and held them together was that they all believed Jesus was the Son of God. There was unity because of Jesus. And throughout the New Testament, we see prayers for unity. Why? Because the thing that paralyzes the Gospel and shuts down evangelism is conflict in the church. That’s why Paul said to the Corinthians, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind” (1 Corinthians 1:10, ESV). Paul urged the Philippians to be “one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:2, NIV).⁶ We must pray for God to protect our unity and fill us with humility and forgiveness and love.

Luke described the sacrifice they made for each other. They were “selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.” Their attitude was “what’s mine is yours.” They liquidated their assets to help each other. They sacrificed for each other, “as anyone had need.” Acts 4 says, “There was not a needy person among them.” They practiced what Jesus preached. “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry” (Luke 3:11, NLT).

Why did they do that? Because they were family. Paul said of the church, “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5, NIV). The church is a family.

And the most attractive feature of the early church was how they loved each other. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35, ESV).

The New Testament is filled with “one another” commands, like “love one another.”⁷ These commands describe how we are to treat each other. They describe what the church is supposed to look like. To be an Acts 2 church, we must “love one another⁸ ... serve one another⁹ ... be patient, bearing with one another¹⁰ ... forgive one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you¹¹ ... comfort one another¹² ... encourage one another¹³ ... pray for one another.”¹⁴

That’s what the church is supposed to look like. How we love each other makes us different from the world and makes people want to know more about Jesus. So, what is our prayer? ***“Lord, make us hungry for You ... let us see Your power ... and fill us with an unselfish, forgiving, and sacrificial love for each other.”***

JOY

To be an Acts 2 church, to be the church Jesus wants us to be, we must pray, ***“Lord, fill us with joy so others are attracted to Jesus.”*** “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, and praising God” (Acts 2:46-47, NAS).

“Together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” They were filled with joy. And people in the city wondered, “Why do these Christians sing? Why do they have such peace? Why do they not fear death?” It was because of the joy of Jesus. And because of that joy, they were “praising God.” Worship is an expression of the heart. It is an expression of our love and respect for God. They loved God and enjoyed getting together to worship Him.¹⁵

In John 15, Jesus said, “(Everything I have spoken to you is so) that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11, ESV).¹⁶ In John 17, Jesus prayed that we would be filled with joy.¹⁷ Not just when we get to heaven, but now, while we’re still in this world.

Joy is gratitude for waking up every morning saying, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24, ESV). Joy is the pleasure of God’s presence, as David said, “In your presence there is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11, ESV). Joy is gratitude for our salvation. “We have been justified by faith,” Paul said, “and we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2, ESV). Joy is the hope of heaven, of spending eternity with Him. The Bible says, one day, we will “stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (Jude 24, NAS).

To be an Acts 2 church, to be the church Jesus wants us to be, we must pray, ***“Lord, make us hungry for You ... let us see Your power ... fill us with love for each other ... and fill us with joy so others are attracted to Jesus.”***

FAVOR

To be an Acts 2 church, we must pray, ***“Lord, give us favor and open doors for us to share the Gospel with our family, friends, and neighbors.”*** The Acts 2 church was so genuine that they had “favor with all the people, and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, NAS). They had favor and influence because of the way they lived. People were attracted to Jesus because of the way they lived.

As a historian, Luke inserted one verse status reports throughout Acts. Acts 2:47 is one of them. “The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Also Acts 4:4, “Many of those who had heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” Acts 5:14, “More believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.” Acts 6:7, “The word of God kept on spreading, and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly.” Acts 11:21, “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number believed and turned to the Lord.” The church expanded. Thousands believed. Why? Because people were attracted to Jesus because of the way these first Christians lived their lives.

Historian Michael Green writes, “They were passionately convinced of the truth of the Gospel. They were persuaded that men and women were lost without it. (The Gospel was) the key to eternal life, without which they would perish ... (The Gospel) affected everything they did and everyone they met.”¹⁸

If we want to be a church like that, we must pray, ***“Lord, give us favor and open doors for us to share the Gospel with our family, friends, and neighbors.”***

CONCLUSION

This summer, we’re going to start the expansion of our church. A building with wood, concrete, and drywall. We’re investing in this because our church is growing and because we believe God is leading us to do it. But there’s something more important we should be building. And that’s the spirit and the heart of the church. What’s on the inside ... inside us.

Acts 2 describes what the church is supposed to look like. So, why do we gather as a church?

- To worship God and to glorify His name
- To sing songs to Him and to sing songs of truth to each other
- To express our gratitude for grace
- To acknowledge our dependence on Him
- To hear the word of God and the will of God, and to be inspired to walk in obedience and glorify Him with our lives
- To belong, to be a part of a spiritual family, God’s family
- To love and be loved
- To encourage someone who is down, and be encouraged when we’re down
- To comfort someone who is hurting, and be comforted when we’re hurting
- To grow in our faith and be conformed to the image of Christ
- To hear the word of God, the voice of God, louder than all the other voices in our culture
- To be inspired to live on mission, to take the Gospel across the street and around the world
- And to remember that one day soon we will see Jesus face to face and live with Him forever in a place He called Paradise

I want to be a part of a church like that, and I hope you do as well. So, let’s turn Acts 2 into a prayer for our church.

Lord, make us hungry for You. Give us a fresh hunger for You, and for Your Word, so we may know You and know Your ways.

Lord, let us see Your power. Let us experience Your presence. Let us see You work in our homes, in our church, and in our community.

Lord, fill us with sacrificial love for each other. Caring for each other and encouraging each other. Protect our unity. And let others see Your love in us.

Lord, fill us with joy so others are attracted to Jesus. May our faith be so genuine and winsome that others want to know about Jesus.

Lord, give us favor and open doors for us to share the Gospel with our family, friends, and neighbors.

NOTES

¹ This theme is found in Francis Chan's book *Letters to the Church* and in Michael Green's book *Thirty Years that Changed the World*.

² Luke was not creating a list to be followed, but a life to be lived. Luke was describing the way of life of these first Christians.

³ This was 60 days after the resurrection. This was 33 AD. There was no Bible yet.

⁴ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), page 272.

⁵ The early church enjoyed material *koinonia* and spiritual *koinonia*.

⁶ Paul urged the Ephesians to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3, ESV).

⁷ Despite the power and brutality of the Roman Empire, Caesar Hadrian was stumped as to why he could not crush these Christians and silence them for good. He sent Aristides to infiltrate the church and get some answers. After observing these Christians, Aristides wrote to Caesar, "They love one another, and he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him into their own homes and rejoice over him as a very brother. And if there is any among them that are poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. Such, O King, is their manner of life, and verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them."

⁸ John 13:34.

⁹ Galatians 5:13.

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:2.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:32.

¹² 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

¹⁴ James 5:16.

¹⁵ See Mark 14:26, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16.

¹⁶ On the night of His arrest, Jesus prayed to His Father, "I am coming to you, (and this is what I pray), that while they are in the world, they would be filled with my joy" (John 17:13, NLT).

¹⁷ Joy is the deep delight of knowing that God loves us and that our lives are in His hands. That's why we can rejoice in difficult circumstances.

¹⁸ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, 2003), page 17.