

THE MEETINGS OF THE CHURCH

ACTS 2:42-47

How would you describe a successful church? Some consider a church successful if it has dynamic Bible teaching. A church with a pastor who is educated and eloquent—able to explain the various nuances of the Greek and Hebrew, able to intersperse a number of humorous anecdotes and poignant illustrations, and, most of all, able to keep your attention throughout the entire sermon.

Others consider a church successful if it has dynamic worship services—services that are soul-stirring and heart-warming so that the worshiper leaves feeling spiritually invigorated.

Still others measure the success of a church by the quality and efficiency of its organizational structure—where there are programs and activities for every age and stage of life, ministries for every need, leadership that can ensure that everything is running smoothly, and an abundance of able and willing volunteers.

Still others measure a church's success by its facility—a church that is aesthetically pleasing with a large sanctuary, comfortable seating, state-of-the-art technology, spacious classrooms, and plenty of parking. (Incidentally, in a survey on why people in America choose a church the number one reason was the appearance of the facility, number two was parking, and number three was the nursery. Whether we like it or not, that survey speaks volumes about the values of our contemporary Christian culture.)

The things I've mentioned are some of the common features by which many North American Christians measure success in churches today. However, if any of the above are *yours*, may I challenge you to reevaluate them. Oh, I'm not minimizing the importance of most of those things. There ought to be excellence in our teaching, our worship services, and our programs. There is certainly nothing wrong with having a beautiful facility. But please be aware that *none* of these things is ever mentioned in the New Testament as being the components of a healthy, dynamic, successful church. In fact, none of the things I've just described are even mentioned at all.

That's because church is not primarily about services or programs or activities. It's not primarily about an experience. The church is about Jesus. It was established by Him and it exists for Him. Therefore, church is all about discovering Him, knowing Him, loving Him, worshiping Him, delighting in Him, pleasing Him, connecting with Him, obeying Him, serving Him, glorifying Him, and eagerly anticipating His return.

And so, success in a church—any church—no matter how big or how small, how rich or how poor, how new or how old, has to do with how well these things are happening. It has to do with the presence and prominence of Jesus in its midst.

Which raises some questions. How do you know if these things are taking place? How do you measure such things?

I want to look at a passage this morning that provides some answers to these questions. In this narrative from the book of Acts, we find a description of the activities of the very first church. It comes on the heels of the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus while they were praying in a room in Jerusalem, filled them, and compelled them to go out into the streets and preach the gospel. Many people who heard believed. In fact, after Peter preached, 3,000 believed and were baptized, and thus the church was born. It consisted of these baptized believers in Jesus whose lives had been transformed by the gospel.

And we read in **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).

Let’s get something straight from the very beginning. This is *real* church. *Church* is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or an incorporated, tax-exempt organization.

According to this passage, church is a devoted group of believers who gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing its Lord, Jesus. Notice the focus in this statement. It is not on programs or activities or places of worship. It is on the Lord Jesus. The church is all about Him.

One of the key words in the Acts 2 passage which describes the early church is “devoted.” *Devoted* means to be thoroughly committed. It is not describing people who are mildly interested or who have an on-again-off-again, take-it-or-leave-it kind of relationship with something. It is describing people who are all in, who have wholeheartedly and enthusiastically invested their lives and resources.

Why were the early Christians devoted? It is very simple. They were devoted because they really believed Jesus was alive, they really believed His kingdom had come, that He was present in their midst, that when they met together, they were encountering Him, and that His power was present to do extraordinary things among them. And they really believed Jesus could return at any time.

In short, Jesus meant everything to these people, and they could not get enough of Him. That’s why *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching”*—the instruction that was given to the Apostles from the Lord Jesus Himself and from the Holy Spirit; *“and to the fellowship”*—the people who comprised the church. *“To the breaking of bread”*—eating together and, specifically, partaking the Lord’s Supper together; *“and the prayers”*—seeking God’s face and God’s blessing and aligning themselves with God’s will.

And by doing these things together they were experiencing Jesus, which is why, **verse 43a.** *“And awe came upon every soul...”* There was an awareness of Christ’s personal presence in their midst. They were not gathering merely to commemorate an historical figure; they were not gathering merely to memorialize sacred events. They were gathering to be *with* Him, to experience Him, to encounter Him. And awe was the attitude that filled them because they knew they were on holy ground.

