

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 9, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH (4)

Acts 2:42-47

These verses in Acts 2 give us a picture of the New Testament church in Jerusalem in the afterglow of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, fulfilling the promise of Jesus, in a dramatic and powerful way. It is a picture of a church on fire for Jesus. It is a portrait of the church being what the church is meant to be, a snapshot of the church at its best.

It was, you might say, the honeymoon period for the church in Jerusalem. Luke says in verse 43 that the hearts of the believers there were “filled with awe.” There was an atmosphere of amazement and expectation because of what God had done on Pentecost and since. Verse 46 speaks of the gladness and joy that filled their hearts because they knew God was on the move in their midst. The passion of their devotion to God and His Word, the passion of their commitment to unity, community, and Christ-like love for one another, and their passion for worship were evident everywhere in the church. In addition, as Luke notes in verse 47, the church was enjoying “the favor of all the people.” Which is to say that the people of Jerusalem – not the Jewish leaders but the regular, common folk – liked what they saw in the lives of those who were part of the church. It wouldn’t stay that way for long, but for the moment the church was looked upon favorably.

The church was experiencing a kind of spiritual euphoria, the euphoria that accompanies true revival, when the Holy Spirit comes with fresh power, bringing new life and renewed vitality to the church. This kind of euphoria is better than a wave of victories on election night. It is better than winning the World Series or the Super Bowl. It is better than winning an Oscar. It is even better than winning on *Jeopardy* or *Wheel of Fortune*. It is a kind of euphoria, a sense of “serenity now!” in your soul, an infusion of faith, hope, love, and joy that can only come from God.

It is my prayer that in our day, in our time, in our generation, in our world, God will again graciously send revival to the church, to renew and transform the hearts of His people here and everywhere. I pray that God the Holy Spirit will once again come with power and grace and draw hundreds, thousands, even millions of unbelievers to a saving, transforming faith in Christ. I pray that we at Faith and the church everywhere in the world will demonstrate in our life the qualities we see in the Acts 2 church.

You have to keep in mind, of course, that this honeymoon of spiritual euphoria for the church in Jerusalem didn’t last forever. This picture of the church in Acts 2 was taken *before* Peter and John got in trouble for healing a crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10) and then broadcasting the message about Jesus in the temple courts (3:11-26), *before* they were ordered by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) to stop speaking and teaching about Jesus (4:18).

It was also *before* the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem tried to put a stop to the Jesus movement by having the apostles arrested and thrown in jail (5:17-18), *before* the apostles were sprung from jail by an angel who instructed them to go back to the temple courts and to keep on talking about Jesus (5:19-20). As you can imagine, when the high priest and the rest of the Council were told that the apostles were not behind bars but were openly teaching about Jesus in the temple courts, they weren't too happy about it. They had the apostles rearrested and brought before the Council. After deliberating about what to do with them, the Council had them all flogged with whips and then released with strict orders to stop talking about Jesus (5:21-40). The apostles, of course, weren't about to stop. They went on their way, not chastened, not discouraged, not intimidated, but rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace on account of the name of Jesus (5:41). And they kept on spreading the word about Jesus (5:42).

The snapshot of the church in Acts 2 was also taken *before* the accusation of racial discrimination surfaced in the church in Acts 6. The complaint was that one group of widows was getting favored treatment, while another group of widows was not being properly cared for (6:1). Not long after that, the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, took place (7:57-60). Then, as it says in Acts 8:1, "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem," and all the believers, except for the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

The honeymoon was over. And yet, the church didn't stop growing. The wave of opposition and persecution didn't stop the spread of the gospel. In fact, God used it to accelerate the spread of the gospel, because, wherever they went, the scattered believers told people about Jesus (8:4). The remainder of the Book of Acts is the story of the spread of the gospel, and the expansion and growth of the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

All the things described in Acts took place a long time ago. But the church has continued to grow from the 1st century until now. And it continues to grow in the world today. Did you know that? The church is not growing here in the U. S., I'm sorry to say. Some churches are growing, yes. But many churches – most churches in the U. S. – are not growing. Most churches, including ours, have either plateaued or they are getting smaller. I'm not happy about it. And I'm pretty sure God is not happy about it (!). Nevertheless, it is the truth.

