

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 22, 2009
Installation Service for Robert Barnett and David Fischler**

MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

Acts 2:42-47

It's an honor to have been asked to preach at the service of installation for my brothers in Christ and colleagues in ministry, Bob and David. It's a special day for them and for all of us at Faith and Redeemer.

Someone has suggested that every sermon fits into one of three categories. No, despite what you may think, the categories are not "Good," "Bad," and "Awful," or "Long," "Too Long," and "Interminable," though you may be tempted to think in those terms from time to time. (I hope not!)

It reminds me of the old story about the visiting preacher greeting people at the door after the service one Sunday where he had been the guest preacher. A number of people complimented him on the fine sermon, then along came one member of that particular church. We'll call him Joe.

Joe shook the preacher's hand and said, "That was the worst sermon I've ever heard in my life." Then he went on his way.

The visiting preacher wasn't so sure what to think about that and other people were coming through the line, speaking politely and complimenting him for his ministry. Then moments later here comes Joe again. Joe shakes his hand a second time and says, "That was the most awful sermon I've ever heard in my life." Then he went on his way again.

A few moments later Joe was back again for the third time and he said the same thing. The preacher was getting perplexed and his confidence was shaken. One of the church members tried to reassure the preacher. He said, "Don't worry about Joe. He just repeats what he hears other people saying."

The categories of sermons I have in mind today are these: Sermons about Him, sermons about her, and sermons about it.

- Sermons about *Him*. That is, sermons which have as their primary focus the person and work of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Sermons which enable us to see more clearly who God is, what He has done, and how He is at work in the world today. Sermons which point us unmistakably to Christ and call us to make a personal response to Him.
- Sermons about *her*. That is, sermons about the church. Sermons which focus on God's design and plan for the people He has called to Him and to whom He has given the Holy Spirit. Sermons which help us to understand what it means to be the body of Christ.

- Sermons about *it*. That is, sermons which focus on the Christian life in one or more of its facets. Sermons which help us to understand what it means to live as fully-devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and provide practical insight for godly living.

Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 was about *Him*. Rooted in the Scriptures, grounded in the inspired, authoritative, infallible and unerring Word of God, his message was Christ-centered to the core, and it called for a response – a personal response – to the most important question any of us will ever have to answer. That question is: “What shall I do with Jesus?” No one can avoid it. Sooner or later, it is a question that every one of us must answer. And the way you answer the question has implications for eternity.

This message fits into the category of being about “her.” It is about the Spirit-filled fellowship of Christ's followers. It is about the church, which is not a place or a building or an organization in the first instance, but a people. The *ecclesia*. The called-out people of God.

We have to remember, of course, that the church is not a human invention. It was – and is – God's idea. It was established by God. And it exists to serve God's purposes.

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, who inspired Bill Hybels as a college student back in the 1970s, has said of the church:

This is God's ultimate achievement – a biblically-functioning community, a center of warm, pulsating, effervescent, outreaching Christian love, a place with all of its components united to become a force in this world instead of a farce.

A farce, unfortunately, is how some people view the church today, sometimes with good reason, when we fail to consistently live out what we profess to believe as followers of Christ. But a biblically-functioning fellowship of believers where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts is not a farce. A Christ-centered fellowship of believers characterized by unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity (love) in all things is anything but a farce. It is the instrument God has chosen to carry out the ministry of Christ in the world, to proclaim the message of His redeeming love and life-changing power, and to be a living demonstration of what it means to live under His sovereign and gracious rule as children of our Heavenly Father and citizens of the kingdom of God.

The New Testament church described in Acts 2:42-47 is anything but a farce. It is, in fact, a picture of the church at its best.

Bruce Larson says these verses provide “a scriptural formula for what the church is meant to be.” And Richard Halverson, long-time Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda and then Chaplain of the United States Senate for 14 years, said this passage paints “a picture of the (true) church Christ is building.”

I want to talk with you about the distinguishing marks of the church in Acts 2. Verse 42 says that the believers in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the

fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” And the result, it says in verse 47, was that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Notice it was the Lord who did the adding. He did it through the life and witness of the church, but He’s the one who did it. God uses His people and the testimony of His grace in our lives to draw unbelievers to Himself, but He gets the credit. For no one can come to Him unless drawn by the Holy Spirit. And while God sometimes works through us, He also works at times in spite of us.

