

The Color of the First Century Church

Blueprints of a Healthy Church – Part I

Acts 2:40-46

Introduction

My heart is overwhelmed with the events of today – the tenth anniversary of our church. We are worshipping today on land that for more than a century, was dedicated to harvesting crops. Now, it has been dedicated for the next century to the harvesting of spiritual fruit; for the planting of spiritual seed and the nurturing of men and women, boys and girls for the kingdom of God.

This morning presents an outstanding opportunity for us to review the difference between church work and the work of the church; between effective ministry and mediocrity; between the status quo and the supernatural.

It was early in the morning of July 4th, 1952, with fog hanging thick in the air, when a young woman named Florence Chadwick, waded into the cold water off Catalina Island. She intended to become the first woman to swim those waters between the island and the California coast. Long distance swimming was not new to Florence. She had already become the first woman to swim the English channel – in both directions.

The water that morning was numbing cold. She would swim for some fifteen hours. Her coach was alongside in one of the team boats, constantly encouraging and directing her. The problem was, due to the thick fog, she could see only one or two feet ahead. Several times she had to be re-directed because she was swimming in the wrong direction. On several occasions as well, the sharks had to be kept away by rifle fire. After swimming for fifteen

hours, Florence asked to be taken out of the water. She had given up.

Later, Florence was interviewed. She said, “It wasn’t the fact that I was cold, or that I was afraid of the sharks, or that I was exhausted, the problem was that I couldn’t see my goal. It was clouded by the fog.”

Would you believe that she had quit just thirty minutes from reaching the California coast?

I am convinced that the reason more and more Christians are asking to be taken out of the waters of spiritual discipline and service; that one of the primary reasons at least one church closes its doors every day is not because of exhaustion, not because of fear of the enemy, but because a fog has crept in that deprives them of spiritual sight and vision. It is a fog that hides from their perspective, the goal of ministry.

So, on this historic day, I want to look together into the clear sunlight of the word, so that we might, with 20/20 vision, penetrate through the fog and see the goal in front of us.

In our last discussion in the book of Acts, Peter has preached a powerful sermon. In it, he has challenged his audience to repent and then, make their change of mind public through water baptism.

In chapter 2, verse 40 of Acts, we read,

And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!”

The message of the early church is the message of the twentieth century church. Society as a whole, will

never be redeemed – it is engineered by the prince of the power of the air. But, we are to rescue from society those who will be redeemed.

The task of the church is similar to the task of a lifeboat in that we are on a search and rescue mission. Like Jesus Christ Himself, said, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 18, verse 11,

For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

The church today seems preoccupied with the water of society and not the drowning millions. The church seems preoccupied with the temperature of the water, as to whether we can somehow make it more comfortable to float upon. The church today seems preoccupied with relating to the sharks that swim about; with developing strategies to minimize the impact of the waves upon the boat. These preoccupations are at the expense of our primary mission, which is to preach like Peter and pull into the boat as many as will come.

Continue to verse 41.

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

This is staggering; supernatural! Three thousand brand new spiritual babies have been delivered in one day!

I imagine the apostles felt like any new father or mother feels when they look into the face of their newborn baby, thinking, “What now? What’s next?”

They did not have manuals on church organization. They did not have discipleship programs. They did not have the New Testament epistles to explain all the details of form and function.

So, what does a New Testament church look like?

What Does a New Testament Church Look Like?

Art Linkletter once saw a little boy drawing a picture. He was furiously coloring away with an intense look on his face. Linkletter asked him, “Son, what are you drawing?”

The little boy replied, “A picture of God.”

Linkletter informed the lad that no one knows what God looks like, to which the boy confidently responded, “They will when I get through.”

“Hey, Peter and John, what does the church look like?”

“We don’t exactly know, but when we’re finished, you will know.”

So, the completed New Testament has indeed painted the portrait of the church with vivid vibrant colors.

The New Testament church had the color of passion

1. First, there is the brilliant color of passion in the New Testament church.

There are four subtle hues of this color that can be observed. They appear in verse 42.

They were continually devoting themselves to . . .

