

Place: Lurgan Baptist 21:11:2006

Reading: Acts 2: 41-47

6. THE CHURCH ABLAZE

WHAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ?

“ *Now what do we do ?* ” he whispers. The young father turns to his wife, and they both look down at the sleeping newborn baby they’ve just brought home from the hospital. They’re arranged the nursery just right, read the latest books on parenting, filled a wardrobe full of baby clothes and baby gadgets. However, none of this preparation can answer his question or equip them for the road ahead. Up late at night feeding the baby, do you remember how it was men ? The endless changing of nappies, the constant visits to the doctor, and in the years to come, young parents have to contend with temper tantrums, little white lies, and fits of defiance. For all young parents, this is an excellent question,

“ *Now what do we do ?* ”

As the apostles surveyed the thousands of baby believers who had joined the church on the Day of Pentecost they must have asked the same question.

“ *Now what do we do ?* ” Earlier that day in the Upper Room there had been 120. Now in a flash there were 3,000. Three thousand new children of God 3,000 shepherding responsibilities for the apostles. Now these newborn Christians would require wise parenting

to learn how to walk with Christ, handle temptation, worship and pray. The apostles, however had no instruction manual to follow no Bible, no handbooks, no guidelines. How would they nurture these young ones ? How would the infant church survive and grow ? Those newly born-again believers were 3,000 bundles of joy and 3,000 accidents waiting to happen.

Now there is no activity so demanding or exhausting or more constant than caring for infants or young children. Ask any mother aside from other needs there is the ever present danger of accident or disease. Moreover as babies grow they need instruction, warning, love, attention and encouragement. The parallels for babies in Christ are obvious. Here in (Acts Ch 2) we see 3,000 baby believers who are given the best care as they prepare for their new life in Christ in a hostile society. Now how did the apostles parent these newest members of God's family ? Well, in this brief cameo of life in the Early Church, three distinguishing dimensions emerge that reveal this to be a remarkable church. They manifested *spiritual Duties* and *spiritual Attitudes*, and the result was *spiritual Impact*. Now breaking that down for you a little more I want you to note here three things !

(1) THE MARKS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Do you recall the context ? This large crowd that must have exceeded 3,000 had been ***Confronted with the Truth:*** (2:14) ***Convicted by the Spirit:*** (2:37) ***Converted to the Lord:*** (2:41) and ***Confessed their***

Faith: (2:41) were now having **Communion with the Saints:** for (2:41) says “ *they were added.*”

Do you see here God's blueprint ? We hear the gospel, we receive the Lord, we are baptised and then we are “ *added.*” Could it be that you are a Christian but you have never openly and unashamedly confessed your faith through baptism ? Have you been baptised but never submitted yourself to the rule of the local church ? The New Testament has certainly no place for “ *lone wolves,*” or “ *spiritual gypsy's.*” Those who were saved, were baptised, and those who were baptised, were added, and those who were added “ *continued steadfastly.*” (2:42) In what ? Will notice that 4 things marked the infant church.

(a) IT WAS MARKED BY THE TRUTH:

First and foremost came the apostle's doctrine. It's no accident that this comes first. It always comes first. In all the epistles, precept comes before practice. Experience must always be tested by doctrine and not doctrine by experience. Do you recall what the Lord Jesus said to His disciples ? (Jn 14:26) What did the apostles teach ? The epistles ? The epistles had not been written yet. The Gospels ? There were no Gospels at that time. What, then did the apostles teach ? The sayings of Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, the final conversations in the Upper Room. So the teaching of the Lord Jesus was brought to the minds and hearts of these new converts through the apostles.

God designed the church to be a place where His Word

is proclaimed and explained. Paul mandates such a priority all through the Pastoral Epistles where he described the ongoing process to Timothy when he wrote, “ *And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.*” (2 Tim 2:2) Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus reflect the priority of preaching the Word. Possibly his last, farewell words to Timothy were, “ *Preach the Word: be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.*” (2 Tim 4:2) An elder must be one who holds “ *fast the faithful Word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*” (Titus 1:9)

My the early church sat under the teaching ministry of the apostles, whose **teaching**, now written on the pages of the New Testament, is to be taught by all pastor/teachers. And a commitment to the apostles teaching is foundational to the growth and spiritual health of every church. Think of those poor apostles there were only twelve of them. There were only twelve of them. There must have been nights when they fell into bed thinking they could never utter another word.

For these new Christians were hungry for God's Word. They could not get enough of it. L. Park and the Friday evenings in Bushmills, the new converts saved from the mission. They have a hunger for the Word.

