

Doing Church Right

Acts 2:42-47

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I loved Jerusalem! Jerusalem, the most holy city, most divided city, and one of the most tense, cities, in the world. And it was in that very place that the Church was born. The first church ever was organized right there in Jerusalem.

I thought a lot about you, about us, when I was in Jerusalem. I thought a lot about our church, and about how any church worth its salt will look like that first church there in Jerusalem.

Look at how Scripture describes that first church. It's not an exhaustive list, but we see here some key elements to doing church right...

They were devoted to the teaching of Scripture

(“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching,” Acts 2:42).

Notice that the phrase is “*devoted* themselves.” You *devote* yourself to something that requires something of a sacrificial commitment. I do not have to devote myself to the eating of chocolate. I have to devote myself to the practice of drinking a glass of V-8 every night.

I hope you will devote yourself to being a part of settings where people teach the Bible. I know that means I'm asking you to listen to me, and that's certainly part of what I'm saying. I'm asking you to do the hard work of listening. I will do my best to be true to the Bible—the pages of which have come alive for me like never before having studied in Israel. And I invite you to study carefully in your Sunday morning Bible study classes. And to join a small group including a small group doing the upcoming study on spiritual disciplines. I invite you to devote yourself to sitting in on the teaching of Scripture.

They were devoted to the fellowship

(“...and to the fellowship,” 2:42)

Again there's that word, “devoted.” Fellowship, you see, requires hard work. Getting along with so many people who often are so different from us requires discipline.

Let's remember who was in this original church! We know the core: In Acts 1:13-14 we read, “...Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and

Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

There are some potential conflicts represented by that list. For example...

Simon the zealot and Matthew the tax collector—polar opposites—were among the disciples. Matthew had made a living collecting taxes on behalf of the occupying Roman army. Simon had made a life of rebelling against the occupying Roman army. Those two guys could not have had more different agendas in life. But they were devoted to each other.

And there were both long-termers and new people. 2:41 reads “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” Some of those 3,000 returned to their homes, many far from Jerusalem. But a number of them had to have been from Jerusalem itself and so the group of Christ-followers grew dramatically in one day and then 2:45 says their numbers were growing daily.

The original core was made up of those who traveled with Jesus and who had shared a lot of the ups and downs of being part of a brand new movement. Then, all of a sudden, they were outnumbered by newcomers—people who hadn’t been part of the beginning, who had not been there in that storm-tossed boat on the Sea of Galilee, or in the traumatic encounter with Judas in the Garden of Gethsemani, or in that famous foot-washing in the Upper Room. The original group was the pioneers and the new folks were like “homesteaders” Yet somehow they made it work for they were devoted to the fellowship.

A healthy church includes all kinds of folks. We need each other. The pioneers and the homesteaders. From various worship preferences and from all our present campuses and from future campuses. We need each other. We Simon the Zealots and Matthew the Tax Collectors and old-timers and newcomers.

Let’s renew our “devotion” to the fellowship, for fellowship is not always easy.

They witnessed signs and wonders (“Many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles,” 2:43).

They witnessed miracles in that first church. Some would contend that the age of miracles has passed—that with the dying off of the apostles, the original disciples—the possibility of miracles died, too. But I don't believe that.

Students of the Bible have noted that spectacular miracles are dominant in certain periods of biblical history. There seem to have been periods when miracles were center stage—like the period of the exodus from Egypt, the ministries of Elijah and his successor, Elishah, the life of Jesus, and the early days of the church.

Why God has chosen to concentrate the eye-popping miracles in those time periods I can only speculate. And, though this period of history doesn't seem to be one of those periods during which the miraculous is as common as in others, I believe God still does perform miracles.

Bill Bays is a young man in our church who was diagnosed with cancer in the spring. His physicians are dancing a jig, for after the treatments and surgery he is surprisingly, amazingly, clear of cancer. His family calls it a miracle and I agree. I know some of you have prayed with equal faith and fervency and you didn't get your miracle. I don't know why God chooses, in some cases, to intervene and, in others, not to. But we recognize Him at work when He does.

There are people among us for whom faithful Christ-followers prayed for a long time. And those who were prayed for experienced dramatic life-transformation. Others of you have been praying for a long time and just as fervently that people you love will be saved, transformed. I know that often people ignore God's gentle interventions in their lives. But when people we care about are saved we recognize God for His loving miracles.

I'm not a "name it and claim it," "be good and send me money and God will bless you" kind of pastor. But I invite you to pray with me—boldly and unashamedly—for more miracles.

We've got to be careful not to fall into the institutional trap. In *Seven Things They Didn't Teach You in Seminary*, John Killinger wrote:

"Most large churches aren't really part of a dedicated Christian movement, they are only secular institutions. They may have been devoted to Christ in the beginning, and eagerly sought the leadership of God's Spirit. But in the course of the years, they gradually turned into something else—major organizations that function mainly along the lines of other organizations such as schools and banks and insurance companies.

The worst part of this, of course, is that something very crucial is missing right at the heart of the church. The Spirit has gone AWOL in favor of machinery and functionality. The very genius of Christianity, the sense of what we are about, has disappeared, and in its place there stands a big

building with all the evidence of its being a church: a spire or a tower, a sanctuary, a pulpit and a table, classrooms and offices, copy machines, a telephone system, and usually a kitchen and a dining area. It is an indictment of our spirituality that we think of these appurtenances as constituting a church, for they don't... We have let ourselves be blinded by the traditional paraphernalia and think we are seeing a church when we aren't."

