

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Acts 2:42-47**

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I begin with an outrageous claim: August 24, 410 AD may well be the most important date in American history.

Though this event took place some 1600 years ago, it is significant to every American today. If you will listen carefully you may discover a key to our near future in the distant past.

On August 24<sup>th</sup> in the year 410 Rome fell. For 800 years this city had stood unscathed. During the past 500 years it had been at the epicenter of the world's greatest empire, and ruled the nations as the preeminent city on earth. But, by the year 410, the empire was already unraveling.

A few years before, a barbarian army of 200 thousand crazed killers swept out of the forests of Germany. Known as the Visigoths, they swarmed southward leaving destruction and desolation in their wake. Swatting aside the legions sent against them, this barbarian swarm moved inexorably and ruthlessly toward Rome. Rejecting last minute peace offerings, the Visigoths sacked the defenseless city. August 24, 410 was the beginning of the end for the greatest empire that the world had ever seen. With Rome's fall, Europe began its torturous descent into the Dark Ages.

There was a saying in those days, "If Rome sneezes the whole world gets a cold." The news of Rome's fall shook the ancient world. Economic markets collapsed overnight. When the news reached the shores of North Africa, panicked citizens rushed to see their great spiritual leader, St. Augustine. There were two reactions: 1) Pagans were screaming that Rome had fallen because the emperors had abandoned the old gods. 2) Christians frantically wondered how the church was going to survive after the collapse of Rome. In response to these two reactions, St. Augustine wrote one of history's greatest classics: *The City of God*. His riveting analysis is relevant for America 1600 years later, if only we will heed his words.

Augustine gives three reasons for Rome's fall on August 24, 410: 1) the unraveling of moral values; 2) a huge influx of immigrants. More than 70 percent of Rome's people were aliens who did not share the old values; 3) by the time the barbarians were at the gates, the people of Rome no longer had the moral strength or patriotic zeal to withstand the terror from outside.

What are the lessons of the lessons of August 24, 410? Rome fell in a single day, but her fall began years before. Like ancient Rome, in America there is an unraveling of moral values that once made us strong, rendered worse by a flood of immigrants with different values. And militant is sweeping across

Europe like the Visigoths of old. Will a postmodern and post-Christian generation be strong enough to stand up to the terror at our gates?

Augustine, in his *City of God*, gives us hope. He sees two cities in this world: the first he calls *de Civitate Homen*—the City of Man. That would be the Rome of his day. For us it might be Washington D.C. Augustine calls the other city *de Civitate Dei*—the City of God. That would be the church. He argues that our hope can never be in the *City of Man*. The great cities of this world are doomed ultimately to fall like Babylon or Rome. But there is another city: *the City of God* or the church. It is the salt and light in *City of Man*. In Matthew 5:14 Jesus said that his people are to be like a “city on a hill” that lights up the whole world.

St. Augustine would say that, if we don’t want August 24, 410 to come to America, our churches must transform the *Cities of Men*. If not, we will be too weak to stop the barbarians at the gates. Our future is not so much in what happens in the politics of Washington DC or the financial markets of New York City, but in that *City of God* that shines its light in the darkness. It is through local churches that the next generation is transformed, great families are built, immigrants are reached, and communities are changed through Christian mission. St. Augustine would give us the same principle we learn from a local church in the city of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago:

**The only hope for the darkness  
is that the “City of God”  
shines as the “City on a Hill.”**

We ignore August 24, 410 to our own peril. In the March 2008 issue of R.C. Sproul’s *TABLETALK* magazine, eminent theologian Jay Adams writes these words of warning to the young generation who will inherit America:

“If you haven’t already, you would be wise to learn some Spanish. More importantly, you should become thoroughly acquainted with the tenets of Islam...because if God doesn’t intervene, you’ll be up against warfare with Muslims...My concern is the softening of the church....look around you. Ask yourself, ‘Could the church in its present condition endure terrorist persecution?’”

There was a new church in Jerusalem. It started with a handful of people meeting in the second story of a backstreet house. But, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, that small group of believers caught fire with a passion that changed their world. They became the *City of God*

that changed the city of Jerusalem, and eventually the world. Their story is recorded in the book of Acts. I believe that Jesus wants this to be the story for every local church. Igniting our passion for God must rekindle our passion for the local church. What do we learn from Acts 2:42-47?

**1. A church with power is a church with particular passions.**

According to pollster George Barna, Christians are increasingly giving up on the church. Less than half of all Americans who claim to be Christians attend church. The Millennial Generation (those born between 1985 and 1995) make up 80 million of our population. Some 85 percent of them believe in Jesus, but less than 10% of them will label themselves as Christians. They admire Jesus but find the church to be messy, irrelevant and boring. Increasingly, older evangelicals are church-hopping consumers.

