

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **The First Fellowship**

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Code: 1709

In Acts chapter 2 there are from verses 42 to 47 are some of the key characteristics of the church in its ideal character. There are really two main ways in which the new testament exhibits to us the ideal of the church. One of them is doctrinal and that is in Ephesians. The other is historical and that is in Acts particularly here in chapter 2.

We see the church purity in doctrine in Ephesians. We see the church purity in actuality in Acts. We see this beautiful new born church in its splendid prime when the memory of Jesus was vivid, when the gifts of the Spirit were fresh and new and when there was a vitality that was beautiful and glorious.

To review for our own understanding, Jesus had arrived, He had died, He had resurrected, He had ascended into heaven, He had then sent the Spirit to finish His unfinished work. He formed His body, called out those of His own choosing, brought them together to form the church. Baptized them into the body, filled them with His Spirit, they began to speak the wonderful works of God in the languages of the people who were there, the crowd was gathered, Peter stood up in the midst of that, explained what miracle was going on and then proceeded to announce to the Jewish population of Jerusalem that Jesus of Nazareth whom they had crucified was both Lord and Messiah. And this fantastic message that Peter gave running fifty days on the heels of the execution of Jesus brought a response that was remarkable in verse 41 it says, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added unto them about three-thousand souls".

One hundred twentydisciples, the addition of three thousand, the church that was born in Jerusalem on the first day had three thousand one hundred and twenty members. Now this is some indication, as a footnote, that they kept rolls, the fact that they knew how many. They evidently knew who was a part of the church by a profession of faith and by baptism and this is really the precedent for such a thing as membership rolls in a church. So they are able to keep track of who it is that's committed himself to Christ and for whom they are responsible in ministries. So the first fruits of the church were gathered on the day of Pentecost which was a feast celebrating First-Fruits.

Now as we see this little church beginning, as we go through the book of Acts we're going to see how it was born, how it grew and how it reproduced. And we're going to see the expansion of the church clear on out to the end of the book of Acts and this is the birth right here. There were already the 120 who believed, there were already disciples up in Galilee but here is the first local assembly of

believers ever brought together in the city of Jerusalem. There is no church in the Old Testament; this is the birth of the church.

Now what was this first church like? And even perhaps more significant than that question is, Can we be like that church? It had a certain genius that every really evangelical church has tried to capture all through the ages since that time. It had a certain kind of vitality and a certain kind of life that all churches that are really committed to the word of God have desired to emulate throughout history. Can we do it? Is it possible to be what that church was? Or are there some restrictions that eliminate it?

But before we can know if we can be that church we've got to know what that church was and in ninety-eight Greek words Luke really gives us some identification tags for that church, very brief and yet very rich with very much insight.

Now as we look at this passage and we're going to consider 42 to 47 and not in great depth as we perhaps do other passages but just in kind of a general way. We see to begin with a little group of humble disciples who have counted the cost...willingly; identified by public baptism with Jesus Christ, thus ostracizing themselves from their historic Judaism. They have named the name of the crucified blasphemer Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah their Lord. The church has been born of which Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The hour of divine dispensation has struck and a new thing was begun. The church, the new dispensation is born and men and women filled with the Holy Spirit and possessing the power promised by Christ begin to do what Christ did not finish. They finished the unfinished work of Christ which was His design for His church.

Now if you'll look at your outline you'll see that this church was an ideal church for three major reasons. Number one, it had the proper content. Number two, because of proper content it had proper character. Number three because of proper character it had the proper consequences. And this is a progressive outline. To affect the proper consequence which is at the bottom of your outline, to be a growing church, you go all the way back to the very church beginning and begin with content. They had the proper input and it resulted in the proper out-go. Evangelism was the last thing on the list in verse 47. Long before that ever happened we have to begin in verse 42 with the proper content.

Now this is where the effective church begins. Our immediate task in the church is not evangelism. In Ephesians 4 it tells us that there were apostles and prophets and teaching shepherds and evangelists given to the church for the perfecting of the saints. Later on evangelism is a by-product And here we have the same thing. There is content to be pumped into the church itself before it is able to reproduce. Before the church is effective in evangelism and winning others to Christ it must be the right church, there must be the right content.

Now let's look at just four things that indicate this church had the proper content. Number one, it was a saved church. In verse 41 it says, they were gladly received and were baptized; and in verse 42 it says that they continued steadfastly. Now here we saw last week was a basic identifying mark of a truly saved individual, continuing. Jesus said in John 15, "That a true branch does", what? "Abides in the vine", it stays there. Jesus said in John 8:31 that, "If you continue in My word then are you My disciples for real", *aleethos*. In other words, continuing in Christ is a proof of real salvation. People always say, What about so-and-so? They believed for a while and then they dropped away. First John 2:19 says, "They went out from us that it might be made known that they never were of us," for if they had been of us they would have remained with us". Continuation, it's all over the book of Hebrews. Continuation is a sign of true salvation.

If an individual is really born again, if they really come to know Jesus Christ they abide in Christ. Now this was a church of saved individuals.

You say, - Is that anything shocking? It is today. There are churches all over the place that are populated in the majority by unsaved people. This morning in our elders prayer meeting one of our elders brought to our attention the fact that he wanted us to pray for a particular pastor of a church that he might be saved. Now you know if there are pastors and there are multitudinous pastors who don't have the faintest idea what salvation is that there are churches jammed with people who don't know what salvation is either. This church began by being a redeemed church. All the professors were also possessors and that eliminated a lot of problems. You know, there are people who say, - We've got to invite all of these people in any way, we've got to make them feel a part, we've got to bring them in and put them into positions and then if they feel that we love them then maybe they accept our Christ. No way. That's like inviting Satan to come in and make your plans with you. That's like saying our church is working well it's a combination of God and Satan. They work together. That is absurd. There is no place within the church for the activity of those who do not claim to love Jesus Christ. We're about His business. We're not about the business of a social club. We're not about the business of being so palatable to everybody that we make God sick. We're about the business of a unique and separated identity of believers in Jesus Christ. You say, Are you saying that you don't welcome unbelievers into the church? Absolutely not. I welcome you to come and hear about Jesus Christ. I welcome you to come and sense the love that we have for you because we want you to know the Christ we know but there's no place for a such in the church to teach or to minister or to serve or to work with us or to be a part of the intimacy of our fellowship for that puts Satan in a place where he can do his work.

