

Back to the Basics!

It's back to school time, which means we're also preparing for new beginnings at Dale Heights. Our New Testament reading describes the activity of the very first church. The Holy Spirit had come upon the waiting, praying disciples on the Day of Pentecost, and after Simon Peter's sermon, 3,000 were converted, swelling the first church's numbers to at least 3,120. Our Scripture reading gives us a picture of the essential elements that formed the character and mission of this first church in Jerusalem. Follow as I read **Acts 2:42-47**:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Vince Lombardi (1913-1970) was one of America's greatest football coaches, having led the Green Bay Packers to five league championships within a span of nine years (1959-67). In honor of his memory, the trophy that is awarded to the team that wins the NFL championship Super Bowl game is called the Vince Lombardi Trophy. Coach Lombardi was a powerful motivator and many of his famous quotes continue to be used, not only by football coaches, but by business leaders and preachers (as in my case today!) who seek to elicit the best from players, employees and congregants.

One of Vince Lombardi's famous quotes was the one that he repeated on the opening day of practice at the beginning of each new football season. Before the team would go out on the field for the first practice session, he would stand before them in a large classroom. And mind you, he was addressing a team of men who were exceptionally talented and had proven their skills over the years, most of whom were veterans of seasons of professional football competition on the highest level. But the great coach, disregarding the experience, knowledge and prowess of the players, would simply hold up before them a football. Then he would say, "Gentlemen, this is a football," which was the most rudimentary, basic thing he could say, even to someone who had never even heard of the game of football. From that beginning point, Vince Lombardi would walk them through the essential elements of the game. He understood how easy it is to take for granted and even neglect the basics. To neglect the fundamentals is to lose the foundation upon which any game, education, business and life itself is based.

Today we look at the basics, the fundamental elements of the church, which stand out so clearly in today's Scripture text. As Lombardi said, "Gentlemen, this is a football," I want us to see that our text is a picture of the church that was birthed by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Not all of the phenomena in Acts are to be repeated today. But we are to see the abiding principle behind those phenomena.

In this first, infant church, we see an ideal to which we are called to repeatedly return. From this description of the church in its age of innocence we see first the element of **learning**.

This earliest, infant church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching (verse 42), which seemed to have been given in the temple and also in homes where the people met in smaller groups. The teaching of the apostles included the Old Testament Scriptures but also the eyewitness accounts of Jesus, his teachings, mighty works and of course, his passion, death and resurrection.

3,000 people had fallen under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit and came to repentance and new life. No doubt some of them had, before their conversion, even called for Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23:34). We see, as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, genuine conversion, i.e. transformation of lives.

Early in the history of the church, perhaps since the time of Emperor Constantine (272-337), the church erased the distinction between Christianity and Christendom. All citizens were baptized soon after birth, and to be a citizen of the earthly kingdom automatically meant one was a member of the church. And hence a citizen of the now "Christian" kingdom of the Roman Empire was a "Christian", even if not a true Christ-one, one who truly belonged to Christ by faith.

For us to go back to the basics, we must first make our "own calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10), being certain we have experienced the converting power of the Spirit who alone makes us new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Thousands had been truly converted, and the core of 120 disciples, who had heard Jesus' Great Commission before his ascension back to heaven, realized their responsibility to make disciples of these converts by teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Those who were already disciples, learning-followers, realized the need to disciple others (2 Timothy 2:2).

The church is to be a school of discipleship—"Following Jesus 101." The Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day and there were immediately 3,000 people enrolled in kindergarten (Stott). Having three young grandchildren, I realize anew how crucial are good obstetric doctors and hospitals, with well-equipped and well-staffed birthing suites. For the remainder of their childhood, until they're ready to live on their own as responsible adults, our grandchildren will need the nurture, care, discipline and instruction of their parents, doctors and teachers who'll be a part of their development into mature persons. Let's consider what we need to do to make disciples, not only through preaching and teaching opportunities, but on mentoring believers who are new in the faith.

Another basic element in this first church was that of **loving**. Although the word "love" doesn't appear, this passage simply reeks with the aroma of love. These earliest Christians obviously were seeking to obey the Great Commandment, to love God entirely and others as themselves (Mark 12:28-3). The dynamic in this infant church was made possible only through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst and within each one of the members. They were as diverse as one could imagine. Yet they were united by the same Holy Spirit who lived in each one. They were experiencing the unity for which Jesus prayed in his High Priestly Prayer (John 17).

As Paul said in the Love Chapter, without love all else is just noise and empty show (1 Corinthians 13). The most precious and essential element of the church according to the Apostles Paul and John (in his first letter) and the Lord Jesus himself is the love that we must have toward one another.

How easy it is for a church to slip away from this gift and genius of unity, just as did the church in Ephesus, which had forsaken its first love—perhaps its love for God and for one another. These people were diligent and dedicated Christian workers and were zealous for right doctrine and intolerant of moral compromise. Yet they stood under the judgment of the risen Christ, who demanded that they repent and return to their former love (Revelation 2:1-7).

