



DERRICK I. TEMPLE, SR.

PH.D., MBA

HOW SHALL WE GATHER?

HOW TO THRIVE IN THE MIDST OF CHURCH DECLINE
- AN EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE -

FOREWORD

REV. DR. DONALD L. PARSON

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to every pastor who has undertaken in the past, present, or future, the high calling and high privilege of shepherding the flock of God. This book was written with each of you in mind, and I pray that what God has freely given me will be transferred to you. I pressed long hours to get this book done to not let you and God down. I pray that it will be confirmed for both me and you that each of our churches can and will thrive as we do "church" Jesus' way.

FOREWORD

I salute Dr. Derrick I. Temple, Sr. for having the prophetic clarity to discern the growing disconnect between the biblical portrait of the Church in Holy Scripture, and the caricatures that masquerade as "The Church of the New Testament" today. A quest to quickly remedy the *Pre* and *Post*-Pandemic decline of the Christian Church in America has led to a myriad of personas and perspectives disguised as churches.

I gladly agreed to pen this Foreword because I recognized that Pastor Temple has the intellectual and spiritual gifts to provide clear Bible-Based strategies for *Post*-Pandemic ministries. Derrick Temple's academic excellence, biblical acumen, scriptural understanding, pastoral, and practical experience has prepared him to share this important work *HOW SHALL WE GATHER?* for such a time as this.

He also possesses a determination fueled by the urgency of "Now." Derrick senses the correlation between church decline and society's slide into the abyss of godlessness.

I feel blessed and empowered because I had the gracious opportunity to read a *pre-release* copy of this manifesto for church revitalization.

FOREWORD

This book will become a must-read for those in the Body of Christ who are serious about remaining connected to our roots in Scripture as we innovate and resuscitate congregations on life support. You will be helped to recognize that God's methods are much more productive than man's marketing.

HOW SHALL WE GATHER? shares a sequential, cohesive, and church-changing plan, lifted from the Bible. A brief look at the "Introduction" and "Table of Contents" will tell you this is the publication you've been waiting for.

As a pastor, I've been blessed to see unbelievable growth and witness frightening decline in the local church and around the USA. I've prayed for men and women of God who would boldly remind us that a local church that will mirror the earliest Church Jesus promised to build could and can experience what they witnessed.

Thanks, Dr. Temple, for heeding the call.

-Reverend Dr. Donald L. Parson
Founder-Pastor, Logos Baptist Assembly
Chicago, IL

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

█ Derek L. Winkley, Sr. - Pastor, Holy Tabernacle Church, International █

My father in the ministry recognized gifts I didn't know I had. To have a preacher on his level define me as one of the best preachers he has ever known is a humbling blessing. Thank you, "Wink," for not only being my father in the ministry but also for being my friend.

█ Armond W. Brown - Pastor, Fellowship Baptist Church of Oak Cliff, TX █

My cousin, Armond W. Brown, always encourages and supports me in all that I do to the glory of God. His quiet strength and strategic support have meant more to me than words can express. His ingenious display of wisdom and knowledge has been my safety and my success.

█ Melvin Von Wade, Sr. - Pastor Emeritus, Mt. Moriah Baptist Church of Los Angeles, CA █

My cousin, who I call, "Uncle Mel" has been my pastoral trainer who groomed me for pastoral ministry. I will never forget when you prayed for me as God ejected me into the pastoral ministry, "Lord, I pray that you will give Reverend Temple wisdom that he doesn't know that he already has, and make new friends for him."

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

■ Donald L. Parson - Pastor, Logos Baptist Assembly, Chicago, Illinois ■

Never in a thousand years would I have imagined partnering with one of the most premier preachers I have ever seen, heard, and known. I recall how, at Bishop College, we would almost fight about who was the best preacher. We took preaching seriously. I would often pick Dr. Parson. How I bask in even the slightest dialogue with Dr. Parson, baffled by his brilliance, acute angles, and prophetic perspectives on the things of God.

■ Urban Christian Church of Oxnard, CA ■

My church, I know a church can thrive in the midst of church decline also because I have experienced it with you. You often hear me say that you are the sweetest group I ever pastored. I pray that you will stay in alignment with Jesus' will for His Church and that you will take the church to the next level when God sees fit for me to transition to another land.

■ My Sons, Grandchildren, and Generations to Come ■

My son, Alonzo, thank you, for championing everything I do and watching my back. I pray the "Ol' Man" is making you proud. No one can beat you doing what God has called you to do. Your gift will make room for you. Every book I write is in hopes of leaving a legacy for *all my children*, including my young lion and first-born son Derrick I. Temple, Jr., my grandchildren, and the generations to follow. Always remember, "Only what you do for Christ will last."

THE DAY THE CHURCH WAS BORN

After Jesus' construction plan for the Church was announced in Matthew 16:18, the next time we see the Church in action and attendance in biblical history was in the Book of Acts, during Pentecost. It is an interesting phenomenon how assaults are hurled at those whose theological convictions differ from their assailants. One of the greatest perils of Pentecost is not Pentecost itself but the vast controversies and church-denominational wars that have erupted over differing views of Pentecost.

One preacher ostracizing and attacking another preacher over theological differences thwarts thriving because Jesus' Church operates on unity and loving one another. How it impacts the autonomy of our own local churches can be non-detectable if we are not careful. When this happens, one whose dogma becomes divisive fights an unseen enemy for the rest of his ministry, and that enemy is himself. Some do not see the difference between Regular gasoline in their tanks versus Premium, but anyone who knows can see that can be a grave mistake.

It matters what type of oil is put in the engine. It will show in time. Battling over differences that will never be resolved drains the oil out of the engine of a local church.

Pentecost is about the engine and the oil. The Church of Jesus Christ is the engine, and the Holy Spirit is the oil. Jesus Christ is the driver, not us, or anyone else. This has everything to do with the striving of our local churches.

Not too long ago, the success of one's ministry could easily settle within the confines of one denomination. Denominations could easily be distinguished. Looking at the state of each of our denominations today, division is not a wise option because all our denominations are becoming dinosaurs. The Church is not the Church until we are all on one accord (Acts 2:1). Listed below are a few fundamentals cited to transcend partisan perspectives, especially among preachers, with the hopes of getting back to the basics of the Church's birth:

I. THEY HAD THE SAME PURPOSE

Acts 2:1a (KJV)

“¹ And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord . . .”

Caution is given to seeker-sensitive techniques tempered to draw more members into our churches. Think about it, the whole idea of finding out how to meet people's needs when they come to church versus people coming together on their own initiative with a single and more objective and worshipful goal in mind should be an easy adjustment to make.

One of the best examples I can give is the NBA. I love the game of basketball, and I have been loving basketball since I was a child. No, I mean, I really love basketball! I love playing it, I love

everything about it. I love it. But the NBA has changed drastically since the Dr. J, Larry Bird, and Magic Johnson era I grew up in. But I don't love the NBA any less. However, I do not appreciate all of the commercialism in the games that happens in the arena. To me, it's like a circus. There are games, activities, and much more that goes on in the arena before the game, at halftime, and during the game. That irritates me and cheapens the game, to me. With an earned MBA degree background, I cannot help but notice the marketing strategies they use, and boy, it is working! They recognize that not all who are in the arena love the game. As a matter of fact, many do not appreciate the game at all; they just love excitement. The marketers are not trying to get people to love basketball as much as they are trying to get them into the arena.