The beginning key to this church was it was a saved church. And I hope that you understand that I'm not saying that we're unloving toward unbelievers, God forbid that. We have a love and a compassion for those who don't know Jesus Christ that's the ultimate end for which we exist that we might reach you with the gospel but when we come together to seek the power of God and to express our desires and to express the will of God we must be of one mind in Christ. Unbelievers are welcome to hear the

message, they're welcome to learn about Jesus Christ but the fellowship of the church, the membership of the church, those who serve and those who work must be redeemed. I've had more people than I'd like to think of tell me, - You know, our church will never be anything that God can really use because there are too many unbelievers in positions of leadership. That's common all over the country in liberal churches. That's common everywhere. It's sad to say even evangelical churches have allowed themselves to get infiltrated by Satan and even those who try to stop it find that Satan is wily and clever. And you know that he appears as an angel of what? Of light. But in this church, they that gladly received were for real and they began with a real group of people. And, boy, that's the heart of the thing. They all really loved Jesus Christ. And if you try to mingle believers and unbelievers in a church you get the same kind of confusion as if you ask God and Satan to work together. It can't be done.

Paul writing to the Thessalonians, who really had an ideal situation they had a beautiful church kind of gave them his finest commendation when he said this, "Paul and Silas and Timothy under the church of the Thessalonians I Thessalonians I:I, "Which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ and in verse 5, "And in the Holy Spirit". Now that was a group that was in. They were in the Trinity. What does that mean? That means they were saved. Verse 3, I remember your work of faith, labor of love and patience of hope.

Also they exhibited the triad of Christian virtues, faith, hope and love. The next verse he says, "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God". That was a saved crew and that's why they had what they had. That's why it was said of them, They've come and turned the world upside down. That's why their testimony got spread all over the world in only a matter of weeks because to begin with they were all committed to Christ. From time to time we have folks who will come and they'll come to see me, make an appointment and say, - I'd like to join your church- and I say, - Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? I'll get into the gospel and find out they are not even a Christian. And I'll say to them, -You know, before you can become a part of the fellowship here and join this church and minister with us you need to know the Christ that we exalt. That's no different then saying we want the players on our side to be on our team. You say, - Well, does the Bible really say that we are not to mingle with unbelievers in the fellowship of the church? Let me give you an illustration. In Revelation chapter 2, and I don't know of a stronger one than this. I prayed that the Lord would give me an illustration for this and as you well know by now I like to illustrate Bible truth with other Bible truth because then it's illustrating and teaching at the same time. And this just came to my heart and I began to study it and reviewing it in my mind and this is a good illustration, better than that it's a divine one. Revelation 2:14 writing to the church of Pergamos Jesus says this, "But I have a few things against thee", and that's a terrible enough statement to think that Jesus Christ has something against a church. You say, - Well, I thought it was the church of Jesus Christ? Yes, but just being just having the title of the church of Jesus Christ doesn't mean you are what He wants you to be. He had something against this church. He had something against a lot of churches, you read all those letters. "I have a few things against thee because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of

Balaam." Now that was the problem. It says there, I have a few things against thee because thou hast there them. Now the problem was they had the them there. That's the problem. You say, - Who are the them? I'll tell you. The them are they that hold the doctrine of Balaam. The them are they that hold the doctrine of Balaam. You say, -Well, what's the doctrine of Balaam? Well, it says the doctrine of Balaam was, "Who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornication". You know what that is? That's compromise. That's compromise. Let me show you what I mean by that. Now you remember the story of Balaam, and this is reflecting back to Balaam, Numbers 22 to 25, Balaam had a donkey who was more intelligent than he was, you remember that story.

But nevertheless, Balak, Balak was the king of Moab. And the Moabites hated the Jews and so Balak wanted to get rid of the Jews. Well, he figured the best way to do it was to hire a prophet to curse Israel, and Balaam had perverted his prophetic office to the point where he was for hire. And so he hired...Moab's king Balak...hired Balaam to curse Israel, but all kinds of circumstances came up and it never came off right. So Balak decided then, if we cannot curse them we'll corrupt them. So the plot got all worked out and this is what they decided. Moab would get their women to seduce the men of Israel. They would then bring them in to intermarriage and into the orgies of prostitution that characterized the Moabite worship. And once the intermingling had occurred and all the foul idolatries of Moab had been mixed with Israel the purity would be lost, the power would be sapped and Israel for all intents and purposes would be destroyed. You know what, it worked.

