

A Loving Church

Acts 2:42

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In Acts 2:42, Luke said, “And they...”—that is, “the believers in the early church”—“...continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

If the first essential of a living church is that it is a learning church—verse 42 says, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine”—the second essential or characteristic is that it is a loving church—verse 42 says, “and fellowship.” So a living church is a learning church and a loving church. Those are the qualities of a true church. It’s alive because it’s grounded and growing in “the apostles’ doctrine”—it’s continuing in the Word of God—and it’s showing love to one another. We are to love one another in our church, in Christian fellowship. So notice that it’s a living church; they’re learning and loving.

I want to remind you that the word “church” is the word “ekklesia.” It literally means “a called-out assembly” or “a called-out group.” First, as believers, we are called out of the world. This world is not our home; our home is in heaven. When all the world is going crazy like this, how wonderful to realize that I have a home in heaven. This world is not my home; I’m just passing through.

But not only are we called out of the world, we are called unto one another. So there are two concepts: we are called out of the world, to separate from the world—my relationship to the world—and we are called unto one another—my relationship to other believers in the body of Christ. Then you might add a third concept: we are called back to the world to preach the Gospel and to be a light unto this world that we live in. So, as Christians, we are called together; we have a relationship with other believers.

There are some basics you need to understand. When you are saved, you are born into God’s family. We call that “regeneration,” “the second birth” or “born again.” So when you are born again and become a Christian, you are actually placed into a family in which God is your Father, and that makes other Christians your brothers and sisters. When we come to church, we are together with our brothers and sisters in Christ in the family of God. So we are called into a loving fellowship.

If you are a member of God’s family, you should be part of a local fellowship of God’s people. You can’t have God for your Father if you don’t have the church for your family. There are people who say, “Well, I love God and Jesus, but I don’t like the church or Christians. They kind of creep me out, and they’re weird, so I stay away from them.” If God is your Father, you need to be committed to fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ. We are like sheep who need to gather together, like a building that needs to be formed together, a body where every member is important and united with Christ as our Head. So we are a family, and we need to grow.

Jesus said in John 13:35, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The identifying mark of a Christian is not a bumper sticker, not a Christian haircut, not Christian clothes, not even carrying a Bible. I’ve seen people carry Bibles, but they’re not Christians. The mark of a Christian is love. That’s the birthmark of the believer. The Bible says that “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” So when you become a Christian, you not only love God, you love your family, the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now the key word that we are focusing on today is in verse 42: “fellowship.” The word “fellowship” is an important New Testament word. It’s the word “koinónia.” It means “joint participation” or “to share in common.” The New Testament was written in Greek, and it was a special kind of Greek; it was known as “koinónia Greek,” which was the common language of the people. So “koinónia” has the idea of something that is common, something that we all hold together in common or joint participation.

It’s interesting that the word “koinónia” does not appear in the Gospels. It’s almost as though the word was born with the church in Acts 2, where we discover the word in verse 42. It says, “They continued...in fellowship” or “in koinónia.” The church was born, they were knit to their living Head as members of the family of God and they began to practice this koinónia, this fellowship, together.

Today, the word “fellowship” has lost its original meaning. For some reason, when we hear the word “fellowship,” we think of the word “food.” Christians love to eat. I jokingly say that we have “sanctified taste buds.” Food tastes better when you’re full of the Holy Ghost.

But I actually think that the word “koinónia” actually meant “donut.” I’m kidding. But every time we said, “Let’s have fellowship,” donuts would appear. This past week, somebody put a big box of Krispy Kreme donuts on my desk. I love donuts, but they don’t love me. I don’t really need them. But we met our kids at the beach that afternoon, and they were all excited that I brought donuts. Thank you for the donuts, but pray for me; I don’t need them.

We think that koinónia just means that we talk and have a good time, you enjoy fellowship. We don’t really think of it in a spiritual term as in the New Testament. So how are we to understand the word “fellowship” or “koinónia”? It’s Christian fellowship. I like that we are called Revival Christian Fellowship.

1 John 1:3 describes this koinónia. It says, “That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship...”—or “koinónia”—“...with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” So our fellowship isn’t just food, it’s not that we just like to have a picnic together; it’s that we have fellowship “with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he wrote about the fellowship or communion, the koinónia of the Holy Spirit. He said, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the

communion...”—or “koinónia”—“...of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” So our fellowship is Trinitarian; it’s with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And it’s what we all share together in common.

What do we all share together in common? Let me give you three things. Number one, as Christians, we share a common salvation. That exact phrase is found in Jude 3. He said, “Beloved...I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation.” I’ve always loved that statement.

There is only one way to be saved, and we all share in that one, common salvation. Let me break it down for you. We’re all saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8 says, “By grace you have been saved...and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” If you are a Christian, you were saved by grace. Grace is unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor. There’s only one way to get to heaven, and you can’t get there by being good, because you’re baptized, christened, confirmed, go to catechism or because you attend church. You get there by the grace of God; we’re all saved by grace. That’s what makes our fellowship so awesome. We’re all sinners saved by grace, and we all had to come to God the same way. So we all share in grace.