Our local church challenges can never afford to resemble the marketplace. Instead, they must always be a ministry place. We cannot succumb to the goal of just getting people into the arena. If that happens, only fans of the arena will be attracted, and players of the game will be rarely drafted, and they will not be appreciated. Furthermore, people who are attracted to church commercialism won't love Jesus; they just love excitement and ecstasy.

The 120 gathered in the Upper Room were there with the one goal in mind. The Upper Room was the arena, but that wasn't what they were attracted to. It was just a room. Regardless of the splendor of some of our sanctuaries and buildings, compared to the glory of God, they are simply, rooms. God had 120 major players in the Upper Room until the Holy Spirit blew the whistle. The 120 were attracted to the reason they were there, not the room they were in. They were there to wait for the power to play. They were coached by Jesus that once they received the power, they would be major players (witnesses) in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth (Luke 24:29).

We are gathered to guard the church arena from becoming a show, or a circus, filled with activities. Instead, we are gathered to understand our assignment.

II. THEY WERE GATHERED IN THE SAME PLACE

Acts 2:1b

“¹ . . . they were all with one accord in one place.”

If the Church is an *Assembly*, we are not members if either of us detests coming together in one *place*. COVID surely revealed to us how committed or non-committed many were. COVID pulled masks off our congregations and showed us our true face(s). It exposed our lack of immunization against the virus of fellowship.

Some may have been coming to church on Sunday mornings before COVID, but too many in our churches were not coming to church whenever the doors of the church were open, particularly when dear pastors prioritized prayer, mid-week ministry, and discipleship. The thought of coming to church daily or even regularly during the week was not even an option for many of our congregants, because it never was.

In 2023, the face of the local church is fading, headed toward becoming a virtual reality and not a seen and felt one. Now that many have mastered the media, we must stay tuned to the means by which Jesus wants us to truly gather, and be extremely cautious of an on-line presence versus gathering in His presence.

III. THEY RECEIVED THE SAME POWER

Acts 2:2 (KJV)

“² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.”

The modern-day 21st-century church does not solely rely on the Holy Spirit anymore. Too many preachers don't rely on the Holy Spirit for unction like they used to. They mistake Holy Fire for being loud. Many seasoned preachers clamor for relevance, feeling outdated, and antiquated, when old Isaiah said the youth shall grow weary, and the young men shall utterly fall.

Age doesn't negate spiritual power. Maybe a preacher may not have the energy like he used to, but spiritual power is more than energy. Spiritual power supernaturally enables the young and the old to execute. As far as the youthful and energetic is a concern, when we are loud with no power, we are lethal, just whooping and hollering.

Most churches worship with the same trends and models, but we rarely assess why. The real reasons why are because we are trying to figure it out. Ministry is difficult. Furthermore, it is also impossible to achieve without a chosen method. These are not as much criticisms as they are identifiers to give many an idea of why the Holy Spirit hovers more in Heaven than He does over local churches. He does so because we (as a whole) don't invite Him to come down like we used to in our church history.

But, since Jesus is building His Church, He is still pouring out His Spirit upon His Church. Our task is to pray for a fresh filling, and continue to be filled with His Spirit (Luke 11:13).

Notice the Bible says a *sound* from Heaven filled the house. That's all it was. It was the sound of the Holy Spirit like a rushing mighty wind that filled the house, but the Holy Spirit didn't fill the house. The Holy Spirit filled those in the house (Acts 2:4).

Allow me to try to explain it like this. When a tornado strikes, you will hear many say that it sounds like a freight train. But, it is not the sound that blows houses down, turns over cars, and kills people; the tornado is what kills people. The sound of a tornado and the tornado itself are two different phenomena.

Sound can do things a tornado can't do, but there are certain things sound can't do that a tornado can. I would rather deal with the sound of the tornado than the tornado itself. But it appears as though today's local church is getting more sucked into sounds than being sold out to the Spirit. The sound of the Holy Spirit that was approaching with the sound of a rushing mighty wind is one thing, but the Holy Spirit Himself is quite another.

Sound can fill an inanimate object, or room, but sound cannot fill a human being. Only the Holy Spirit can fill a human.

In today's church, many have mastered the art of noise, but at the same time, nothing spiritual or supernatural is seen in the sanctuary. Many respond to how a preacher sounds and do not screen the source. If he is blowing his trumpet under the power of God, they are disinterested. If he is about entertainment, they are electrified. More appear to be attentive to performances, and not demonstrations of power. Everything that glitters isn't gold, and everything that speaks of God is not of God.

Mistaking a lot of noise for spiritual power is not a mistake the local church can afford to make. The proof of power is what they do when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and released through them. As we appreciate a true anointing, we will be meaningful ministers and martyrs on a mission. We live to die, and after we die, we die to live again.

The filling of the Holy Spirit fueled the Church in the Book of Acts to travel further than the church parking lot. They were to be witnesses from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. True *Holy Spirit Fire* will make a timid Christian as bold as a lion, and that Christian's lifestyle will be centered around living a thriving life that is willing to live and die for Christ. A witness is not someone walking around the neighborhood with the Four Spiritual Laws or Gospel tracks (no offense meant). Neither is a witness a member of an evangelistic crusade or an attendee or participant of an evangelism conference. Witnessing is not what we inherently do. A witness is someone we inherently become. Jesus said when the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we will become witnesses. The only thing that qualifies us for witnessing is being endued with power from on high.

MUCH PRAYER, MUCH POWER; LITTLE PRAYER, LITTLE
POWER; NO PRAYER, NO POWER

IV. THEY HAD THE SAME PRAISE

Acts 2:3-11 (KJV)

"³ And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵ And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. ⁶ Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaens? ⁸ And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? ⁹ Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews, and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretes, and Arabians, do we hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God."

The supernatural dynamic is realized when read literally. The Bible not only says that sound filled the room, and the Holy Spirit filled those who were in the room, but the Bible also says *tongues fell upon each of them*, both men and women.

First, it must be distinguished that fire did not fall upon them, but *tongues* that were like fire fell upon them. Tongues fell upon them. For Luke to witness tongues that looked like fire, it had to be something that Luke and the others *saw*. Luke is using the best imagery he can to communicate a supernatural sight.

Luke states that tongues fell upon them, and they began to speak with those same tongues. If we do not interpret the Text in the literal sense, the power of Pentecost will pass us by. They did not speak with their own tongues, but they spoke with the same tongues that fell upon them.

Furthermore, these were “cloven” tongues (Acts 2:3) that fell upon them. Fire is what they looked like, but cloven was what they were. The word for “cloven” is **διαμερίζω** [*diamerizo*]. The word “Diamerizo” is used 12 times in the NT. Six times, it means “part.” Five times, it means “divide,” and only here, in verse 3, does this word mean “cloven.” The word means, *to be divided into different and even opposing parts, to be at variance, or to also be diverse*. Luke is very detailed in communicating to us that these tongues were different, but they all *looked* the same. They all looked like fire, but they were different tongues. In other words, Luke is saying that there were different dialects falling upon all those who were in the Upper Room. Luke, in the Book of Acts, goes further to substantiate his claim that they all spoke in different languages (Acts 2:4). These languages were known and not strange languages. The languages were recognizable and understood by those who were of different ethnic groups.

Getting back to the fire, Luke says the tongues *looked* like fire. There was no burning, but they were bright. Notice the order. The King James Version says “it” rested on them. However, the Greek word really means “they.” The New American Standard and other versions accurately state “they (tongues)” fell upon them.