It worked. The Moabites infiltrated the Israelites, intermarriage, fornication which is sexual sin, idolatry, foul things began to happen, the power was lost, the power was sapped. Now this is exactly what happened in the church of Pergamos. Satan's strategy was simple, infiltrate the church with unbelievers. It's exactly what he did. And they got in there and he began to teach spiritual adultery. They began to teach immorality, they even had the doctrine of the Nicolaitans which apparently, it's an obscure term, but apparently refers to some kind of gross immorality connected with a man named Nicholas. But anyway this immorality began to grow inside the church in Pergamos as it had grown inside Israel when Moab infiltrated. And it was so much of a concern to Jesus that look at verse 16. Can you imagine Him saying this about His church? "Repent or else I will come unto thee quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth." Jesus deals very harshly with the church. Just because you're a church doesn't mean you're sacred. Just because you're a little sign out front says church or church, like ours does, just because you have the title doesn't necessarily mean that you're free and clear, Kings X, you know, spiritually. If there is something wrong in that church then believe me the Lord Himself will fight against that church. People say to me, -You know, I go to a liberal church and the pastor doesn't believe anything but we're praying for this and that and ... Brother, if God doesn't even go there, why do you go there? If that is a church that the Lord is going to fight against with the sword of His mouth, the best thing for you to do would be to leave it. There certainly comes a time when God writes Ichabod, the glory hath departed. You see what happened in Pergamos is what can happen in any church. When you open your arms on a social basis or on

whatever basis you want to let everybody come in that wants to come in you have then infiltrated the church and that's exactly the thing the Bible warns about. In case you'd like an explicit warning I give you one that is extremely explicit. It says this, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with", what? "Unbelievers, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness." Are we to let that unrighteousness enter our fellowship? No. "And what communion (fellowship, same word) hath light with darkness? And what concord has Christ with Satan?" Or what part hath he that believeth with an unbeliever? There is no fellowship there.

And so we believe that the church must be purely those who love Jesus Christ. And this church was, and that's the beginning of the proper content.

Notice the second thing, and we'll hurry. They were not only a saved church they were a studying church. Now I like this because this talks about doctrine. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." They studied. The thing they committed themselves to was study, that's the basis of it. Now when we say the word doctrine that is not some great mystical word, it is the word didache it means teaching, that's all. They gave themselves to being instructed and teaching others. Paul said to Timothy in II Tim. 2:2, Here's the way it goes, Timothy, you have been taught by me, you teach faithful men, they will teach others also. Reproductive cycles of teaching. That's the pattern for the church. The church is not, never was intended to be, a spectator organization. It never was intended to be an entertainment center. It was intended to be a reproductive teaching cycle where faithful men are taught who in turn teach others. Now this church had it right.

They had the right content. They were committed to studying, to studying.

Now if you're going to teach you've got to do what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:2--teach. So then in verse 15 he says, first of all, "Study to show yourself approved". You can't teach if you don't study. A lot of people try but you can't do it. It's not too effective. The pattern for growth in the church is simply given in 1 Peter 2:2, which says, "As babies desire milk you desire the word that you may", what? "That you may grow by it." Growth comes from teaching. And, I believe, you can count I counted in my own life, a wasted day when I haven't learned a new truth from the word of God or plumbed deeper than ever before into an old truth. I count it a wasted day.

Teaching, studying, content, doctrine is the basis of the church. Not emotion-doctrine. Paul said to the Romans, What you need to do is not conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of your what? Of your mind. Of your mind. You say, Oh, that's an isolated text. No, that is not isolated. Listen to this one, here's another isolated one, Colossians 3:10, "Put on the new man that is renewed in knowledge." Put on the new man that is renewed in knowledge? That's talking about what you know. Listen to 1 Peter 1:13, "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind". That's where to begin. You need to learn. You've got to have the right input. Doctrine is the basis of everything. And that's why we're

committed to teaching the word of God. Not doing all kinds of other things. And you know there are books out by the truckload that you can look at on how to do it in the church and every once in awhile you find one that says anything about teaching Reproductive cycles of teaching is the church. But we have degenerated into all kinds of things. A sort of a Sunday Circus and teaching somewhere gets lost. We must teach doctrine. The great commission of Jesus was to teach the world, the gospel and the word of God. Doctrine is the heart of everything. It is absolute stupidity to come along and say that the curse of the church is teaching. Hosea said this, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge". Doctrine is the heart of everything. Paul said to Titus, here's how to do it. You want to be a minister, Titus? Do this. "Speak thou the things that become sound doctrine." Fairly straight statement, I'd say.

Titus 1:9, "Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught that he may be able by sound doctrine to exhort and confute the imposers." 1 Timothy 4:6, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ nourished up in the words of faith and good doctrine". Verse 11, "These things command and teach". Now that's pretty straight. Verse 13, "Till I come give attendance to reading to exhortation, to doctrine". Verse 16, "Take heed unto thyselfes and unto the doctrine continue in them". And then he says to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 4, "Preach the word, Preach the word, Preach the word". And he says because the time will come when men will not endure what? Sound doctrine. That time's come.

And they do it even in the name of Jesus Christ. Doctrine, proper content is the basis of everything. If we do not teach the truth how do we then know an error is there? And any shepherd who does not teach the truth to his sheep does not protect them. So you see they had the right content, they had doctrine, they learned the word of God.

Beloved, you don't need to be entertained. You don't need to be cajoled; you don't need to be anything but taught the Word of God. And the Spirit of God in your willing heart will activate that teaching into the dynamic of living where it's got to be there. You can't operate on the content you don't have. You got that? You can't function on the principles you don't know.

Now it's an interesting note here also that they still were involved in doctrine even after they had been baptized by the Holy Spirit and filled with the Spirit. Because many people, today, assume that when you get filled with the Spirit in some ecstatic experience or you receive the so-called Baptism of the Spirit, that at that point you never need to be taught again you've arrived at a point of spiritual maturity. You have a ripe spiritual knowledge. Well, that sure didn't happen to them and they were right there at the hottest part of the fire. They received the Spirit of God in Acts 2, they spoke in languages the wonderful works of God. They had all of those miracles going on and they were still ignorant. They had to be taught doctrine. And so they began with the right content.

