



Acts 2:42-47

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Someone once referred to Winston Churchill as a pillar of the Church. Churchill replied, "*No, no, not a pillar of the Church, but a flying buttress, supporting it from the outside.*" A flying buttress is an architectural structure used to help support the high, soaring ceilings of cathedrals. Like giant arms they reach out to hold up the church from the outside. For a variety of reasons, many Christians today support the church more like a buttress than a pillar. They keep the church at arm's length. They stand at a distance, afraid to get too close.

My purpose in this message is very simple. I want to persuade you to get connected in the Church in a very practical way. I want you to go beyond being a buttress of the Church, to be a pillar of the Church. I want you to support it from the inside and not just the outside. I want you to commit yourself to the worship, the ministry, and the fellowship of the *local* church!

Many Christians today are not sure what to do with the church. Some Christians at best are confused, and at worst are disillusioned. More than anything, they just don't see the point. Like a child who has experienced the pain of a broken marriage, some Christians have been hurt by the church or know those who have. As a result, they would rather not get too committed. That way no one gets hurt. Maybe you feel that you just don't get that much out of Church, or that you are too busy, or that church is irrelevant. Or it might be that you agree with the lines of this sarcastic little poem:

*"To dwell above with saints in love, why that will be glory.
To dwell below with saints I know—that's a different story."*

For all these reasons and more, many Christians today are saying that a personal relationship with Jesus is all you need. In their eyes, when it comes to the Church, especially the *local* Church, you can take it or leave it.

As for me, I still believe in the Church, not as my savior, but as God's chosen instrument for establishing his kingdom on earth. It's not always pretty, and it doesn't always run great; but like my first car, it gets you where you are going. I hope to restore your faith in the church as well, or at least renew it some. Great theologians throughout Church history like Cyprian, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all believed that if we have God as our Father we must have the church as our mother. More importantly, I believe the biblical passage before us proves the same point.

But if you are still not convinced, let me answer the question that might be on the edge of your tongue:

Why should I get connected in the Church?

I will lay out three reasons for you—three very *convincing* reasons I might add.

Reason 1: You need the Church. There, I said it. You need the church. It sounds so intolerant and pushy in our day, doesn't it? It seems so limiting to our sense of personal autonomy and liberty. It hits us as too definitive against our cultural backdrop of relativity. Nevertheless, I can say with absolute certainty today that it is God's will for you to get connected in His Church. It's not an add-on to the Christian life. It's an essential, and you need it for your own spiritual benefit. Don't view your Involvement in the Church as a heroic act of service for God and country. Let's start right back at the beginning. *You need the Church* and what it has to offer. It's okay. I have a hard time admitting my need too.

In **Acts 2:42-47** we are given a captivating and compelling portrait of the life of the Early Church, immediately following the magnificent outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.¹ The vibrant community of Christians described in this passage is the direct result of the ascent of the victorious Jesus to heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church. Here we have a picture of what the Church is and should be in its purest form. And what we see is phenomenal.

The first observation we make is that **they made an ongoing and eager commitment to the spiritual growth opportunities offered by the Church.** *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and to the prayers"* (v. 42). The Early Christians committed themselves to four activities that were given by God for their spiritual growth: (1) the teaching of the Word of God (the apostles' teaching), (2) fellowship, (3) the sacraments (the breaking of bread), and (4) prayer. Theologians call these disciplines "the means of grace" or "the channels of grace." They are the means through which God fills our lives with grace, strengthens our faith, and equips us for kingdom service. The Pentecost Christians got connected with the ministries of the church that were vital to their daily walk with Christ.

Look at the effect of their devotion: *"And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles"* (v. 43). The Early Church was filled with the joyous reality of God's presence. This was not a "yawner" Church. When they got connected to the worship of God, they were transformed by the power of God. The blessings of the gospel began to flow through them. They were changed, the world was changed, and God was glorified. Likewise, we will never grow individually as Christians nor see the power of God working in our church if we do not devote ourselves to these practices of worship, study, fellowship, and prayer.