(that is, they were passionately involved and committed to),

. . . the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The New Testament church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching

- First, they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching.

Ladies and gentlemen, the mark of a church is not the height of its steeple nor the size of its auditorium. The defining characteristic of every church is its doctrine. What a church believes will determine how the church behaves.

The reason the church swims in a fog today is because it no longer knows what to believe. We are living among a generation that considers doctrine stuffy and divisive. This vibrant, exciting New Testament church was devoted to teaching doctrine.

We need to be reminded that the local New Testament church is responsible to hand down pure doctrine to the next generation. We are to do more than have services, sing some songs, and quote a few verses. Peter declared, under inspiration, that the New Testament church is the pillar and ground of the truth.

However, the New Testament church was not all study.

The New Testament church was devoted to fellowship

- Secondly, they were devoted to fellowship.

This word “fellowship” is “koinonia” in the Greek and the basic meaning of this word is, “partnership or sharing”. Those who receive Jesus Christ become partners with Him in fulfilling the mission of the church, as well as partners with each other. The Bible never envisions a Christian being separated from a body of believers.

Nearly a century ago, Pastor G. Campbell Morgan visited a church member who had been absent from church for some time. They were sitting near the fireplace and a warm fire burned with red hot coals. The man informed Dr. Morgan that he did not need the church anymore in his spiritual walk. Without saying anything, Dr. Morgan took the poker and reached into the fire. He separated just one coal, which he slid toward them. He then sat back, and both of them watched the way that, in a short time, the coal lost its fire.

Now most of us, when we think of “koinonia,” think of potluck suppers and socials. However, it was actually a word that directly related to their commitment to each other in order to accomplish the mission of the church. So, in Jerusalem there is a band of red hot believers who banded together in fellowship or partnership to see the task accomplished.

Notice the depth of their fellowship in verses 44 through 46.

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart

Now notice in verse 42, there are two more shades to this brilliant color of devotion.

The New Testament church was devoted to the breaking of bread and to prayer

- They were also devoted to the breaking of bread or communion, and to prayer.

Why was this New Testament church devoted to the breaking of bread? Because there was nothing

more important than remembering the sacrifice of their Lord. So, when they came together to eat their meal, they set aside a portion of the bread and the fruit of the vine and they celebrated His death, until He comes.

And, they were also devoted to prayer?! The missing ingredient in the lives of most believers and churches? Do we really believe that prayer is the slender nerve that moves the omnipotent arm?! Let me put it this way, do you think for a moment that we could ever operate a supernatural ministry without supernatural involvement?

Some years ago, a study was done by an agricultural school in Iowa. It reported that production of a hundred bushels of corn from one acre of land required 4,000,000 pounds of water, 6,800 pounds of oxygen, 5,200 pounds of carbon, 160 pounds of nitrogen, 125 pounds of potassium, 75 pounds of yellow sulfur, as well as other elements too numerous to list. In addition to these ingredients, rain and sunshine are required at the right times. Although many hours of the farmer’s labor are also needed, it was estimated that only 5 percent of the produce of a farm can be attributed to the efforts of man.

So it is in spiritual realms – God causes the growth, as I Corinthians, chapter 3, verses 6 and 7 tell us. David wrote as well, in Psalm, chapter 127, verse 1a, words that we can apply not only to our homes, but to our church,

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it

I would hope that our church could not survive one day of operation without the power, guidance, and wisdom of our Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now notice the second color with which God paints the portrait of His new creation, the New Testament church.

The New Testament church had the color of power

2. The New Testament church had the color of power also.

Notice verse 43 of Acts, chapter 2.

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through . . .

(note this),

. . . the apostles.

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe. Frankly, I would not want to give up the sense that I feel today – the sense of awe and excitement that God is doing wonderful things. They lived with it daily.

The word “awe” comes from the Greek word, “phobos,” which can be translated “fear”. There was a sense that God was powerfully at work. And there was a holy fear – they were in the presence of God.

Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, without the power of God in our lives and ministry, we are doomed to formality and mediocrity. We may build buildings, but we will never enhance the kingdom of God. We will be involved in church work, but we will fail to accomplish the work of the church.

