

“Being the Body of Christ, Together” | Acts 2:36-47 (Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together)

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Preaching Draft | September 1, 2024

(Discussion questions on page 9)

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Father of modern management, Peter Drucker, believes that a company’s mission statement is a “declaration of that organization’s reason for being.”¹ In other words, an organization needs more than a few goals and value statements. It needs to be able to answer the fundamental questions *who it is* and *why it exists*. And it is answers to these questions that give an organization a sense of identity and fuel for purpose that abide over time.

During my first year as rector of the Falls Church, I found myself thinking about these types of questions often. I wanted to do more than set forth a few five-year goals. I wanted to grasp *who we were*, *why this church exists*. What is it about the Falls Church that must always be true, if we are to be and remain a true church? Whether church planting or starting fellows’ programs or running food pantries or prayer ministries or vacation Bible school—what, most fundamentally, makes us, us?

I took my questions to Scripture. I have sought to see in Scripture what God sets forth as *His* purpose, *His* vision, for *His* Church. Why does this community—which Jesus, Paul, Luke, James, John and the writer of Hebrews all call the “church”²—exist?

This morning I would like to draw our attention to the birth of the Church, as recorded by Luke in Acts 2. There are three crucial things to notice in this chapter: **(1) The Centrality of the Church. (2) The Creation of the Church. (3) The Commitments of the Church.** A true, biblical church, must account for all three of these.

¹ Branislav Djordjevic, “The Business Vision and Mission.” In *International Journal of Managerial Studies and Research* (IJMSR) Volume 9, Issue 5, May 2021, PP 12-18.

² **Jesus:** Matt. 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock² I will build my church, and the gates of hell³ shall not prevail against it. **Luke:** Acts 5:11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. **Paul:** 1Cor. 4:17 That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. **James:** James 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. **John:** 3John 9 I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. **The writer of Hebrews:** Heb. 12:23 and you have come to the assembly (or, church) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.”

I. The Centrality of the Church

There is a perennial law of real estate that proves true for interpreting the Bible, *location, location, location*. Where a passage is located—it's context—impacts how we understand and access it.

Consider the location, context, of Acts 2 and the birth of the church.

It is “the day of Pentecost” (2:1) when the church is born. Pentecost was a Jewish festival falling fifty days after Passover. It touched on themes of the renewal of God's Covenant with his people.

Significant for us is that this Passover that came fifty-days prior saw not merely the sacrifice of natural lambs. On this Passover, Jesus—“the lamb who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29)—was crucified. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples he was inaugurating a new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20).³ As prophesied in the Old Testament (Joel 2), the new covenant meant God would pour out his Spirit, renewing and expanding His people. Something huge was about to happen.

Three days after the crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead. He appeared to his followers, who wondered if at this time Jesus would restore the Kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6). Jesus pushed them off this question, and instead told them to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high for the sake of a global mission.

Jesus then ascends into heaven—in a type of enthronement—and begins to rule from his father's right hand. What is his first act as king? Sending the Holy Spirit, to empower his Apostles, to preach boldly about him, and through all this, he creates the new covenant people—the church.

Jesus' first act as reigning king in heaven, is to birth the church. What should we make of this?

One commentator says of this event in Acts 2 that it is one of the three most important events in history: the first being God's creation of the World; the second being the death and resurrection of God's Son; the third being the birth of the Church, the New Covenant people of God—the community where sinners are being restored into the image of God.⁴

What we need to recognize from the location, or larger historical context of Acts 2, is simply that the church is *central* to God's plans. Paul, who spends his life planting and caring for churches, and goes so far as to say that “through the church the manifold wisdom of God is

³ “And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” (Luke 22:20).