So it was a saved and a studying church. Well, I'm preaching too much I've got to get going. Third, they were a fellowshipping church. It says in verse 42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and they continued steadfastly in fellowship". Fellowship we're going to be studying in a couple of weeks, I'm not going to take a lot of time. It just means spiritual togetherness. The fellowship of the body is the interaction of believers with each other in ministering their spiritual gifts and various other ministries. And this church was involved in that.

Now let me say that fellowship is a positional word in the first sense.

The word comes from a word that means partner. When you receive Jesus Christ you became a partner with Christ. You also became a partner with every other Christian, that can never change. So in the purest sense we talk about being out of fellowship, that's an impossibility. You can never be out of partnership with God or with other believers. You're always in that fellowship. But you lose the joy of that fellowship when you sin, that's 1 John 1:4, "These things I write unto you that your joy may be full", see. Fellowship is permanent but the joy comes and goes as you participate in the fellowship. So these people were one in position and they were really experiencing their oneness. They were moving through each other and sharing with each other and living with each other and having commonness with each other. They were together. Down in verses 44 to 46 they had things in common. "They were daily in one accord in the temple, breaking bread at home and private houses, eating their food with gladness and singleness of heart." They were one group. They had a beautiful kind of fellowship. Their partnership that was positional was also experiential. Now I just want to pick off one point here and then we'll go. This idea is very important and germane to us this morning for many reasons but let me just pull one. Many people fail to participate fully in a local congregation. There are a lot of things about the organized church that I don't like. Like one man said, when Christians become organized they become very unChristian. There are a lot of things about the system church that I react against. I was raised all my life in the church. You know, I've been in the church so long I had sticker stains on my head from turkeys and stars you know, all through my life, see. But I know what the church is like and I've been inside the church for enough years to know there are a lot of things about the church that I really don't like in terms of the establishment churches we think about. But may I hasten to add that I also react violently to somebody who says, -Well, I went to church one time and I got turned off. I went over there and the pastor didn't treat me right so I'm out here and I worship God with my nine-iron and my one-wood or I worship God in my camper or I worship God in the surf or whatever it is, you know, and I love the Lord but I don't have anything to do with the church because they turn me off. I reject that attitude. And I reject it biblically. For example, the fellowship of believers is what it's all about, beloved. That's why we're here. And if we can't come together and exercise the fellowship as the Spirit wants us to then it is not for us to leave but it is for us to deal with the issue that restricts our fellowship from being what it ought to be. The genius of the church there is no separation between the visible church and the invisible in the mind of God. Let me show you what I mean. Take for example, the New Testament word *ekklesia*, called out ones, the assembly of believers; that word, we are the *ekklesia* or the *ekleesia*, the church. Now that



word is used to speak of the spiritual reality of believers, is it not? All Christians are part of the church.

True? The church in a spiritual sense. Now watch this little point. The same word is used to speak of the local assembly. Not only does church mean all believers, it also means a group of believers in a given area.

You say, Well, why would God use the same word? Because in the mind of God it's the same thing. Did you hear that? God never provided in His design that there would be a difference between those believers in the world and those in any local congregation because He always assumed that any true believer would be a part of a local assembly. Do you see the point? God's word provides for no dichotomy between being a Christian and being a part of a Christian fellowship. And if you're not involved, if you're not involved in the life of a local assembly you're disobedient as a believer to the very concept of fellowship to what it means in the very beginning.

If your Christianity amounts to only sliding in on Sunday morning and sliding out and that's the limit of your fellowship, then you have missed the point. And worse yet, if your concept of the fellowship of believers only involves sliding in and sliding out once a month you've missed the point. And Hebrews chapter 10 verse 25 the Bible says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together and much the more as you see the day approaching". Do you think Jesus is coming pretty soon? Do you think the day's approaching? Then is it time to get together? Once in awhile?

Oh, we ought to be together all the time. You say, - Why? Because, verse 24 says this, "That we might provoke each other to love and good works". I need you to provoke me to love and good works and you need me to provoke you to the same thing. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together.

Now you can make that as practical as you want to make it just be careful that you don't spend all your week-ends away from the people of the Lord.

Just be careful of the boob-tube that it becomes the Cyclops of your living room that puts a hypnotic spell on all of you and glues you to the thing so that you're not involved in the lives of other Christians. Don't let any activity destroy the concept of fellowship that the Spirit of God designs for you to be a part of. This church was together. They were together, ministering mutually to each others needs.

Now look at the symbol of their togetherness. It says in verse 42, "In breaking of bread". This is a term referring to communion or the Lord's table. The symbol of their fellowship was the communion and I'll show you why. At what point do all Christians come together, at what point? The point of the cross, right? That's where we all meet. We all meet at the foot of the cross as common sinners saved by the grace of God. The common ground upon which all of us stand is the cross. And thus the cross is that which brought peace which reconciled us to God, which reconciled us to each other and then it

becomes a symbol of our fellowship. Doesn't it? We are one with Christ at the cross, "I am crucified with", what? "With Christ."

We're one with each other; now all of us being crucified with Christ are one. Therefore the cross is the symbol of our unity. And so every time we celebrate communion we're acknowledging that the cross is just the symbol of our unity. Our fellowship came because Jesus died. He purchased us, we were in Him in His death, all of us. And you know, that every Christian that ever lives in this world was in Christ when He died? And therefore we were one.