Once the tongues (known languages) fell upon them, Luke says that they were *then* filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with those same tongues that fell upon them. In no way can we dismiss the power and the supernatural occurrence that took place when the Church was born.

Picture a newborn baby, and a glowing tongue falls upon the newborn. Then, the baby is supernaturally infused with the Holy Spirit and begins to speak English without ever being taught. Even better than that, the baby begins to praise God in articulate English, and speak the wonderful works of God (Psalm 8:2)! The words the baby use are praise words from Heaven. Praise was declared from Heaven, and the baby translated those words.

That's exactly what happened when the Church was born. The Church was an infant, but it was a powerful infant Church. The first words the newborn Church said were in the order of, "Praise God." Out of the mouth of even this babe, the Church, did God ordain praise. The peak of Pentecost was not the preaching of the apostle Peter, Baptism of the Holy Spirit, or speaking in tongues. The highest point of Pentecost was their high praise! Worship is the Church's ultimate priority. We, the Church were created to worship Him.

Regardless of the logistics regarding the differences between praise and worship that we theologians or preachers may pay the necessary attention to. We must dare not flirt with the ultimate priority of the Church. Worship was praise when the Church was born, and the worship they extended was praise.

Many of us may have declared at some time that preaching is the ultimate priority when we gather on Sunday mornings, while others may have claimed evangelism is the top priority. Then, there may be those who declared prayer as the main motif, but the fact is, worship is the ultimate priority.

A local church thrives when perfect gaze is directed toward the glory of God, and not the glory of man. Pentecostal praise is far beyond a denomination, sheer ecstasy, or shallow emotionalism. It transcends the worship gatherings of some of our nation's best expositors. I have been in worship gatherings where praise was so strong that the minister had no room to preach, and I am sure many of you have as well. One problem is that we are living in such shifting times, that people are not spiritually inclined, and many dear pastors are allowing it to affect their identity.

Now, we have so many ministers who are suffering from severe cases of insecurity and have given room for Satan to use them in embezzling God's glory. Social Media is a platform where it has become obviously evident. There's more advertisement going on than a true understanding of our assignment.

Look at this glorious Church, praising Him with the burning tongues from Heaven, shouting to the Highest His wonderful works. And they did so, with glossolalia that was glorious and glowing (languages nations could understand). If our minds can even begin to imagine the thunderous praise that resounds even now in Heaven, as the fiery Seraphim who are warring and worshipful angels of God join with the swift humble Cherubim in glorious praise, worshiping His majesty, we can then begin, in our own finite efforts, to comprehend the call to worship.

What good deed is done if we speak another language in a church gathering where everyone understands English only? The priority is not in the tongue, but the priority is in our praise. God wants all nations to understand how glorious He is. It is crucial to ensure that our praise makes sense. Performing ecstatic exercises is a selfish act. Our gifts are meant to edify one another. So, each fiber of our being is to be a witness, a living walking testimony of the wondrous works of God.

V. THEY HAD THE SAME PREACHER

Acts 2:14-40 (KJV)

¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them . . . ⁴⁰ And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.”

Although preachers are cut from different cloths, the needle of the Gospel that runs through us should be the same, starting with Peter. The first preacher who preached in Jesus' Church was Peter. Yes, the same Peter who was a preliminary preacher before he understood the ramifications of “feed my lambs, feed my sheep” (John 21:15). Although different, we should not be too different. The fraternity of preachers should never break the code of being co-laborers in the Gospel (I Corinthians 3:9).

Any signs of pride and self-sufficiency dilute our privilege to preach. Each of us as preachers can identify when arrogance has taken hold of either our brothers of the Gospel or ourselves, and we must always be sensitized to our own ascending ambitions.

Furthermore, our target audience should not be our preaching peers. Never should we preach to impress preachers. We must make our target audience the sheep who God has assigned us to shepherd. To be validated by the brethren puts a preacher in a small circle, even if he is known nationwide. Sooner or later, we must come back home to the people who God has assigned to us. A preacher preaches best when he is grounded.

After the *Power* came upon the Church, there was preaching. Notice the posture of Peter's preaching. Listen to the fine print. Peter "raised his voice and addressed the crowd." This is no mere understatement. When he had a mega audience, in no way, was he seeking to mesmerize them. He was seeking to minister unto them. In no way was he seeking confirmation from them. He was deliberately determined to convict them.

We should never lose convicting content in our sermons. Rev. Dr. Sandy F. Ray said, "Preaching ought to be fierce." If we have the subtlest ambition to seek affirmation, we immediately forfeit the sobering privilege of preaching with precision.

Secondly, Peter addressed the crowd. He preached straight at them. I discovered for almost 39 years of preaching that most people do not mind you preaching, but they just do not want you to preach to them. After Peter got a revelation of who Jesus was and went through the preliminary preacher's process of failure, he understood the danger of refusing to preach.

Peter was not preaching in a way to save his skin. He preached in a way that was trying to save their skin, but to do that, he had to address them more than skin-deep. Peter's words were "save yourselves from this untoward generation!" To flow with this generation is a curse, not a blessing.

Generational curses have nothing to do with a hex cast upon families. The truest form of generational curses come from God. Curses are given by God upon generations whose family trees are barren of God's moral absolutes.

He reminded those on the perimeter of Pentecost that it was their sins that put Jesus on the Cross, and in no way, did Peter forget that it was his sins also. Peter was converted, and they also needed conversion as well. When Peter finished preaching with Holy Spirit Fire, the Bible says they were “cut to the heart” (vs. 37).

Every real preacher ought to know there is no cure if there is no cutting. Not only that, but we have a surgical anointing we must continue to use when we realize the serious “heart trouble” people are in. They were cut to the heart. When people who we preach to and pastor are willing to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38), the only blood that flows into the heart valves of the sinner is the Blood of Jesus. It is only by the “Blood” can our sins as well as their sins be washed away.

Thirdly, preaching must have a strong element of pleading. Acts 2:40 says that “with many other words, he warned them and pleaded with them.” Preaching Peter did not gloss over the need to give people stern warnings. True pleading is the by-product of stern warning. Because we know there is condemnation to those who are not in Christ Jesus, we urge them with unction and every persuasive power we have to turn to the Lord, and not fall into the hands of an angry God.

Neither can the preacher assume that even the most reputable people in our congregations have a deep saving knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If a person confesses Jesus as Savior but not as Lord, the stewardship issue will be severely lacking. To accept Christ as Lord settles the issue of transfer of ownership. In short, that person quickly understands that Jesus is to have full reign over their hearts, minds, bodies, souls, and possessions. A Christian is powerful when they start out giving it all to Jesus.

When Peter stood up, stood down, and stood strong, he preached the way a preacher should, and 3,000 souls were added that day:

VI. THEY HAD THE SAME PROSPERITY

Acts 2:41 (KJV)

“⁴¹ Then they and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls . . .”

The bottom line is that God adds to a healthy local church, and He also subtracts from a sick local church for it to be healthy. That is much of the biblical paradigm for church growth, health, and the thriving of a local church. The Church is like a mother to a new convert. The local church should be a place of spiritual nurturing for infant Christians. God is not quick to add babies to a sick mother. He has the fatherhood part down. God is a good, good, Father.

The Church had a startup group of 120 members who were “on fire.” Their pastor not only “could” preach, but he “would” preach. This is somewhat personal for me because I discovered, with great concern, that more preachers who can preach are not preaching anymore. Not only must churches be revitalized, but preaching must be revitalized also. Our charge is to preach, our content is the Word, and our commitment is to preach in season and out of season. COVID was just another season. After COVID, there are enough preachers who allowed COVID to take the “preach” out of them. Be encouraged and preach.