Another important point is that **the early Christians devoted themselves to enjoying true Christian community.** Notice verse forty-four: *"And all who believed were together and had all things in common."* Don't worry. This is not a proof text for communism or socialism. I'm not convinced that this verse even speaks about money or possessions directly (verse 45 does that). What it shows is that the early Christians shared life together. They shared a common faith in Jesus Christ as Lord

¹ See Acts 2:1-13

and Savior. They shared a common experience of his salvation. They shared a common purpose as his servants and witnesses. That is where we get the word community. It is our *common unity*, or the *unity* that arises out of what we share in *common*. This was not a superficial sense of community that amounted to sharing a warm cup of coffee on a cozy leather sofa. Their lives were intertwined on a deep level, as the Holy Spirit wove their hearts together in a very real way.

We need to pursue Christian maturity *with* other believers. When we are saved, the Holy Spirit not only connects us to Christ, He also connects us to other Christians. As I Corinthians 13:12 says, "*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.*" We are united to Christ and we are united to Christians. It is our connection with Christ that redeems us, and it is our connection with Christians that strengthens us. All of it, however, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

We cannot do the Christian life on our own. We need the fellowship of other believers and the worship of the Church to keep the fire of our love for God burning. There is a story told of a pastor who tried for years to get an elderly man in his town to come to church. The man claimed to be a Christian, but didn't want anything to do with the Church or with other Christians. Finally, one cold, winter night the pastor went to visit the estranged saint one last time. He found the man sitting in a rocking chair in front of a burning fireplace. The pastor said nothing. He just grabbed a set of tongs from the hearth, took one of the burning logs from the fire, and set it off to the side by itself. Then he took his seat beside the old man. Both men watched as the log slowly lost its flame and went out. Finally, the pastor got up from his seat, placed the cool log back onto the fire, and left. Within minutes the log began to burn bright and hot. Get connected. You need the Church. Without it your fire will go out.

Something else I want to point out before we move on is how ***the weekly worship of the Early Church spilled over into the rest of the week.*** "*And day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people*" (vv. 46-47). It's great to come to worship on Sunday. That is a good starting point, but what about the other six days of the week?

I don't need to remind you of what a great athlete Michael Jordan was. Just the mention of his name brings to mind tongue-wagging slam dunks, swishing fade-away jumpers, back-to-back championship trophies, and of course, shoes. Most people do not realize, however, that Michael Jordan was the first NBA player to add a "love-of-the-game" clause to his contracts. This clause allowed him to play basketball anytime he wanted in the off season--something that was unheard of before then. What made Jordan great was his love of the game. I think when people join the church we should add a "love-of-the-church" clause to their vows that encourages them to get connected to other Christians during the week to worship, grow, and serve. If that sounds suspiciously like a small group, you're on to something.

Let me encourage you once again to get connected to the life of the Church and the lives of other Christians. You need it, you'll enjoy it, and you'll be changed by it.

Reason 2: The Church needs you. To know why we should get connected in the Church, we have to first understand what the Church is. The most common metaphor or image of the Church in the Bible is a human body. In I Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul explains, *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ....Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* (vv. 12, 27). Like our bodies, the Church is one entity made up of a variety of indispensable parts.

Now, let me ask you, which part of your body are you willing to go without? Even for a week? Which part of your body do you *not* need? Exactly. The body is perfectly designed. Every part is essential. Now some parts might be more important or honorable or visible than others, but each and every part is necessary for the body to do its work.

The church needs you, because you are one part of the body, and a very necessary part at that. If you hold back, you are not only hurting yourself, you are hurting the Church. The Church cannot function as it should without you. In Ephesians we are told that *"we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love"* (Ephesians 4:15-16). Do you see how it works? For the Church to grow, every part and every joint must be in place and working properly.

Have you ever spent an entire rainy afternoon putting together a puzzle only to find that the last piece is missing? It is frustrating, isn't it? The picture that the puzzle is meant to reveal is left unfinished, and the gaping hole where the missing piece should be shouts, "I'm incomplete!" The Church in our day, for all its wonderful traits, is not finished. Maybe you are the missing puzzle piece.

Another reason that you are so essential to the church is that **God has given you gifts that are needed by the Church.** As Ephesians makes it clear: *"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift"* (4:7). You see, Christ has equipped us for the task to which he has called us. It's not an impossible mission to be the Church. Furthermore, no single person has all the gifts. They have been distributed among the members. Nevertheless, each Christians has at least one spiritual gift.

