

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

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Tonight we're in Acts 2. We've been in Acts for a number of weeks. We're focusing, as we look at Acts, on these early foundational chapters. Acts 1, the experience of the church up to the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2, the Day of Pentecost and the subsequent follow-up to it. Right away, we see in the Early Church that a great revival, without consolidation and without incorporation into the life of the Body and what God is doing, that revival with dissipate. It cannot last.

I also, quite frankly, want you to pray with me on something that has been coming to me in the Book of Acts. I'm beginning to develop a strategy out of this book as I search for what God's direction is for the church in the days that are ahead. One of the things I see emerging in these first chapters, whether it's before Pentecost or after Pentecost, is that the body of Christ that was gathered—whether it was the hundred and twenty or whether it was the three thousand, in addition to the hundred and twenty—were marked by probably one word more than any other. That is the word “unity.” They did things together. They believed together. They had similar commitments.

We're living in a day in which the church of Jesus Christ and the local expression of that church is fractured. It is going all directions; just like all four members of our nuclear family are going all directions. One of the things that is going to be critical for the church to discover—if the Lord tarries and if we are to indeed to enter into the next millennium with strength and power—is what it is to all be together and to truly walk in unity.

It was at the turn of this last century that a group of believers—a small group—began meeting as the old century ticked out, and asking for a visitation of God at the outset of that new century.

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

We are now less than thirteen years away from the year 2000. It is going to be important in these years, at the close of this century and millennium, if Jesus tarries, that there be local churches such as the church that we're a part of, that are marked by an uncommon unity, so that there might be an uncommon visitation of God in our hour.

The thing I've been formulating—I'm going to develop a set of commitments that I'm going to ask people to commit themselves to. You don't have to commit to these to attend this church, or anything like that, because I don't want to lay legalism on anyone. But I'm going to ask for there to be a core of people in this body, beginning with the leadership on down, that will give of themselves to certain things in common. I want you to pray together, as we look at Scripture, and formulate an understanding of what it is to be in unity; that God will help us in the direction there.

As I open the Scripture this evening to Acts 2, we're at the end of Acts 2. I started two weeks ago, by looking with you at some of the essential qualities of unity that are present in a biblical and New Testament church. Qualities of unity, I suggested, that were not meant simply for the Jerusalem church. But qualities of unity which are meant to characterize the church of Jesus Christ whenever it moves in authority and power.

From Acts 2:38–47, ten verses in all, there are given to us thirteen specific areas of unity or agreement. Essential qualities that the Early Church walked in. We've already looked at seven of these qualities. I want you to note an important word that is in these ten verses that is often overlooked, because it is such a common word. But if we miss that word we really miss the analysis that is appropriate to these ten verses. It is the conjunctive "and." It occurs—and it's an easy word to miss—in these ten verses sixteen times. It is not a throw-away word. It is a word which adds to.

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

It is unlike, for example, saying to someone, “Go to the grocery store and take your pick. Get ice-cream or vegetables or fruit or meat.” If you go to the grocery store with those kinds of orders, you can get all four of those, three, two or one of those. Because you have the option. The word “or” is being used. But when you are using the word “and” you’re under the obligation to fulfill all the terms that are stated. So that, if I say to you, “Go get fruit and vegetables and meat and ice-cream, that means, “Don’t come back with one, two or three. Come back with all four.”

The church of Jesus Christ was meant to function with the word “and.” These qualities that are articulated for us are not options, but they are meant to be taken compositely. To the degree that, any of these are absent due to our own failure—three of the thirteen are actually solely God’s initiative, and we don’t have a thing to do with them except be available—but ten of them lie almost completely in our power to do something about them. The three that do not that lie specifically in God’s power, we’ll look at those. But it would be my assumption, in looking at this passage of Scripture, that the more we put into effect or activate the ten that are within our power, the more it is likely that God, in His sovereign power, will add to the ten His three.

The seven we’ve already looked at are: it’s essential, first of all, that the church, if it’s to be constituted as a church, will repent. We get into the church through repentance. Individual confession of faith, not through osmosis, not because our parents went to church, not because it’s a nice place to go. But through personal decision. Laying aside our misinformed understanding of who Jesus Christ is and embracing Him as He really is—Lord and Savior, the sinless one, dying the atoning and sacrificial death for us, rising physically again from the dead. We believe in Him. We repent of our sins and lay aside our wrong understanding of Him and submit to Him as Savior and Lord.