The true definition of prosperity, if we are to thrive in a time of church decline, is the effect caused in the hearts of people when we preach how God called us to preach. In other words, real preaching has a mass effect. Not only does it have a mass effect, but it also has a massive effect. A local church thrives, in one way or another, when we purge our perceptions of prosperity.

VII. THEY HAD THE SAME PRACTICES

Acts 2:42 (KJV)

“⁴² And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

How is the day-to-day operation of Jesus' Church to be settled? While we can easily drift into all types of business and organization methods for operations, the answers are quite simple. The local church is guaranteed revival, survival, and thriving when it learns how to “continue.”

Consecrated consistency is underrated. Understanding that the shifting values of our cultural milieu are increasing in speed as the days go by, we cannot afford to try to keep up with our culture. On the other hand, our calling is to ensure that those who have been initiated into Christ's Church keep up with Christ. Thus, our stance is to be steadfast and unmovable. This body of Believers continued steadfastly.

What even makes it more interesting and inspiring is the fact that we develop Christological constants by concentrating on our character first, and our conduct will follow. Continuing steadfast had something to do with what they did and everything to do with who they were. The words “continued steadfastly” is εἰμί (*eimi*)^[1]. It has the idea of “*belonging to a particular class*”; a state of “*being*.” Translating that into our vernacular, we will better understand this phrase to mean that they stayed in a class all by themselves. Their spiritual DNA was doctrinally-devoted, membership-oriented, and they were highly-communicative with God.

The Church (3,120) was doctrinally devoted. They were not devoted to every wind of doctrine, but they were devoted to the Apostle's doctrine. They were consecrated to the Apostle's Creed. Remembering the Apostles were the most powerful agents of Christ, we can easily ascertain the power they had.

The Text reveals that signs and wonders done by the hands of the Apostles (Acts 2:43). In addition, the prophets joined them in laying the foundation, and that foundation is Jesus Christ. They laid the foundation of the spiritual building, Jesus' Church, of whom we are the building. What a phenomenal truth!

“²⁰ And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” – Ephesians 2:20 (KJV)

The Church was a class, and they were a “Class Act.” They were admirable. They were learners, they studied, they listened, and they retained sound doctrine. Not only were they “in class,” but they were also a Doctrine Class. They remained in alignment with the doctrines of Christ which the Apostles taught. Their core subject was Christology; not philosophy, politics, social justice, contemporary ideologies, race-theory, or cultural norms. These Believers were not craving relevance. They were craving revival.

They were ***membership-oriented***. The Church was devoted to fellowshiping with one another. They also were intertwined and connected. They were members one of another that composed a body. They were interdependent and not independent. Neither were they deficiently dependent upon one another, but each of them had their own personal relationship with Christ. When they came together, they were in a constant communal mindset to give more than they took from one another.

They ate together, broke bread together, and they were in a constant remembrance of Jesus' body, broken for them, and of Jesus' blood, spilled for their sins, sicknesses, and salvation; no small plastic cup, grape juice, and a cracker. The only way to get the power of their practice is to imagine each of our churches doing the same thing, continuing daily in the Apostles doctrine (instead of only trying to be Apostles), daily coming together, daily praying, daily praising God, and daily in the Word of God.

They had revelations of Christ and relationship, and they had a devoted disposition to sound doctrine. In other words, they were serious and centered in Christ.

They talked to the Lord, and the Lord talked to them. They did little apart from prayer. They conversed with God “daily.” They didn’t just call on God in a crisis, but it was a crisis for them not to call on God. God wants to hear from us. He wants us to hear from Him. If there’s one practice the Western Church can plead forgiveness of, it would be the sin of not praying. Too many of us preach longer than we pray, and the rest of us seem to ponder more than we pray, but they prayed “daily.”

These four spiritual disciplines and many on this order (Acts 2:44-47) are much of the Modis Operandi (mode of operations) of a local church if it is to thrive. Please understand, pragmatism says that if something works, then it must be right. Universalism says that if everyone else is doing it, then it must be right. However, God says the Body of His Son must not be detached from His Son, who is the Head of the Body (the Church). If we are the Body of Christ, we must have the mind of Christ, and not become our own ministry mentalists who do more thinking, instead of having sound theology. There must be a Creed and Constitution we conduct ourselves by that is standardized and in alignment with how Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets outlined for us.

VIII. THEY HAD THE SAME PANIC

Acts 2:43

⁴³ And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.”

Regardless of popular opinion, there must be a strong sanctified sense of “Holy Terror” in the hearts of the Lord’s Church. If a member of the Church lied, they died; ask Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:3). If a member of the Church partook of the Lord’s Supper

unworthily, they got sick and died; ask the Church of Corinth (I Corinthians 11:30). If a member of the Church was involved in incest, they got ejected from the Church; ask the boy who had sex with his stepmother in the Corinthian Church (I Corinthians 5:11). Judgment really does begin in the House of God.

But, there must not be Holy Terror only because of sin. Even more so, the ultimate reason to fear is because Jesus is the Great Head of His Church. The closer we get to Christ, the more Christ causes our hearts to tremble. There is no way we can be intimate with God and not come into contact with His holiness. The more we see His holiness, the more we see our sinfulness. When we stake the claim to be members of His body, Jesus has directions on how He wants for us to move, if we say we are His members.

John told us in the Book of Revelation that Jesus' eyes are a flame of fire, His feet are like fine brass, and His voice is as the sound of many waters. He's our friend, but we dare not get on enemy terms with Him. Dr. John Taylor of Gateway Seminary made a statement to our class many years ago. He said, "It is wise, if you have unsettled issues with God, settle them immediately."

IX. THEY HAD THE SAME POPULACE

Acts 2:44-47

⁴⁴ And all that believed were together and had all things common;
⁴⁵ And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. ⁴⁶ And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

How Jesus manages the economy of His Church is the apex of integral money management and community development, and it is more than impressive. I will try to capsulize the truest

essence of verses 44-47. The passage indicates that no devoted member of the local church should suffer need. Furthermore, the most effective and strategic way to accommodate the needs of every devoted member is to share possessions. To equalize possessions, those who are more fortunate are mandated to release luxuries so that those luxuries can be transferred as necessities for those within the Church who are less fortunate.

These verses acknowledge and reward every member who had devoted themselves to Christ and Christ's Church, abandoning the world. The reward is to know that not only does God supply our needs, but the Church also supplies each other's needs as God supplies their needs.

That is how it worked and still works. They all had the same corporate agenda. They had "all things in common," even their material "things." To ensure that those who were in need were supplied, the more fortunate sold their possessions to bring in the necessary capital. They continued in fellowship, and once again, the Lord was pleased with this healthy thriving church and added more saved members to the Church.

Picture this urban development strategy. We tend to resort to political alliances to develop our communities. Nevertheless, with urban initiatives, this puts us at the mercy of government powers. While these can be noble involvements, the most effective effort is in developing the community of members within our individual congregations. Members of our churches are a constitution of blocks of people who live on neighborhood blocks.

Mutual sharing creates exponential power. The ties that bind discipleship and stewardship are inseparable. Money matters. If the ox who treads the corn should not be muzzled, how much more does that apply to the ministry of the Church? More than a business principle, it is Kingdom Business. If there is to be a true acquisition, there must be a merger. We must learn how to share sacred space. Commonality creates caring congregations.