⁴ See Al Mohler, *Acts 1-12 For You*, 27, and also the comment of Thomas Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters*, 11, “One of the most significant events in Christian history occurred on the first Pentecost after Jesus's resurrection.”

made know to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). Paul tells the church leaders in Ephesus that Christ died for the church: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).⁵

What might be some reasons the church is central to God’s plan? No doubt there are many, but consider two:

The church is where the rulership of Jesus shows up vividly: His Word is proclaimed as authoritative in the church; by baptism and the Lord’s Supper Jesus shows who the citizens of his kingdom are. The church is like Jesus’ embassy, signaling what his kingdom is, and will finally, be like.

The church is where the follower of Jesus is to be shaped most fundamentally: The church is to the Christian what the nuclear family is to the teenager—it’s not the only place she spends time, but it’s the most important for her identity, growth, and health. The church is to the Christian what the world is to the sinner—that web of relationships, that culture, that petri dish of leaders and ideas and messages and experiences that so fundamentally shape who we are and how we think.

Reading Acts 2 in light of the larger picture, it becomes clear the church has become the shape of our following of Jesus.

This is an important words for Protestants, and especially those of the evangelical strip. Writing on the tenants of evangelicalism, Anglican authority J. I. Packer notes:

The central things for evangelical theology were—biblical authority, justification by faith, original sin, and the new birth—while ... evangelicals were not especially interested in the doctrine of the church.... The church was not their focus.⁶

Protestants, for good reason, often prioritized the *personal* and *individual* aspects of the faith: *personal conversion, personal devotions, how our faith impacts our vocations or helps us care for our personal families*. These are all extremely, crucial things. They just are not the center of the universe when you consider how God has chosen to work in the World. All these other things are meant to derive their energy, and be guided by, the thickness and power of the community of God’s people.

⁵ Some might wonder, but Jesus almost never talks about the church, but instead the kingdom. But note: Jesus talks about the church just three times in all four Gospels. He says far more about the “kingdom,” with that term appearing some 125 times in the Gospels. But in his first act as the ascended King, he creates the church. And from Acts 2 onward, the term “church” (ecclesia) is used 111 times, whereas use of the term kingdom goes down to just 36. The church becomes the epicenter of the Kingdom breaking in.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *The Heritage of Anglican Theology*, 243-44.

A communal aspect to God's work is evident across Scripture: from Adam and Eve, to the people of Israel, to the Church, God's design is not for us to be alone, but to be drawn together into His family.

What community has the greatest shaping influence on you? Is the local church closer to the center of gravity in your life, or more on an outer orbit? It is at the center of God's plan—may it be at the center of how we do life as well.

II. The Creation of the Church.

As an Anglican, I can't count how many times I've heard people say, "Your church was started because King Henry wanted a divorce." Many feel the church is simply a man-made institution, created by persons for reasons of power or control. But how is the church created?

The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 is dynamic and dramatic: rushing wind, tongues of fire (2:2-3). This miraculously empowers the Apostles to preach in various languages to the diverse groups of people gathered in Jerusalem that week. Peter then, filled with the Spirit and emboldened, gives a powerful sermon about Jesus, which convicts many hearers who are then converted. And "God adds to the church during this time three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

What should we make of all this?

This all speaks to God's work of creation. Wind and fire are ways God manifest his presence in the Old Testament (think Moses' fiery bush, the pillar of fire, and fire on Sinai in Exodus, Exod 3, 19).

Even more interesting, is to recall the link in Scripture between wind, the Spirit, and God's power to create by speaking, or by his word. God's breath is synonymous with his Spirit, as he breathes the spirit of life into Adam in Genesis 2:7. And God's spirit, or breath, is closely associated with his Words (just as we can feel our breath if we hold our hand up to our mouth when we speak). Psalm 33 captures all this vividly:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps 33:6).

We could say that across Scripture, God creates by his Spirit-infused-Word.

And God's Word has always created His people: Adam and Eve are created by God speaking ("let us make man..."); Israel is created when God speaks to Abraham, and Moses, and gives his Word (his law) at Sinai; Jesus uses words to create, calling Lazarus from the dead with a word ("come forth" Jn 11); and Paul tells us that faith—new life in Christ—"comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

Sinful humans were cast out of God's presence (Gen3), unable to bear the sight of his holiness and live. But in his mercy, God doesn't leave us without a trace of his presence; he speaks to us; he gives us His Word.