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

Then the second quality is that we are baptized. It's not optional. It's not, "Repent or be baptized." It's, "Repent and be baptized." We follow that by baptism and water.

Then the third quality is, "And you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," which is that aspect of the three, which God Himself sovereignly imparts. Our responsibility in that is to simply present ourselves as one who is willing to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Which is also called "the promise of the Father." Which is also called "the baptism in the Spirit." We simply make ourselves available for this deeper infiltration of God's Spirit into our life, bringing us through the baptism of the Holy Spirit into a deeper walk with God, the Spirit dwelling in us in the language of praise, in another language which we did not learn, which we do not have a capacity to articulate, but which comes to us as the Spirit gives us utterance. Which gives us, then, in addition to a freedom of praise and intercession with God, a new authority and power in our own life.

With those three, the Early Church gets under way. That single day, three thousand are added. We've already noted that the hundred and twenty who were already in the church provide the determinative methodology or formulation or formation of Christian life that will control the three thousand. It's not the three thousand new converts who bring all their new ideas into the church, and the church is corrupted by all those new ideas. But it's the hundred and twenty who have been discipled by Jesus Christ who have repented, been baptized, been filled with the Spirit, who provide the formation of how that church is to function. Which means that when the church is tracking in, being the church, it has the capacity to rapidly absorb new members. And to so (rapidly absorb them) it should not be deficient in its training and spiritual care for them.

Quite frankly, as a pastor, that's one of the things that always scares me. We have new people commit to the Lord, new people coming into the church. What's going to happen? Are they

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

going to be disciplined sufficiently when the church, all of us, are together, being all that God has called us to be? That is not a difficult function at all. It happens as a regular ongoing part of our life together as the people of God.

Then there was the fact that four qualities flowed right together. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Not new ideas. Not new revelations and not the teaching of one apostle. But collectively, the body of teaching which was proclaimed by all the apostles and believed on by them all together. Whenever the church adopts that as a criteria for doctrine, it stays away from strange teaching, strange values, strange ideas. Aberrational theology.

Devoted also to fellowship, *koinonia*, to being together, to the breaking of bread, which is communion.

And to prayer. Those are the seven we have thus looked at.

We now want to add the other six, which began with verse 3, that mark the essential qualities of a New Testament and biblical church.

I. The eighth, in verse 43, is the presence of the supernatural.

The activity of God in a supernatural way. This appears not to be contingent upon human instrumentality. The church can't work this up and it can't work it down. God has to do this. He operates through gifts of faith. Through human gifts of faith. We'll see an example in Acts 3 of Peter operating through a gift of faith, being the agent of release for supernatural signs and wonders to occur.

But I don't think the church can lose a lot of time condemning itself if that, in this moment of time, may not be present. We are to give ourselves to what we know to give ourselves to and we are to leave to God those sovereign times, which can only be impelled or controlled by His Spirit. You can't shout that out. You can't bring it down. God has seasons of moving I don't

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

understand all that. I believe that His seasons of moving work definitely hand in hand with our brokenness and humility and confession before Him. But it's clear that some things lie in the initiative of God. Signs and wonders in the New Testament happen to be among them.

Notice specifically that the signs and wonders were being done through the apostles. I think there may have been a rationale for that. Rather than being done through the three thousand that were coming in—if signs and wonders, these miraculous manifestations, were such powerful things that they were happening through people just fresh in their walk with the Lord, it might go to their head. And they might be tempted to use those new gifts that God is giving for personal aggrandizement. Like, for example, in Acts 8, Simon Magus wanted to buy what Peter was doing. It may be, therefore, that in Acts as well as in the contemporary scene, God trusts some special gifts of miraculous power to those who will most effectively use those gifts to establish the church. There's a lot in this area I don't understand. But I do know that every one of us in this room is hungry to see something that can only be explained by the fact that God did it.