Staying with the body image, we must all be connected together in order for the full range of spiritual gifts to be present and active. The gifts are not for your own personal enjoyment. They are intended to be used "for the common good" and to encourage other Christians, to build up the Church (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 14:1-5). If you are connected to Christ, then he has generously gifted you with supernatural and natural abilities that can serve the Church. The Church will always be

incomplete until you are connected in it, exercising in faith the gifts God has apportioned to you.

This means that the Church needs more than your money. *It needs you!* For some of us, it is easier to write a check and leave the hands-on ministry to the professionals. But as we all know, there are some things that money cannot buy. The Church needs your listening ears and your helping hands and your going feet. It needs your time and your talents. It needs your love and your prayers and your faith. It needs you.

Yet another reason the Church needs you is that **“fishing for men” is team sport**. When Jesus first called his disciples to follow him, he told them, *“Follow me and I will make you fishers of men”* (Matthew 4:19-20). By this he compared what would become the Great Commission to fishing. When we think of fishing today, however, we think of an individual with a single fishing pole. In Jesus' day, however, fishing was a team sport. They didn't really use fishing poles. Peter and Andrew were commercial fishermen, kind of like the ones you see on the TV show *Deadliest Catch*. They would go out in a boat and lower large nets in the water. When the nets were full of fish, it would take several strong men to haul them in. There just isn't any Lone Ranger Christianity in Jesus' conception of the Church, especially when it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission. If we are to make disciples of all nations, it will only be done together, as a body—a whole and complete body. We all need to put our hands to the nets.

Getting connected in the Church keeps us from becoming one of several less-than-helpful Church goers. First, don't be a **church critic**. This is the Monday morning pastor who always wants to tell you how it can be done better—by you! Listen to this great quote from an unlikely source, President Teddy Roosevelt: *“It's not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly ... who spends his himself in a worthy cause; who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have never known neither victory nor defeat.”* There you have it. God has not called you to sit in the stands and critique the way Church is done. He has called you to get in the game. I heard a joke once that those who can't play, coach; those who can't coach sit thirty rows back yelling at the referee. Don't be that kind of Christian.

On the way home from church one morning, young Isaac Watts (1674-1748) complained about the singing and music in their church service earlier that morning. In those days they only sang psalms without any accompaniment. His father simply and wisely replied, *“Well son, then do better.”* Watts went on to become one of the greatest hymn writers of all time, composing classic works like *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, *Joy to the World*, and *Jesus Shall Reign*.

Stop for a minute and ask yourself, "What is the single biggest complaint I have about my church?" Now that you have that issue in mind, ask yourself, "What am I willing to do about it?"

Secondly, don't be a **church hitchhiker**. Kent Hughes, in his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, describes disconnected churchgoers as "ecclesiastical hitchhikers." These church drifters say, "You go to the meetings and serve on the boards and committees, you grapple with the issues and do the work of the church and pay the bills—and I'll come along for the ride. But if things do not suit me, I'll criticize and complain and probably bail out—my thumb is always out for a better ride."² That's not who God wants you to be either.

Finally, don't be a **Church consumer**. Guard yourself from viewing the Church as a religious business that provides religious services for a fee. Make sure that when you come to Church it's not always to receive. The beauty of getting connected in the Church is that there is *reciprocity*. You give and you receive. If we all come to give, we all end up receiving. If you come to be ministered to for an hour on Sunday morning, why not offer to also serve for an hour? That's only fair, right? "Ask not what your church can do for you" You know the rest.

Just yesterday, our youngest daughter, Kate, brought a large book of *Fairy Tales* to me. It is a large, beautifully illustrated collection of stories that our girls love. Kate had torn one of the pages completely out. I almost cut my losses and considered just throwing away that page. But then I thought, the story won't be complete without that one page. The girls would be devastated at story time if their favorite part of the story was missing. Then I began to think about how the torn out page itself was worthless if it wasn't in the story book. Who wants one page from a story? So I taped it back in. If you are not connected in the Church, the story is not complete, and you on your own makes no sense either.