The cross, then, is a symbol of our unity. And Jesus wanting us to be sure that we maintain the beauty of that unity and never forgot it said I want you to do this and He commanded that we partake of the bread and the cup, did He not. Constantly reminding us of our unity. I dare say, and I hate to ask and you ask in your own heart, how long has it been since some of you have experienced communion? It's not right. It's not right. This commanded of our Lord, and we sit around so often and we say, Lord, what do you want me to do over here, what do You want me to do over there and we're not willing to do what we know He wants us to do. Follow Him in obedience in sharing the cup and the bread. And we do this the first Wednesday of every month. It's not a public service for unbelievers to come in, it's for us who love Jesus Christ to share and fellowship. You need to be a part of that. That's commanded by our Lord. And if you obey Him you're blessed but you ought to obey Him anyway because you love Him. From the earliest days of the church this was joyfully celebrated. And I don't - so many times communion can be very serious and sober thing and kind of liturgical and a lot of holy- mogus going on and you wonder if it means anything, you know. I think that in the early church it was a time of joy. It was a celebration. I can't look at the cross without celebrating. And so we come together to celebrate. And when we come together for communion did you know that in a real spiritual sense Christ is one with us when we partake of that cup and that bread? Spiritually speaking. It says so in I Cor. chapter 10 as clearly as possible. When you partake of the bread and the cup you are literally in a spiritual sense partaking of Christ. Listen, "The cup of blessing which we bless is it not the fellowship of Christ? The bread which we break is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" Now we don't believe as the Catholic Church teaches that it's the actual blood and body but we believe in a spiritual sense you're exhibiting your unity with Christ And not only that but with every other believer because the next verse says, "For we being many are one bread and one body for we are all partakers of that one bread." So when you come to communion you're celebrating your oneness with Christ and with every other believer. What a beautiful symbol it is. And it's a time for confession of sin; it's a time for getting things right; it's a time for examining your heart as Paul says. This church had fellowship that was real and they maintained the symbol of that fellowship the breaking of bread. So it was a saved, studying, fellowshiping church.

Fourth, it was a praying church. It says, "And they continued steadfastly in prayers". That's so good. Oh, man, if there's anything you could ever want of a church, that would be it, wouldn't it? I mean, you know, prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence and if you can get enough

people praying then you're going to activate God's power. These dear Christians in Jerusalem had had a promise from Jesus.

Jesus told them in John 14:13-14, that from now on people, anything you ask in My name, I'll do it. And, boy, they were taking Him at His word. And they were activating that thing all day long, every day they were in prayers. And it's not so much here talking about the individual prayer as it's talking about when they came together collectively they were involved in prayer. They had meetings for prayer. Oh, sadly, today that is so neglected. The church will be packed, you know, for the Christian rock concert or whatever. Or for Mister Super-Star to tell his testimony of how he got saved from this to that and majoring mostly on the this. Or it will be packed for the super-extravaganza program. And then you announce a prayer meeting and a few faithful saints will trickle in. Something wrong. I hate to say it but it's true. The depth of commitment of most Christians wouldn't fill a birdbath. You see, the genius of this thing was they had the right content.

People will sit back and they'll criticize the church but maybe they're not willing to apply to the church the right content. It's so easy for me to sit back and, you know, then if I see something I don't like to be critical of that thing or that person when I ought to be prayerful about it. My dear friends, I believe we would see things happen we haven't dreamed could happen if we got together in mass and prayed. Do you believe that? I believe it.

We announce a prayer meeting and what happens. It's like it's all over the place in America,- we're complacent, smug. In Africa the African churches are up from 5 to 7 every morning, two hours of prayer and they're all there And they do it seven days a week. And you know what, they're seeing things happen. Remarkable things.

Well, this church had the proper content. Listen, you put the proper input in and you're going to have the proper character. That's the second point. If you've got the right stuff going in you're going to have the right stuff being manifest. True? But you've got to start at the beginning. People say, How do you get to be the right kind of a church with the real testimony to the world? It starts with the input and a commitment on your part, beloved, first of all that you really know Christ. Secondly, that you're studying the word of God and teaching somebody else or being taught.

Thirdly, that you're involved in fellowship administering your spiritual gifts and sharing and loving each other, communing around the Lord's table. Four, that you're faithfully praying together with other believers. And you know what will happen? Before you know it, you'll wake up some day and say, Hey look at this church, look what God's doing. Well, we've seen God do some wonderful things, haven't we? We haven't scratched the surface. We haven't begun to see what God can do if we really commit ourselves to the right content.

Okay, you have the right content you're going to have the right character. Now because of this church's content look what kind of church it was. First of all it was an awesome church. Verse 43, "And fear came upon every soul". We'll stop there. This church brought fear. Now the word fear is the word awe. It means reverence. It's not terror. It's not the idea of being horrified or afraid it's awe. It's the idea of the awareness of something supernatural is going on, you know. Just that kind of idea that God is working. Every soul, literal translation, every soul kept feeling a sense of awe. Do you get the point? It was just there, you know. You were just around that group and you just..your mouth ahhh, you know. It was all happening fast and it was obvious divine and you couldn't explain it see. This is fantastic. Their life was so real and so powerful that the watching world was standing around with their mouths hanging open, couldn't figure it out. Now this word awe is reserved for special times in Scripture. It's reserved for those times when people's minds are struck with an awe that is based on something divine that they can't explain. And there are Many good illustrations of its use; one classic one is in Luke 7:11, "And it came to pass the next day that He went into a city called Nain and many of His disciples went with Him and much people", this is Jesus, "When He came near to the gate of the city behold there was a dead man being carried out the only son of his mother and she was a widow", here comes a funeral procession marching along and they've got the guy in his little bier thing, casket, "And when the Lord saw her He had compassion on her and said unto her, Weep not", don't cry - I love this, "And He came and touched the bier and they that bore him stood still. And He said, Young man I say unto thee Arise". Can you imagine what that must have caused, the reaction? "And he that was dead sat up and began to speak." Just imagine what that must have caused. And He said, "And He delivered him to his mother, and there came a fear on all". Now that doesn't mean they were afraid. It says in the next statement, "And they glorified God". You see, it's that idea that God is doing something. And they said, "There's a prophet come to our place". It being unable to explain the divine that leaves you in a sense of awe.

