

RESURRECTION RESPONSES (3) “Experiencing Profound Fellowship” a sermon– by Gary R. Hindman. Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Text: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” --Acts 2:38

We are continuing our journey through the exciting Book of Acts and the Early Church’s “Response to the Resurrection.”

Last week we talked about Peter’s sermon on Pentecost and saw the amazing result of the Word preached: three thousand souls were added to the Kingdom. But then what happened? Does the story end there?

It certainly appears to for a lot of people. We have all heard stories of those who came forward at a great crusade and gave their life to Christ. They were full of exuberance and emotion at the time but then, feelings faded, enthusiasm cooled, the fever subsided, and eventually, they went back to their old ways. Is that what happened to those three thousand souls on the Day of Pentecost? Indeed, it was not! Listen to the text for this morning and I think you will agree that something wonderful and lasting happened to them!

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Henry Ward Beecher once said, “The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians but a school for the education of imperfect ones.” So we keep coming back because we need each other and we need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ who promised all who follow him abundant, eternal life. But no matter how important church is, people sometimes get lax about their commitment which reminds me of a story:

A little boy went to church with his grandparents. His grandmother sat in the choir and it really disturbed her to see her husband nod off every Sunday during the sermon. So she decided on a plan: she gave her grandson fifty cents each Sunday morning on the condition that he would poke his grandfather whenever he started falling asleep. The plan worked until Easter morning. The church was packed and grandfather started to fall into his usual trance but Tommy seemed to make no effort to awaken his grandfather who, to his wife’s embarrassment

even started snoring! After church the grandmother came up to her grandson and asked, "Tommy, what happened? You knew I would pay you fifty cents to keep your grandfather awake!" "Yes," said Tommy, "but grandpa offered me a dollar if I would let him sleep!"

I can sympathize with the grandfather. I have been to church services that were not very exciting. But I like what was said by another boy. He and his friend were discussing the story of Noah and the ark. "I don't think I could stand being cooped up with all those dirty, smell animals for 40 days and nights," said the one neat little boy. "Yes, but look at it this way," said the other, "it was still the best thing afloat!"

That is the way I feel about the church. It is not perfect, it has plenty of flaws. Things may not always go the way you want them too and sometimes we are disappointed but taken as a whole, it is still the best thing afloat. But it could be even more. When we turn to today's passage in Acts we get a glimpse of what the church could and should be. Here we find four ingredients: it is a place of fellowship, prayer and worship, study and outreach. Let's look at these.

First, the church is a place of FELLOWSHIP. The word "fellowship" has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon language. Fellow, from the word *feoh* means "cattle" and *schippe* means "quality" or "condition". It goes back to a time when wealth and cattle were synonymous. Sometimes neighbors would put their cows together, breaking down the fences between them. By doing this they were showing trust in one another and thus having "fellowship."

That is exactly what fellowship is in the church--a place where people share common values and a common faith in the Lord Jesus. It should be a place where they can be themselves and where they can come when they are hurting and vulnerable knowing they can trust each other in a safe environment. I am always pleased when I hear someone say that when they entered the sanctuary or came to an event at this church and that they felt comfortable and at home here. But having fellowship is not just a coincidence. It is a blessing of God and it takes a lot of work.

Sometimes fellowship turns inward as in the case of churches that are cliquish, clannish or snobbish. There is nothing wrong with making friends in church, in fact that is a wonderful thing, provided we do not make friends to the exclusion of everyone else. A sign of the wonderful fellowship of the Early Church of Acts is found I verses 44 and 45: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Apparently they were so concerned about the welfare of each other that they put the needs of others before themselves.

Some groups have tried to emulate the Early Church by living in communes and sharing everything in common like the Amana colonies in Iowa and some Amish and Brethren groups. I am not advocating that but I do think we should try to be

sensitive to the people around us and, whenever possible, reach out to them. It would create a fellowship blessed by God and a blessing to us all.

