

Anyone who spends any time with me knows that my passion is the church. In my heart of hearts, I am driven by the single goal of a spiritually mature church with a strong mission and vision from the Lord. Before I could come to the realization of what that passion meant, I had to know what the benchmark for a Biblically functioning church was. The last three years I have been studying to that end. I read books upon books trying to find the answer, but, as it always is, the ultimate answer came from the Scriptures. It was when I read the end of Acts 2 that I came upon the answer. The following is a synopsis, or a teaser, of what I believe the Lord has shown me. A much more detailed work is already in progress with more Scripture references and further developed thoughts.

### **Four Pillars of The Church Synopsis**

© Copyright 2003 Mike Kerby and Paraclete Publications

*“And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47, NASV*

I want to be very clear. This is not the *mission* of the church, which is the Great Commission, but rather a balanced foundation from which the church may function in the world. The end of verse 47 stands out to because it demonstrates that the mission of the church was being fulfilled. The reason is simple: the church offered people something different from the world. When the hurting, which really includes everyone outside of Christ, saw the lifestyle of this early group of believers, they were seeing the transforming power of the Gospel played out before their eyes. This is an incredibly attractive sight.

What set these early few apart? The answer lies in the passage above. They dedicated their time and lives to four areas: the Word, prayer, worship, and community. Almost every book on the subject of church growth has focused on programs to draw people, usually from other churches, while a few more truly insightful pieces have been written with one of the earlier four in mind to draw souls. As yet, few if any have examined the need for a balance of the four areas.

None of these pillars can stand alone. Each feeds and supports each other and must be in perfect balance in order for the church to function. If any area is weak, then, eventually, then all of the others will weaken as well. This has been played out over and over again throughout history and is still being played out in our churches today. Weakness in any area will gradually cause a decay of faith into a religious exercise. Without the Word, there is no true knowledge. Without prayer, there is no communication with the Lord. No worship, then the soul is not laid bare in pure love of Jesus. If there is no community, then the love of the Lord is not shared with others and there is no hope.

There are two components to each of these arenas, one personal and one corporate. It is

the responsibility of the individual believer in Christ to develop each discipline and disciple others, while the local church must create an atmosphere for growth and provide resources and instruction to facilitate discipleship. In short, it is not the pastor's responsibility for any one individual's growth, but aiding in growth and discipleship is the responsibility of all of the leadership, including, but not limited to, the pastoral staff. The bottom line is that for an individual or for a church to grow spiritually, all of these must be developed together for a strong walk of faith and to fulfill the Great Commission.

**The Word:** The Word of God is vital to all who call upon the name of Christ. In the Word is life and truth for it is the revelation of Jesus, both in the Old and New Testaments, as the living Word. Under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures come alive in the hearts and minds to transform the character of all who are open to its teachings. With a strong discipline of reading, speaking, and hearing the Word, followers of Jesus are washed in truth that comes only from divine wisdom that no lie of the world or flesh can shake.

The converse is also true. If there is a lack of the ministry of the Word, then the fall into deception is much easier. Jesus warned us that many of the elect would be deceived building upon the warning spoke through Hosea that the people perish for lack of knowledge. Paul warns Timothy that a time would come when people would no longer accept sound doctrine and turn to false teachers. This applies not only to the lost, but also to the church. A cursory examination of the rise of liberalism among several denominations clearly demonstrates this truth. Without a daily discipline of Bible reading backed up with a strong teaching ministry in the local church, the flesh may more easily take over and send the unwary to follow after ways that *seem* right or after charismatic leaders who themselves are deceived and taking others with them down the road of damnation.

Early in a new believer's walk, very few have the discipline to undertake a deliberate reading of the Bible. For most, it is a daunting task. The sheer size of the Bible and its holy nature are intimidating to most who come to the Lord. Encouragement and instruction are needed that can only come from more seasoned disciples in the local church. A combination of teaching programs for new or immature believers, solid preaching from the pulpit, and direct discipleship from a mentor or series of mentors will overcome this initial obstacle and ease the building of a difficult new habit.

This continues to the mature and maturing in the faith. Very often, once the intimidation factor is overcome, zeal in the "baby Christian" takes over and he devours the Bible like a man starved for food. Gradually, pride in the new found knowledge or pressing time concerns begin to erode discipline and passion. Daily readings drop off and transformation is slowed. The "mature" churchgoer is more likely to rely on sermons and occasional Bible studies in church than are younger disciples. While it is the direct responsibility of each disciple for his growth, the corporate body must continue to provide encouragement and teaching on the need for continued personal study, including further instruction on methods for study.