And this is what's happening in Acts 2. God is created once again by Spirit-infused-Words. The Holy Spirit takes the form of "tongues" (Acts 2:3), empowering apostle to speak. It is through Peter's preaching, his Spirit-infused-words about Jesus—that God saves so many souls on Pentecost: "now when they *heard* this" (2:37). Notice the emphasis on Peter's speech:

"And Peter said," (v. 38); "with many other words Peter bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying" (v. 40).

Summary: God creates the Church—not a person, or historical movement. And God does so by His Spirit working through His Speech, his word, just as he created the world in Genesis 1.

How does this impact us?

First, it ought to humble us. We are so quick to credit the growth or stability of a church to a gifted leader, or generous people, or committed parishioners. These things matter, God works through them. But when Paul exhorts the elders in Ephesus, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock... care for the church of God," he doesn't add the qualifier, "which I've sacrificed so much for," but rather, "which God obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). No one has sacrificed for this church like God has; no one cares about it more than he.

And notice that how one enters the church is through repentance:

Now when they heard this [=Peter's preaching about Jesus] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:37-38).

There should be no sense of ultimate ownership in a church—we belong to God. And if we all enter through the door of humility (repentance), our culture should be marked by anything but pride.

Second, along with humility, this should give confidence. If God creates the church, and if God shed his blood for the church, then we can have an indestructible confidence in the church. Even if our particular church might dwindle, or be crushed by persecution, these momentary setbacks can never thwart the power of God.

Third, how God creates the church must shape how we organize it. If we have been birthed by God's Word, our programs, small groups, friendships, ought to be saturated by the Spirit-filled-Word of God. And sometimes the Word works immediately and dramatically (as in Acts 2); but more often it's like the seed planted, the farmer waiting patiently. But the sowing of the Word is

what God adds the promise of fruitfulness to—not to flashy programs, or management techniques, or gifted speaking—the Spirit works *through the Word* to create and build the church.

The church is central to God’s plan; and the church is Created by God’s power.

We have one final thing to consider—the commitments of the church. By this, we mean what are its practices, what types of things is a true, biblical church committed to? We close by noting four commitments that are highlighted in Luke’s first description of the church’s life together, here in verses 2:42-47.

III. The Commitments of the Church

The “they” in verse 42—“and they devoted themselves...” —reminds us that individual salvation, from the beginning of Acts, leads into new community life. When you become a son or daughter of God, he places you in a new family of brothers and sisters in Christ. This new community is marked by “devotion” Luke tells us, and devotion to four things.

1. The Word: First, the Word: “they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching” v 42). The Apostles teaching is modeled in Acts by the preaching of Peter and Paul. It is the teaching of those appointed by Jesus as Apostles, who are eyewitnesses to the resurrected Lord, empowered to teach and lead by the Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians that the church, the household of God, is “bult on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20). Their teaching has been passed down to us—now in the New Testament—in an unbroken chain.

Why is the word so central? The Word holds out to us the object of our faith—the real Jesus. It holds out to us God’s promises, that we cling to and live by. “The Word is the final authority in our ministries—not pastoral vision, congregational tradition, statistical goals, ministry program.”⁷

We are first a people devoted to what God says, not to what we think or want to hear. When a church veers away from the apostle’s teaching, it ceases to be a biblical church.⁸

One of the staples of our church is *discipleship*—growing and helping others grow more like Christ. The chief tool we use for this is Scripture, “devotion” to the Word.

2. Fellowship: Second, a true church is marked by fellowship, a special kind of togetherness: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship” (v. 42). These first

⁷ Dever, *Nine Marks*, 10.

⁸ Article 19: The visible Church of Christ is a *congregation* of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinances. [so, too, Augsburg Confession; Calvin’s *Institutes*; The Belgic Confession, etc. focus on these two marks: Word and Sacrament]

Christians were called to be a new people, a new family. The Christians were to be noticeable by their love: “they will know you are my disciples by your love for one another” (Jn 13:35).⁹

This love is real, active, experiential: They prayed for each other, sacrificed in order to provide for the needs of one another: “they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (v 45).