Do you ? Like a new-born baby do you desire the sincere milk of the Word ? (1 Pet 2:2) Do you read your Bible ? Do you mark it up ? Do you ensure that

sometime, somewhere in your week, you are being taught ? (a)

(b) IT WAS MARKED BY THE TIE:

“ *Bless be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.*” This is the first occurrence of the word (*koinonia*) fellowship in the New Testament. The root idea is “ *commonness,*” or “ *commonality.*” These early believers shared a commonality with one another based on their faith in Christ. Now the interesting thing is this, every time this word is used in the New Testament, it denotes some kind of sharing either sharing something with someone (2 Cor 8:4) or sharing in something someone else is experiencing. Here in (Acts Ch 2) the emphasis of the word is on **giving**. Look at (2:44-45) Fellowship cost something in the Early Church, in contrast to our use of the word **fellowship** today. My fellowship is not just a sentimental feeling of oneness. It does not take place simply because we have a cup of tea in the upper room. Fellowship is not little cliques meeting together who only welcome certain believers to their circle.

Fellowship comes through sharing and giving. Now we have a beautiful illustration of this in (2 Cor 8:4) Here we see the Macedonian church begging for the privilege of participation (the word is *koinonia*) in an offering, a contribution. Now these particular believers were extremely poor, and yet they determined to practice **koinonia** by giving to others. My this is true fellowship. When we think about this word that we use

and abuse all the time, we need to remember its link with giving. Do you want to have fellowship ? Then you must be a giver. So they were marked by (a) (b)

(c) THEY WERE MARKED BY THE TABLE:

Here we have reference to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's last request before He went to the Cross was, “ *This do in remembrance of me.*” (1 Cor 11:24) In baptism we show our death with Christ: in breaking of bread we show His death for us. My as has been often said this duty is not optional, since our Lord commanded it for every believer. How do you come to the Lord's Table ? Do you approach it **REGULARLY** ? Paul says, “ *As often,*” (1 Cor 11:26) Do you recall when you were in love ? And to be with your fiancée was pure delight ? How would you have responded if someone had said, “ *Limit yourself to once every three months ?*” What would you have said ? “ *I love her so much I want to be with her as often as possible.*” Have you fallen out of love with Christ ? Is that why you never come to the Table ? Or do you approach it **REGULARLY** ?

How do you come to the Lord's Table ? Do you approach it **RIGHTEOUSLY** ? With no un-confessed sin, no bitter spirit, no proud heart ? How do you come to the Lord's Table ? Do you approach it **THANKFULLY** ? My be regularly coming to the Table we keep our minds and hearts focused on Christ, and this focus is indispensable in our walk with the Lord. Do you see the things that marked this Early Church ? They were marked by (a) (b) (c)

(d) THEY WERE MARKED BY THE THRONE:

The Greek says literally, “ *they were continually devoting themselves to the prayers.* ” (2:42) Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence. Understanding the sense of loss His disciples were feeling as they anticipated His leaving, the Lord Jesus had promised in (Jn 14:13-14) “ *And whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in My name I will do it.* ” My ... the early church took that promise as the source of God's provision for all their needs, and they relentlessly pursued divine help. (4:23 7:59 10:9 12:5)

Sadly, the Cinderella of the Church to day is the prayer meeting. Programs, concerts, entertainment or the testimonies of the rich and famous draw large crowds. Prayer meetings, on the other hand attract only the faithful few. Here undoubtedly is the reason for much of the weakness in the contemporary church. Unlike, the Early Church we have forgotten the Biblical commands to pray at all times (Lk 18:1 Eph 6:11) and to be devoted to prayer. (Rom 12:12 Col 4:2) Now do you see the four fold realm in which the Early Church moved ? I find in our day that believers emphasise one of these practices at the expense of other. The truth is that they are all vitally important. For the Early Church moved in the realm of the **Word**, the **Fellowship**, the **Cross**, the **Throne** ! (1)

(2) THE MEMBERSHIP OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

You see the three thousand who confessed faith in Christ and were baptised are the **they** in (2:42) who showed the genuineness of their faith by continuing. Despite the hate, ridicule, and persecution they suffered they remained faithful. Is that not a mark of genuine salvation ? The Lord Jesus said, “ *if ye continue in My Word then are ye My disciples indeed.* ” (Jn 8:31) The good seed will not wither and die under persecution. (Matt 13:21) That the church should be composed of saved individuals seems self-evident. Sadly, however, many churches today are made up largely of unsaved people. But in this first fellowship, *all the professors were possessors.*