But I want you to notice at the outset, three things about those Christians in Jerusalem: 1) **They were passionate about their church.** Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves..." The Greek word for *devoted* means "to wrap you're your arms around something (or someone) and never let go." This word *devoted* defines passion. 2) **Their church was a local church.** They devoted themselves to one, specific, local body of believers under the oversight of one group of elders. 3) **They were passionate about particular things.** They were intentional in their focus, with specific core values that drove their mission. If you look on the back of your bulletin you will see that they were the same nine values that we aspire to at Covenant:

1) **Passionately worshipping God.** If you read verses 42-46, you will read a list of core values that drove their passions. Verse 47 begins, "Praising God..." The original Greek sentence structure is specific: everything else that is listed up to this point flows out of "praising God." Praising God was their primary focus. Verse 46 says, "Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts." That's where the Jewish people gathered to praise God publicly. Though they became followers of Jesus, they didn't stop being Jews. They remembered the most fundamental tenet of Judaism: life is about worshipping God. Even Islam knows that fact. I can't tell you how often I have been in Africa, the Middle East, or Asia, only to be awakened at 5 o'clock in the morning by Imams on loudspeakers calling the faithful to get out of bed for morning prayers and worship. And, as I wrap my pillow around my head, trying to muffle those Islamic praises to Allah so that I can get some more sleep, I realize how lazy we Christians are. The Protestant Reformers coined a phrase that drove their passions: *Soli Deo Gloria*. "To God alone is the glory in everything." The chief value, from which every other value flows, is passionate worship. They gathered

*every day* in the temple courts. There can be no higher priority in a church, or an individual Christian's life, than passionately praising God.

2) **Measured by the Bible.** Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." What did the apostles teach? The book of Acts tells us that they taught the Old Testament Scriptures, they gave the teachings of Jesus, and those became the New Testament Scriptures. These early Christians couldn't get enough Bible teaching. They believed it, devoted themselves to it, and were consumed by it. Jay Adams warns our post-modern American generation that we will be undone by softening the doctrinal truths of the Bible. In his *TABLETALK* article he says that the problem with today's evangelicalism is that "we want to get along with everyone else..." He reminds us that in the book of Acts we read a reoccurring phrase: they spoke *boldly*. If we lose the courage of our biblical convictions, what hope will we have when the barbarians are at the gates? Militant Islam will not be stopped by soft talk designed to appease seekers.

3) **Dependant on prayer.** Verse 42 says that "they were devoted...to prayer." This was a church birthed by prayer. 120 believers had prayed together all night when the Holy Spirit fell on them. Later that same morning, 3,000 people came to Christ. A few months later, the church was growing so rapidly that the authorities hauled the Apostles into court, and told them to stop preaching. After they reported this threat to the church, Acts 4:24 says, "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God..." After that prayer meeting, the church began to grow even faster. Someone wrote, tongue-in-cheek: "This ancient church was so dependant on God's power that it wouldn't have lasted a second without the Holy Spirit. But we are so well organized with Harvard Business School technique that the Holy Spirit could leave and most churches wouldn't miss a beat." Without prayer, we cannot survive or succeed in our mission.

4) **Investing in caring relationships.** Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves...to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread..." Verse 46 says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts..." This was a church scattered in the community, and gathered together in one another's homes. People took the time to invest in caring relationships. We live in an age of gated communities and Internet intimacy. Starbucks is successful because people want to find living room gathering place complete with sofas and coffee. People are desperate to connect.

One word describes New Testament churches: *hospitality*. In the original Greek it is a combination of two words: *xenōs* and *phileōs*. Literally it means

“to love strangers as brothers.” The word *xenōs* was a Greek word to describe aliens, foreigners, and immigrants. America has been built on successive waves of immigrants. Its founding values were set by people who came out of the Protestant Reformation. But each of the successive waves of immigrants has brought religious and cultural values that are increasingly farther away from those of our founders. In terms of sheer numbers, the largest influx of immigrants in our history is taking place today. Along with a flood of Latin Americans, we are seeing waves of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslims from the Middle East and Asia. America is no longer a melting pot, but Balkanized into ethnic groups with different languages, religions, and cultural values. More than ever it is imperative that Christians evangelize immigrants. Hospitality demands that we love aliens as brothers. The world has come to America and foreign missions can take place in our own backyard. I believe that planting Hispanic and Haitian churches should be the number one priority of our missions outreach. If August 24, 410 teaches us anything, it is that cities full of immigrants who don’t share our values will be disastrous when outside terror is at the gates.

5) **Building strong families.** Verse 46 says, “...they broke bread in their homes.” This was a church that met in homes. Children were not excluded from the meetings. If you read some of Paul’s epistles, he directly addresses children as if he fully expects them to be in the church meetings. Hustling kids away to children’s church is a new innovation in the church. Splitting our ministries up into age-graded demographic groups is new too. The ancient church was intergenerational. They understood that if they were going to make a lasting transformation of the world, they had to reach the next generation through building strong families. That began by discipling dads to be strong leaders in their home, and building strong marriages so that children would grow up in healthy homes. In an age where families are unraveling, and children are not made strong for adversity, we are more vulnerable than ever to the Visigoths of our age.