In the local church, the responsibility is more than just promoting individual study. Everyone in a teaching position must present sound doctrine based in Scripture. Lesson preparation must be done with an open mind, allowing the Holy Spirit to illuminate the Word fully and direct the lesson. Following the basic rules of hermeneutics, guidelines for interpreting written documents, is also essential for developing logical, well developed, and accurate lessons. Sometimes this means setting aside personal or denominational biases to allow the truth to enter

into teachings. Teachers should never forget the stern warning from James that those who teach will fall under stricter judgement. Any who teach should bear in mind that all they will be held accountable by the Lord for all of their instruction.

When developed, the combination of individual and corporate ministries in the Word keep the body grounded in truth and in obedience. The truth is vital to our continued health and growth. The liberty those in Christ enjoy comes from our foundation in sound doctrine and truth.

**Prayer:** Prayer is the conduit for communication with our Lord. Not only is it time to go before the throne of grace with individual needs and those of others, it is a time to receive words from the Lord. To borrow a cliché, communication is a two-way street. A strong prayer life enriches the soul and spirit and draws one closer to the Lord and to the brethren. Through prayer, disciples receive the peace of the Lord and grow in confidence in His ability and desire to care for His people.

The danger inherent in a weak or nonexistent prayer life is the inability to recognize the voice of the Lord when He speaks. Without the direct communication with the Lord, it is impossible to know His instructions for everyday situations and for the destiny He calls all who follow Him to seek. Prayerless people are often tossed about from crisis to crisis with no sense of peace in the midst of the storm. Double-mindedness is a potential result of an inconsistent prayer discipline.

Just as with Bible reading and study, prayer is a very intimidating discipline when first approached. New converts often find prayer difficult because they feel that they just don't know what to say. Many still feel "too dirty" to approach the Lord with their "petty" concerns, despite a knowledge that Jesus' blood cleansed all of their sins. The church needs to come alongside these new believers and encourage them to just open up, although just telling them to do so is not enough. Guiding these young disciples through some prayer time is of great benefit for their growth.

As a disciple matures, so should his prayer time and knowledge. Avoiding the pitfalls of becoming "too busy to pray" or other traps the maturing may fall into needs to be a high priority for all serious disciples of Christ. The maturing follower should also advance beyond the basic prayer life of asking for his own needs to seeking the needs of others and seek to develop more "advanced" skills such as praying the Word and listening for the promptings of the Lord for specific needs. These skills are available to anyone who seeks to move deeper into a prayer walk and greater communion with the Lord.

Corporate prayer is just as important to the growth of individuals as it is to the growth of the body. When believers gather in groups to pray, the effect is exponential. There is power in the combined prayers of a unified group that exceeds the individual potential of each participant. There are several examples throughout the Bible of large groups gathering to fast and pray with incredible results. The same is still true today.

A vibrant, growing church needs to have strong prayer ministries in the lives of her members individually and a strong corporate prayer ministry. Concerted efforts to gather people together to pray and separate times of teaching on prayer are essential to the spiritual well-being of a community of believers.

**Worship:** To worship the Lord, to open oneself completely in a genuine, heartfelt expression of devotion to the Savior is a powerful yet simple act. Deep emotional reserves called

forth to lift the Creator of the universe up and praise His holy name draw new believers and seasoned disciples alike into a communion with the Lord unmatched in any other area of discipline. The true joy of the Lord comes upon all those who truly worship Him in spirit and truth.

Worship is more than just a gathering to sing praises to our King. It is a lifestyle. Every action taken needs to be done for the glory of God. When disciples come to the realization that their entire lives are to be offered as a simple act of devotion to Jesus, it is a transforming moment. Deeper than intellectual conviction and more vital than just this knowledge, this is a point of deep maturity when this is not only known, but acted upon. To live each moment with the thought of eternity is a high calling, one laid out for all believers in Christ.