They also knew that extraordinary things would happen. **Verse 43b.** *“...And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”*

I told you that the church is a devoted group of believers who gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing its Lord, Jesus. One of the ways Jesus expressed His life was by doing miracles through the Apostles. Those miracles were done, in part, to validate the legitimacy and authenticity of the church, its leaders, and their message.

But there were other ways that Jesus expressed His life through His people who were part of His church, and we find some of those ways in **verses 44-45.** *“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.*

Not only was there a profound sense of Christ’s presence at these gatherings; there was a profound sense of Christ’s love that manifest itself in the lives of His followers. The

concern and the compassion of Christ was being expressed through His followers to one another, compelling them to pool their resources and share everything with each other. We are told in Acts 4, “...*the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to Him was His own, but all things were common property to them*” (4:32).

Throughout church history Bible scholars and students have read these passages and debated as to whether the socioeconomic practices of the Jerusalem church are prescriptive for the church in every generation. I would suggest that is not the point of these passages. The passages are historical, they are simply describing what happened, not prescribing what should happen.

But one thing is certain. When Jesus shows up at a church, and when Jesus reveals Himself through His followers like He did in the church at Jerusalem, this is the kind of thing that *will* happen, because this is a picture of real love—Christ’s love. Needs being met, people being cared for, unselfishness, generosity, community. All of which produces joy and harmony and peace. All of which are by-products of the gospel.

Look at **verses 46-47a**. *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.*

This is real church. *Church* is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or an incorporated, tax-exempt organization. Church is a devoted group of believers who gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing its Lord, Jesus.

Years ago, I had the opportunity of visiting a city in Argentina where the Spirit of God was working in an extraordinary way. One night, a weeknight, I visited a church in a barrio on the outskirts of the city. It was winter, it was cold, and it was just as cold inside the building as outside because almost all the windows were broken. But the place was packed, full of people of every age, some sitting in rickety chairs, some standing. They were there to seek God’s face—to worship and to hear the Word of God.

During the meeting they worshiped...for a long time...with a lot of energy and a lot of emotion. Someone gave a testimony, and there were lots of tears. A girl in her early teens sang a song. Quite honestly, she did not sing very well, but when she finished, she was lavished with encouragement. Then the pastor preached for an hour or two. He was not particularly dynamic in his presentation, but the people were attentive and responsive. And the meeting went on and on and long about 11:00 the pastor told everybody he thought it was time for them to disband and go to each other’s homes for supper.

But what may have been most astonishing is that this was not a special church event. They did this every single night. And it was not just happening in that church; it was happening all over the city.

What do you think? Be honest. Some of us hear this and think, “That is hard to believe; that is hard even to imagine. But if it is true, what makes those people do that? What makes them *want* to do that, night after night? Because to me, it sounds boring.”

If that is what we are thinking it is because we just don’t know. It is because we *may* have never experienced church as God intended it.

Church is not a building, or a service, or an incorporated organization. *Church* is a group of devoted believers who gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing its Lord, Jesus. And the reason those people were there, in the cold, for so long, until so late at night, every night, was because Jesus was there. The reason they got so excited about that girl who sang off-key is because they encountered Jesus in her. The reason they had to be told to go home is because they could not get enough of Jesus.

OK. How do we, in America, apply Acts 42-47? Let me say, first, that we do not apply this passage by trying hard to replicate what they did, as often as they did it, as passionately as they did it, thinking that somehow, if we can do everything the same way they did it we are assured of the same result. Likewise, I do not believe in trying to replicate what I saw in Argentina, or anywhere else where there are dynamic expressions of Christian community.

No, these are illustrations of what happens when the Spirit of God is having His way in a church—revealing the glory of Christ, expressing the life of Christ, displaying the power of Christ, and letting them experience the love of Christ. In all dynamic and healthy churches believers are simply riding the wave of the Spirit of God in their midst, joyfully and expectantly following His lead.

So, I would like to offer a couple of suggestions as to how we can apply this passage to us as a church.

First, some of us may need to change our fundamental concept of “church.” I’ve said it several times already today (and in this series), “Church is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or a non-profit, tax-exempt organization.” Yes, I realize that the word “church” is used in our modern vernacular to mean these things. When we say, “I’ll meet you at the church...” everyone knows you are talking about the building. Or when we say, “I went to church today...” everyone knows you are talking about a Sunday morning worship service.