Sometimes in your lives you've felt that, haven't you? You've seen God work and you've just kind of stood there and it was just kind of unreal.

Every soul kept feeling a sense of awe about that church. I wonder if we affect the community like that?

Not only was it an awesome church but number two, and this is the reason it was an awesome church, it was a miraculous church. Listen to this "And many wonders and signs were done by the apostles". Notice, please, that it doesn't say all the people did the miracles the apostles did. This was a church where miracles were going on all the time. The first one was about to happen is defined for us in chapter 3, the lame man, Peter and John. Chapter 3, verse 6, and Peter said to this guy who'd been begging at the gate beautiful and everybody in town knew he was--that old blind guy, that old lame guy I should say, that's been there for so long. He'd been lame since he'd been born. "Peter said, Silver and gold have I none but such as I have give I thee, In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." One critic said, Boy, the church can no longer say silver and gold have I

none. And another guy said, Yea, and they can no longer say rise up and walk. "And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood and walked and entered with them into the temple walking and leaping and praising God." Can't you see this guy? They're all saying this, you know. In other words, there were miracles going on and you can go clear through the book and chapter 5 and you can see the effect of these miracles. Chapter 5, verse 12, "And by the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were wrought among the people". And verse 15, "Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and couches that at the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them and there came a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem bringing sick folks and them which were vexed with unclean spirits and they were healed every one". And then you come over to chapter 9. Listen, this is kind of an exciting thing, "Peter said unto him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee well, arise and make thy bed. And he arose immediately. And all that dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord." Now that's the point, isn't it? What are miracles for in the Bible? To turn people to Christ. Over in verse 40, "Peter put them all forth and kneeled down and prayed and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes and when saw Peter she sat up.

And he gave her his hand and lifted her up and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive. And it was known throughout all Joppa and many believed in the Lord." That's all I could think about when I was in Joppa of what that Peter had done there. Tabitha, arise. And everybody believed. You see, miracles always had a purpose. They created wonder as a sign pointing to the message of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus did miracles. Did you know that in John 14 He said, "Believe on Me for the works I do". In other words, the works that He did and the miracles had the direction of pointing right to Him as Christ, the Messiah. And the apostles were given power to do miracles in order to confirm the word they preached. In Hebrews 2:3 it says, "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him". How was it confirmed? With signs, wonders, diverse miracle and gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God attended the preaching with miracles that the preaching might be believed. Got it? Let's say five guys go into town and all five have different messages but one of those five raises the dead, who do you believe? You see, the miracles were to confirm the word. That was a miracle church. God was doing miracles to confirm His word.

Now, of course, when the word was finally completed in the Scripture, the age of miracles as such ceased. If five people come into this building and they all teach five different things I can tell very quickly who's teaching the truth. I compare him with the Book. Right? I don't need miracles anymore I have the standard right here. When that which is perfect is come being the word of God, then those attendant things begin to fade away. But in that time they were so necessary. You say, - Well, are you trying to tell us then, John, that there aren't anymore miracles in the church? Not at all. But I am telling you that miracles today aren't so much the sign for the unbeliever that they used to be--the Word of God is enough. Miracles today are for the blessing and the increased faith of the believers.

Do you think God does miracles? Do you? I know He does. Has He ever done any miracles in your life? If you're a Christian He did one great miracle--the greatest one in the universe; He made you a new creature. I've seen God do miracles in this church. I've seen God touch people's bodies and heal them. I've seen Him touch their minds and give them understanding. I've seen Him call people out of one kind of life and put them into another and make them into a servant of Himself. I've seen Him patch together broken homes. I've seen Him piece together broken hearts. I've seen miracle after miracle. I see them all week long. Don't tell me God's not a God of miracles. He's not a God doing public signs today because the word is here to confirm what anyone says but He's still a God who by miracles cares for His own and accomplishes His will.

And, beloved, I do believe that this can be a church that has a reputation for miracles. Somebody once said to me and I always thought of this as a supreme compliment, they said to this person, -You know, I'd like to know how to be saved? This person said to him -Well, go to Grace Community, they know how to be saved over there. Now that's the admission that this is a miracle church in a sense that somebody can come here and if their heart is right God can accomplish the miracle of salvation through the lives of people here. This is a miracle church in Jerusalem and yet even today if we give God the right to work with the proper content I believe He'll do miracles. Don't you believe that?

Well, let's go on. There's a third thing about this church's character. It was a sharing church. Verse 44, and we'll just look through these "And all that believed were together and had all things common", they just passed stuff around, unselfish, oh selfless people they were. Humble, loving selfless people. In fact verse 45 says, "They sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need and they continued daily with one accord", stop there. Just imagine being together all the time, everyday and still being of one accord. Umph, no strife. You say, There it is, that's my passage to prove communal living. Oh really! Yes, you see, as Christians we should sell all we have, pool our interests and dole it out on an equal basis and all live in the same building. You know, that's being propagated a lot today, communal living Christians. Boy, that's very, very popular. Let me just say a word about communal living. Is this teaching that they lived in communes, that they pooled everything and had a kind of Christian communism where everybody's resources went into one pot and they doled it out on an equal basis? Is that what they're saying? The answer is no. I think if we carefully examine the text we'll find that's exactly what they are not saying. Now let me show you what I mean.

At this time in Jerusalem there were many pilgrims who came for the feast. Right? It was a very common custom in Israel that at anytime of religious feasts, historians tell us, that there was a sharing of everything. For example, when all of these people as many as a million would move in at a feast time, they would have to have housing. Well, of course, there weren't enough inns to accommodate. People would open their homes, they never rented their homes they gave them. They would allow a person to come in and live with them, stay in their rooms, use their ovens, their pots, their utensils all of the things they had. The city even provided water for these individuals. And so that this was a very

common thing because of the nature of Judaistic religion that when the pilgrims infiltrated the city everybody shared everything. So that spirit pervaded many, many historic feasts in Israel and it was nothing new. Now to add to that thing many of these pilgrims had received Jesus Christ undoubtedly from out of town. That was part of the design of the Spirit for the spread of the message. So consequently there were some immediate pressing problems. What do we do with these people who having received Christ are now lingering around to grow in their faith and to sit under the apostles' teaching. Right? They did not want to go back immediately but remained to be taught in their new faith.