Is Killinger cynical? Maybe. But isn't he too right for our own comfort? Almost certainly.

Acts 1:14 describes what they did while they waited in Jerusalem: *They all joined together constantly in prayer.* Would you join me in praying for miracles among our family of faith? Real miracles?

They shared with each other (“...had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need,” 2:42-43).

I normally don't like to use myself as an example of how to do things but here I have an opportunity to show how it works when we share things. I have a pickup truck which, of course, is very handy for hauling things. One of our members, Karen Fugate, has asked for my truck three times and each time I gladly allowed her to use my pickup truck. In fact, when I see her I often offer, graciously, for her to use it whenever she wishes.

Some of you skeptics are going to ask, “Isn't Karen the one who owns that nearly new SAAB convertible? And doesn't she let you borrow that when she borrows your truck? And haven't we seen you driving around town with the top down and your sunglasses on acting like

Well, yes, but that has nothing to do with letting Karen use my truck. My motives are pure as the driven snow!

So we hold things in common here at Bon Air. Of course we don't live as a commune—the world is different from the first century world of the first church. But we do share.

We put our tithes and offerings together and thus support ministry and mission projects that we otherwise could not. And when our folks are in need we have the member needs fund. We try to help in those financial emergencies.

Obviously there is a limit to what we can do financially. And even the early church had to draw some lines. 1 Timothy 5 talks about that. But we do what we can.

Let's follow the mandate of Galatians 6:2 to “bear each other's burdens.” Would you commit yourself to bearing each other's burdens? Not just financially but also physically and emotionally

and spiritually? Would you commit yourself to looking out for each other? To letting someone know when your burden is so heavy you can't bear it alone? Will you be willing to swallow your pride and say, "I need help?" Let's share each other's burdens.

They were liked by outsiders ("...enjoying the favor of all the people," 2:47)

Of course, in time, these folks were run out of town by the authorities. In the early days of the church the Roman Empire persecuted the church because of false perceptions. But regular folks *liked* this group of Christ-followers.

Luke 2:52 says, "Jesus grew in favor with God and men." People liked Jesus. The authorities crucified him, but commoners were drawn to his magnetic grace.

We church folks, however, aren't always seen as likeable folks. But if people liked the first church and they liked Jesus then we must do more to "grow in favor with people." I'm not talking about violating our values in order to be liked, but we must "grow in favor with outsiders as best we can. Here are two ways:

1) Make people feel at home here.

Have you ever met someone and been pleasantly surprised? Maybe what you'd heard about them made you think you wouldn't like them. Well, we can pleasantly surprise people here at church!

I've been visiting other churches this summer. And I've remembered what it's like to walk into a place you've never been before. Those first few steps inside the building are terribly awkward.

Where is the worship place? Am I supposed to go in our wait here?

Then during the service it's hard to know what to do. When do I stand and when do I sit? When they have that time that introverts hate—the "everybody shake hands" thing—do I take the initiative or do I wait for someone?

I was at a church in South Carolina last Saturday night. During the "greet your neighbor" time I was nice to the lady next to me. But before everybody sat down she picked up her purse and moved to sit with some other folks. I wondered if I'd done the greeting wrong or if maybe my 24-hour deodorant was on hour number 25. It's awkward for newcomers!

And then there is the offering! When they place the plate in front of me do I say, “I’m a member of another church?” or “I gave at the office?” Do I look down and act like I don’t see him? Do I smile? It’s awkward for newcomers!

God’s Spirit draws people to church. Some will be devoted Christ-followers who are new to Richmond and looking for a church. Others will be far from God but willing to give Him a chance. When both get here, they feel awkward. Let’s go out of our ways to make people feel welcome here. If you can smile and shake hands then you can be an important link between someone and God Himself!

2) Touch people where they hurt

We do that, I believe, in a number of ways. Through NorthStar and its recovery emphasis. A lot of people from the outside say to me how meaningful to them and to their families NorthStar has been. We’re touching people where they hurt through ministries like tutoring and Habitat for Humanity and the prison ministry.

And we are increasingly passionate about the poor, I believe. Aaron Graham’s message this summer was very well-received. Of course Valerie has been encouraging us for years to get involved in ministry to the poor. I’m committed to doing what I can to make sure we care for the poor and the prisoners, the widows and the orphans—to touching people where they hurt.

They saw increasing numbers of transformed lives (“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved,” 2:47)

In 2002 I told you about an American lady taking a tour of one of Europe’s great cathedrals. The tour guide painted verbal portraits of the historic events that had taken place there and described in detail the exquisite architecture of the great edifice. The tourists could almost feel the presence of the throngs of commoners and the handful of famous people who had worshipped there. The place of that building in history was undeniable and inspirational.

And when the guide paused and asked for questions he wasn’t prepared for the American lady who, with no sense of decorum, asked, “Has anybody been saved here lately?”

That's the result of an effective church. If we do church right, God will add to His Family people who are being saved—rescued for this life and the next.

And I want us to do church right.

A local, big-time developer told me of visiting a planned community in South Carolina. He and his wife walked down main street—a street created to feel like a quaint, small town square.

Along the street was a church. Stained glass and steeple and the whole bit. Even had bells that subtly pealed comforting hymns for the passersby.

This developer and his wife walked inside.

It wasn't a church at all.

It was the mere façade of a church. It was a community center built to look like a church. Those building that planned community felt like the presence of a church would make the town more appealing. So they put up a façade.

I'm not interested in a façade. I'm interested in our being a church with a deep sense of mission and a willingness to do whatever it takes to fulfill that mission.

Let's do church right.