I was thinking, as we were worshipping a while ago and singing, "Come Holy Spirit I need you," my mind went back to the stories of Azusa Street, where the great revival that kicked off the Pentecostal movement in this century began. Back in 1906-1909, on Azusa Street, Los Angeles, there was a meeting that never stopped for three years. In a converted barn, believers gathered. There was always someone on the premises, or a group of people praying continuously for a period of three years. People came to Azusa Street from all over the world. Not to a cathedral. Not to a stained-glass window. Not to hear a pipe organ. Not that anything is wrong with any of these things. But came to a ramshackle kind of place, where there was no ostentation at all. The pastor of Azusa Street was a black man from Texas, who had no formal education, a man by the name of Seymour, whose great contribution to that revival was that, most of the time, he spent

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

hiding behind his orange crate-like box of a pulpit, just hiding behind it, praying. When people came into that place, literally from the corners of the world, there was such a sensitivity to the fact that God's Spirit was in that place. You couldn't rationalize it. You couldn't program it logically. But you knew when you hit the inside of Azusa Street that God was moving sovereignly and deeply in people's lives. You couldn't walk into that place and leave it with unconfessed sin in your life. You couldn't walk into that place and leave it without having a powerful, transforming experience with God.

That Azusa Street experience didn't happen simply because a bunch of people got together and said, "We're going to demand that God show up in this place." It came because a humble group of black and white people, poor and largely uneducated, met together and began to say, "God, we're available! We're hungry for You. Will You visit us in our day and in our time?" And God visited.

I want to see that kind of atmosphere in the body of Christ, not just in this local fellowship, but we need to pray it for the whole body of Christ. It is not sufficient that we come to church and simply go through the order of ritual. Yes, it is important that we sing. Yes, it is important that we pray. Yes, it is important even that we have the announcements because we need to know what's going on in the body. Sure, we need to hear teachings from God's Word. But there has to be more than that. All of that part of a worship service is like laying wood on the altar and, unless God's Spirit comes down and touches it and quickens all that for us, we'll come in tired and we'll leave tired. We'll come in unregenerate and leave unregenerate. We'll come in unfilled with the Spirit and we'll leave unfilled with the Spirit.

There are some things in a worship service, as pastor, that I cannot do. And you cannot do. Only the Spirit of God can do them. I just want to declare again, and before the Lord, I want us, as a

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

congregation, to open ourselves to God for His visitation. Because a powerful characteristic and essential quality of the church is that it is a church in which God is moving as only God can move. People will go away from such a church not talking about the great sermons, people will go away from such church talking about a great God. People will go away from such a church, not talking about the scintillating ideas that were discussed. People will go away from such a church talking about a life that was dramatically transformed by the power of God. That's what's involved in a reformation church, in a restoration church, in a biblical church. It is where, I'm sure, all of our hearts are tracking together. We want God to do that in our midst.

Visit us, O Lord, with Your manifestation and with Your power and presence. When that happens, everyone is filled with awe, because it's so obviously God who is at work.

II. The ninth essential quality of a New Testament church is generosity.

Generosity of material things. We go from the spiritual, the immaterial, to the physical, the material, the financial. Selling their possessions and goods—verse 44—“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” There are another couple of references later on in Acts 4 and Acts 5 to this particular quality. This someone said that in the Early Church there was communism with a small “c”. That is, they were having all things in common. Right away, we get bugged at that and want to develop—I will need to develop, so you'll understand this Scripture—an apologetic to understand why the Jerusalem church did that, but we're not called upon to do that. Wouldn't that be too radical? It was very radical.

I can look at this hermeneutically, as you will. That is, interpretively, and suggest to you that one of the things we need to be doing in Acts is ask what is unique and what is normative, what was singular to that church that is not meant to be carried out in its particular pattern throughout

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

the church as a whole. When we look at that experience, of selling all things and having them in common, we see that it was not a command from the Lord. It was voluntarily done. It was not a constraint that was laid upon all the members. It was not even a constraint or pattern that was practiced in any of the other New Testament churches. It simply happened in the Jerusalem church. We can, therefore, say that since it was not commanded as a pattern, and since it was not practiced in other New Testament churches, it is therefore a particular manifestation (living out of a common fund or having all things in common) which was singularly unique to the Jerusalem church. Therefore, God allowed it for some specific purpose and indeed He did. For if you look later in Acts we'll develop some reasons why He allowed it, but I'm not going to get into that right now. But it becomes clear later.

However, if we simply develop that rationale, we'll miss the point. The point is that, when believers really fall in love with the Lord and are in *koinonia* or fellowship with one another, they are sensitive to needs in the Body. They hold it to be unconscionable that someone should be living in excess when another person is living without.

