

“Spiritual Health Check”

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (ESV)

If I were to ask you whether or not you believed there was a need for America's churches to have a spiritual health check, what would you say, yes or no? Just to give you some parameters around which that might indeed be the case, some simple facts might help in clarifying that if you are in doubt. The first one is that most denominations (most churches) in America have either plateaued or are in a state of decline. The ones that seem to be experiencing growth at some level do so not because they're seeing people converted, which is what we saw here in Acts 2:47. As the church was being who God had called her to be, filled with the life of Christ as they were ministering and being ministered to and encouraging one another, as they were gathering and praising, as they were in one another's homes worshipping with glad and generous heart, as all of those things were going on, the community around the church saw their lives had been changed and started asking, "Who is this Jesus that has come into your life?" It says, "The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." The most effective community witness is the witness that happens as a result of the spilling over of the life of Christ in God's people. We can't share what we don't possess ourselves, but if we have Christ in our life and He is indeed the most important person to us, then that spills over in how we live and it spills over in their impressions of us and the way they relate to us because they see that our lives are different. Yet in America right now, the majority of denominations have plateaued or are declining. One estimate is that 50 percent of ordained clergy are no longer in ministry. Half of the ministers for various reasons have left ministry. On any given Sunday less than 17.5 percent of the American population is in a worship service, less than 17.5 percent. Taking into account that there are over 300,000 churches in America, it's not as though people don't have an opportunity to go somewhere. You and I both know that a lot of times (and it's a selfish excuse, one that's generated because we all look for justifications about why we don't do something) people look in the church and say, "Well, because the church is the way she is, I don't want to have anything to do with that, thank you very much." But the fact of the matter is that the church is far more than just an institution that is being challenged in the day in which we live for her survival. The fact of the matter is the church is the living, vibrant body of Christ here on earth. God is committed to His people to keep working in them, moving in them, stirring in them, and when necessary confronting them with the things that need to change, the sin in their life or the things they're doing wrong. He's going to keep shaping and moving and stirring until the fullness of Christ, Whom He's given to the church, is manifest and spilling over once again. What we've often forgotten—I know I certainly I have—is the fact that Christ is in the midst of the difficulties and challenges, at times the wars within the church and at times oppression from without. Christ remains Lord of His people. He remains the head of the body and He calls us as members of His body to respond to Him in His love and grace.

But that being said, nevertheless there are times when we need as believers to take serious spiritual health checks to see if, "Is there anything going on in my life, is there anything that is going on in the life of the church that is hindering the kind of witness that God wants us to have." I do not know of any pastor that would look at Acts 2:42-47 and not see that that's a snapshot of a healthy church. Why is that? Because this reflects what happened on Pentecost when the exalted Lord of glory ascended to the right hand of the Father, poured out His Spirit, which meant He was bringing His life to His people in the fullness of ways, and that's what happened in the church. All of a sudden they cried out, "What must we do to be saved?" They were told, "Be baptized in the name of Jesus. Share it around, pass it around." And they said, "This is the most awesome thing we have ever heard." So they started devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking the bread, prayer, eating in one another's homes.

What you see in Acts chapter 2 is more than a summation of parts. A lot of times people that are concerned about discipleship or growth will go to Acts 2:42-47 and start listing dominant characteristics of things true and say, "Those four or five things that are what we ought to be doing; therefore, let's duplicate that. That becomes our program." For example, top of the line, especially for us, "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching." Then we see the necessity of fellowship, the necessity of communion (breaking bread), the necessity of prayer, and love in action as believers were sharing things with each other. They were involved in ministry. We take four or five of those things

and we say, "Okay, let's have a program around each of those." But when we do that, as good as that is and as much as we need to do that, we will miss what's behind that is the life of Christ. We will miss the boat if we forget that came as a result of people yielding their lives to Jesus. So what happens is that churches look at other churches that are growing and go there and say, "Well, this program's taking place. Let's get that in our church so we'll grow." You can transport the program, but you can't manipulate the life of God. If you want Jesus you have to go to Him, and if you do come to Him He will indeed freely pardon and forgive and work and stir and move because He wants us as His body to far more reflect a relationship with Him and a witness to the community than you and I could ever conjure up on our own.

So, is this a new problem? Let me read to you a quote the Session is studying in a book called, "Why We Love the Church." I wanted to read a quote out of this just to let you know that this is something that other godly people have wrestled with. See if you sense that other pastors, other clergy, other scholars (biblical scholars) were concerned about the life of the church. Listen to these words.