The Lord did the adding. Whom did He add? Those who were being saved. Those who were gripped by the gospel of His grace and embraced the Lord Jesus in faith. God did not add them to the church without saving them. And He did not save them without adding them to the fellowship of His church. John Stott makes that crystal clear when he says that salvation and incorporation into the body of Christ go together. If you belong to Christ by faith, then you belong to His family. You belong to the fellowship of His people. Faith and fellowship go together. Believing and belonging. They all go together.

The Lord added to their number those who were being saved. And He added to their number *daily*. The quality of their life in Christ – the quality of their fellowship, the quality of their witness, the quality of their joy – was so contagious and compelling that they were seeing people come to faith in Christ on a daily basis. It was their experience daily as the presence and power and love and grace of Christ were manifested in their midst.

My dream is that what happened then and there might happen here and now – that the Lord would add to *our* number daily here at Faith and Redeemer and throughout northern Virginia and the greater D. C. area those who are being saved.

That is the desire of my heart. How about you?

There is a connection, I believe, between the incredible blessing the church experienced in Acts 2:47 and the devotion of the believers described in Acts 2:42. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word “devoted” refers to a steadfast, unshakable, and single-minded fidelity or commitment to a person or cause or course of action. So we speak of a woman’s devotion to her husband, or a father’s devotion to his family. Applied to the believers in the Acts 2 church, we see that in their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ there was no deviation.

Like Peter’s Pentecost sermon, the young church in Jerusalem was Christ-centered to the core. They understood it was all about Jesus – who He is – what He has done. That the existence of the church itself was the result of His person and work in this world.

A couple of hundred years ago Napoleon Bonaparte was reputed to have said that if Socrates were to walk into this room we would be inclined to stand up, all of us, and to applaud him in honor. But, Napoleon said, if Jesus Christ walked into this room, we would be compelled to bow down and worship. Now I don’t know that Socrates holds as high a place in our world today as he did a couple of hundred years ago. But suppose the President of the United States walked into this sanctuary. We would, out of respect and honor, rise to express our honor to

him. But if Jesus Christ physically walked into this room, standing up wouldn't be enough, would it? We would be compelled to fall on our knees, to bow before Him and worship.

The New Testament church was Christ-centered to the core. They knew, and we must know and never forget, that it's all about Jesus. And for them, there was no deviation from their devotion. Their devotion, their commitment to Christ, was expressed in several distinctive ways – ways that I think we could identify as marks of a healthy and living church.

1. THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES

Notice, first of all in verse 42 that they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching. I like the way John Stott describes the situation:

One might say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem (on Pentecost). Its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed. And already there were 3,000 students in the kindergarten.

These believers sat at the feet of the apostles, figuratively if not literally, just as the apostles had sat at the feet of Jesus. They were hungry to receive instruction in the Word of God. They were eager to learn and to put into practice what they learned. They were motivated to grow in both faith and godly living. They were devoted to the Word of God. That is one of the distinctive marks of a healthy, living church.

The apostle's teaching to which they devoted themselves was first and foremost the gospel itself – the message of the life and ministry and suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus – along with the teaching the apostles had received from Jesus Himself. That teaching has come down to us in definitive form in the New Testament, in which the prophetic hope and promise of the Old Testament find their fulfillment.

So, for us today to be devoted to the teaching of the apostles is to be devoted to the Word of God as we have received it in the Old and New Testaments. For the Spirit of God – the Spirit poured out on the church at Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit we receive today when we turn in faith to Christ – leads the people of God to understand and submit to the Word of God.

As a very brief aside, let me say that we need both the Spirit and the Word. It's not an "either-or", but a "both-and" kind of thing. If you have the Spirit without the Word, someone has said, you blow up. If you have the Word without the Spirit, you dry up. But if you have both the Word and the Spirit, you grow up. For, as the Westminster Confession teaches, it is only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that the truth and power of God's Word become clear to us. And we can be sure that the Spirit of God will never contradict the Word of God.

A devotion to the Word of God is one of the indispensable distinctives of the church at its best.

2. THE FELLOWSHIP

Second, in addition to the teaching of the apostles, the believers in the Acts 2 church devoted themselves to the fellowship. They placed high value on *koinonia*, which is a word that refers to community or to their shared life. Another way of putting it is to say that they were devoted to one another in Christian love. And they were open-hearted, they were generous, even more than generous in expressing their loving commitment to one another. In other words, they understood that love is a verb. It is an action word. It is something you do. So they put their love into action and did whatever they could to help a brother or sister or neighbor in need. And they did it willingly. Voluntarily. Not because they had to, but because they could.