Secondly, we’re all saved through faith. That’s also in Ephesians 2:8. “By grace you have been saved through faith.” By trusting and believing and receiving Jesus Christ, we’ve all been saved.

Thirdly, we’ve all been saved in Christ. There’s only one way to be saved, and we share that in common. We’re all sinners saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That’s how salvation works. “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” than at the name of Jesus. So remember that when we come to church and worship God and sing praises, we’re fellowshiping by virtue of the fact that we’re all sinners saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The second thing Christians all share in common is that we share a common sanctification. Not only are we saved by grace, through faith in Christ, but we are sanctified the same way: in Christ. In 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter says, “As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”

What do we mean by “sanctification”? When you are born again, you are justified. That means that you are declared righteous. Justification is the act of God whereby He declares—not makes—you righteous. He declares the believing sinner righteous, based on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

All Christians are equally justified; no one is more justified, no one is “super justified” or kind of justified. We’re all fully justified. That is our position: righteous in Christ or holy. That’s positional holiness.

Now after you are justified, a process starts. The key word here is “process.” And it’s a life-long process. Those of us who have been walking with the Lord a long time know that it’s a life-long

process; there will always be room for improvement. In sanctification, you are being or actually made—not declared—righteous. That's the difference. In justification, God declares us righteous; in sanctification, God makes us righteous.

So it's important to understand those two distinctions. Every person who is born again is justified. It then starts a life-long process by which God is making us to be practically—not positionally—holy. That's what it means to be sanctified or to be made holy. The words “saint,” “sanctified” and “holy” all come from the same root word. They have the idea of being set apart and made holy.

What is the goal of sanctification? It's to be made into the likeness of Jesus. God is working in your life and in mine together, in fellowship, to make us more like Jesus Christ. Let me give you some of the tools that God uses to sanctify us or make us holy. Number one, He give us the Holy Spirit. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit. I think that we sometimes emphasize the Spirit side rather than the Holy side. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of holiness. One of His chief designs in your life and in my life is to make us holy. He's come to make us like Jesus. The Holy Spirit is all about Jesus and making you and me look more like Jesus. So He's trying to produce holiness in our lives.

In John 14:16, Jesus told His disciples in the upper room that He was going to leave them but they shouldn't freak out because, “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper...”—he used the word “Parakletos”—“...that He may abide with you forever.” The Holy Spirit would come to them and make them into the image of Jesus.

The second tool God uses is the Bible, the Word of God. One of the chief ways that God sanctifies the Christian is through the Bible. You can't become holy without the Holy Bible. Again, when Jesus prayed to His Father in His upper-room prayer, His high-priestly prayer, He said, in John 17:17, “Sanctify them...”—referring to His followers—“...by Your truth. Your Word is truth.”

It's so simple that I think we stumble over it: if you want to be holy, you need to be in God's Word. The Holy Spirit takes the Word of God and transforms the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

The third tool is prayer.

You say, “The Holy Spirit, the Bible and prayer. Can't you give me something a little more profound and exciting than that?”

“No; because it's true.” I'm not here to dazzle you; I'm here to tell you the truth. You need to pray, you need to read your Bible and you need to surrender to the Holy Spirit. How are you going to grow in Christ if you don't have those elements in your life?

James 1:5 says that if we're going through a trial and we pray, we can ask for wisdom, and God will give it to us. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and

without reproach, and it will be given to him.” So we need to pray and know that this trial is working for our patience. James 1:3 says, “...knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” So you pray, you talk to the Lord, you ask for wisdom, but it also produces patience.

The fourth tool, which introduces us to our topic of fellowship, is other believers in the faith. God uses you to help me grow. God uses me to help you grow. That's why there is a responsibility and an interdependency that we have toward one another. We need one another; we're not to be alone. We're to be part of a family. We're to be sharing together in our sanctification in the fellowship of Christ.

Here is my third, and last, main point of what Christians share in common. Not only do we have a common salvation, we have a common process of sanctification, but we share a common heart for service, to serve the Lord. That's the Christian life: justification, sanctification and service. We are fellowshiping with one another and serving one another. The disciples gave their substance and their goods to provide for and to meet the needs of one another. So in the fellowship of the church, we share a common responsibility to love and to serve one another.

Responsibility and interdependency is what we have in the church. You and I have a responsibility to one another. And there is an interdependency, that we need one another. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” We all need one another. In Romans 12:5, Paul says, “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

In this common service in the family of God, we need to practice what's called the “one anothers” of the New Testament. Over and over, the church is told to love one another, pray for one another, serve one another, forgive one another, build up one another, “provoke one another to love and good works.” We need to put that into practice.

In the absence of meeting in church, you can't do that. But when you come together or meet in small groups, and you're praying and serving one another, you can put these into practice.