Consequently the financial pressures did exist. In addition to that there were many poor people in Jerusalem whose income may have been cut off by certain Jews when they had named the name of Christ. So they had an immediate problem of dispensing welfare to these individuals. And of people, who perhaps for a little season, had ceased their employment in order to sit under the teaching of the apostles and would later on go back to their employment. And so there were these pressures.

Now in order to accommodate this they shared what they had. It doesn't say that people quit their jobs. It doesn't say that people pooled their money. In fact it says they still owned their own houses down in verse 46. They broke bread, the Greek is, in private homes. Apparently they maintained their own homes. There was no pooling of a communistic nature, even in the Christian sense. But the key thing to understand are the two verbs in verse 45, there are two verbs there; sold and parted. Now there are two types of past tense verbs, if I can use an English phrase in the Greek aorist, which means a point action, and imperfect, which means a continuous action. For example, if I say, I said: you understand that I said it. If I say, I was saying; you understand that I was in the process of speaking. There is a difference just as there is in English. Now what is translated in verse 45 appears as if it's aorist, sold parted in the Greek it is imperfect. It reads this way. And were selling their possessions and goods and parting them to all men as every man had need. You say, - What's the big deal?

The deal is this, at no one point did they ever sell all they had and pool their funds. They did not do that. A continuous process was going on whereby I in the economy in which I live and with the same processes of my daily routine with my own things, possessing what I possess and owning what I own would see a brother in need and as the need came I would sell what I had, perhaps, and give him to supply. There is no idea here of selling everything and throwing it in a common pot and dispersing it. The idea here is simply that when somebody had a need somebody then sold something and supplied that individual's need. That's all that it's saying. Please understand that they did not live in a communal life. This is so important because I believe that God has ordained the family unit to be such and to be independent enough to function as God designed it to function as the building block of society. They did not live a communal life. The money and the possessions given were not put in a common fund from which all received equal portions.

There is no word that those who were supporting themselves gave up their employment and pooled their earnings. They were selling their possessions, that Greek word means their land holdings and their portable goods and parting them as people had needs. If I had a need and you had a lot then the willingness on the part of you to sell that was all that was being said here. Now is that any different than what we do today? I trust not. I trust today that we're willing if we see a brother in need to supply his needs. That's all they did. Now, undoubtedly, some of the pilgrims were sleeping in the homes of those folks and eating in the homes of those folks who lived in Jerusalem. That's far from communal living. Distribution was made only as every man had a need. Do you see? And those who sold possessions did so completely voluntarily. You say, Uh-uh, Ananias and Sapphira? But Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 they sold what they had, the sin was not, the sin was in not giving all the money. The sin was in lying to the Holy Spirit about what they got. God didn't say you have to sell that. God didn't even say you have to give it all to Me. God just says, Be honest. That's a pretty good principle. And no other church founded after this one do we ever find the sharing of goods, there's no necessity for it, this was a unique situation at a feast time in Jerusalem. In fact, it's interesting to recognize that if you go from here on throughout all the other churches in all the book of Acts you never find this concept. It is not a part of Christianity. God has designed the family as such. God has designed people at different levels of income and different levels of employment according as He designs them to be witnesses in different parts of a society all according to His plan.

And so they shared and that's the beauty of it. And you know something? This is a much more glorious testimony than a regimented communism. It's a much more beautiful testimony for us as Christians to willingly supply the need of each other than to be regimented into throwing everything we've got in a common can and having it doled out. That takes away the responsibility from me of giving as the Spirit directs me. That makes the gift of giving non-existent frankly. They had all things in common in the sense that anybody who needed received.

Now watch verse 46, "And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple". And of course, they went to the temple for the hours of prayer and it was a good place to witness too. And of course the break hadn't come clearly yet with Judaism and that was the place where Jesus had said was the Father's house and I'm sure they made it down there to pray and they did it in good conscience. And they were there even sharing Christ. "And then breaking bread at home." That's what it literally means. Breaking bread by households. And this again refers to communion as well as eating their food. And we know that they had a love feast prior to communion which was patterned after the Last Supper. You remember how that Jesus after supper He instituted the communion. And so they often had a love feast followed by communion and they did it every day from house to house, having a wonderful time, see. Oh, this is the kind of hospitality that Peter talks about isn't it? In 1 Peter 4 when he says, "Give yourself to hospitality," which translated in the Greek means "stranger love." Here were all these pilgrims from all over everywhere and they didn't even know them and they were having them in their house and they were sharing communion with them and feeding them food and



just taking care of their needs. What a beautiful testimony. You say, Well, how did they get such a good character? I mean, how did they get so committed? They got so committed because they had the proper what? Content. That's where it all starts. What a beautiful sharing character.

In 2 Corinthians. chapter 8, verse 14, listen to this; this is Paul: "But by an equality that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance may be a supply for your want that there may be equality". Paul says, you see, that's how it works in the church when you've got a need I'll supply yours. When I've got a need you supply mine. Beautiful. Verse 15, "As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over. Why? Because he gave away what he didn't need. "And he that had gathered little had no lack." Because he got what the other guy gave away. That's the genius of the thing. You say, -Well, I'm not giving anything away. I hang on to everything. Let me read you this; you're going to like this. "By this we perceive the love of God because He laid down His life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." If you ought to die for him you certainly could spare a buck here and there. "For whosoever hath this world's goods seeth his brother and shutteth up his compassion from him how dwelleth the love of God in him, my little children let us not love in word neither in tongue but in", what? "Deed and truth." So, this was the right character. Awesome, miracle, sharing church.

