

Mission 242: Fellowship and the Breaking of Bread

Acts 2:42-47

I Have Always Loved the Church

I have always loved the church, and I'd say that even if I was paid to say it.

Since childhood the church has always been a big part of my life. Some of the deepest and most significant relationships of my life have been nurtured in the church.

To a large extent, the Lord has formed me in the church. The ministry of the church has afforded me the opportunity to grow not only in the knowledge of Christ, but the experience of Christ.

There are a lot of really great groups and organizations in which to invest our lives, there are none like the church.

I regret we live in an age where so many have turned their backs on the church, and if they haven't turned their backs on the church, they keep it at arm's length.

Far too many have been hurt by the church. Others don't see the need for the church. Still others don't want to have anything to do with what they view as a group of hypocrites that profess one thing and do another.

On that front, I figure we are all just "*sinners saved by grace.*" We are all human and apt to blow it more than we'd ever care to admit.

That's all the more reason to be a part of church. The church is a place to be deeply loved, significantly challenged, and otherwise held accountable.

That may be another reason as to why people stay away from church, nobody these days wants to be accountable to anything or anyone, much less God Almighty.

What Essentials Make Up the Ministry of the Church?

I've been to a lot of churches.

In fact, by God's grace, I have had the opportunity to lead a lot of churches—from open country churches to high steeple churches. While they have all been a challenge each in their own way, they have been a supreme delight.

Whether visiting churches or leading them, I'm constantly asking myself what's the best way to do church? What are the essentials that make up the ministry of the church?

If we were to ask ourselves that question, we'd probably answer "*worship that features thrilling music and inspiring sermons, engaging programs for children and youth, broad outreach, and a place where I am well-received.*"

We'd do well though to ask what God wants of his church.

I'm sure it would include, *"a love for one another, a desire to reach out to the least, last, and lost of this world, an overriding concern for making disciples, and a willingness to trust and obey."*

The Church of Today

Regrettably, when it comes to the church in this country a lot of time and energy is spent on programs for program's sake and not ministry. And because of that, the church has a tendency to be *"a mile wide and an inch deep."*

Sometimes I wonder whether we even a mile wide, we're stretched so thin.

The church of today is more into performance where a few do what seems like everything, while the rest are content to sit and spectate.

Today's church is way too fixated on personalities, ecclesiastical rock stars, if you will, at the expense of keeping its gaze upon Christ.

And, of course, there's way too much time and treasure given over to buildings and what it takes to keep them up.

Instead of doing church simply, the church of today is characterized by complex systems that often times rival those of a Fortune 500 company.

I remember years ago visiting a church in a village just outside of Nairobi, Kenya on a Sunday morning. The building was small and unassuming. In fact, its walls and roof were nothing more than corrugated tin. And as you might guess, it had a dirt floor.

Those people really knew how to worship though. There was no mistaking who their focus was. They sang with great gusto, accompanied by a couple of drums and a clanging gong. A couple of them even broke out into dance.

It was their praying though that caught my attention. In preparing to pray they first closed the shutters on the couple of windows letting light into the room. I was told that by so doing they were shutting out the distractions of the world.

Boy, did they pray--everyone prayed out loud, some kneeling, others holding their hands high. It was like we were in the middle of Pentecost. And you need to know, they prayed for a long, long time.

I got the distinct idea that day they knew how to do church.

Called Out to Go Forth

The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*, which means “*called out*.” We are those who are “*called out*” of the world, only to go back into the world in the name of Christ.

We’d do well to ask ourselves, “What in the world are we doing here?” Is it about us or is it about God?

I had a fellow at Centenary who was quick to remind me that our focus needed to be forward on the altar. Essentially he was reminding me that our focus needs to be on God and not ourselves.

There’s a pretty strong dose of a consumer mentality when it comes to the church of today.

Francis Chan writes in his book *Letters to the Church*, “*We’re not doing people any favors by pretending they are the center of the universe. Either people will be awed by the sacred or they will not. If the sacred is not enough, then it is clear that the Spirit has not done a work in their lives. If the sheep don’t hear his voice, let them walk away. Don’t call out with your own voice.*

Too often we add our own voices, thinking if we offer just the right services or package the gospel in just the right way so no one gets offended, we can convince people to stay. By catering our worship to the worshippers and not the Object of our worship, I fear we have created human-centered churches.

And this from a fellow who led a mega-church for thirty years and just now is re-thinking his approach.

Fellowship and the Breaking of Bread

During my seminary days the mantra was repeated over and over again, “*The model for doing church is the early New Testament Church.*”

There’s no greater summary of what went on during the earliest days of the church than in Acts 2:42ff, hence the title of this present sermon series, Mission 2:42.

We’ll be considering that passage over the next couple of weeks, seeking to apply what went on then to what’s going on now.

We read a bit earlier that the believers “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” Acts 2:42

The fellowship the believers experienced was a part of the very fabric of everything they did. It was a part of their DNA, if you will.

The church was clearly marked by the love they had not only for God, but for one another.

The old song, “*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. We will guard each man’s dignity and save each man’s pride. And they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.*”

Theirs was a togetherness that was neither programmed, nor otherwise contrived. They were in love with one another, would do anything for one another, and would go to the mat for one another, just as Christ did for them.

After all, he was the one who went to the cross so that their sin might be forgiven and their lives turned around.

When I said earlier that I love the church, the fellowship of the church has a lot to do with that. I am eternally thankful for the relationships I’ve had that have been nurtured in the church. They have sustained me in marvelous ways.

A lot of that has had its focus around this table and others like.

It was that way for those of the early New Testament Church. They relished the opportunity to “*break bread*” together.

The reference of “*breaking bread*” together is more about fellowship than simply having a meal together.

While they did come around tables to eat together, they also shared in loved feasts that had deeply spiritual overtones to them.

They also came together regularly to share in the Lord’s Supper, to remember all that God had done through his Son.

We continue to do that to this day.

When bread is broken at this table, we remember that Christ’s body was broken on our behalf. As we remember his love in this way, we likewise are reminded to love others in the same way.

Just like those of old, what we do here today we do together. Our “*communion*” is with God and with one another.

So let us break bread *together* on our knees.

The Wesleyan Covenant Service

At the end of one year and at the beginning of the next, the early Methodists would gather for what was called a Covenant Service. A love feast was often a part of that as was the celebration of Holy Communion.

The Covenant Service was an opportunity for believers to offer their thanks to God. It was also an opportunity to renew their commitment to him.

An important part of that service that remains to this day is a covenant prayer that seeks to renew one's commitment to Christ and his church.

It is the sort of prayer we need to pray as we enter this New Year and as we consider what it means to be wholly dedicated to Christ and the ministry of the church.

It strikes to the very core of what it means to live as faithful disciples without all the trappings that sometimes skew our focus and sap our energies.

Let's pray:

“Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal. Amen”