Liberation is not only in the acquisition of goods, but it is also in the acquisition of services. When we gather, absent of greed, we are empowering one another to eat for a lifetime. Out of our churches will independent and empowered members be developed. They will have a Kingdom mindset that funds families and ministers to members. Then, those same members return to their community and are empowered to love their neighbors in a more tangible way. If we choose not to care, we are left with the only options of seeking to reform our neighborhoods through persuading politicians and also protesting, clawing our way trying to get the simplest things done. If we choose a more excellent way (giving, loving, sharing, caring), we are better able to build one another up, in every sense of the term.

Consider the scenario: A church with an income of, let's say, about \$300,000 per year might have a membership of 175 to 300 members. Let's consider this to be a small church. While numbers vary, the principle is the goal. That income is most likely needed to pay the pastor, overhead, and a staff member or two, probably part-time.

Consider the source: The Church in the Book of Acts didn't have any overhead, only members to take care of and a God to glorify. So, they weren't just going from house to house to have church, but they were going from house to house to also take care of households and families as well as households and families taking care of them.

When we shift our gathering paradigm by prioritizing taking care of members and members taking care of one another, we are truly gathering, not just paying a cover charge.

Just think if the same church in the scenario of 175-300 members had no overhead, what they would be able to do for one another if they would just share. With \$25,000 per month, with no overhead, look at the possibilities of empowering one another in a church that size, including taking care of the pastor. He would be financially free to tread the corn, empower, and equip members, and no one should have need when the money is invested in members, ministry, and getting them to a point of management.

^[1] Swanson, J. (1997). In *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Logos Research Systems, Inc.



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PH.D., MBA

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THE DAY THE CHURCH WAS BORN

Strategy Guide for Chapter 3 of the Exegetical - *How Shall We Gather? How to Thrive in the Midst of Church Decline - An Exegetical Perspective.*

Foundational Verse: "2 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place." - Acts 2:1; KJV

Timeless Truth: The practices of the Church the day it was born are timeless, and must be continually practiced, and never sacrificed by any other church practices.

Strategic Implementation: To defragment the doctrinal and denominational differences of interpretation and implementation of what happened at Pentecost, and then, implement the key principles the apostles highlighted as marks of an authentic church.

THE SETTING WAS SIGNIFICANT

When the Church was inaugurated, they were all in the Upper Room. That was the setting.

Notice that when the 120 believers were gathered together in the Upper Room, what happened was more attractive than the room they were gathered in.

The building must never be more attractive than the Spirit that is supposed to rest upon the believers as they welcome the Spirit.

I have never seen or experienced the church building being a spiritual transformer in the lives of the believers energizing them to be witnesses.

Local churches build new buildings or move into more supposed improved buildings, but the habits of the believers are never transformed by the building.

This has been the disappointment of pastors as they sweat blood and tears to facilitate a new church building, and if the habits of the church don't get better in the new building, they get worse. As a matter of fact, they appear to get too comfortable in the new church seats.

In addition, most believers take the same habits from one building to the next. A pastor must never be duped into thinking a building can be a motif for building people. Much is to be said about the building.

A local church must resemble an upper room more than any other building structure.



The Upper Room in Jerusalem

When I say the local church should resemble an upper room, I am not speaking of it being an exact replica of the Upper Room in Jerusalem. But, make no mistake about it, there was **purpose** in sovereign fashions for God ordaining the inauguration of the Church being in the Upper Room. The Upper Room at Pentecost and the houses members gathered in for worship in the New Testament suggests several things, among many:

THE SETTING WAS SMALL

There were only 120 in the Upper Room. Considering all that took place in the Upper Room, that's a good number for any local church. Then, after Peter preached, 3,000 souls were added to the Church. That's even a better number for a local church. The 3,000 did not gather in one large arena. Instead, they gathered in the Temple, and went from house to house, mostly in upper rooms of houses.

Their gathering together in the Temple did not last very long. The Temple was destroyed in AD 70 by Titus' army. For the most part, they gathered in the upper rooms of houses. Many of these were business houses that had upper rooms as living quarters. The

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business houses were not as small as we might think, but they were not very large as well.

The point is that they gathered as a church family in structures that facilitated inspiration, intercession, and interconnection. This, in no way, says that a much larger church building is a detriment to thriving as a local church. The point is that the building must accommodate and suggest inspiration, intercession, and interconnection.

Houses can be so large that it is difficult for them to become homes. In like manner, the same is true of the local church. It can become so large that it is lethal.

Downsize to Precision: After COVID, many larger and even smaller churches have a large number of people who no longer attend or regularly attend Sunday services. Some churches have declined from thousands of members to hundreds on any given Sunday. It would be more than beneficial for the powers that be in the local church who see a sizable decrease in church attendance to consider downsizing to precision and **purpose**.

Pastors must not be hesitant to consider more creative worship spaces that accommodate those who faithfully attend, rather than pursuing an almost impossible goal of getting members back into the larger local church arena. Radical moves must be considered and made on **purpose**.

Liquidate Assets, If Possible: If at all possible, **consider liquidating assets**, and utilizing the funds for more strategic, meaningful, and lasting ministry practices. In addition, the liquidated assets can also be used to build, rent, or renovate smaller settings with a spirit of excellence that accommodates a committed core of believers and smaller groups.

In addition, once a smaller worship space is invented, if the larger space must be retained, make it a privilege for members to gather there, only if they commit to attend in large numbers. Also, utilize the original larger building (sanctuary) for special church events, or even, certain times of the month or year, so that members can gain a greater appreciation for what God had provided for them previously. If a church has been blessed to have a large facility, every member should be grateful for what God has done. We have a saying, "If people don't appreciate what God has done, I am not going to embarrass God or myself by their absence."

Don't Underestimate the Value of the Hispanic Church Community: Jesus is building mighty local churches in the Hispanic community because they are giving Him material to build with. If the larger church building is not being maximized by the present members, consider renting the present building to churches who have more growth potential. The Hispanic church community is one such community to consider, many times. Reason being, they have been known to have a stronger sense of community, festivities that facilitate togetherness, and tend to come together on more days out of the week as a church.

Consider an article in *Christianity Today* (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/january/hispanic-protestant-landscape-survey-us-pastors-lifeway.html>):

"Hispanic churches in the United States face unique challenges but are finding success in building community within their congregations and reaching those outside their walls. Lifeway Research partnered with two dozen denominations and church networks to include what is likely the largest number of Protestant Hispanic congregations in the US ever invited to a single research study. Sponsored by Lifeway Recursos, the Billy Graham Evangelistic

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Association, and Samaritan's Purse, the study surveyed 692 pastors of congregations that are at least 50 percent Hispanic.

'For decades, the Hispanic population in the US has been growing exponentially, and it is imperative for churches to be informed about the specific needs of this community,' said Giancarlo Montemayor, director of global publishing for Lifeway Recursos. "This study will help us to continue the ongoing conversation of how to serve our brothers and sisters in a more strategic way. Hispanic churches in the United States face unique challenges but are finding success in building community within their congregations and reaching those outside their walls.

Most Hispanic Protestant churches (54%) have been established since 2000, including 32 percent founded in 2010 or later. Fewer than 1 in 10 (9%) trace their history prior to 1950. Not only are the churches relatively new, but most people in the congregations are also new to the United States. The majority are first generation Americans (58%), born outside of the country. A quarter are second generation (24%), with parents who were born outside of the US. And 17 percent were born in the US to parents who were also born in the US. As a result, a majority conduct their services only in Spanish (53%), while 22 percent are bilingual.