However, this is not to downplay the need for active worship, both individual and corporate. In any believer's life, there must be time set aside for direct expressions of love and devotion. A relationship with Christ is no different than the relationship with a spouse. It is wonderful if there is communication, but the relationship still suffers if there is not a regular profession of love for one another. A wife may acknowledge that the husband's long hours at work are for her benefit because he loves her, but this does not replace the need for the husband to *tell* her he loves her as often as possible. The knowledge of love does not replace the need to express it and hear it expressed.

Song is the most common way that we worship. A heartfelt song of praise and love sung with deep emotion touches the heart of God. The praises of the church are presented before Him as a sweet incense for His pleasure. While the angels worship continuously before the throne, all of their adoration pales when compared to the song of the redeemed sung from a repentant, grateful heart in pure love.

**Community:** Community is the bond formed through the blood of Jesus between all those washed in its flow. The love of Christ is shown in practical ways in a true community. It is the place where needs are met, disciples made, and true friendships formed. The fellowship of the brethren should feed its widows, house its homeless, comfort its hurting, and strengthen the weak.

The devotion to one another in the early church was greatly attractive to the people in the surrounding city. Nowhere in the standard world system was such a feeling of true warmth and love comparable to the fellowship of the early church. One of the expressed desires of people today is finding a community of that nature. Everyone, deep down, longs to be loved and love others. It is a part of the inherent design of man to desire the type of acceptance and love that only comes through a relationship with Jesus and His people.

Because community is so vital, it is the most often assaulted. Gossip, slander, misunderstandings, and broken communication arise all too easily in the church. Add in many other problems such as racism, class warfare, and generation gaps, godly fellowship does not just happen. Love is an act of will and must see through all preconceived prejudices past hurts. The goal is to see people and treat them as Jesus would. After all, the church is the chosen vessel to pour out the love of God onto the fallen world. The body needs to model that love to one another if the message is to be believed by the dying.

When the brethren are unified, the blessing of the Lord is multiplied. The Scriptures said that the disciples were of one mind. In their unity, no one was in need and great signs and wonders were among them. The same is true today when the followers of Christ move together

in unity of purpose and devotion to Christ. Despite the doubts of a few, great signs and wonders will be seen today in such a setting such that the world cannot help but notice and again be drawn to the truth of Jesus.

**The Balance:** Each of these pillars are important. No single discipline can stand alone, nor can strength in one or two substitute for another that is lacking. They are intertwined, feeding one another. A weak spot in any of the four will ultimately cause the whole to fall.

The ministry of the Word affects all three of the others directly. How can there be effective prayer if the will of God is not known from an understanding of the Scriptures? Worship comes from the place of knowing the Lord as He is revealed in His Word and what He has done in His mercy and love. In order to know how the Lord sees others, we must use the filter of His Word to see as He does. Without the Word, we cannot understand His love and mercy and have nothing to sing about or speak of to the lost.

Likewise, prayer has a dynamic effect on the others. Praying God's will and even praying the Scriptures requires an understanding and knowledge of the Bible. Without prayer, that same understanding of the Bible is made much more difficult because the revelatory power of the Holy Spirit is blocked. Prayer opens the heart to the Lord, facilitating expressions of love. Few activities draw people closer together than to pray for each other. Direct communication with the Lord opens the channel for the Holy Spirit to impact all of these disciplines.

Worship is a vessel that opens the heart to receive all that the Lord offers. Through worship, the mind is opened to the teachings of the Word. Prophets sometimes called upon worship musicians to play that they may hear better from the Lord. Times of intense prayer are strengthened by opening them with a time of worship to focus the mind and spirit. After such expressions of love and adoration, even the most hardened heart is softened toward its brother. Bonds of love are formed in corporate worship and walls of separation are shattered. Worship in spirit and truth is vital to the health of all disciplines.

Community binds all together. The fellowship of the church is where both new and seasoned disciples learn to understand the Scriptures and the love of Christ. In a loving community, the truth may be spoken freely without a hint of condemnation. Of course, how can we pray for one another as the Scriptures command if we don't know each other and our struggles and joys? Being surrounded by a community in worship opens hearts to deeper expressions of love and devotion than would have otherwise been reached drawing individuals into closer communion with Jesus. The community is our glue.

When a church is in balance with all four areas strong and growing, the mission of spreading the Gospel and teaching the nations to obey all of the teachings of Jesus can be fulfilled with much more power and authority. After all, when the church no longer looks like the world, there will be a great draw for the lost. Each pillar combined moves the church and the individual disciple closer to the character and nature of Christ.