

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, January 2, 2011 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

The Family of God - Acts 2:42

On this first Sunday of 2011, I want us to think about the concept of family. I'm not talking about the way many of our modern families' have become – dysfunctional, fragmented, and disassociated. No, I want to talk about the model family - a family that stays together, shares together, and fellowships together. I want to talk about what a true family should be. I'm talking about the Family of God.

In 1970 Bill Gaither wrote one of the classic songs of my generation about this kind of family. He wrote:

*“You will notice we say ‘brother and sister’ 'round here -
It's because we're a family and these folks are so near;
When one has a heartache we all share the tears,
And rejoice in each victory in this family so dear.
I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God
I've been washed in the fountain cleansed by His blood!
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod,
For I'm part of the family, the family of God.”*

I'm glad to be a part of that family, through something God established called the church. Now, I have to be honest with you and tell you that there are churches out there that look like anything but a family in the Biblical sense. The church is not perfect, even though it's established by God and loved by God. The reason is because it's made up of imperfect people. But, it is God's church and that alone makes it worth becoming a part of. So, today, let's look to a passage of Scripture that describes what the Family of God looks like. Acts 2:42.

As you're turning, let me give you the context of this passage. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). So after His ascension, they went to Jerusalem to watch and pray. And sure enough, on the day of Pentecost, God sent His Holy Spirit down to indwell those first followers of Christ. And as a result, they boldly went out into the streets sharing the good news of Jesus. The Bible says that when Peter preached that day, many people were saved, and instantly, the church was born. In one day, the family of God grew from 120, to over 3,000. (2:41).

The rest of the book of Acts is an account of the shift that occurred from traditional Judaism to radical Christianity, and the struggles and victories that ensued as God began to work in and through the church. But in Acts 2:42, we find a description and a model of what God's family should look like and how it should function. In this verse, we see that God's Family – above anything else, is serious about Spiritual disciplines.

Acts 2:42 (NIV) says, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

The word *“devoted”* means *“standing ready in constant attendance.”* This church was obviously made up of saved individuals who showed the genuineness of their faith by continuing on in their pursuit of Christ. These newly adopted family members were consistently deliberate, constantly diligent, and continually devoted to the core spiritual disciplines of discipleship, fellowship, following Jesus, and prayer.

The fact that these individuals banded together and remained faithful is quite remarkable when you consider the hatred, the ridicule, and the persecution they most likely faced as they turned from their old way of life to follow Jesus in this upstart religion. But if you understand the true meaning of the word church, you'll see why they were called a church. The word church (*ekklesia*) literally means, *“the called out ones.”* So this was truly a church which was completely defined by the devotion to those spiritual duties which make up the unique identity of the church. And that is what made this family of God so effective.

Let's look briefly at these spiritual disciplines and see how they serve as examples for the church of today to emulate. First, this church was devoted to:

1. Scriptural Teaching

Some people believe that the church is a place. But that was not the idea God had in mind when He set out to establish His church. God designed His church to be a living and growing body of believers who would learn,

meditate on, obey, explain, and proclaim the truth of His Word. So having a commitment to God's Word would be a foundational cornerstone on which to build God's church.

This idea is found throughout the Pastoral letters of Paul in the New Testament. For example, Paul wrote to a young pastor named Timothy and said, *"If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed... Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.... Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."* **1 Timothy 4:6, 13, & 16 (NIV)**. So, a devotion to Scripture is clearly one of the basic and fundamental disciplines God's church should adhere to.

Now for the early church to recognize this and devote themselves to it is a testament to the wisdom and leadership of the apostles. But you have to understand, that the apostles didn't have a New Testament to teach from back then. They didn't have the benefit of scholarly works of theologians to glean from. They had something even better. They all had been eyewitnesses of Christ. So as the apostles taught, they were literally an extension of Christ's teaching. They taught what they had learned from the Master Himself.

Can you imagine hearing Peter tell the story of the time he walked on water? Can you hear Nathaniel talking about the time when Jesus found him and called him to be His disciple? Can you hear ole Thomas teaching a Sunday School class on faith, and using the time when he doubted Jesus' resurrection as an illustration? Those guys were able to make those stories come alive because they taught from experience. They were there when they happened! No wonder these new believers developed such a hunger and thirst for God's Word. The apostles taught in such a way that made them want to learn and grow in their faith.

Now if we are to be the church – the family of God that He wants us to be, then we too must devote ourselves to Scriptural teaching. You see, like it was with the early church, God's Word is the food and nourishment we need in order to grow and have power in this world. There is no other source.

But sadly, too often the church of today are guilty of either minimizing or ignoring the exposition and application of Scripture. Hosea wrote in **Hosea 4:6 (NIV)**, *"My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge."* When Sunday School classes become social clubs, the people are being destroyed. When people mostly hear messages from the pulpit about social issues or current events, the people are being destroyed. When family devotions are centered around one's devotion to their favorite team or restaurant, the people are being destroyed. The church cannot function on biblical truths or principles they have never learned. So I say it again: To be the church that God wants us to be, we must devote ourselves to Scriptural teaching.

The next spiritual discipline the church was devoted to was:

2. Fellowship

Now, in our culture, we might not consider fellowship to be a spiritual discipline. After all, fellowship is something we do when we sing the *"fellowship song"* on Sunday mornings. Fellowship is something we do when we gather outside the classroom for coffee and doughnuts before Sunday School. Fellowship is what we have when we have a pot-luck dinner in that place we call the *"Fellowship Hall,"* right?

We might think of fellowship in those terms, but for the early church, it had a different meaning. The word for fellowship in vs. 42 is *"koinonia."* It means *"sharing or having a common partnership, participation, and togetherness;"* in other words, a family. So this family of God saw fellowship as a vital part of their relationship with Christ. When they received Christ, they became partners with Christ and with all other believers. And the apostles taught them the importance of staying together. That is why they were devoted to fellowship.

