

Why the Church is Still the Hope of the World

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The Church that Changed the World

Acts 2:42-47

It's an incredible privilege for me to be able to speak here at this New Albany Campus. Marlene and I have been so excited about the start of this new campus led by Michael and Hannah here. Michael, as you've heard, was one of my residents in the residency program that I led for Vineyard Columbus and he was absolutely outstanding in the residency program. So, I knew that he would be a great pastor.

One of the questions, of course, that many people would ask when you tell them that you're going to start up a new church anywhere is why? Why in the world, especially in 2025 would you start a new church? We can understand if you decided to do something with AI consulting or e-commerce or home delivery of groceries. That stuff is hot! But church? Why invest in a dying institution?

Church attendance has been declining in America for the last 40 or 50 years. Part of what's happening with church decline is that there's been an almost total loss of confidence in virtually, every institution, not just religious institutions like churches, but in political institutions, business, medicine, the media. Trust in virtually every institution has tanked.

Another part of declining church attendance is due to the scandals in the church over the past few decades. When people think about the American church, many think about the televangelist scandals that we heard so much about in the 1980's and 90's, if you were alive back then. Then we had the tragic revelation of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, in the Southern Baptist Church, and lots of independent charismatic churches. And there's been financial scandals in lots of churches, especially in the independent charismatic space.

So, some people ask, "Why would you start a new church?" and even more basically, "Why would you go to church when the church has been associated with so many terrible things?" Let me ask you a personal question. Do you see in contemporary America a growing cynicism about church? Have you witnessed or ever experienced any leadership failure in a church you were attending? If you're a regular church-goer and somebody throws this question out to you, "How can you go to church when the church has been guilty of so many terrible things? There's so much corruption. There are so many leaders who have been spiritually abusive or financially abusive or sexually abusive. How can you associate yourself with an institution like the church?" What would you say?

Very often, the best response to people's upset regarding the church is first of all to empathize and to agree. As a pastor, I would just be honest and say, "Yes, the church has been associated with some really bad things. That's all true. We

haven't represented Jesus very well." As Gandhi once put it, "I like your Christ. I just don't like your Christians."

But after we've finished apologizing, I'm tempted to want to turn the tables on someone who's objecting to church in general, or to starting a new church in particular, and ask them a question. And my question would simply be this, "How can you live in America?" I mean with all the terrible things that our country has been associated with: the genocide of native Americans, our history of slavery and Jim Crow, and our materialism, and all the wars we've been involved with everywhere in the world. How can you bear living in this country? How do you do it?"

Maybe they would say, "Well, actually, I'm not from America. I'm from France." You might respond, "Don't get me started about France! What a horrible country with what you did in Algeria and North Africa and your history of colonialism. Don't get me started about France. I don't see how anyone could live there." Or in England and the terrible things that the English did. Or in China, or Russia, or India. In fact, I can't see how you could be associated with any country at all if you really explore that country's history.

Or if you didn't want to get into all this political stuff, and somebody asks, "How can you be associated with church or with starting a new church," you might say, "I can't believe that you still watch football on Sundays. I mean, with all the

concussions and the brain injuries that we know about. And all of the drug abuse and criminal activity of football players, and especially the domestic violence, and don't get me started about all the taxpayer-financed stadiums! I mean, my goodness. We're giving hundreds of millions of dollars of Ohio taxpayer money to help build a new stadium for a billionaire in Cleveland. Don't get me started about football!

And I wonder how you could be associated with cars. With all the deaths on our highways and drunk drivers, and pollution, how can you associate yourself with cars?"

To say you can't be associated with the church because of terrible things the church has done or terrible leaders the church has had is really not very different than saying you can't be associated with anything that people do. I can't be associated with marriage because of all the hurt that people have done to each other in the name of marriage. I can't have children because there's so many bad parents. To go even further, and I say this with all affection to each of us this morning, how can we live with ourselves knowing what we know about what we have done and how we have treated others over the course of our lives. How can we live with ourselves?

And let me just push this all the way to the edge or over the edge. Imagine you are God and you're looking down on this world and you see all of the things that

we do to each other. How can you associate yourself with this world? And you don't know things just from observing – you're God, you know it from the inside of people's hearts. You know people's thoughts and motives and desires. How in the world can God associate with us? The good news of the gospel, friend, is that despite everything that God knows about us, he is still willing to open his arms and invite us into relationship with himself. God knows that we fallen human beings are all made of crooked timber. Everything that we human beings are involved with has some degree of crookedness and corruption and hurt attached to it. And yet, because of God's great love, he still sent his Son to die on our behalf. He's still willing to relate to us!

As I said, there are still many objections to church these days. As this church begins in New Albany, I want to respond to some of the criticisms leveled against church in a talk that I entitled "Why the Church is Still the Hope of the World."