Now the Early Church would have to go out and do some things, because compassion is a tricky business. Who do you show compassion towards? Anybody who shows up and says, "I want money." I get so frustrated as a pastor because people are coming to the church from the outside and asking for money all the time. Many of them make a living at it. If we honored all the requests for money, there wouldn't be ability to do anything in this church and we would be encouraging sloth and laziness. It's very interesting how the Early Church ultimately dealt with this problem. They set up a committee!

It was originally the apostles. Then it became the deacons. But it was for the administration of the welfare funds of the church, all these assets that came pouring into the church simply

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

couldn't be indiscriminately scattered abroad, so they found a way of administrating it and creating a roll by which persons would get on the roll, namely widows, and they would receive from the church a regularized payment so that there was equality of treatment.

And ultimately, the church, as we see in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, lay down a requirement that if a person was capable of working and didn't work, was lazy and should not be fed. He should not eat. So the problems are still the same. But again, they must not destroy the main point: that the body of Christ is really being the body of Christ, it is aware of need in its midst and it is meeting an honest and genuine need.

Most of our giving is probably what I would call from disposable income. One of the struggles we have, as Christians, when even we begin to tithe is that initially that tithe is not disposable income. It seems to be very necessary income. It hurts like crazy to let it go. "How am I going to make ends meet and give that first tenth to the Lord?" You will never make ends meet if you pay the tithe last, as you well know. You have to do it first, then live on faith with the 90 percent.

And God does some wild things in doing that. Sometimes, you're just holding on by your fingernails. But once you've gotten through the hitch of the first year or two of tithing, you begin expanding and giving in other areas. Like, for example, when we had an appeal last week for a missionary family. We gave a very generous offering to them. I commend you for it. But as generous as it was, it was disposable income. It may have been earmarked for something else, but we said, "We'll just re-designate it. That can wait. This is more important right now." But we did not go out and sell property or get rid of possessions.

That's what makes this giving so singular and so special. It was giving that was motivated by something more than emotional appeal. It was giving that was far deeper than disposable income. It was a decision to sell off assets and to take the equity in those assets and put it into God's

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

church, which was His people, so that one side of the church would not be living in excess while the other side of the church was living with great need.

Why was there need? There was need for two reasons. One is that the new faith in Jerusalem probably unemployed a lot of people. They were going to work and their employer said, "If you're going to follow that Nazarene, you can forget about working here." The other thing is that in the Jewish social system, without Social Security as we have, there was a provision for the care of widows. It was the family's responsibility. Or if the woman didn't have a family, it was the synagogue's responsibility to provide for the widows and the orphans. Those people are moving out of synagogues or their families are disenfranchising them, and it creates a whole new class of people who need some kind of care, financial care. So the church, in this fresh burst of love for the Lord, exceeded itself in generosity. Show me a spiritual group of people and I'll show you a generous group of people. Because you cannot simultaneously be spiritual and stingy. There's just no way it can be done.

So the Early Church was generous and was concerned that it met financial needs among its own. That has to be an essential quality of the church.

III. Then another quality they had in common, a tenth quality, is public gathering for worship.

Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. In the Jewish ritual of worship, there were specific times of the day when people would gather, especially gather, although worship was going on all day long with sacrifices. But especially at nine in the morning and three in the afternoon, the opening times and closing times, people gathered in the large places, the Court of Israel or the Court of the Gentiles, and there was teaching or worship or gathering to hear the proclamation of the Word. What the church was doing was showing up in solidarity day

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

by day to learn, to grow, to participate in worship. By that act of gathering together, they were being a witness to the world.

What is being said here, between the lines, is that although the church had home groups, although it was gathered together in *koinonia* and fellowship, it did not neglect its larger occasions for being together. This counters the kind of idea that is sometimes circulated in recent years in the church, that if you really want to be spiritual, don't bother with the body of Christ at large that meets in a building, but just get in your home and have a small, comfortable, intimate group that can grow with one another spiritually. The Early Church had those wonderfully close, intimate, spiritual groups, but they did not see themselves as isolated from the rest of the body. There were these times when the whole body met together. And they met on a daily basis. Later, that would become a weekly basis—on the first day of the week, as Paul tells the Corinthians. But it's essential that we give ourselves to public worship.

IV. Then an eleventh quality is a tough one for our culture.

Glad meal times. Meals. Who has time to eat? I realize that their food did not change after they became a believer. They were still eating the same stuff. How I know they were eating the same stuff is at that time, everybody in the church was kosher. Peter hadn't had his revelation yet, which allowed him to eat cheeseburgers. Go to Israel today and you cannot get a cheeseburger in any restaurant in the country, because it is illegal to mix a dairy product with a meat product. You'd be violating the Old Testament Scripture that says that "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk," which is the mixing of a meat product and a dairy product forbidden by the Torah, the law.