They realized that their relationship with Christ and each other wasn't like a social club, where people just hung out together. They understood that it wasn't just a pot-luck dinner or greeting time in Church either. There was a purpose for their gathering. In fact, the early church was organized fellowship.

When we gather together, there ought to be a purpose for it. As believers, we ought to stand ready in constant attendance to actively participate in the life and purpose of the local church. We ought to be doing as the writer of Hebrews suggests, *"...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."* **Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)**

That's how we build each other up and encourage each other - through our fellowship. Another spiritual discipline this family of God was devoted to was:

3. The Breaking of Bread

Now some have suggested that this refers to sharing daily meals together, but in keeping with the context of these believer's devotion and desire to follow Christ, the correct interpretation of "*the breaking of bread*" is following Jesus' instruction to remember Him through partaking of the Lord's Supper.

In Communion, the believers identified themselves with the crucified Christ. And since we all are sinners saved by the grace of God through the broken body and shed blood of Christ, what more common ground do we have than at the foot of the cross?

Partaking of the Lord's Supper is one of the ways we acknowledge that what Jesus did on the cross is a finished work. He suffered and died for our sins once-for-all. There is no other sacrifice needed. Jesus was, is, and will forever be the only sacrificial Lamb who can take away the sins of the world.

Also, through the Lord's Supper, we are called to self-examination and repentance of sin. And nothing helps the church confront its sin any better than when we come together to remember the price Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. Finally, this family of God was also devoted to:

4. Prayer

The apostles taught these first believers the importance of prayer. No doubt, from their experience with Jesus, they relayed Jesus' message to them as He sensed the loss they would feel after His departure. He told them in **John 14:13-14 (NIV)** "*And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*" The early church took that promise serious. They believed that God would provide for all their needs, so they relentlessly pursued His help through individual and corporate prayer.

I mentioned earlier about the disciples leaving from the ascension of Jesus and going to Jerusalem to wait and pray. What I didn't mention was that they prayed for 10 whole days before God sent His Holy Spirit upon them. That is a relentless pursuit of divine intervention by the church.

In chapter 4, we see where the church prayed for the courage to witness. In chapter 7, Stephen prayed as he was being stoned. In chapter 8, Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans. In chapter 12, the believers gathered in Mark's house and prayed for Peter's release from prison. And in chapter 13, we see the church praying before sending out Barnabas and Paul on their missionary journey. Prayer was a normal and vital part of the early church's daily ministry, and the apostles especially gave special attention to it (Acts 6:4).

Oh how different things are today in our churches. Today, it takes a concert or a testimony of a famous person or big-name evangelist to draw a big crowd at church, while only a "*faithful few*" show up at prayer meeting. Why is that? Have we forgotten that Jesus said that we "*should always pray and not give up?*" **Luke 18:1 (NIV)**. Why are we ignoring the Biblical commands to "*Devote yourselves to prayer.*" **Colossians 4:2 (NIV)** and to "*Be...faithful in prayer.*" **Romans 12:12 (NIV)**? No wonder the church of today is so weak and powerless! No wonder folks are not being saved on a daily basis. We've unplugged the power supply of prayer.

Warren Wiersbie says, "*Prayer is both the thermometer and the thermostat in the local church; for the spiritual temperature either goes up or down, depending on how God's people pray.*" (Be Dynamic, pg 18).

Oh that we would realize the awesome privilege, power and purpose of prayer. Joseph Scriven knew the power of prayer as he wrote: "*What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*"

Conclusion: The early church – this diligent and devoted family of God - left us with the ideal model and example of what a church family should look like and how it should function. Vs. 43-47 bears out that it was the formula for the church achieving God's purpose and for growth, both spiritually and numerically.

43 *Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.* **44** *All the believers were together and had everything in common.* **45** *Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.* **46** *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,* **47** *praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people...."*

The church thrived as they continued to be serious about these spiritual disciplines. The believers were united. They took care of each other and anyone who had a need. They continued to grow in their faith and in their joy as they continued to meet together for worship and fellowship and teaching and breaking of bread and prayer.

The non-christian world didn't quite know how to take them. Many were won to the Lord through the witness of the church. Others marveled at their love and devotion these people had for one another, while others responded with threats and persecution. But either way, the clear message was that God was at work in the world through a devoted and committed church, and it was contagious for the last part of vs. 47 says, "*The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*" (47b).

The family of God was growing because they were fulfilling God's purposes. They were acting like a family by demonstrating true Christian togetherness.

My prayer is that Sonoraville's family will grow this year. But it won't happen by merely adding programs or personnel. It won't happen by building buildings or paving parking lots. We'll grow as we fulfill God's purposes. We'll grow as we act like a family of God by studying His Word together, by fellowshiping together, by praying together, serving together, and worshipping together in Christ.

So here's the challenge: Will you resolve this year to be a more committed member of this family? For some, that will mean a re-arranging of your priorities, because you've put some other things above the church. For some, it will mean a re-commitment of your time, talents, and treasures because you've let other things come between you and your prior commitments. For some, it will mean a first-time commitment to this family of believers. I'm not talking about joining the church, I'm talking about joining God's family by committing your life to Him. I'm talking about repenting of your sins and following Christ.

Then, once you've joined God's family, I would encourage you to join our family here at Sonoraville. You can look on the insert in your bulletin and see how you can join God's family and how you can join our family.

The bottom line is: We're family here. But more importantly, we're part of God's family; brothers and sisters living and growing and working and needing each other together under the authority of our Heavenly Father.

As we begin a new year, let's do it together, as God's children, in God's family, fulfilling God's purpose for the family of God.