Next, the church is a place of PRAYER and WORSHIP. In Acts 1 it says “the people were constantly devoting themselves to prayer (verse 14)” and I believe it was while in prayer and worship in the Upper Room, that the Holy Spirit came upon them that first Pentecost and filled the whole room with the sound of rushing wind, distributing on them tongues of fire. Suddenly, their worship came alive! And it continued so for we read in today’s passage that they spent time daily in the Temple, broke bread together, had prayers and spent much time praising God.

I rarely miss church, but two Sundays ago I could hardly get out of bed. Knowing Dave was preaching and that most other duties could be handled by other capable people I called Dave at 7:00 a.m. and asked if I could be excused. He graciously said “yes” and I went back to bed. I have had back problems off and on for years and I know how it works but that Sunday afternoon I started getting much better for no apparent reason except for one thing: many of you were praying for me! Thank you! I felt your prayers lifting me, literally. Prayer is that powerful and a praying, worshipping church is powerful for God’s purposes. God honors our prayers and answers them. God is blessed by our worship and it is pleasing to God, and in turn, God honors a church and the people who pray and worship with their whole heart.

Next, the church is a place of STUDY and our primary document is the Bible. One of our confessions says the Bible is “an infallible guide to faith and practice.” It is necessary to know the Scriptures if we are to know our faith and how to live accordingly. It scares me when I think that people of other religions often know their holy writings better than we know ours.

Consider this, for instance: There is a large Moslem university in Cairo, Egypt called AlAzar. It has over 20,000 students an entrance requirement that goes way beyond grades and tuition. Every applicant to AlAzar is required to repeat from memory the entire Koran, a book about the size of our New Testament! It takes approximately three days to recite it cover to cover. How many of us would be willing to memorize the New Testament in order to get into a Christian university? How much of the New Testament do you personally know by heart? If someone asked you to show them from the Bible the reasons for your beliefs or how they might come to know the Lord or find salvation, could you help them, could you show them the road to faith? I hope so.

The Early Church, like Christians today, was surrounded by powerful secular, pagan forces. They knew they were experiencing great fellowship and enjoying the fruits of profound worship and prayer. But they wanted to understand their faith, too. That is why they also studied. Our text says “they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.” And when they were called to defend or share or understand their faith, they were ready because they had spent time learning the sacred teachings. And so should we!

Finally, the church does not exist for itself; it exists to spread the Good News. The fourth ingredient of a church is OUTREACH, the ability to share our faith and tell others about it. Another word for this is “evangelism” – the art of sharing the good news with others. Unfortunately, the way some people evangelize is so unappealing that many of us are just plain “turned off” to evangelism altogether. That’s too bad because God needs good evangelists and we never know when we might be called upon to share the gospel of Christ.

Out of the blue one day a nurse called the church. “There’s a man here at the rest home. He is rude and unruly, in fact he is incorrigible and he is dying,” she said. “He wants someone from a church to come visit him.” I dropped what I was doing and went right over.

It was a run-down facility, not exactly a nice place to die! He was an old man, stuck over in a corner of a ward, very much by himself. He looked lonely, depressed and afraid and he did not seem to be in very good health. We talked for a few moments. The subject turned to God and then to his relationship with God. The truth is, he did not know where he stood and I knew I was sent there to help him. “Would you like to know God better? Would you like to be certain that, when you die, you will go and be with God and with Jesus?” I asked. “Yes,” he said, without a moment’s hesitation. So I prayed with him and I asked him to ask Jesus into his heart, and he did. He seemed greatly relieved. We parted friends, friends in Christ!

A few days later the phone rang. It was the nurse. “I thought you would like to know, Albert died this morning.” “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. The nurse went on, “I just have to ask you, what happened when you were here? I mean, Albert has been a different person since the day I called you. He has been quiet and kind and he died with a smile on his face.” The issue of outreach and evangelism is more important than we can imagine. God calls us, from time to time, to share the good news and usher people into a whole new orientation. Thus, “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The people of the Early Church responded to the resurrection with a profound sense of fellowship and they became a people of great prayer and worship, study and outreach. I would hope that we, in this church, could glimpse the contagious joy of what they were doing and follow in their footsteps. Amen.