For another thing, let me warn all careless members of churches to beware lest they trifle their souls into hell. You live on year after year as if there was no battle to be fought with sin, the world, and the devil; you pass through life smiling, laughing, gentlemen-like or ladylike person and behave as if there was no devil, no heaven, no hell. Oh, careless church member, or careless Dissenter, careless Episcopalian, careless Presbyterian, careless Independent, careless Baptist, awake and see eternal realities in their true light! Awake, and put on the armor of God! (from "The Great Battle" by J. C. Ryle, first published as a "Helmingham Series" Tract)

Now, do you think he was stirring up, or what? He had a reason. And, that was written back in the 1850 by J. C. Ryle who was the first, I think, Episcopal minister, an Anglican pastor in Liverpool in the 1850s. He was used as part of the evangelical movement in England because of the things he saw in his day and was concerned about. The truth of the matter is that he could say that pretty much anywhere in America and it would be relevant. How is it that when God intends the church to be as she is in Acts 2:42-47 we get off-track so easily? I want to suggest three reasons this morning why that happens.

The first is because we no longer live out of the headship of Christ. Jesus actually spoke to this in John chapter 15 when He was telling the disciples that they were going to be completely incapable of bearing fruit unless they abided in Him. "Abide in me and let my words abide in you so that you can ask the Father anything, and he's going to give it to you. But know this, unless you abide in me you cannot bear fruit, apart from me you can do nothing." In fact, Jesus gave the picture and said in fact, "If you aren't bearing fruit and you continue that state, eventually you're out there like a limb that is going to be cut off and pruned, but even if I prune you it's going to be because I desire to cause you to bear more fruit." The church constantly forgets where her source of strength is, and it is in Christ alone. We just sang that hymn, "In Christ Alone."

There's a second reason why we at many times start to falter and fail, and weakness creeps into the church. Not only because we've lost that vital, on-going, life-giving connection to Christ, but sometimes it's because we've lost that vital connection that we have with each other. We forget that we're members of the body of Christ, individually, yes, but also members together of that body. It would be as though I had a rubber band and I put it on my finger and I made it as tight as I possibly could and then ignored it. What would happen? It would not be good. How soon is the circulation stopping to my finger? It's already started, hasn't it? If I were to keep preaching and I were to forget the clock (which I did last week) and I were to put my hand in my pocket and just go on, by the time I was out there shaking somebody's hand, something might fall off. Yet, we as members of the body often forget that we are called into fellowship in Christ in the body of Christ. Today there is this separation between knowing Jesus and whether or not you're going to be part of a church. The New Testament doesn't know anything about that. The New Testament says that if you're in Christ you're a member of the body by virtue of your union with Him. You're part of His body. You and I don't get to make a choice on that. We don't get to pick out who we like or don't like in the body. We're part of God's eternal family that He has chosen to redeem in His marvelous grace to do an incredible work that will demonstrate to the whole world that He alone is the God of all grace. Yet at times in the church we constrict what happens in other member's lives. Sometimes we don't feel good about what's going on in our life as Paul said in I Corinthians 12:15. He said at times members of the body feel inferior to other members. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like you don't fit in or somehow you don't have the gifts you need to have? Paul says that we shouldn't feel that way. If the foot should say to the hand, "I'm not a hand and I don't belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. You're still part of the body. No one of us should feel inferior about our

relationship with God or our giftedness. But then on the other side, we shouldn't be made to feel inferior because of somebody else's superiority attitudes. Paul says in I Corinthians 12:21, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" We can't discount or put down what God is doing in the lives of other people. We need to embrace the body of Christ. We need to do that not just within our own church, but within the community, the fellowship of believers wherever they are, from here to Ethiopia [Senior Pastor Tommy Allen made a recorded video report from Ethiopia earlier in the service]. Yet many times the body of Christ suffers because we have a lack of encouragement one to another.

Sometimes churches hinder in growth because they separate themselves in one way or another from Christ, they don't continue to have him as Lord and life before them. Sometimes they start to wither and die because they don't value one another within the church, but sometimes there are also things that are happening in the life of the church, call them the sin or the disease processes or processes of disease that are sinful, but there are things that are happening in the life of the church that are not pretty, what the Bible describes as things that quench the Spirit of God. God is honest about what is healthy in the church or what health looks like as He gives us this Acts chapter 2 passage. They were continuing together, devoting themselves to fellowship, bread, all of these wonderful things that were going on. He's also honest in His word about what it looks like when things go terribly wrong. If you can look at one church in the New Testament where things had gone terribly wrong, it was the church at Corinth. Some of the things that were going on at that church that was keeping the life of Christ from living out of her as the body of Christ, that was keeping her from ministering effectively within themselves as members of the body, that was keeping them from having a strong public witness are these. You can have more than one per chapter, but I've just chosen one per chapter.

I Corinthians chapter 1, one of the things that was hindering the body of Christ is that they needed to repent over their divisiveness, I Corinthians 1:10. Some were saying, "I'm of Apollos." Others are saying, "Paul led me to Christ." Others were saying, "Well, I knew Jesus personally." All of these divisive spirits were present. Paul says, "You need to repent of that."

I Corinthians 2:1, they needed to repent of their pride. They were boasting as though what was happening in their midst was a result of them. It wasn't. Paul said, "Let all boasting be in the Lord," because anything that happens in your life as a Christian is a result of grace. What do you have that you did not receive? They needed to repent of their pride.