And one more thing, a joyful church. Can't you imagine that was a happy bunch? Joy is so fantastically contagious. Just being happy and excited about Christ the people were struck with their joy. Look what it says at the end of verse 46, "And they did all of this with gladness", that from the Hebrew, pardon me, from the Greek verb - to rejoice. They were just glad. They were blessed. And when they weren't blessed with financial things so much that didn't make the big blessing they were blessed because they had such a sharing of love. And that kind of stuff is really contagious. You say, "Well, what produced that joy?" Well, part of it was produced in verse 46 by singleness of heart, unity brings joy doesn't it? When we're one we're experiencing joy. And then verse 47, they had one mind praising God. Did you know that everybody, watch this, if everybody's involved in praising God and giving Him all the glory then everybody's one with everybody else. It's when somebody says - No, God, I want the glory, then you've got problems. That's why the Bible says watch out for those who seek the pre-eminence. Who does the pre-eminence belong to? It belongs to Jesus Christ and to God. You'll never have any conflict in a church until people begin to seek the pre-eminence but as long as we're all singly committed to praising God and exalting the Savior then we're one with each other. If you're concerned with praising yourself you're never going to be happy because you'll never be able to praise yourself sufficiently because you're not worth praise. Did you get that? There's no joy in praising yourself because you wind up the only one involved. There's joy in praising God and seeing what happens as a result. And they had joy because they put their sights on the glory of God and gave Him the praise. Joy comes from unity. Unity comes from everybody praying, everybody praising God. Get it? Joy comes from unity. Unity comes when we all care about God's glory and not our own.

They had the same goal, praise God, so they were one. And because they were one they were happy. All right, there you go. They had the proper content and because of that they manifested the proper character. Thirdly, they got the proper consequences. When you're the right church you're going to see the right things happen. And notice this is a by-product of all the other things. First of all, they were an attractive church. I like this. It says, "And having favor with all the people". The people thought this was something great. You say, Where was the persecution? That was going to come from the hierarchy later but the people couldn't resist the dynamic of this group. The people were attracted to this thing. It was fantastic to see what was going on. Their life commended them to all men. True piety melted the hearts of the people. Don't you see what Jesus said was true in John 13, He said, "A new commandment I write unto you that you love one another, by this shall all men", what? "Know that you're My disciples."

In John 17:21, "I pray that they may be one that the world may know You sent Me." Boy, our testimony is a testimony of loving unity. The world looked at this group and they just couldn't believe it. They wanted to be a part of this. Aristides, the Athenian philosopher, was an unbeliever.

This is what he wrote in his Chronologies. Here is Aristides, an unbeliever viewing the early church; listen to what he wrote. This is ancient writing I'll translate it into English however. Quote, "They abstain from all impurity (which is shocking in itself, right?) in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. As for their servants or handmaids or children they persuade them to become Christians by the love they have for them and when they have become so they call them, without distinction, brothers. They do not worship strange gods and they walk in all humility and kindness and falsehood is not found among them and they love one another. When they see the stranger they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother. And there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities they will fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with the necessary food. They observe scrupulously the commandment of their Messiah. They live honestly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and all hours on account of the goodness of God toward them they praise and laud Him and over their food and their drink they render Him thanks. And if any righteous person of their number passes away from this world they rejoice and give thanks to God and they follow his body as though he were moving from one place to another. And when a child is born to any of them they praise God and if again it chance to die in its infancy they praise God mightily as for one who has passed through the world without sins. Such is the law of the Christians and such is their conduct." end quote. Boy, what a recommendation to have that the critique of the world. They were an attractive church.

Lastly, the greatest consequence. They were a growing church. Listen "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Again, the indication is the Lord was doing the adding. A lot of churches are racking up the points but it's not God doing it. So many times we have X number of

converts but there not the ones the Lord added always. Boy, we've got to be careful that our evangelism is pure to make sure that it's the Lord adding. But isn't it beautiful to know that the Lord's prerogative was to add to His church? And He did it in response to the fact that the church was the right church. Did you notice that down here there isn't a lot about evangelistic methodology? Oh, I'm sure they were careful to talk about it and figure out how their strategy was going to work to win the world but at this point, you know what happened? They were so spontaneous and so energized by the Spirit of God that their very existence was a witness in itself so dynamic that people came flocking to the church daily because the Lord brought them. That's true evangelism when the Lord adds to His church. The greatest evangelistic tool in the world is a church like that church. You can't stop it. You can't stop it. When the body is what it should be it will reproduce.

So we begin at the beginning: proper content, saved, studying, fellowshiping, and praying. Then we will begin to manifest proper character, awesome, miraculous, sharing and joyful. And then come the consequences. Where do you begin? Listen to this, begin with me will you today, right now, right here, begin with this. Are you saved? Do you really know Jesus Christ?

Two. Are you committed to studying the word of God? Three. Are you really administering your spiritual gifts? Are you really absorbed in the fellowship of the ekklesia or are you eyesighting yourself by non-attendance?

And by not being with other believers? Wherever they meet? Fourthly, will you commit yourself to really pray? To meet with us to pray? Do you know what God could do if we put ourselves in the right place and the right content? He'd do just what He did here, He'd add to His church daily because the world would be struck at this church.

Father, thank You for teaching us this morning. We covered a lot, Lord and we just pray that You'll help us to assimilate it. Help us to commit ourselves to You. To be what we ought to be so the church can be what You want it to be. In Jesus name, amen.

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