I have become convinced that love is largely local—love is not something you can do through a social media post, or by a sign in your front yard. Love is what you do over time, to real people, and often at real cost. Why? Because you love the people that Jesus loves.

This is another staple of our church, fellowship of *community*: we want to know and walk with other Christians; we help each other grow like Christ and remain faithful to Christ.

The indicator for success for a church is not evident results in terms of numbers; it is faithfulness to God’s Word and the quality of love we have for each other.¹⁰

3. Mission: a third commitment of the community is that it does not exist strictly for itself, but for the sake of those around it. All across Acts, it is a community that shares the Gospel with those around it, and does what it can to serve the needs of others.

And note that it is not just, or mainly, by street evangelist and preaching that God bears witness to his Son. It is through the collective witness of these communities—by their lives, how they act, and when they have opportunity, but the stories they tell about Jesus Christ.

A third feature of our life together, then, is mission: we go into the world (our neighborhoods, workplaces, and friendships) as those who bear witness to Christ.

4. Worship. A final commitment is worship. They were “devoted ... to the breaking of Bread and prayer,” which likely includes not only meals together but the Lord’s Supper. And they also were going to the temple regularly (v. 46) and “praising God” (v 47).

John Stott has pointed out that the church’s “preeminent responsibility is *not* evangelism... evangelism comes under the heading of our duty to our neighbor, whereas worship is our duty to God, and our duty to God must take precedence over our duty to our neighbor.” Stott also notes that whereas evangelism is temporary, ceasing in heaven, worship is not.¹¹

To worship is to glorify God’s holy name—whether by songs and prayers of thanksgiving, or by prayers of dependence and need. Worship is when we *spiritually relate to God, as God*.

⁹ “If anyone says, ‘I love God’, yet hates his brother, he is a liar...” (1 John 4:20-21).

¹⁰ See Dever, *Nine Marks*, 35.

¹¹ John Stott, *The Living Church*, 34

A fourth and all-encompassing staple of our church's life, then, is worship—do we burn with passion for the living God?

Heat can kill bacteria and viruses. May it be the case that the *heat* of our worship—the burning fire of our love for God—kills a thousand different germs of division or pettiness. It is much harder to hang on petty grievances when you are in the throne room of the living God whose own son died for your sins.

A few weeks before I started as Rector here, I was in traveling in Europe and found myself standing in the middle of Dam Square in Amsterdam, looking at the towering 15th century church, *New Church* (Nieuwe Kerk) that stands there. The church is dead today, no longer used for services but for exhibition space for various things.

You can imagine many scenes like this in Europe, and increasingly this will be the case in cities in the US.

There are some reasons good churches close—persecution, natural disasters, or other things that Christians cannot do anything about. But may it never be the case for falls church, that we weaken or diminish because we forget who we are: we are part of the Church of God, at the very center of what he is doing in the World. We are a creation of God, not man—made by God's Word, bought by his blood. And we must remain committed to our most fundamental and timeless commitments: The Word, each other, the worship of God, and the fact that we are here not to have our best life now, but to be on a mission that will reverberate into eternity.

Small Group

1. How would you complete this sentence, “A true biblical church is...”? Now read Acts 2:36-47. How does this impact your answer? Article Nineteen of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles answers it this way: *“19. Of the Church. The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men and women, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”*
2. The church is God’s new community, which shapes how disciples follow Jesus. What community has the biggest impact on how you think, act, and live?
3. The first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). In what ways might your own life model a devotion to teaching? Whose teaching? How might your life become more devoted to Scripture? How might you help your children, or spouse, or a friend, be more devoted to Scripture this month?
4. The first Christians “devoted themselves ... to the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Are there Christians you are devoted to fellowship with? What does this look like and how could you increase this devotion?