Now its interesting to notice how Luke describes the movement of God in relation to salvation. He says in (2:47) “ *And the Lord added* ” Who were added ? Believers ! Who added them ? The Lord ! To what were they added ? The church ! They were saved, baptised and they identified right away with the church at Jerusalem. They did not ask the question, “ *Need I join a local church ?* ” They didn't say well, “ *The students union is good enough.* ” They did not say, “ *Is the local church important ? Does it really matter whether I participate in it or not ?* ” John Bisagno, the former pastor of the First Baptist Church, in Houston, Texas tells the story of going there, as this church were considering calling him to be their pastor. He said that as he entered the building, it was dimly lit, there was

hardly any one there to welcome him, the congregation were just a few people huddled together, singing some old song that was so depressing. Later that day John Bisagno took a walk in downtown Houston and came to a jewellery store. It was a grand opening, brilliant lights and a man at the door who gave him a warm welcome.

He was not only warmly welcomed, but offered some refreshments. And John Bisagno said that after attending both the church and the jewellery store, if the jewellery store had offered the invitation for him to work, he would have taken it. Is that you feel? And perhaps you feel that way with some justification? Are you questioning the validity of church membership? Are you asking, is the local church important? Well, what is a local church made of up? Bishops, pastors, elders, deacons and saints. (Phil 1:1) What kind of people made up this first fellowship? Do you recall learning this rhythm, “ *This is the church and this is the steeple open the door and there are the people.*” Well, Luke opens the door here and he shows us there was:

(a) A CONSTANCY ABOUT THEM:

“ *And they continued steadfastly.*” (2:42) There was a faithfulness in their gathering for worship. Someone has said that in the average church the Sunday morning service is “ *A Big blow out,*” the Sunday night service is a “ *A Little turn out,*” and the mid-week service is practically “ *A Fall out.*” Do you know what the Scriptures say? “ *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but*

exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.” (Heb 10:25) A little girl asked her new neighbour, “ *do you go to church?*” “ *Yes do you?*” the new neighbour responded. “ *we are Methodists and I go every Sunday with my mother.*” “ *Doesn't your Daddy go to?*” “ *No.*” “ *Is he not a Methodist?*” The little girl retorted, “ *I'm not sure mother said he was a Seventh Day Absentist.*” I want to tell that there are many Seventh Day Absentists among professing Christians. You see, in these last days there will be a tendency for people to absent themselves from the place of public worship, but God says don't you be like that. As God's people we need to be together in these last days, we need to be hearing from Heaven before Tribulation and Turmoil come on planet earth.

Oh, you may not have unusual talents, you might not be gifted to sing, preach, lead, but there is one thing that you can do as long as God gives you health and that is to be faithful to service's of the fellowship. (a) Is there a constancy, a consistency about you? Are you too busy to be here when the church meets? Then a reassessment is required of your activities for activity without spirituality is useless. (Jn 6:63) (a)

(b) A GENEROSITY ABOUT THEM:

Look at (2:44) Now this does not indicate communal living. The first Christian fellowship was not a commune, for the family not the commune is the basic social unit in God's design. No, what happened here was this. It was a long standing tradition in Israel that

during the great religious feasts, the common people in Jerusalem opened their homes and shared the resources with the visitors. Now many members of the Early Church were such pilgrims, saved while visiting Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. They now stayed to be part of the new work of God. And those in the city shared with them. No doubt some lost their jobs because of their conversion and the rest of the fellowship met their needs. Look at (2:45)

Now this was not some primitive form of communism, this was not cold charity. My this was the Body of Christ at work. This was the hand caring for the foot: the eye looking out for the ear. ***This was love not law, this was compassion not compulsion.*** A spontaneous voluntary expression of mutual love not an involuntary communism. (4:36-37 6:1 11:29-30) Now while this was only temporary because of the emergency situation it was an indication of their genuine love one for the other. Here were believers who were in love with the Lord, with each other, and with lost souls ! My do we care when another member in the body suffers ? Materially, Financially, Physically, Spiritually. Do we care enough to give ? Do you recall John's words, “ *My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue but in deed and in truth.* ” (1 Jn 3:18) (a) (b)

(b) A UNITY ABOUT THEM:

Do you know what the key phrase of the Book of Acts is ? Look at (2:46) Now you'll find that phrase at least 6 times in the Book of Acts. “ ***With one accord.***” My Do you know what the early church had that we

need ? Unity ! In a peanuts cartoon Lucy demands that Linus change the television channels. “ *What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over ?* ” asks Linus. “ *These five fingers,*” says Lucy. “ *individually they are nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.* ” “ *What channel do you want ?* ” asks Linus. Turing away he looks at his fingers and says, “ *why can't you guys get organised like*

that ? ” **Unity !** Do we know anything about it ? Do we realise that the tactics of the devil have not changed ? My if Satan cannot hinder the work of God from without he will seek to do it from within ! (4:20 6:1)

