

January 8, 2006

When a Church Is Working Right

Acts 2:42-47

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

As we begin a new year, it seems appropriate to take a Sunday to reflect on a passage that describes a church that is really functioning well and to consider how we are doing as a faith community. Acts chapter 2 concludes with the following summary of the believers in Jerusalem after the Holy Spirit had come upon them after Jesus' resurrection.

*“They devoted themselves to **the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***

*Everyone was filled with awe at the many **wonders and signs** performed by the apostles. All the believers **were together and had everything in common.***

They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

*They broke bread in their homes and ate together with **glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.***

And the Lord added daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47 TNIV

In these brief verses from Acts we receive one of the most powerful and compelling descriptions of a biblically functioning faith community in the New Testament. It is a picture of when a church is working right. These verses provide a **Prescription** for healthy followers of Jesus and a vital church as well as a **Description** of the impact God can make through a devoted, biblically functioning community of believers.

At BBC we've tried to express our desire to be a church like that in Acts 2. All of us have a part to play in the church working right. By our participation, our prayers, our worship, our serving, our financial support, our compassion, our fellowshiping, how we speak and act – each of us shapes whether BBC is a church that is working right or getting off track. When a church is working right, the vision is clear,
the message is proclaimed,
the lost are found,
believers are grown up,
spiritual gifts are deployed,
community is strong,
the isolated are drawn in,
the poor find compassion,

hope is restored,
lives are transformed, and God is glorified.

When a church is working *wrong*, one might say the vision is unclear (no one knows what we're trying to do), the message is muddled, the lost are ignored, believers fail to grow up and mature (they repeat the same faults), people don't volunteer to use their spiritual gifts to serve others, community is weak, the isolated remain on their own and unengaged, the poor are given no consideration or assistance, hope is waning or lost, lives are not being changed in a positive way, and God is not honored. No one wants to be a part of a church that is working wrong. In a church that is working wrong people care more about getting a good parking spot for themselves than whether a senior who needs a little assistance or a single mom with several kids can find a spot closer to the building. In First Wrong Church, people care more about sitting in "their pew" than in reaching out to a newcomer who happens to be where they like to sit or who is standing alone in the lobby. In the Wrong Church folks never tell anyone they know where they go to worship or why they like it so they never invite anyone to worship. In the wrong church lost, lonely, and poor people are just not a concern, they are not our problem. A church that is working wrong is no fun to be a part of and brings no glory to God.

When a church is working *right* the vision is clear and the message is proclaimed.

The first thing Christ followers devoted themselves to was the apostles' teaching.

They taught the actions of God as presented in the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. They shared what God had done uniquely in Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection to break down the barriers that had separated people from God and from each other. The new members of the church, some 3,000 who joined on Pentecost, listened to messages concerning living as a believer. Community begins with communion, with a relationship with God that transforms our relationships with others. We learn about this through faithful, biblical teaching. In the Bible we see repeatedly that there is a relationship between people doing what they are able to do and then God acting in ways beyond human ability. The apostles teach and preach as well as they can, folks are faithful in hearing and responding, and then the early church witnessed **wonders and signs** being done by the power of God through the apostles. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:20, "*The kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.*" If God is making an impact in a faith community, things will be happening.

There is a saying in sports, *"It's not bragging if you can back it up."* It is one thing to talk; it is another to demonstrate power.

The apostles not only talked about the power of God, God's power was evident in their lives. We have been blessed to see God's power at work in this church over the last several years in a variety of ways. As exciting as completing a building or paying off a mortgage may be, I get even more excited watching the construction and growth of individual lives as they are devoted to learning and doing the apostles' teaching. To see people develop a hunger for God's word personally and in Bible study or small groups. To see folks serving with their spiritual gifts in so many different ministries of worship, caring, administration, missions, teaching, fellowship, assimilation, in a myriad of ways.

Devotion to biblical teaching, which is more than listening to sermon once a week, is important because of the long-term impact of what we put into our minds. Jeff Davidson, Executive Director of Breathing Space Institute of Chapel Hill said in a speech to the National Institutes of Health, *"Every bit of information we take in has impact. This impact is ultimately cumulative, and the quality of your life will ultimately be influenced by the kinds of information you take in. If you listen to people who make millions of dollars by deriding society, telling off-color jokes, using foul language, or telling tales that are unsubstantiated, then it tells a lot about you."* In the same way, if we devote our selves to learning and doing what the Bible teaches, that also tells a lot about us.

The first Christ-followers also devoted themselves to **Fellowship or Community**. This passage seeks to answer the question some of us have about, why should I be a part of a church rather than just doing my own thing. The Bible doesn't say, *"All who believed went their own separate ways and did whatever they wanted and became faithful, mature, devoted followers of Jesus who lived happily ever after."* No, it says they devoted themselves to learning, to community, fellowshiping, eating, praying and taking care of one another. Floyd Roseberry wrote in his little book, *Invitation to Relationship with Christ: A Seeker's Guide to the Christian Faith* (p.46), *"God expects us to be part of the Christian community, the church. Faith in Christ brings us not only into relationship with God, but with God's people. **Nowhere does the Bible refer to persons who enter into relationship with God through Christ and do not become part of the Christian church.** Rather, individual Christians are likened to parts of a body, stones in a building, branches on a vine, citizens in a community. **Faith in Christ is personal, but not private.** Part of faith is joining the community of faith."*

The first disciples dedicated themselves to the fellowship of the church. *“All who believed were together,” they “had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”* **That kind of generous giving, sharing, and compassion** would be a wonder and a sign – perhaps one could even call it a miracle! In a time when there was no unemployment to collect, no aid to families with dependent children, no social security, no Medicare or Medicaid, what sort of impact do you think this kind of fellowship and sharing would make on folks inside and outside the faith community?