Half of the churches (50%) are in a large metropolitan area with a population of 100,000 or more. Around 3 in 10 (31%) are located in small cities, 9 percent are in rural areas, and 8 percent are in suburbs.

In the average Hispanic Protestant church, a full third of the congregation (35%) is under the age of 30, including 18 percent under 18. Another 38 percent are aged 30-49, and 28 percent are 50 and older.

'The growth in the number of Hispanic churches in the US has been remarkable,' said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. 'While some of these congregations were started within Anglo churches—14 percent of Hispanic congregations in

this study currently are conducting services within a church that is predominantly non-Hispanic—the missional impetus has clearly come from within the Hispanic community itself as two-thirds of these congregations are led by first-generation immigrant pastors.'

In US Hispanic Protestant churches, the average worship service attendance is 115. Like most other churches, they've not yet fully recovered from the pandemic. In January 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the average attendance was 136. Still, 13 percent of churches are currently around their pre-pandemic levels. And 32 percent say they've grown in the past three years, despite the pandemic."

Think Outside the Box: There is no need to curse the new generation of churchgoers by insisting that they should go back to the "old way" of doing church. At one day and time, the "old way" was the "new way." Jesus is still building His Church, and He is raising local churches all over the land who are committed to being in alignment with His Kingdom agenda. New wine cannot be placed in old wineskins.

However, borrow many traditions of the "old way" that were timeless. Historically, in the early and mid-twentieth century, local churches were more reverent and held to ordinances, hymns, and a sense of community.

Think Inside the Box: Dispose of the idealism of building larger buildings unless the present building is detrimental to the growth and health of the present church. We have a tendency as pastors to overbuild more than underbuild for many reasons.

Pastors just don't think small. We minister in a vacuum and always know that there is something more to do and become.

However, it is important to realize that we all have limits, and establishing boundaries is more beneficial than crossing them.

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Also, consider the overhead of building projects. If a new church building costs \$2 million dollars (for example), just think of what \$2 million dollars can do if we renovate and improve our present worship locations, and expend the rest in missions, ministry, and the investment in our members.

Now, and within the succeeding generations, local church decline is inevitable because the Bible tells us so. This is one biblical reason to expect church decline. Less will want to know Jesus, the closer He comes.

"³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears." - II Timothy 4:3; KJV

THE SETTING MADE SENSE

It is critical when we gather together that everything we do is intentional and that the entire church is in agreement and aware of our intentions. Thus, our gatherings must make sense as on the day when the Church was born.

Gather in a worship space that makes sense. The Upper Room was also a strategic location in close proximity to them being heard and seen during Pentecost. They were located in the mix, right in the middle of an evangelistic and explosive environment that needed the Gospel.

If the worship space doesn't make sense, renovate it in a way that it is conducive for the people who gather within that space to worship. It makes no sense for 300 people to be gathered in a sanctuary that accommodates 1,000 people.

Small and common sense things such as the distance between the preacher and the audience, when lighting is effective and

ineffective, and when dimming the lights is effective and ineffective, etc., are the things that must be strategically considered.

A Few Words on Dark Worship: My greatest concern is in not offending many who dim the lights during the worship service. That is not my intention. This book is only to be a guide and a helpful tool. God gave me a few simple sentences for the reader to consider without going into unnecessary debate or criticism.

- 1. The pastor needs to see what is going on in the audience** - In the New Testament, Jesus always sat or stood in a place where He could see the people who He was to minister to as well as those who were opposing Him and wolves who may be in the midst of the sheep. People in the average church are not as focused on what is happening in a worship service as those in a concert or other performance with the lights dimmed. A pastor is an overseer, and he definitely needs to see what is going on in the audience for a plethora of reasons.
- 2. The people need to see what's going on in the audience** - When members gather together, they need as much inspiration from one another, intercession for one another, and interrelatedness with one another as possible, especially in a larger setting. They need to see each other. When the lights are dim or dark, it disconnects them from each other. If we dim the lights so they can focus on God, we can keep the lights on instead, and encourage them to close their eyes. Cutting the lights down is not always necessary.
- 3. When the lights are dim or dark, the attention is on a select few on the stage, while the importance of the audience is minimized** - When lights are on the stage in any venue, the lights are on the stage because the performers

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want or need the audience to focus on them. In a worship gathering, we are to encourage all to focus on God. When we gather, we all should be one in worship. There is not supposed to be an unbalance in worship, where certain segments are marginalized. In addition, those on the stage lose eye contact with their audience and a disconnect is inevitable.

4. **The audience is supposed to be participating, and not spectating** - Compare dim lights to the Upper Room. In the Upper Room they were in continual prayer, and the Spirit came upon them. When the lights are dim or dark, how much less does that quench the possibilities of the Holy Spirit falling down upon the audience? It lessons it substantially. Notice another Upper Room in the Book of Acts: "8 And there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together." - Acts 20:8; KJV
5. **Never Hide Your Audience** - Your members need to shine, and their lights need to be shining, even within the corporate worship gathering. I understand the embarrassment a pastor or concerned parishioners may feel when there are more empty seats than those who are present, but what matters most in any worship gathering is *not* who is not there; what matters most is who *is* there. Those who are present are more important than those who are absent, if their absence is unexcused. As we used to say, with a little slang, "One monkey don't stop no show."

THE SETTING WAS NOT SANCTIMONIOUS

sanc-ti·mo·ni·ous - /,saNG(k)tə'mōnēəs/

adjective DEROGATORY

making a show of being morally superior to other people.

In the Book of Acts, they were not putting on a show. Neither did they exemplify pride just because the Holy Spirit fell upon them.

I have seen oh, too many times, the pride on the faces of many when they tend to have an air of superiority, due to the size or style of their church. It was not easy to predict the fall that would go before their pride. But God has a way of humbling us all.

Yet, it doesn't take much for any of us to think more of ourselves than we ought. Concentrating on staying in a state of perpetual humility sometimes takes strategic and thoughtful effort.

THE SETTING WAS SANCTIONED

“² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.” - Acts 2:2

It is not too "old school" or antiquated to understand that every time we gather, we ought to pray for spiritual power. We are to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. To continually be filled does not mean that we have an internal spirit faucet we can turn to be filled. To be filled, we have to yield to the Spirit, coupled with continual prayer to be filled with the Spirit.

When a church gathers together in Jesus' name, on one accord, in the right setting, and prays for the filling of the Holy Spirit to become even greater witnesses for Christ, the Holy Spirit will always come. The problem is in the praying, not in the power. There is no need to argue doctrinally about the filling of the Spirit. What needs to be argued more is why we do not pray for power earnestly as a corporate body every time we gather.

If we take an hour to preach on Sunday, why don't we take an hour to pray? To the brief and timely preacher and pastor: If

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we take 30 minutes to preach on Sunday, why don't we take 30 minutes to lead our church in prayer each Sunday?

It takes deliberate and strategic action, not words.

1. If time is of the essence, reduce preaching time or other announcements on Sunday so that more room can be made for prayer time in the worship on Sunday. The average time frame for churches I have noticed is about two hours in worship. First of all, that's too long for this generation. Secondly, only a few minutes, if any, are dedicated to prayer.

2. Make it a priority of the teaching ministry to teach people to pray.

3. Being the first and the last man standing preaching and teaching sound doctrine does not supersede private or corporate prayer. Preaching is a public proclamation, and prayer should also be public when we gather in Jesus' name. When we do, Jesus said He would be in the midst of us.