This does not mean, however, that the gospel has lost its power or that the Christian church is not growing throughout the world. When he stopped by to visit us here at Faith a few days ago, EPC missionary Greg Livingstone, who has spent the last 50 years as an ambassador of Christ to the Muslim world, said that a new believer is added to the church Jesus is building every 2.5 seconds. Did you know that? A new believer is added to the church somewhere in the world in less time than it takes me to write my name.

I did some math, and here are the numbers I came up with: A new believer every 2.5 seconds works out to 24 new Christians every minute, which equals 1,440 every hour, which adds up to more than 34,000 new followers of Jesus every day, or more than 12 million new members of the body of Christ each year.

This means that what Luke says of the church in Jerusalem in verse 47 – that “the Lord added to their number *daily* those who were being saved” (*italic added*) – is still true today. It is happening right now! Praise God! We may not see it here where we live, but it is still happening today. It is my prayer that the Lord will add to *our* number here at Faith those who are being saved. I pray that He will use *us, our* witness – *yours, mine and ours* – and *our* proclamation of the gospel to draw unbelievers to saving faith in Christ, and that we will be faithful to our Great Commission to make disciples in the name of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). I pray that the Lord will daily add to His church here in the U. S. those who are being saved. I pray that there will be a continual wave of conversions and revival that will transform individual lives, impact whole communities, and even change the culture here in the U. S. and around the world. Is this the prayer of your heart, too?

Yes, the church of Jesus Christ is growing in the world today. It is even growing in some places where it is dangerous to be a Christian, places where persecution or the threat of it is a daily fact of life. Some here in America may be critical or dismissive of the Christian faith, even hostile to it, but persecution is something foreign to our experience. Nevertheless, as I’ve already said, many, if not most, churches in America are either declining or plateaued at best. Thom Rainer, who wrote an excellent little book for church members about church membership entitled *I Am a Church Member* that I commend to you, has written another little book entitled *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* in which he identifies mistaken attitudes and misplaced priorities that lead to ways of doing church that, if left unchecked or even unrecognized and not repented of, will contribute to the demise and death of a church.

Even though I have never observed an autopsy taking place, I am pretty sure it is not a particularly pleasant experience. I do have a favorite medical examiner, though. He is not really a medical examiner. He just plays one on TV. It is actor David McCallum, who plays the inimitable Dr. Donald “Ducky” Mallard on the *NCIS* television show. On many episodes, the results of “Ducky’s” work in autopsy are essential to solving the case at hand. In a similar way, conducting an “autopsy of a deceased church” can help us to see what went wrong and what we need to do to prevent it from happening to our church.

Jesus told Peter that His Church will never die. He said: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell (or Hades) will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). True. Yet, as Rainer points out, while the Church will never die, particular churches have died, or are in the process of dying.

Why do some churches die? In some cases, it is because church members live “for a long time with the past as hero” (*Autopsy*, 18). Churches whose leaders and members make an idol of the past and long to return to the way the church used to be, are on the road to death. It is good to remember the past. It is good to treasure the past. It is good to learn from the past. It is good to acknowledge and celebrate the blessings of the past. But to live in the past or to try to recreate it in the present is not good.

Some churches die because they become “me-centered” or “us-centered” instead of “other-centered,” which is to say they care more about themselves, about their own personal comfort and traditions, than about reaching out to their community to share the message of the gospel

and to show the love of Jesus in action. Some churches die because church members are more “preference-driven” than “gospel-driven” (*Autopsy*, 47-52, 75). They are more concerned with keeping things the way they like them than with the Great Commission mandate to reach the lost and make disciples of all nations. A church is in serious trouble when “the Great Commission becomes the Great Omission” (*Autopsy*, 39-45), when an outward focus on ministering to our community and reaching others with the gospel is replaced by an inward obsession with keeping church the way we like it. Any time a church loses sight of the fact that it’s not about me and not about us, but about *Him* – *God* – about *His* purpose and *His* glory, that church is in serious trouble.

While there are other causes of death in particular situations, the causes I’ve mentioned can serve as a caution or warning to us as we examine our own hearts and the level of our commitment personally to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His church – to the body of Christ here at Faith, and assess the health and wellness of our church, or the lack thereof.

As usual, there is more to say. We’ll come back to this picture of the Acts 2 church next Sunday. Make sure you don’t miss the qualities that distinguished the church in Jerusalem:

- biblical teaching
- disciples eager to learn and grow
- living worship
- and ongoing, outgoing evangelism

(J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, 87)

with the result that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (2:47).

May all these things be true of our church today and always, to the glory and praise of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.