Why now do their meals become glad times? Because the Lord has done something in their life, which makes them look at the same food in a different way. Maybe now, instead of even looking

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

at the food, they're looking at what the Lord has done and how He has changed the relationships among the people at the table.

I always think it's the little things that are hardest to do. This is a hard one for me, to have glad meal times, because my idea of eating is to get it done and out of the way so you can go do other things that are more important. Or to get up in the morning and have a solitary breakfast and read a newspaper. Because it's important, you know what's going on in the world. The Lord will have to reform my character totally to make me step in to a vaster appreciation for glad meal times.

But I think I'm capable of change. How about you? It's wonderful how the gospel meets the shoe leather of the road in some practical applications. God, when He intervenes in our life, even changes such common things as eating habits and meal time practices.

V. The twelfth quality was again one that they had no control over. That is, that they had favor with people.

So many times in the New Testament, as well as in our day, the church is doing all the qualities that I have just enumerated and yet it doesn't have favor. The reason it doesn't have favor has nothing to do with its own deficiencies. The reason it doesn't have favor is because the world has turned against it and persecuted it. And by the way, that shortly is going to happen against this church. It is going to be turned against. But in this moment, they have favor. And the church can live in peace as well as in conflict. We must not think that the only way a church can grow is through martyrdom and through persecution and conflict. We read later, in the Book of Acts, that the church having peace was multiplied and built-up. Paul will tell us, as believers, that we are to pray for those who are in authority over us, that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives. So the church had a gracious gift given to it. People had favor with it. That ought to be the quality of Christians wherever it is possible within a culture.

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

VI. Then the other thing which happens, which the church has no control over except to be a faithful witness, is that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The Lord added to the church. The church was witnessing, yes. But there is a difference between witnessing and winning a soul. We sometimes, I think falsely, ask the question, “Have you won anyone to the Lord?” That’s really not so much a New Testament question. The New Testament question is: “Have you been a witness to anyone? To whom have you witnessed? Not simply by your life, but also by your words.” A person can watch your life for umpteen years, but unless, at some point, we open our mouth and declare who God is and why we’re like we are, our witness will be ineffectual and incomplete. But even when the witness is done, it is the Lord who, by His gracious drawing, brings that person into the Body. The Lord was adding, in this particular case, daily to the church.

We see the Lord in this church pretty much adding weekly. We’ve not seen Him add daily. Later, there will be a point in the Book of Acts where the increase becomes so significant that they quit using the word “add” and go to the word “multiply,” because the growth becomes phenomenal. I pray that God will give us that visitation as well, so that, in addition to favor, the church will be marked by a fruitfulness, by those coming to Christ who do not know Him.

Here are thirteen essential qualities of a New Testament church. They’re not optional. They’re meant to be taken together. We need to make it a focus of our praying and of our faith, that God will bring all of these to bear on us. Many of them are present already. Many of them are not present at all. Some of them are not present in the degree they’re meant to be. I want to ask you to join with me in beseeching the Lord to make us, as His people, complete and whole.

Closing Prayer

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Acts 2

Our Lord, whenever we open Your Word, we find You dealing with us, not only as an individual but as a community. So we do not pray simply for ourselves, but we pray for the Body of which we're a part, for the church which You meant to be such a bright, shining glory to Your name. Which You meant to be a city set on hill that could be seen and have influence. Which You meant to be a community of people who care, really care, for one another and for the world. We'd like to be that kind of place and that kind of people. We want to seek Your face for that. We want to ask You restore everything that has been lost to the church. Restore any area, Lord Jesus, in this assembly that is deficient. Give strength to Your church. We so often pray for the healing of the body. Lord, we pray for the healing of the church, Your spiritual Body. That its atrophied parts will be restored. That its broken limbs will be mended. That its cancerous diseases will be cured. That its creaky weariness of old age will be rejuvenated by the power of the Spirit. That You would take all the diseases that attacked Your spiritual body and repel them. And that we would, as a community of faith, join together, that this be a whole and healthy expression of Your people in this world. Do that among us, Lord. We give ourselves to You. In Your name. Amen.