Thirdly, Paul said they were actually doing things to destroy their bodies. Some of that was immorality when they were joining themselves in immoral relationships with others. That's I Corinthians 3:10 and I Corinthians 6:19. They were destroying their bodies and Paul says, "By that you're destroying the place where the Spirit of God dwells."

I Corinthians 4:10, Paul said they had become really boastful about themselves. They were calling themselves kings and queens, spiritually reigning, doing all that they were doing for Jesus. Paul said that they needed to repent about that.

In I Corinthians 5:1, as well as verses 6 and 10, they needed to repent of their immorality. In chapter 6 in verse 1, Christians were taking lawsuits out against other Christians. Paul said, "Can't you guys settle this among yourselves? One day you're going to be judging angels."

Chapter 7 in verses 1 through 9, Paul said they needed to repent about the stresses that were being placed upon marriage. Husbands were dealing wrongfully with their wives. Wives were dealing wrongfully with their husbands. All of these stresses were coming about as a result. Paul said, "You need to repent of that and know that God has brought you together for a purpose in marriage to love one another."

In I Corinthians chapter 8, you may not have realized it, but they were even having food fights. I get this picture, like a cafeteria in high school except what they were fighting about was whether or not it was okay to eat food sacrificed to idols. Some Christians were saying it doesn't mean anything, others were saying, "No, if you do that, you're sinning against God." Paul said, "Why are you fighting about food? Don't do anything that's going to put your brother down, but what's the fighting about?"

I Corinthians 9:1-6, Paul said that he wasn't being valued as a minister. Paul said he had rights that he didn't act upon because he was trying to minister to the church at Corinth yet they didn't value that.

I Corinthians 10:12, Paul said they'd become like the Israelites. They were grumbling like in the desert about things that they wanted to see done and God hadn't done yet. Paul said, "You're flirting with sin. Repent."

Oh, and there's something else that was going on at the church there. They had issues over dress codes. Another modern church doesn't have this problem about what you're supposed to wear. But in I Corinthians 11:16 they were fighting over the length of women's hair and whether or not they were being submissive and all kinds of issues that were rising out of that.

But perhaps worst of all, and perhaps more humiliating, was the fact that they were not allowing (this is in I Corinthians 11:21), the poor to have access to the good food at the Lord's supper feast that constantly took place in the early church. So some Christians went away hungry because they didn't get a chance at the table.

Spiritual war gifts, I Corinthians 12:21. Lack of love, I Corinthians 13. They had worship wars, I Corinthians 14:20. And they had false teaching, I Corinthians 15:12, they denied the resurrection of Christ.

Now if that's not a messed-up church I don't know what is. Yet do you know what's so incredible? That she was still the body of Christ. With all the sins, with all the things that needed to be repented of, with all the things they needed to once again remember about Jesus to bring their lives back into line and connection with Him and to yield to His purpose in their life so that they were functioning not only in a relationship with Him, but with each other, so that they would be the effective witness they needed to be in the community—with all the things that gave God reason not to love them, Paul still calls them "saints beloved of God," I Corinthians 1 verse 2 and following. That's because God never gives up on us. When I looked at this picture in Acts chapter 2, I was once again reminded that this incredible snapshot, and as a pastor over the years between here and Australia, pastoring in all kinds of different congregations, I've often longed for all these things to be true wherever I was pastoring. Sometimes that can be a selfish thing, but it can also be a heartfelt thing to want more of God in our lives. Yet, at the same time one of the things that I fail to realize was the whole time none of that stuff seemed to be going really well, the church was still the first-born of Jesus. She was still the body of Christ, and God has never, ever, ever given up on His people.

One of the things that's happened over the years as I've talked to people about whether or not they're going to make a commitment to Christ, some of the reasons I hear the most about why people are not going to give their life to the Lord are, "Because of stuff in the church," or they say, "Because I'm waiting to get my life right before I give my life to God because it's in too much of a mess." On both accounts they should read I Corinthians because there's no way first of all you can ever clean up your life. Only Jesus can do that. And if you ever thought that the church was perfect you really need to read I Corinthians because it's not on the basis of us being good people that we're here. The basis of our forgiveness is on what Christ has done, in Christ alone, His blood, His sacrifice, His atonement for us. And the reformers said even though the church struggled and sometimes she seems to be triumphant, often she is militant, with warfare going on within her. Yet this is the incredible thing God calls His body. He is committed to working with us until Christ is fashioned and seen as we sang, until either Jesus comes back or we go to be with Him in glory. But He'll never, ever let us go.

Do you think we need a spiritual health check once in awhile? I think we do. But when we take that check and we are reminded of all the things that need to happen in our life, be astounded at the grace of God toward us. Be overwhelmed at His mercy toward us and relish in the cross and in the resurrection and in the return of Jesus one more time.