Are you giving him a foothold ? Are you doing the work of the devil ? Are you speaking evil of your brother in Christ ? (James 4:11) Are you sowing discord among the brethren ? (Prov 6:19) Are you accusing your sister in the Lord ? Do you recall the story about the 2 sisters who were always fighting ? After one such bout of squabbling their mother said, “ *you are sisters you should love one another.* ” There was an unusual silence and then one of them responded, “ *I know she's my sister but do I really have to love her can't I just like her.* ” Do you feel the same way about your church family ? Well, then listen to the words of Christ, “ *A new commandment I give unto you that ye love one another.* ” (Jn 13:34) Notice also there was,

(d) A RADIANCY ABOUT THEM:

Look at (2:46-47) Does it really surprise us that a consistent, sharing, loving, unified church was also a joyful church. One of the reasons for that joy was their “ *singleness of heart,*” or their “ *sincere hearts.*” (2:46) This Greek word (*aphelotes*) appears only here in the New Testament. It literally means “ *simplicity,*” and derives from a root word meaning “ *free from rocks.*” There were no stones of selfishness in their hearts. Praising God also produced joy. My have we lost the joy of the Lord in our churches ? The joy of Him who said, “ *these things have I spoken unto you that your joy might be full.*” (Jn 15:11) Oh, that we might be like a tea kettle still singing when we are up to our neck in hot water. (1) (2)

(3) THE MAGNETISM OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

You see the dynamic corporate life and spiritual character of this church had great impact. This Early Church was like a magnet drawing sinners into contact with the Living Lord. You see,

(a) THEY WERE EFFECTIVE:

Look at (2:43) AT puts it like this, “ *And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.*” It describes the feeling produced when one realises that God is at hand. (5:5 5:11 19:17) You see the life of this first fellowship was so genuine and spiritually powerful that everyone whether inside or outside the church kept feeling a sense of awe. (1 Cor 14:24-25)

One reason for the awe the first fellowship inspired was the “ *many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.*” (3:1 5:12 9:32 9:40) God attended the preaching of the apostles with miracles to confirm that they were indeed His messengers. With the passing of the apostolic age and the completion of the canon of Scripture, the need for such confirmatory signs ended. (Heb 2:3 2 Cor 12:12) But my God still performs miracles in response to the prayers of His people. For He transforms rebellious sinners into His children, who are becoming like His Son. There was a sense of God in the Early Church. Is there a sense of God's presence and power in the Modern Church ? (2:47) says,

(b) THEY WERE ATTRACTIVE:

“ *Having favour with all the people.*” (2:47) Later on came the intense persecution by the Jews. But now they had favour with the people. They were still going to the Temple so that all could see their changed lives winsome, holy, Christ-like. There was no complaining, no criticizing, no envy, no strife. The fruit of the Spirit was evident everywhere “ *love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.*” (Gal 5:22-23) (b) I wonder what the outside community thinks of this church ? As they watch us coming and going what do they see ? Something that attracts them or something that repels them ? Does it surprise us after all we have noted about this Early Church to find these words in (2:47)

(c) THEY WERE PRODUCTIVE:

Magnetism ?

Blessing was Divine: “ *The Lord added,*” That reminds us that God is sovereign in salvation. (5:14)

Growth was Constant: “ *And the Lord to the church daily.*” (2:47)

Salvation was Continual: “ *Such as should be saved.*” (2:47) People were continually being saved as they observed the daily conduct of the believers.

WHAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ?

Its a church that is growing, living, vibrant and fruitful ? Its a church that is continually seeing souls saved. My why is that today there seems to be so little growth, so little fruit, so little life ? The answers are varied. God is sovereign, we're living in the last days, we can expect little else, materialism has sapped our vitality. No doubt a measure of truth in each answer. But do what has struck me like never before ? Effective evangelism flows from the life of a healthy church. What do I mean ? Well, look at our three points again. The (1) brought about the (2) and that brought about the Magnetism of the Early Church.

One stems and flows from the other. *Spiritual Duties* produces *Spiritual Character* which in turn produces a *Spiritual Impact* on sinners. Little fruit, little growth, little life ! Why ? Is it because we have no joy ? Is it because we have no unity ? Bickering all the time ! Is it because we have no genuine love one for another ! Sure we have all the *Marks of a New Testament Church we're sound* that's great but are we *sound asleep* ? We have all the *Marks of the Early Church, but have we its*