Eager to Gather

Last in the Spring 2017 series “Eager to Do What is Good.”

# Scripture: Acts 2:29-47

# Key question: Why are Christians eager to gather together?

# Intro:

Your time is limited. Your energy is more limited. What is so important about gathering together with fellow Christians? Today I want to work on the answer to this question. We will only get started on some of the reasons. But my hope is that we will all find sufficient cause to be “Eager to Gather” with the people of God.

# What is the unifying factor in the congregation?

 When we talk about the unity of a local congregation, there are many ways to approach the question. But this morning, I want us to think about Acts chapter 2 and then ask, “What is the essential spiritual unifying factor the transformed the first congregation?” My first thought would be to reply, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ.” But then I remember that even after the resurrection, the disciples were waiting for something more. And that something made the difference. So I have to answer that it was the presence of the Holy Spirit which made a transforming difference in the disciples and gave them a spiritual unity even beyond their common truth in Jesus.

The difference between a secluded Acts one church gathered behind closed doors in fear of the Jews and an empowered church in Acts two with Peter standing on the street preaching a message to which 3000 people respond can only be one thing—the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the gathered disciples in the beginning of Acts 2. The Holy Spirit made the difference. From then on, the disciples operated on a different level.

For example, think of Peter’s bold words to the rulers after the healing of the lame man.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is

“‘The stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:8-14

The Jewish leaders hated what was happening, but they knew a God thing when they saw it. The NT writers knew the source of the difference, Peter was filled with the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the church led to signs and wonder, bold and fearless preaching, displays of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, and spontaneous sharing of goods as there was need.

# What are the crucial functions of a church?

If the Holy Spirit is the underlying unifying spiritual force in the church, what things should the church be doing through the Holy Spirit’s power and leading? What should be the normal functions of church life?  How do we recognize a real church? If we think it is important to gather, then it is important to know what the gatherings of the church should be about. This awareness is particularly important today when sadly, from a legal standpoint in the US, anyone can just order an ordination certificate online and then get a few friends together at your house and call it a church.

Chuck Colson in his book The Body lists six marks of the “new community” which I’m calling the community of faith. (P. 128). I will be adding two more with which I’m sure Colson would have agreed. At least three of them you won’t get anywhere else except through a church body meeting together.

## Unity

The unity of the local body of believers is a shared sense of being in the family of God together. It has formal dimensions of membership that identify its core group, but it embraces more who may not yet be official members but who agree with its tenets, practice its beliefs and assist in its ministries. Whenever these people are gathered there is an almost palpable sense of unity. Paul described it this way as he encouraged the Ephesian church.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Eph 4:3-6

John Wesley also believed that a denominational church should have a sense that the true church is bigger than any one denomination (See Sermon 39 Catholic Spirit). There is a unity that is greater than an individual church. Because of this, I am always suspicious of teachers who act like they have a corner on the truth.

## Primacy of the Word of God

The primary source document for the church, which is itself a great unifying factor is the Word of God. Unfortunately, today there are many churches where you can attend for weeks and weeks and hardly be exposed to the Word of God. What is worse, there are some churches today that really only believe in parts of the Bible. Judging from their messages, their primary sources are news stories, movies and contemporary culture.

But in the true church, the Bible is always the key book. One of the dictums of the

Reformation was, “Sola Scriptura,” which means “Scripture alone” is the source for our doctrine. Even though John Wesley, founder of Methodism, was an avid reader of many books, and was very learned, he was still known as the “man of one book,” for his dedication to the Bible.

The true church always is looking into God’s Word for answers. The church sponsors Bible studies and encourages people to read the Bible and memorize it. Part of the underlying philosophy sounds like this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Tim 3:16-17

## Fellowship

This is the mark of the church we are emphasizing this morning. Sometimes you find a church were all you really have is a collection of individuals who happen to choose to worship in the same location. They hardly know each other and make no contacts other than to say, “hi” on Sunday. Often in this kind of church, attenders don’t live in the neighborhood of the church either. If someone is missing for a couple weeks, no one will notice, unless it is the minister. Is this really a church? Certainly not as God intended because there is no family feeling. The group is not caring for its own. Its identity is around a place or a minister, not around the group of worshipers or its collective mission.

## Administration of the sacraments

The true church administers the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. In Protestant churches we only have those two sacraments since those are the two liturgies that Jesus most specifically instructed us to practice. A full explanation of the blessings of each will have to wait for another day. But certainly this is a benefit that can’t be received anywhere else.

## Prayer and worship

It is the function of the people of God to lift up a “sacrifice of praise to God.”

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. Heb 13:15

It is our job as Christians to pray together. I attended a meeting this past week where Bishop Bickerton was describing the three characteristics of the thriving churches in his area. The very first one he had noticed was this: “evidence of a deep spirituality.” Where do you see this characteristic most easily? When the church is at prayer.

##  “Supernaturally endowed under the seal and with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (Gifts & fruits)

Here Colson is emphasizing that any true church exhibits the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. I have already mentioned that the Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual unity. He is also our spiritual power source. Things happen because the Holy Spirit is present that would not happen without him. There are attitudes and characteristics of a true church that can only be explained by the presence of the Holy Spirit. If everything that is happening can be fully explained from a human point of view, then it is not necessary to posit that the Holy Spirit inhabits that group. But if some things just cannot be explained on a purely human level, then certainly, a God thing is going on in that group of people. It is evidence of a true church.