Reason 3: The world desperately needs the Church. The last reason, and definitely not the least, is that the world needs the Church, and it needs it desperately. I don't know if you are aware of it, but America has become a post-Christian nation. We don't need to go to the ends of the earth to find a mission field. But if we all get connected in the Church, and if we truly become the Church once again, God's power will flow through us to reach the lost. Look at the last verse in our passage and see how this dynamic was at work in the Jerusalem church. It concludes by saying that they were "... *having favor with all the people. The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*" (vv. 46-47). This was a fulfillment of what Jesus promised the Apostles in Acts 1:8: "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" When we are connected to Christ and to other Christians, the Holy Spirit comes and bears witness to the reality of Christ's lordship to

² Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pp. 169-170.

a watching world. The world needs us to rise to the occasion more than ever before. Why?

First, the average church in America is declining and the number of un-churched people is rising. George Barna wrote in 2004 that the number of un-churched adults had doubled since 1991.³ The Gallop Organization, which has studied church and synagogue attendance since 1939, found that in 1996 weekly church attendance fell to its lowest point since 1939—just 38 percent. The high was 49% in the years 1954, 1955 and 1958.⁴

Secondly, the cults and non-Christian religions are growing at an alarming rate. According to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, the Mormon Church tripled between 1965 and 2001, going from 1.8 million to 5.1 million members. The *Jehovah's Witnesses* have also tripled since 1965, going from about 330,000 members to roughly 990,000. *Islam* is growing rapidly in America as well, with mosques popping up all across the country. Between 1994 and 2000, the number of mosques increased 25% and the number of people associated per mosque increased 235%.⁵ The *American Religious Identification (AMRI)* survey in 2001 revealed that between the years 1990 and 2001, the number of *Hindus* increased by 237%, *Buddhist* grew by 109%, and *Wiccans* by 1,575%, totaling 134,000 self-proclaiming witches. American culture is fast becoming religiously pluralistic and post-Christian. However, we do not need to fear or despair. We just need to become the Church again. The Early Church faced a similar cultural setting in its day in the form of the pagan Roman Empire. Because they all devoted themselves to being the Church and pursuing the kingdom of God above all things, the world was radically changed for the better.

The last point I want to make is that **the Church is essential to the world.** Or at least it should be. Many today view the Church as irrelevant, but Jesus never did. In fact, he seemed to think that it was something essential to human history and culture. In the Sermon on the Mount he compared us to two of the most basic needs on earth—*salt and light* (see Matthew 5:13-16). Salt is a preservative and it gives flavor. As the salt of the earth, we preserve a decaying culture around us and add flavor to life. Light of course allows us to see, it warms the planet, and it causes plant life to grow.

Now imagine if salt was no longer available on earth. Or imagine that there was no longer any light. That's what it would be like for the Church to disappear. Maybe the Church as it is now is irrelevant; but the Church as God designed it and as the Bible describes it is far from irrelevant—it's essential. If we get connected and become what God has called us to be, who knows what will happen?

³ George Barna, "Number of Unchurched Adults Has Doubled Since 1991," Barna Research, online: www.barna.org (May 4, 2004).

⁴ Gallop Poll Topic: A-Z," The Gallop Organization, at www.gallop.com (Dec. 13, 2001).

⁵ Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Paul, Bryan T. Frochle, "A Report from the Mosque Study Project," *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* (April 26, 2001), 3; online at www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/.

Let's do a little logic exercise. The world needs the Church, and the Church needs you. Therefore You got it! Get connected.

Conclusion

During World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal. Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held after the war. First, he said, would come the sailors who had kept the vital shipping lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had fought the Germans on the battlefield. Then would come the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe from the sky. Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, "*And where were you in our critical days of our struggle?*" And from their ten thousand throats would come the answer, "*We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.*"⁶

One day, when it has all been said and done, and God's kingdom has fully triumphed over all, the saints and angels in heaven will ask, "*And where were you in our critical days of struggle?*" And those who have devoted themselves to Christ and his kingdom will reply, "*We were in the Church, with our hearts and our hands to the work!*"

*I love Thy Church, O God!
Her walls before Thee stand.
Dear as the apple of Thine eye.
And graven on Thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall;
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be giv'n,
Till toils and cares shall end.*

-Timothy Dwight, president of Yale

⁶ This is recounted by Don McCollough in *Waking from the American Dream*.