This infant church was devoted to fellowship, *koinonia*, a word rich in meaning that includes “common life, fellowship, relationship with God and others, sharing, participation, and communion,” just to name a few definitions. Fellowship, as one scholar has said, is more than friendship but not less (Wright). Christian fellowship should be the very definition of friendship in its deepest and truest sense.

The believers in the Jerusalem church probably from the outset began to feel the economic consequences of their new commitment to Christ, with the likelihood of many losing their jobs. The people were simply motivated by love to share with any and all who had needs. This earliest church was so filled with the Holy Spirit that it was the right and natural thing to do, to love as Christ himself loved and as he taught us to love, in practical and sacrificial ways. The church was simply practicing the presence of Jesus in their midst and loved Jesus by loving one another.

There were no church buildings as such in the earliest churches, with the believers gathering for corporate worship in the temple and for closer fellowship in homes, as we see in our text (46). Through the centuries of church building and focusing upon the gathering of the church almost exclusively in the building, something important has been lost. Our homes, as well as this building, can be places of fellowship where even outsiders will feel welcome. And Dale Heights is a place of sweet fellowship, where everybody knows your name.

As Coach Lombardi said, “Gentlemen, this is a football,” so our text says, “Brothers and sisters, this is a church”—one that is **learning, loving** and also **worshipping**. This was a church that was caught up in the worship of God and the risen Lord Jesus. They experienced corporate worship in the temple courts and also house worship as well as their individual walking in the presence of God. Their worship was done with a sense of awe (43). This was not just the awe of outsiders toward them, but the believers themselves sensed the awesome presence of a holy God and the risen Lord Jesus in their midst. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was working powerfully through the apostles, which everyone was noticing with a sense of wonder. There was a sense of reverence and fear of the Lord.

In church life today we have trivialized God and made him into our resident therapist and indulgent “grandfather.” What a difference there would be in our personal living and in our church life if we actually realized and practiced what we profess and preach to be true, that the holy God is actually in this place! We would be like Jacob who said, “‘the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ He was afraid and

said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'" (Genesis 28:16f).

The highest purpose of this church was to worship God, to glorify and enjoy him forever, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says. They lived in a spirit of joyful celebration and their worship together expressed it. Their worship was not for their enjoyment. Some so-called "worship" is not really worship but entertainment with therapeutic value, which gives no pleasure or glory to God. Our worship is for God's pleasure, glory and honor, which means he accepts whatever style of music or form of liturgy that focuses on his honor and is done with a whole heart and as the best that we can offer him. The worship of this first church was a joy-filled and joyful celebration that the risen Christ, through his Spirit, was actually among them.

How is it that the church, God's house of prayer for all nations, can relegate this priority action and privilege to a place of lesser priority and even neglect? (Luke 19:46). This church was to face the immense task of gospel proclamation and mission expansion, plus the hostility of society and the forces of Satan and thus depended absolutely on the weapon and resource of prayer. Prayer was their vital link to their relationship with God and the only way they could hope to join God in his mission to their world.

The final element in the basics of the church is that of **missional living**. The number of believers was growing at a phenomenal rate, with the three thousand who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost, and then with sustained daily growth (verse 47). In this first and truly missional church, everyone seemed to have a role to play in the spread of the good news of Jesus and in the growth of the church, whether through preaching and direct proclamation or through the support role of prayer and building up the fellowship and "body life" of the congregation.

The persecution that the apostles and others in the church were to soon receive was not from the general population, but was rather at the hands of the leaders of the ruling religious establishment of Judaism. These leaders were the ones threatened by this burgeoning new movement of the Christian faith. But in general the church had a positive impact and witness to the surrounding community and enjoyed their respect and even inspired in these outsiders a sense of awe over the signs and wonders done by the apostles (verse 42). The most important sign and wonder which the Holy Spirit continues to perform is the wonder of a transformed life. The unconverted people around you need to see the change that Jesus Christ is making in your life. This is what will capture their attention and cause them to want what you have.

It's important that outsiders and unbelievers be able to see that we're a people of unconditional love and acceptance of all people, with a desire and even a passion to see them experience the same love and fellowship that we enjoy and to be transformed by the Lord Jesus as we are being transformed. People are looking for meaningful relationships and the church of Jesus Christ should be the most obvious place where love and acceptance can be found. Those who have little or no knowledge of the gospel need to know how much we care and not how much we know. As someone said, people will not care how much we know until they see how much we care.

When we're focusing on Jesus and surrendered to his Lordship, he'll add people to us. And those, all of those whom the Lord adds, we're to accept. Those whom God adds may have special needs and challenges that will also challenge us, but they're nevertheless God's gift to us and we are to love and accept and learn from them. And whoever God adds to us, we must ask what gifts and opportunities they give us and what signposts they show us as to what Jesus is doing among us.

If Vince Lombardi were our preacher today, he might say to us, holding before us our text, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a church." And for sure, the Holy Spirit is calling us back to the basic elements of the Christian life, of life together in the church—**learning, loving, worshiping and missional living.**