4. Minimize tongues and maximize expecting the Holy Spirit to come like a rushing mighty wind. We can never predict how the wind blows, and the effects the wind will have upon the objects upon which He (the Spirit) blows. We can expect one thing, we will be impacted in an unpredictable and supernatural way that can never be duplicated the next time.

The late, Rev. Dr. Gardner Taylor said, "A ship must be careful not to miss the sail. So, I think I better sail on." We must not be careful as "The Old Ship of Zion" (The Church) not to miss the sail.

"⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." - John 3:8; KJV

THE SETTING WAS VOID OF SYCOPHANCY

syc·o·phan·cy /'sɪkəfənsē,'sɪkə,fənsē/

Nauseating and flattering behavior toward someone important in order to gain advantage, ". . . we hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." - Acts 2:11; KJV

Modern day praise in the local church must defy praising God in a way that is only a flattering attempt to get an advantage from God. Instead, the praise offered to God must be as the Church in the Book of Acts, a praise that expected nothing from God, but a praise that spoke in every intelligible language necessary to nations of the wonderful works of God.

Our praise is to be a testimony of the awesome wonders of God, for all the world to see and hear. In this sense, their praise was more prophetic than it was personal. It was not a praise that directed attention toward them, but a praise that directed the adoration to God.

Strategic Implementation: To seek anointed animation in our worship gatherings, void of a dull and conservative form of reverence that downsizes the high activity of a joyful noise that the Bible commands us to make.

THE SETTING WAS SOUL-SEARCHING

"¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them . . . ⁴⁰ And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation." - Acts 2:14-40; KJV

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Our gatherings are to have an evangelistic outgrowth of our inward worship. After the Holy Spirit descended upon the newly inaugurated Church, the religious crowd in Jerusalem wondered about the commotion in the Upper Room. Peter stands up as a preacher should, realizing the ordained opportunity to preach a sermon to the same nation who pierced Jesus in the side, seeking to bury Him forever.

Strategic Implementation: Starting from the pulpit, especially after COVID when we have made our worship services available online to all, our sermons are to also have an evangelistic outreach that boldly addresses sin and counter our culture more than compliment it.

The Need for Soul-Searching: Identity the issues, practices, and lifestyles that have been either sanctioned or accepted in today's society that you fear speaking boldly against. It is important to note that no one can be saved, unless they understand the need to be saved from their sins. For the world to know their sins, they must be called out, with each preacher and parishioner realizing that we are not to retreat from the very essence of the salvation of souls, and that is, to call all to repentance.

THE SETTING WAS SUPPLEMENTARY

"⁴¹ Then they and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls . . ." - Acts 2:41; KJV

sup·ple·men·ta·ry /,səplə'men(t)ərē/ - completing or enhancing something.

God adds to a healthy church, and He subtracts from an unhealthy one. Because this Church was in strict alignment with

Jesus the Baptizer of the Holy Spirit, God enhanced it by adding more souls to the Church.

Strategic Implementation: To defy and denounce any church-growth initiatives that are man-made by also realizing that it is only God who can truly give the increase.

Who Can Make the Seed Grow? It is only God who can give the increase. Our responsibility is to either plant or water, but only God can give the increase:

"⁶ I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. ⁸ Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour." - I Corinthians 3:6-8; KJV

Protect Your Sanity: We inflict upon ourselves unnecessary psychological hardship if we hold ourselves responsible for the growth of our churches.

THE SETTING WAS SPIRITUAL, SACRED, AND SOBER

"⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' **doctrine** and **fellowship**, in the **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and **breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart**, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the

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people. And **the Lord added to the church daily** those who were being saved." - Acts 2:42-47; KJV

Notice that all these practices listed in Acts 2:42-47 are "Christ-Centered" and not "church-centered" as we traditionally know the local church today. Even more so, even within the structure of our average churches, so many other practices we can be accustomed or attracted to would have to be removed or repositioned substantially to make room for the practices of the Church when it was born: solid and deep teaching, Christ-centered fellowship, intense and unrushed communion (breaking of bread), songs, hymns, and spiritual songs sung to one another, and baptism that is the result of the battle won for souls and a battle cry to save more souls.

Doctrine (Spiritual) - The apostle's doctrine was solid teaching centered upon Christ (the Rock). Their teaching was the teaching that laid the foundation, which was and is Christ. In other words, they taught Christ, about Christ, what Christ expects of us, and how to be more like Christ. Their teaching was not seeker-sensitive, i.e., about how Christ could meet their needs. It was more about how they could more please and be like Christ.

In seminary, we usually hear about the subject of Christology, but Christology should be the central doctrine of the local church.

Teaching sometimes supersedes preaching in the local church. Sinners in the world can't understand teaching because they can't understand spiritual things.

¹⁴ But the natural man (unsaved person; one who is not a Christian) receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are

foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." - I Corinthians 2:14; KJV

But, sinners can receive and understand the Gospel when it is preached in its rawest and most sincere form:

"¹⁴ How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" - Romans 10:14; KJV

However, in the local church context, the central method of infusing the Word of God into the hearts of believers is through the ministry of the Pastor. According to Ephesians, the pastor's job word-wise is to teach.

"¹¹ And he (Jesus) gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, **pastors and teachers**; ¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: ¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: ¹⁴ That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of **doctrine**, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." - Ephesians 4:11-14; KJV

We know the Greek word for "pastors and teachers" is actually one word, "pastor-teachers." Notice that sound biblical teaching combats false teaching. It is false teaching that carries people away from Christ, and it is sound teaching that will bring them back to Christ.

Begin teaching sound doctrinal messages without feeling the human urge or pressure to preach, especially on Sunday mornings.

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If Christians can't get inspired by the teaching of the Word in its rawest form, there is a glitch in their salvation.

In addition, if a pastor cannot trust the Word in its simplest presentation, there is a glitch in his calling. In certain contexts, preaching makes more sense to preachers in the audience than the people in the audience. Our audience on Sunday mornings does not consist of preachers, but they are everyday people. We hate hearing "it doesn't take all of that," as preachers, but most of the time, it really doesn't. Teaching provides people more practical ways to implement sound doctrine, which leads to wholesome Christian lifestyles.

What about preaching? Yes, we are called to preach, but preaching usually was geared toward evangelistic contexts in the Bible, assuming the audience was people who did not know Christ. Even when Peter preached, it was before an audience of unbelievers.

However, Paul charged Timothy to preach the Word, and to be instant in season and out of season. Also, remember the Ephesian church was a stubborn church, full of pride and activity, and unorganized. So, preaching was also necessary to shake them from their senses of self-sufficiency.

Either way, when preaching is practiced, preach Christ-Centered messages with substance, and shun relevant ideologies, and by all means, avoid being "preachery." It's really not about style, it's about substance.

In addition, preach the Historical Jesus, and shun feeling the responsibility to make Christ "relevant." Know that Christ is already relevant:

"⁸ Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever." -
Hebrews 13:8; KJV

Our charge is to preach the Gospel and the Word. The Gospel is the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hopefully, the majority in our congregations are already Christians, or, at least, they should be. Continuing in the apostle's doctrine (teaching) implies implementing strong teaching ministries in the local church, and the major portions of that teaching must start with the pastor.

Fellowship (Spiritual) - The context of fellowship has to do with the fact that they were so close that they all knew each other, and they knew each other well. When they gathered, they weren't talking about Greek and Roman sports in the colosseum. They were talking about Jesus.