I want to give you eight “one another” verses. Romans 12:10 says, “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”

James 5:16 says, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” He's not saying that I have to go to a confessional and tell the priest my sins. He's telling us that in our relationships, if I'm struggling with a sin, that I should share it with you, so you can pray for me. We can pray together. There are times that I need prayer and you need prayer. We have to open our hearts to one another and pray for one another, that we will be forgiven and that we will be healed.

Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” That's one of the great “one anothers.” We are our brother's keeper. If you have a burden, I need to help carry that burden. If I have a burden, you need to help me carry that burden. So we are carrying one another's burdens.

In Ephesians 4:32, Paul says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." Let's just be kind to one another. I don't know why sometimes Christians can be so mean. God help us. We just need to show kindness. Someone said, "Be kind to everybody you meet; we're all fighting battles." How true that is. We need to be kind to one another. And we're to forgive one another, because God has forgiven you.

Galatians 5:13 says, "Do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." When you come to church, you don't ask, "Who is going to serve me?" But you ask, "Who can I love and serve today?"

In Ephesians 5:21, Paul goes into the section on marriage by saying, "...submitting to one another in the fear of God." Then Paul goes on to say, "Wives, submit to your own husbands," and "Husbands, love your wives," in verses 22 and 25. In the body of Christ, in our home, in our marriage there is a mutual submission and respect.

Romans 14:13 says, "Let us not judge one another anymore." It means don't have a critical, censorious, fault-finding, judgmental attitude toward others. We are our brother's keeper, but we're not our brother's judge. We need to give them to God; He'll take care of them.

Romans 14:19, our last verse, says, "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify..."—or "build up"—"...another." If there is anything we need in the church, it's to be built up. You go back out in the world, and everybody's tearing down—in the last week, literally tearing down. But what we want is to come and be built up.

This has been just a sampling of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Now how do we build up one another? Number one, by our personal example. You have a responsibility in the body of Christ to be an example to other believers. Number two, by our speech, by the things that we say. Thirdly, by our spiritual gifts. This is my favorite. So if I'm going to edify you, and you're going to edify me, we need to use the gifts that God has given us to build each other up. I believe that God has called me to teach the Bible, to be a pastor-teacher. As much as He enables me, I try to teach God's Word, so that you, God's people, are built up, that you're edified. I pray that when you come on Sunday, Wednesday, when you meet in your Bible study groups, or when you open God's Word, you will be built up.

When Paul met with the elders at Ephesus, in a little place called Miletus, on the Aegean seacoast, he said, "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up." He said that he was putting them in God's hands and entrusting them to God's Word. Nothing builds us up and makes us stronger than the Word of God.

We need to live an example, we need to speak and we need to use our spiritual gifts to build others up. Use your gifts how? In love, to build up others for the glory of God. These are three things that years ago I discovered are rock-solid, central issues about the gifts of the Spirit. Number one, they are to be used in love. Number two, they are to be used to build up others.

Number three, they are to be used for the glory of God.

God has given every one of you a gift of the Spirit. You are to use it, in love, to build up others and for the glory of God. Everywhere you study in the New Testament about the gifts of the Spirit you will always find those three elements: you use them in love, you use them for others and you use them for God's glory.

Fourthly, we build up one another by praying for others. This past couple of months it's been so wonderful that we have prayed for one another. As pastors, we've been gathering and praying for the church, and you've been praying for us. Cards and words of encouragement have helped us to keep going through this time.

Number five is by sharing God's Word. That's how we build up one another.

Number six is by sharing your goods. In our text, verses 43-47, it says, "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common..."—or "in *koinónia*"—"...and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart..."—or "purpose"—"...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

So the people were saved and then were added to the church. No one is added to the church who is not saved, and no one is saved who is not added to the church; they go together. When you are saved, you are placed in the church, and you should be part of a local fellowship or family, using your gifts, in love, to build up one another. We actually need one another. We need to love, pray and serve and seek to build up one another.

In conclusion, a living church is a loving church. It's a fellowship of loving brothers and sisters in Christ. Number one, we're sharing a common salvation—this is what we share in. Number two, we are growing in a common sanctification, as we "provoke one another to love and good works." Number three, we're serving one another in an interdependency—this is what we share out with one another. So we can pray, encourage and build up one another.

In closing, I want to read Hebrews 10:24-25. This is my favorite "one another." Let's think of ways to motivate one another. "Let us consider..."—or "stimulate" or "motivate"—"...one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting..."—or "encouraging"—"...one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

I believe that Jesus is coming soon. I don't know how you can watch the news these last couple of weeks and not believe. "Even so, come Lord Jesus!" Amen.

Aren't you glad that this world is not your home? I am. But until the Lord comes and takes us home, we are the family of God. We're to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

We're to love each other, encourage one another, pray for one another and we humbly need one another. There is a responsibility and an interdependency that we have in the body of Christ.