6) **Generous with resources** Verses 44&45 says, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to everyone as he had need.” Because of disease and death 2000 years ago, there were lots of widows and orphans. Poverty was a way of life. There were few social services, no social security benefits, government welfare programs, or pension plans. So the church took care of those who were widows, orphans, handicapped, diseased, and disposed. Notice that phrase: “they had everything in common.” In other words, they lived by this simple philosophy: “what’s mine is yours.” If someone had a need, someone else liquidated his assets and met that person’s needs. It was

voluntary charity, not government-enforced socialism. Look back at the history of the church: almost all hospitals, charities, schools, orphanages, universities, and every other social agency was started by the church, not the government. It was that commitment to being generous with resources in the Early Church that won pagans over to Christ. In India, Christians are persecuted. But, when I was recently in Calcutta, I found that Hindus, Muslims, and Communists all spoke well of Christianity. Their good opinion can be boiled down to a single person: Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

7) **Striving for excellence.** The word *devoted* in verse 42 speaks to everything that follows in the next five verses. They gave it all. There was nothing haphazard in anything they did. What is excellence? It is to give your best in everything you do, from our worship, to our Bible teaching, to the condition of our facilities, to the quality of our strategic planning, to the way we welcome visitors and share in one another's needs. Excellence is a passion to do all things for the glory of God. Excellence has no other desire than to hear Jesus say to us one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

8) **Living in God's grace.** Did you catch their attitude at the end of verse 46 and beginning of verse 47? "...and (they) ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people..." These were people who had discovered the joy of grace. They knew that God had loved them unconditionally when they were still sinners, and that he had paid the full penalty for their sin through Christ's death on the Cross. As a result they had a sense of overwhelming joy in their salvation. Verse 46 says that they ate with *glad* hearts. Verse 46 says they had *sincere* hearts. The word Greek word for *sincere* means honest or transparent; nothing masked; no cover-up. They accepted one another for who they were, because God had accepted them for who they were. Verse 47 says that their focus was on *praising God*, not finding fault with one another or focusing on the negative. Most non-church folks are turned off by the uptight, judgmental attitudes of Christians. Ghandi once said, "I would become a Christian if I ever saw one." But verse 47 says that these joyous, grace-filled people "found favor" with the neighbors who were looking in on their home gatherings. When we live in grace, and treat others with graciousness, we too will find favor.

9) **They were committed to bold evangelism.** They were a church distributed. By that, I mean that they didn't stay in their holy huddles. They brought their faith to their neighborhoods. They took it with them to the temple courts where Jews without Christ gathered. They reached out to strangers through hospitality, and did works of mercy among those who had been neglected and abandoned by society. Later, a persecution broke out

against the church in Jerusalem. But Acts 8:4 says, “Those who had been scattered preached the gospel wherever they went.” The word for *preached* is literally “gossiped” in the Greek. Everywhere they went, they gossiped about Jesus. He’s the only one they ever wanted to talk about. Two things describe their evangelism: 1) **they were scattered**. Though they spent plenty of time with one another, they were out in the world; and 2) **they were bold**. They didn’t hold back for fear of others. This was lifestyle evangelism.

All these core values were accomplished because people were passionate about the church. And their church became the “City of God” that shined brightly like a city on a hill. It was never hidden because it lived out such wonderful core values in the sight of the watching world. These lived-out core values led to a second fact:

**2. Irresistible lifestyles transform culture.** Verse 47 says that all of all of the core values of the Jerusalem church flowed out of “...praising God...” But it goes on to say that something else flowed out of the fact they lived out these core values: “...and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” They began by praising God, which led to irresistible lifestyles, which resulted in people being drawn to Christ. Within a few months it is estimated that there were some 50,000 believers in a church that started with 120 people. They were a transforming church. They would have been satisfied to stay in Jerusalem, while enjoying a wonderful church experience, but God had bigger plans. He allowed a persecution to break out against them. So they were scattered abroad, taking the gospel with them. God never wants us to have anything less than a world vision. We cannot grow if we stay in our comfort zone. Jesus wants his gospel to penetrate every dark corner on planet earth. Look again at the back of your bulletin. There is a vision that drives our core values: “...to build bridges of irresistible influence to our daily network of relationships, community and world in response to Christ’s challenge in Matthew 5:16: *“Let your light so shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”*”

After August 24, 410 St. Augustine said that more than ever the *City of God* must take seriously its call to transform the *City of Man*. We stand again at a critical crossroads in history. Will we take this challenge for the sake of the next generation?

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