The single greatest thing our city needs is the powerful witness of a church that is totally devoted to its mission, totally dependant upon its Messiah, and totally empowered by the true and living God.

A few years ago, on New Year’s Day, the annual Tournament of Roses parade was being telecast to millions of viewers. Suddenly, a beautiful float sputtered and stalled. While the workers and builders of this float had meticulously cared for everything related to its beauty, they had overlooked one important thing – gasoline. The truck moving the float had run out of gas. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a can of gas. The ironic thing was the fact that this float represented the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its truck was out of gas.

The church today is reaching for the boat – unable to swim any longer; lost in the fog; powerless before its enemies and ineffective before its culture, while at the same time, representing the powerful creator of universe.

The early church had power through obedience to the empowering Spirit of God. And as a result, they turned their world upside down for the cause of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament church had the color of praise

3. The third color I see painted upon the first century canvas of this New Testament church is the color of praise.

You cannot help but see that the early church was electric; it was contagious; it was exciting. And everyone who observed them had to shake their heads with wonder, “This must be of God.”

Notice verse 46 again through verse 47.

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

There were over three thousand new believers who were filled with excitement and hunger. They met in the temple, like we are meeting in the tent, and the overwhelming thought upon their hearts and on their lips was, and is with us today, “It doesn’t get any better than this. Praise to God for the great things He has done.”

Three Principles

Three principles emerge from this text. Let me give them to you.

What God begins supernaturally must operate supernaturally

1. What God begins supernaturally must operate supernaturally.

The church was created on the day of Pentecost by the descent of the Holy Spirit. Two thousand years later, the creation of any New Testament church is nothing less than miraculous.

If we could only see the battle waging in the heavens above us, we would pray more, invest more, and serve with greater intensity as a church, called by God, to reach our city for Christ.

When the church functions with power, its ministry may be unexplainable

2. When the church functions with power, its ministry may be unexplainable.

In 1988, the original deacons of our church met in the home that my wife and I were renting. They had just been elected to office and we were meeting to begin strategizing and praying about our future. The church at that time, was averaging around one hundred seventy people each Sunday. That included adults, children, and infants in the nursery, and we counted stray cats that walked across the parking lot. I wrote in my notes that we discussed what we would like to see the Lord do at this church. We came to the

conclusion that what we wanted to see happen was something that we could not fully explain humanly.

I want that even more deeply today – an unexplainable ministry. And I can say, “I don’t know how, but I know Who!”

Last night, my wife and I had dinner with those original four men and their wives. I brought the minutes from our first few years of deacon meetings. One entry from 1988, related to the need to purchase a better photo copier, since we were now making seven hundred fifty copies a week. Today, we photo copy study notes, chorus sheets, materials, curriculum, and many other things, at the rate of nearly sixteen thousand every week.

In October of 1990, our congregation, averaging three hundred fifty people per Sunday, voted unanimously to pursue a one million dollar bond issue. It was an unbelievable amount of money for a church whose annual budget was only 169,000 dollars.

We believed God was leading us into unexplainable territory. I cannot explain how, eight months after we moved into our brand new building, five hundred new people had begun attending, and that congregation voted unanimously to start all over again.

Apart from God moving in our hearts to follow His will, it is unexplainable.

When the church ministers with godly power, the results are undeniable

3. One more principle is that when the church ministers with godly power, the results are undeniable.

Upon the shoulders of the past decade, we stand, responsible to do nothing less than carry on the mission with greater passion and zeal – we are here to win this city to Jesus Christ.

So, let this tent send a signal – we will not be satisfied with just a wonderful past; we refuse to walk by sight instead of by faith; our light will not be hidden; we’ve come to this land to plant a new harvest, and we intend to fill our city with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Historians have preserved for us a resolution. It was written and signed by all the builders of the famous Cathedral built in Seville, Spain, in 1401. The resolution they signed read, “Let us build here a church so great that those who come after us will think us mad to have ever dreamed of building it.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/10/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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