There are many forces working against community and fellowship in our culture, I would highlight two. **Mobility** – Most of us are relatively new to Cape Cod and have moved any number of times and dozens of folks who have joined the church in the last 10 years have moved off Cape.

Individualism – which is so celebrated can also lead to loneliness. Mother Teresa wrote, *“In the developed countries there is a poverty of intimacy of spirit, of loneliness, of lack of love. There is no greater sickness today than that one. Loneliness and the feeling of being uncared for and unwanted is the most terrible poverty. One of the great diseases is to be nobody to anybody.”*

With many factors working against community and fellowship we shouldn't be surprised community is so hard to find, create, and maintain. To have community in a church our size is also difficult because it is impossible to know everyone else.

We can work to build community individually by doing several things:

Striving to notice the absence of a person as well as their presence.

Seeking to know people by name as well as by face.

We are all creatures of habit- we tend to sit in the same place and to follow the same routines. A letter I received said, *“On the way home I was wondering why it is so odd that people usually sit on the same side – is it because they are left-handed so they sit on the left side and right side because they are right handed? Once you get to know the people around you, by face if not by name, you feel sort of comfortable and do not feel like changing sides. I decided to change sides so I sat on the right side – how different it was – I didn't know anyone – had never met them before – nobody on that side was singing – they were all more quiet and reserved or maybe just shy – is that the way we are with our relationships too? We should all change sometime, I think.”*

What is clear is that people's experience of community – it's presence or absence- varies, but clearly there is work to be done by me and other church leaders,

but even more so by each of us as individuals who are part of the body of Christ. Each group at BBC whether Worship Welcomers, Fellowship, Assimilation, Deacons, Christian Ed, Mission, Women's and Men's Ministries,— every group has to be doing all it can to promote fellowship and community in a way consistent with its mission so that folks get connected and don't drift away unnoticed and unmissed.

A great deal still falls on us as individuals. How do we relate to and interact with the people who sit around us? Do we take the initiative in speaking to those seated near us, or who are standing alone? Or do we expect other people to take the first step in reaching out to us? Are we disappointed when people fail to reach out to us or notice us, even as we are being guilty of hanging back the same way? A church is friendly, welcoming, and fosters a sense of community no more or less than the individuals who compose it are doing those things. The church is not a fellow-kayak, it is a fellowship; which means we're all in it together.

In addition to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the early disciples devoted themselves to the **Breaking of Bread and the Prayers**. They ate and prayed together. There are few better ways of getting to know people than eating or praying with them. If you want to build community, invite some folks over or out for a meal. Go through Luke's gospel and note how many times Jesus is eating at someone's house. For the early church, breaking bread was also a re-membering of Jesus in fellowship with one another in what we call the Lord's Supper.

They worshiped, learned, fellowshiped, shared, ate, and prayed together – community resulted. Prayer is last but not least. I remember seeing a Christian magazine that had two pictures on the cover. One was a paper airplane which had crashed and gotten bent up on the ground. Underneath was the caption, *"This is your church without prayer."* Next to the paper airplane was a glorious photo a space shuttle taking off with the caption, *"This is your church on prayer. Any questions?"*

Prayer is the means for hearing from God and speaking to God, it is something we need to grow in if we are uncomfortable doing it. But we need not fear, because God loves to hear from us as a parent delights in a child's voice, even if the words or grammar aren't perfect.

This passage from Acts 2 presents a holistic prescription for individual and communal spirituality and growth. Listen to what the scripture says resulted from the early believers devoting themselves to these four key activities – the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. **They had glad and sincere or**

generous hearts. What a great legacy. Wouldn't you like people to say of you: **"You have a glad and generous heart."** They were praising God and had the good will of all the people –wouldn't it be great to be a part of a church that was respected in its community because of our devotion, love, faith, and generosity.

We participate in a faith community so we may grow in Christ-likeness, to express and receive love, and to carry out the ministry God has given us. Together we learn, share, encourage, support, laugh, cry, pray and provide accountability as we live out our commitment to Christ and to Christian community. And we all have an important part to play in making it happen.

As we begin a new year together, I hope each of us will resolve to rededicate ourselves to Jesus and to His church and to doing our part in the Body of Christ so that the church is healthy, well, and working right. How wonderful would it be in the last month of 2006 to be able to look around our church and see many people whose lives were changed because our church was working right.

When a church is working right,
the vision is clear,
the message is proclaimed,
the lost are found,
believers are grown up,
gifts are deployed,
community is strong,
the isolated are drawn in,
the poor find compassion,
hope is restored,
lives are transformed,
and God is glorified.

Each of us in our own way can proclaim the message, seek the lost, grow up in faith, use our gifts, contribute to a sense of community, reach out to the isolated and lonely, share compassion, and give hope. When we do what we can do, then the Holy Spirit will transform lives, Jesus will be lifted up, and God will be glorified.

Homework:

I would like to challenge you to identify three people you know who either don't know Jesus or who may have a nominal faith but who are not regularly attending a local church. Write down their names – they may be neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, or classmates – and begin to pray for them daily and reach out to them as mentioned above.

“Our vision is to be a community of **loving** disciples, **growing** in spiritual maturity, following Jesus by actively **sharing** in God's mission to transform the world.”

Our mission: “We seek to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit by **sharing** God's love and grace, **guiding** people to God, and **developing** fully devoted followers of Jesus.”