

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*, has written that, “The key for churches in the 21st century will be church health.” **The story of the church’s early life in Acts 2 details four signs of a healthy church populated with healthy disciples.**

Listen once again to verse 42 of today’s reading: “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” This Scripture gives us an up-close look at the early church, filled with the Holy Spirit and, taking its first steps like a toddler. I could describe the scene like this: “Mommy and Daddy, Grandma and Grandpa, get your cameras ready, because little ‘Church’ is about to get up and walk! Watch it learn and fellowship together and break bread and pray together!” This Scripture serves as a guide for examining our spiritual health. And if you think about it, a church will only be as healthy as those who belong to that church. So let’s evaluate our spiritual health this morning based on Luke 2:42.

The first sign of healthy Christians is that they devote themselves to the apostles’ teachings. The New American Standard Bible reads, “...*they were continually devoting themselves to the apostle’s teachings,*” reflecting a literal translation of the verb tense. *Continually* means they stuck to it, they persisted, they persevered. A Christian who is led by the Holy Spirit will never give up. The mark of a true church is not the attendance count or how beautiful the sanctuary looks. **The important issue is whether the church holds to the teachings of the prophets and the apostles, and to those of Jesus himself.** Christians who are alive in their faith have *a teachable spirit* and *a hunger to learn* more and more of God’s will through regular study of Scripture and by attentiveness to God’s Word. Albert Barnes once wrote, “Christians who are hungry for Holy Spirit inspired teaching will make time to be exposed to it.”

Sounds reasonable. Christians who are devoted to the teaching of the Word of God are like the Bereans mentioned in Acts 17:11. “*These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.*” Solomon, in writing to those who would listen, said, “*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools*” (Ecclesiastes 5:1). Friends, this is the first spiritual health check for today. Can those who know you see a person that has high regard for the Word of God and a natural curiosity for the things of God?

Another sign of a healthy Christian is their fellowship with other Christians. Fellowship (the Greek word *koinonia*) means to share in something which involves participation. *Koinonia* has various translations, such as, “fellowship,” “participation,” “sharing,” “partnership,” and “community.” The practical application is sharing material goods, sharing ministry, and becoming partners in the gospel. All of these are rooted in the spiritual reality of a connection between believers that is based on their connection to Christ. Christians not only devote themselves to the Apostle’s teachings, but unite in the work of spreading the gospel.

The Sunday School Times once ran a story about Christians in China, where there were several missionaries working together. When they held services, one particular man attended regularly, showing

much evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in his life. One day he acknowledged that he was a Christian and that he no longer worshiped his ancestors in the customary manner. This occurred at the Chinese New Year when he was supposed to perform the usual rites of burning paper and incense to his ancestors. When he refused, he was given fifteen days to recant or be beaten with one thousand strikes of the whip. As the fifteen days passed, a Christian from a different Chinese clan went to talk to the head of the clan of the sentenced man who was about to receive the thousand lashes. The Christian man explained, “We cannot stand by and watch our brother in Christ beaten, so we propose that if you insist in carrying out this sentence, we will all join with him and take our share of his lashes.” The head of the clan said, “If we would have understood the sharing of all things among Christians, such a verdict would never have been passed.” In the end, neither the Christian man nor his Christian brothers or sisters received one lash.

A healthy Christian has fellowship with other believers because he or she shares spiritual experiences with other Christians, building faith and trust. All church leaders feel disappointment from time to time. I was disappointed in a number 4 years ago. The number was 150. The last time we scheduled photos to be taken for a new church directory at Ken Mawr, only 150 photos were taken. Our church has over 300 family units. Over one half of our congregation decided it wasn’t important to them to be known in the fellowship of Jesus Christ here at KMUPC. I have a hard time understanding that because healthy Christians share in *fellowship* with their Christian family and with the body of Christ. And I’ll share a little side note: because our directory is over 4 years old, an update of our photo directory is due because all the children are four years older now; even if some of you prefer looking 4 years younger!

Besides teaching and fellowship, the first Christians also observed the “breaking of bread.” This phrase is an idiom that describes the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or what we commonly call Communion, which is to be observed in remembrance of Jesus Christ. The bread is in remembrance of Christ’s body that was given for us; and the cup is for remembering his blood that was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. When we consider all that God in Christ has done for us, there is a strong urge to participate in Communion with other believers—and to remember.

A powerful ruler once built a great palace. Among the rooms was a room that was always locked. It was called the Chamber of Memories. Every day he visited that room, but no one else was permitted inside. One day his servants got a peek inside the locked room, but found no silver, no gold, no precious jewels. All they saw was a humble shepherd’s robe; the one the king had worn before he came to the throne. The Lord’s Supper serves to remind healthy Christians of where we came from and that our sin put Jesus on the Cross. Healthy Christians strive to make decisions and live lives that demonstrate the fact that their lives are not their own. That’s why we take time to examine our lives in a service of Communion at least once a month.

Healthy Christians partake regularly in the Lord’s Supper and, lastly, they devote themselves to prayer. Without the power of God we can do no lasting work for Christ. A healthy Christian knows that if the church is too busy to pray there will be much activity but very little accomplished; lots of church programs filling the calendar without any life changing results. Watchman Nee wrote, “Our prayers lay the track on which God’s power can come. Like a mighty locomotive, his power is irresistible, but it cannot reach us without rails.” An artist or a musician cannot fully reach their full potential unless they

learn about and spend time developing their gift. Most people enjoy the benefits of beautiful works of art into which an artist put much time and effort. People appreciate the benefits of listening to music in which a musician has invested hours of practice. So it is with prayer. It is those who spend time in prayer daily and continually who bless all those around them, especially those for whom they have been praying.

The Christian Index ran the story of an African American gentleman who was in service to General Stonewall Jackson during the Civil War. Many noticed that he was able to discern whenever the General was about to mount another expedition. When asked how he knew, the man said. “Mr. Jackson prays every night and every morning. But when he prays more than one hour, two to three hours, during the night, that is when I pack his baggage, because I know we are about to go on another expedition.” A healthy Christian prays regularly, faithfully and wholeheartedly. And so does a healthy church.

Because the Holy Spirit was at work in the newborn church four things were clearly evident. **Disciples in the church lived lives devoted to 1) The Teachings of Scripture, participated in 2) Christian Fellowship, regularly observed 3) the sacrament of Communion, and practiced 4) daily Prayer.** The same Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of those who profess Jesus as Lord today. When we surrender ourselves to the Lordship of Christ, these four signs will be evident in our lives too.

I pray that every blessing of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit will be with each and every one of you—and with all the church in all times and places. Amen.