They embodied in their life together what Paul would call us all to aspire to in Romans 12:10-13:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.
Honor one another above yourselves.
Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
Share with God's people who are in need.
Practice hospitality.

And again, in Galatians 6:2, 9-10:

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.
Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

God wants His church to be a community of care and compassion. He wants us to step out of our comfort zone, if that is what it takes, to care for our sisters and brothers in times of need. It is a critical, vital way for the church to be the church. To demonstrate that people matter to God and to us.

This is another distinctive of a healthy, living church. God's people are devoted to one another in the fellowship. And they show it in practical ways.

3. WORSHIP

The third distinctive characteristic of the believers in the Acts 2 church is that they were devoted to worship. Verse 42 says they were "devoted to the breaking of bread." The expression Luke uses in this verse suggests that he isn't talking simply about the fellowship of a shared meal, but has in mind the Lord's Supper, which is an act of remembrance and of worship.

They were devoted to worship – both private and corporate – because they were overwhelmed with a sense of God’s worship and the wonders of His grace expressed in the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Their worship wasn’t just an every Sunday thing. It wasn’t just a once-a-week experience. It was an every day occurrence. “Every day,” it says in verse 46, “they continued to meet together in the temple courts” and in their homes, with glad and sincere hearts overflowing in praise to God.

Nothing we do is more important. It is not to be done thoughtlessly or haphazardly, but with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. This is the third mark of a healthy, living church.

4. PRAYER

The fourth quality we see in the Acts 2 church is that they were devoted to prayer. They were seized with a sense of both the privilege and the power of prayer.

In Colossians 4:2, Paul says:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

It’s the same word used in Acts 2:42. Devote yourselves to prayer. Keep your eyes open to what God is doing in the world. Keep your eyes open and be alert to opportunities to impact the lives of others through the ministry of prayer. And then be sure to give thanks to the Lord for the answers He gives and the grace He imparts. Devote yourselves to prayer. Let it permeate your life.

In his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, Pastor Jim Cymbala of the Brooklyn Tabernacle writes:

When we sincerely turn to God (in prayer), we will find that His church always moves forward, not backward.

Forward. Isn’t that the direction we want to go? Forward in faith, forward in ministry, forward in contagious witness, forward in devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cymbala says that for our churches and ministries to be all God wants them to be, they must be saturated with prayer.

I dream of the day when prayer just breaks out all over the church, in every pew and every corner of the sanctuary, as the people of this church and all those whom God brings to our fellowship do heart-business with one another in an atmosphere of unconditional love and mutual submission to Christ.

I dream of the day when praying with and praying for one another will be as natural as breathing, when even ordinary telephone conversations will become holy occurrences of prayer.

I dream of the day when church committees and ministry teams will spend more time talking with God in prayer than they do talking about the business of their committees.

I dream of the day when every facet of the life and ministry of Faith EPC is saturated with prayer.

I dream of the day when every seat in this sanctuary will be filled – at two services – and at Redeemer – with men and women and children and youth who are drawn by the Holy Spirit to the house of worship and prayer in order to meet with God and be changed in His presence.

The life of prayer, like a daily devotion to the Word of God, is indispensable to a healthy Christian life and to a healthy church.

5. DEVOTED TO REACHING THE LOST

God did extraordinary things in and through the lives of ordinary Christians in the first century as they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread (as an act of worship), and to prayer. He added to their number daily those who were being saved. And God can do the same thing with ordinary 21st century Christians who are fully devoted to Him.

But understand this: It is possible to be an Acts 2:42 church and still not be the church God wants us to be if we become ingrown in our relationships and activities and neglect our calling in Christ to share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors. If we live our daily lives in a kind of Christian ghetto and fail to engage people outside the faith who don't yet know Christ. If we do not devote ourselves to sharing the life and love and saving grace and transforming power of Jesus with people who are spiritually lost and headed for hell without Him. If we think the church exists only or primarily to meet the needs of the "already convinced."

Devoted to the Word? Absolutely.

Devoted to one another in the fellowship? Unequivocally.

Devoted to worship? With both reverence and great joy.

Devoted to prayer? Without ceasing.

And devoted to the ministry of reaching out to unbelievers with the message of Jesus Christ and inviting them to become His fully-devoted followers.

That is a biblical formula for what the church is meant to be. It is a picture of a healthy, living church. May it be so here at Faith. May it be so at Redeemer. May God do extraordinary things in and through us. And may all the glory, honor and praise be His. Amen.