The Lord's Supper (Sacred) - Begin to prioritize the Lord's Supper in as many ways possible through practicing it more, longer, teaching on the Lord's Supper, and holding members accountable for how they partake of the Lord's Supper, not only through the eating of bread and drinking of wine, but also through the ultimate meaning of the Lord's Supper, i.e., doing it through practice and lifestyle in remembrance of Christ.

Notice the "breaking of bread" (verse 42) in the Church in the Book of Acts: It was deeper than a cracker wafer and plastic cup of grape juice, symbolizing the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The Bible says in verse 46 that they "ate their food with gladness and singleness of heart." When they gathered, they also ate.

If church started at 9:45 am., at 9:45 am., they greeted each other with a holy kiss, sat down, and ate, partook of the Lord's

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Supper, shared Jesus together, prayed together, continued in the apostle's doctrine, etc. Something on that order was the order of worship.

Notice the Western Civilization Church. If we eat, we eat together after the worship service or at an entirely different time, apart from a traditional Sunday morning. I understand it sounds ludicrous to have a full dinner before or during a Sunday worship service, and that is not what I am suggesting. It will begin to make better sense when we understand what the church looked like during the days of the NT in the Book of Acts:

- When they gathered, they were a community who gathered daily, whether it be from "house to house" or "daily" in the Temple.
- Furthermore, it was a "closed communion and community." Only Christians gathered together. It was their Christian "family time." When they gathered, they were not event-oriented, but they were relationship-oriented and Christ-centered.
- When they gathered, they would eat as part of worship. Fellowship was a part of worship. When they got to the bread and wine, they did that in remembrance of Jesus Christ.
- Notice the Western Civilization church. We have small crackers, plastic cups, and commune for about 15-20 minutes in a one-and-a-half to two hour worship setting. And, it takes a lot to get people to even stay to participate in that. When we so call, "fellowship," we gather for hours and rarely center our food gatherings around Christ. We don't fellowship and eat "in remembrance of Christ." The only time we tend to do that is for 15-20 minutes in an event-oriented worship time, usually once per month on a given Sunday for Communion. For many Churches, it is on the

first Sunday of the month, but Jesus told us to do it often. When He says, "As often as you do this, do this in remembrance of Me," He meant often because He wants to be often remembered.

Prayers (Sacred) - Gathering together committed Christians in Jesus' name who gather to experience Christ in their midst is a priority over simply gathering in prayer to only make prayer requests for personal reasons - "20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." - Matthew 18:20; KJV

The Church continued in prayers, i.e., supplications, and all types of prayer. Prayer permeated throughout the Church on a regular basis. A good picture of how they prayed is how the Jews pray at the wailing wall in Jerusalem. However, the Church was praying in the name of the Jesus who had already come, while the Jews on the wailing wall are praying for a Messiah to come who has already come, who they have rejected and crucified.

Songs, Hymns, Spiritual Songs (Spiritual) - Begin to encourage corporate singing more, along with screening songs that are not Christological (Christ-Centered) and doctrinally sound. Imagine each member singing along to one another versus the choir/praise team singing to the audience, and the audience trying to keep up with the words on PowerPoint. The interconnection of the local church centered upon Christ results in gathered members of our church as a community of believers who center songs upon Christ (the Rock) and one another. This is what and how we should "sing" when we come together.

Baptism (Sober) - We see the implied practice of Baptism because the "Lord added daily to the Church, such as should be saved." We

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can easily infer they were Baptized. Peter even preached "Repent, and be baptized." Baptism cannot be underrated within the gathering of the local church. It is to be done publicly before the entire church and highly celebrated and not seen as a cute little act as if a newborn baby Christian has been born.

Instead, Baptism is the result of Jesus Christ, in spiritual warfare, snatching souls from the grips of Satan and delivering them into His Kingdom, initiating them into His Church, setting captives free, giving sight to the blind, and unstopping their deaf ears so they can now obey the Gospel.

This can also be done by focusing on the ordinances, and practices of the church which are Christ-centered and prioritized in the Bible. Notice that all of these original ordinances and practices of the average Protestant church mentioned above in the Book of Acts are minimally and marginally practiced today.

This is what it means to thrive in the midst of local church decline. When these practices are marginalized, that local church is in a state of declination regardless of whatever else it has or does.

THEY HAD THE SAME SHAKING IN THEIR SOULS

"⁴³ And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles." - Acts 2:43; KJV

Never should a Christian and member of a local church lose a sense of trembling. Our God is an awesome God, and it should cause our hearts to tremble.

What has caused too many of our local churches to lose a sense of shaking in our souls? We have lost real encounters with God in our worship gatherings. This is due to being out of alignment with our assignment.

The 120 were on assignment as they were commanded of Christ to tarry in Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high.

Peter was on assignment when he preached in a way that cut those in Jerusalem to the heart in order to cure them.

The 3,000 were on assignment, who were added to the Church by the Lord as they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Then, the apostle's were back on assignment as many signs and wonders were done by their hands.

Strategic Implementation: For each of us to get to our anointed assignment on the Earth. God placed us on this planet for a reason. Each day we rise, we are on assignment. As we are continually filled with the Spirit, we fulfill our assignment and witness others within our local church fulfill their assignment. Supernatural results will always follow, reminding us of the wonderful works of God.

THEY HAD THE SAME SELFLESSNESS

⁴⁴ And all that believed were together and had all things common;

⁴⁵ And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. ⁴⁶ And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." - Acts 2:44-47; KJV

It is no debate that more are becoming "lovers of themselves" as the days go by. The beauty of the local church being built by

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Christ is that it is a reminder that there are still some good people in this world.

Although under Roman yoke, the Church in the Book of Acts was well-known, even among the Romans, for being a selfless society. Historically, that is true, and we see tinges of evidence of that fact in verse 47 that they "had favor with all the people."

Strategic Implementation: To begin strong initiatives in creating a sense of community within your local church, imaging the local church being a family who should in some sense, convene together in interpersonal relationships on a daily basis.

It's a Supernatural Thing: Please keep in mind, these are the fruit of the Spirit when the people of God are filled with the Spirit. In every way possible, we should do well to be cognizant through teaching and our ministries that the Holy Spirit is a person of the Godhead, who fills people to do things people should do with and for one another. And, the Holy Spirit's ultimate assignment is to help conform us into the image of Christ, our selfless and sacrificial Savior.



Derrick I. Temple, Sr. is the Author of *The Pastor and His Anatomy Volumes I & II* (and Revised Edition); *Making the Last Days Your Best Days* (and Revised Edition) Including Bonus Chapter - "The Delta Storm"; *The Apostasy of America - A Biblical Examination of Our Nation's Defect from God* and *In My Father's House - A Black Father and a Black Son*

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After Covid, the face of the local church has changed and will no longer be the same. Some have thrived, but most have slowly begun a dissolving process, and pastors are resigning, retiring, and/or rethinking "church" at sober and strategic levels. In this work, *HOW SHALL WE GATHER? How to Thrive in the Midst of Church Decline - An Exegetical Perspective*, Pastor Temple seeks the most reliable source when all else fails, i.e., God's Holy Word. Derrick exercises the exegetical graces God has bestowed upon him in this work to bring hope to those who love the local church from a biblical perspective. He capsulizes the essence of the Church and gives hopeful and helpful truths to strengthen every discouraged, dedicated, and decisive pastor and parishioner.

This unique LEGACY EDITION includes bonus resources available to readers through connecting with Legacy Ministries Association, Inc., thereby, resourcing assistance to pastors, leaders, and churches in revitalization initiatives.