That’s not necessarily wrong, and it’s certainly not going to change. But let us be mindful that the New Testament’s concept of church has reference to the corporate *gathering* of believers in a community. The literal definition of “church” (ecclesia) in the Greek language is “the gathering” or “the assembly.” So, when you think of “church,” what ought to come into your mind first is the *people* who comprise the church—our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And there is an assumption and an expectation in the New Testament that we gather regularly. How often? The New Testament does not specify, though there is evidence to suggest that it ought to be at least once a week. On what day of the week? The New Testament does not specify, though there is evidence to suggest that most churches met at least every Sunday (which they called the Lord’s Day—a reference to the fact that he rose from the dead on Sunday). But Paul makes it clear in Romans 14 that it doesn’t really matter on what day we meet, because in the new covenant what makes the gathering sacred is not the day of the week, but the people who meet, because we have the Spirit of God living in us.

Where should we meet? The New Testament does not specify. We know that many churches in New Testament times met in homes, some met outdoors, and some met in public spaces (like the temple court). We also know that when Jesus established the New Covenant, He declared that places of worship were no longer sacred, because God does not occupy buildings anymore as he did the Temple and the Tabernacle. He occupies people, therefore, wherever His people are gathered is sacred, whether it is in a sanctuary like this, or a home, or at the beach, or in a garden.

Do you understand what I am saying? Do you understand the implications of this? When we gather on Wednesday nights for prayer meeting, we are doing church, and it is every bit as significant and consequential as when we gather on Sunday morning. Next weekend, as the men gather together at Twin Rocks for the Men’s Retreat, we will be doing church, not just when we meet in the chapel, but as we are sitting around the table having a meal, as we are gathered on the beach having conversation. As Life Groups meet this week in homes throughout our community, they are doing church.

But let me take this one step further. Almost two years ago, when the pandemic started

and the governor closed down public meeting spaces so that we could not gather on Sunday mornings in our sanctuary, some of us were outraged and said, “Wait, she’s prohibiting us from doing church!” I can see how you might think that if your concept of church is a Sunday morning meeting in a building designated for worship, but that is not the New Testament concept of church. Many of us still met in homes in smaller groups during that time, and that is just as much church as when all of us are together on Sunday mornings. It’s okay to miss and lament our typical Sunday morning gatherings, but a governor’s mandate does not prevent us from doing church or being the church. The underground church in China has been thriving for decades, meeting at odd times in various places (mostly homes) under the radar of government authorities.

Third, if the gatherings of the church are for the purpose of experiencing and expressing Jesus, let us remove anything from our meetings that hinders this, and welcome anything that facilitates this.

Some of these things are obvious. Shallow songs with bad theology hinder an authentic encounter with Jesus, as does shallow preaching. So does entertainment-oriented worship where the focus is on the performance rather than a Person. So does political commentary from the pulpit. So does an attitude of superiority—that our church has got it right, or we *do* it right, or we are better or more spiritual than the church down the road.

The New Testament writers identified a number of things that either hindered or facilitated churches experiencing or expressing the life of Christ. For example, eating with one another during meetings was encouraged, but Paul did warn the Corinthians of being over-indulgent at their mealtimes, especially with wine. He also warned against being too tolerant of those in their midst who were living in willful, unrepentant sin, and he was particularly critical of a divisive, argumentative spirit, because it threatened the unity of the Spirit. James singled out social injustice and favoritism as hindrances to an authentic encounter with Christ. Pride, cliquishness, rigidity, and legalism are other things the New Testament cites as barriers to Christ-honoring gatherings.

The point is, if we are not careful or thoughtful, we can easily detract from Christ in our midst. In fact, we can miss Him entirely, and if we do, our meetings are in vain. Let’s keep Jesus in our focus at all times. Let us fix our attention on Him, gaze at His beauty, marvel at His majesty, delight in His goodness, and be awed by His glory. Let’s look for Him in each other, and in everything we do. Amen.

The Meetings of the Church

Acts 2:42-47

Main Idea: Real church is a devoted group of believers who gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing its Lord, Jesus.

Introduction: Is our definition of a successful church the same as God's?

The devoted community
Their activities

Their attitudes

Their impact
In each other's lives

For the Kingdom of Christ

Application for Emmanuel Bible Church

We should not try to replicate dynamic expressions of Christian community

We may need to change our fundamental concept of
"church"

If the gatherings of the church are for the purpose of experiencing and expressing Jesus, let us remove anything from our meetings that hinders this, and welcome anything that facilitates this