I could tell many true stories from my last church which was a spiritually powerful church. I don’t think I was always as aware of it as perhaps I should have been. For one, I think of the story of Fran. Tall and thin and in her upper 70’s, unbeknownst to her, she was followed as she drove home from the bank one day by two men. Reaching her drive, one got out of his car and then asked her for something. When she hesitated, he quickly stepped forward and snatched her purse. When Fran held on, he yanked so hard that he threw her to the driveway, breaking a bone in her arm and causing a concussion as well if I remember rightly. The criminal was captured, jailed, and convicted. As for Fran, as soon as she was partially recovered, she actively reached out to forgive the robber. Why does a victim respond like that? That only happens by God’s Spirit at work in a person’s life.

Here are the two functions of the true church we need to add to Colson’s list.

## Active serving of the needs of others both in the community of faith and outside it.

This is the active love of Jesus at work in the world. Our sermon series is “Eager to Do What is Good.” The writer to the Hebrews encouraged the church saying,

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Heb 13:16

In our bible studies we have been studying 1 John. John is very blunt that if we do not love in practical ways, we are not related to Jesus.

 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 1 John 3:14-17

Of course, we serve spiritual needs when we pray and when we share testimonies and Scripture verses; but the Bible asks us to go further and share our love in very tangible ways. The true church is always noted for this as well. Incidentally, the second characteristic of thriving churches that Bishop Bickerton had observed was “a sense of mission that was known by the laity.” This kind of mission usually involves service of some kind. When I told our church Council about Bishop Bickerton’s list, within moments, they thought of the various ways we support the Food pantries in our area. It’s not our only mission but it is one of them.

## Outreach

The true church also is under a strong commission from Jesus to reach out to others with the story of Jesus, the truth of God’s word, and the message of God’s forgiveness. We are witnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus which are described in the Word. Through the Holy Spirit, we seek to help others discover the God of the Bible for themselves. This is evangelism or outreach or making disciples, whatever term is used. It is what Jesus commanded when he said,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matt 28:19-20

If this work is not a part of the agenda of a body of believers, then they are not fulfilling one of the key tasks that Jesus assigned to the church. The true church is always a disciple-making church. Not surprisingly, Bishop Bickerton observed that the third characteristic of thriving churches that he had observed is that they know what “evangelism” is. They were attempting to reach out to others in various ways to help them discover the joy of following Jesus.

All Christians need to be eager to find a true church with which we can gather. There are many of them, and I believe we have found one right here. All eight of those characteristics are here. We work on keeping them all strong. I hope you have found it so as well.

# What are some more benefits of meeting together?

Those are the functions of the true church, but there are other kinds of benefits that people receive from being a part of the church too. Let’s talk about four of them.

## Encouragement

One of the first benefits that comes to mind is encouragement. The church fellowship is an encouragement machine. Listen to the writer of Hebrews.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb 10:23-25

So one of the intentional purposes of the meetings of the church is encouragement. Check out Paul’s description of the functioning of the church for encouragement.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rom 15:4-6

## Preparation for Ministry

Another benefit that people receive in the church is help in being prepared for and then doing the ministries for which God has created them. Remember that we learned from Eph. 2:10 that God has prepared good deeds for each us to do, deeds that are uniquely suited to our own temperament, gifts and experience.

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Eph 2:10

There is nothing worse than having that feeling of sitting on the sidelines in life. God has designed his church so that the people of God do not need to ever have such a feeling. Instead they will feel purposeful, because they are about the business for which they were created.

One of the specific jobs of pastors according to Paul is to prepare the people of the church for the ministry God has chosen for them.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Eph 4:11-12

So one reason we should be eager to gather with the people of God is so we can be prepared for our own ministry. Our sense of purpose in life will be greatly increased as a part of the family of God. This preparation happens through sermons, classes, personal encouragement and on-the-job training.

## Hear Testimonies

A third reason why we are eager to gather together, another benefit of gathering is the privilege of hearing the testimonies of others. This benefit is very important to our spiritual growth, to our confidence in Christ, to our personal encouragement and to our own witness. When we hear recited the victories and joys of others resulting from the work of Jesus in their life and in answer to their prayers, we learn vicariously what God can do in our lives. We are encouraged to step out in faith ourselves. We have stories of faith to tell others beyond our own. We gain confidence in God.

In the book of Revelation, John tells how in one of his visions he was told about the power of testimony.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. Rev 12:10-11

Some of the testimonies of which John wrote were the testimonies of martyrs, as is still happening today in our world as well.

# Conclusion

## Character Formation-- My Personal Testimony

I remember going to church since I was a little boy. So maybe I should share something that I feel has been a great benefit to me from being in church nearly all the Sunday’s of my life. I would pick character formation as one of the key benefits I have received. I opened my life to Christ as a small child. It is one of the reasons I believe so strongly in children’s ministries. Children understand much more than adults give them credit for. I remember committing my life completely to God in my home church at the altar after a stirring message, one of many times I have done so. The church has shaped me. It has been my exposure to the Word of God read and preached that defined for me selfishness and unselfishness; love and hate; deceit or integrity; greed versus generosity; thanksgiving over against grumbling; and bearing burdens and going the second mile versus social isolation or worse, provocation. It was faith learned in the family of God that grounded my optimism and hopefulness in something beyond having a good day. Who I am today is very much a product of the family of God; and of many parts of it; multiple churches especially the small country church like this one in which I was raised; the three Christian colleges where I have studied, and the three church families I have served as pastor. People today pay for a life coach. And I understand that. But I have to testify that I have received a great deal of coaching in life, shaping influences, transformational teaching through the church. And I believe you can too!