We read this in Acts 2:42-47:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere

hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” [Acts 2:42-47]

Let me give you a little background to this text. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his followers to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. He told them that they would receive power when the Spirit of God came. And on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus died, the Holy Spirit came. In Acts chapter 2, all of these people had a profound spiritual experience. In fact, the whole Book of Acts is about the activity of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned 70 times in the Book of Acts. Many people believe that the Book of Acts should be titled the Acts, not of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Now, Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, started with the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, this wonderful spiritual experience - Spirit filling and speaking in tongues. But Luke doesn't stop with the spiritual experiences that the disciples had on Pentecost. He goes on and talks about the church. You may have heard someone say, “I'm spiritual, but not religious.” In other words, I believe in something greater than myself. I believe in transcendence. I believe in a higher power. I've had spiritual experiences. But I have no interest in institutional religion or anything like joining a church

In contrast, Luke talks about the church. In the Book of Acts so often that he used 19 different terms to describe the church!

He calls the church “God's people.” He calls the church “the brethren” 23 times. He calls the church “the disciples” 21 times, and “the church” 19 times. For the New Testament writers, it's not enough to be spiritual. You also had to be part of a religious community. If it was enough just to be spiritual, but not religious, Luke would have stopped his book with the Day of Pentecost, but he goes on and he writes Acts 2:42-47, which is all about the church.

Here's the first reason why the church is still the hope of the world:

Over against being spiritual but not religious, we need the church to arrive safely in the kingdom of God.

Let me give you a simple illustration that I've used in the past. Imagine if in the age before airliners, you wanted to travel from England to the United States. Well, you could decide to go by yourself in a rowboat. You pack the boat with as much water and food as the boat can hold and you set off from Liverpool to New York. The likelihood of you actually arriving safely in New York is likely about 0%. You would almost certainly die along the way either from exhaustion or hitting rocks or getting washed overboard by a storm. There's almost no chance that you would get to New York by yourself.

On the other hand, you might discover that there is an infinitely better way to travel to New York and that is by an ocean liner. You could travel in the company of thousands of other people in relative safety. You might learn that ocean liners have captains who have studied the tides and know exactly how to travel. Ocean liners have navigators and life boats.

The spiritual life is likewise a journey across a vast sea.. And it's not a journey that one can simply set out on their own and succeed at. There are masters of the spiritual life just like there are masters of the sea. Masters of the spiritual life are folks who have gone ahead of us and discovered that there are dangers on the spiritual journey that can kill us. There are ways that we can advance spiritually and there are ways that we can regress. These masters of the spiritual life have told us that we are far safer in the community of other people as we progress. The point, friends, is simply this – the Christian life is not a solitary life. Almost no one can safely reach the kingdom of God on their own. We enter the kingdom in the company of God's people called the church. We need the encouragement of each other, we need examples of each other. We need the teaching of our leaders. We need the rhythm of the church in order to move forward towards God's kingdom.

Here's the second reason that the church is still the hope of the world:

Over against deciding truth for yourself, the early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching.

In verse 42, Luke records that the early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching. Now this is. so countercultural, because contemporary people, when they examine the Bible, tend to look for things that they can't accept in the Bible. "Well, I'm sorry, but I just can't believe in a God who would ever judge anyone or send anyone to hell. The idea of judgment is simply unacceptable to me. I believe in a God who is going to embrace everyone in the end. I believe in a God of love and tolerance and inclusivity. I don't know why I would ever want to go to church where the pastor occasionally mentions the idea of hell or people being accountable to God and not just to themselves. I am committed to my own truth." In contrast to contemporary culture, the early church was filled with people who were devoted to the apostles' preaching. And again, I think this is so countercultural. because we - and I include almost all of us - tend to pick and choose what we will accept as we read the Bible and what we will reject.

Let me challenge this "pick and choose" method of reading the Bible. Only if God can say things that will upset you, do you know that you are worshiping the real God. If your God never upsets you by what he says, then you're probably worshiping a figment of your imagination and not the real God. If your God never disagrees with you, never outrages you, never challenges you, never upsets you, then you're probably worshiping an idealized version of yourself.

The late Tim Keller once wrote that to “stay away from Christianity because part of the Bible's teaching is offensive” to you assumes that if there is a God, he wouldn't have any views that upset you. He went on to say, “If you don't trust the Bible enough to let it challenge you, and correct your thinking, how could you have a personal relationship with God?” You see, in any truly personal relationship, the other person has to be able to contradict you. For example, if you're in a marriage and you never allow your spouse to challenge you or correct you, or say anything that contradicts you, you don't have a relationship with your spouse. You're just having a relationship with yourself. If your friends, if your parents, if your kids, if a pastor, if a member of the church, can't ever say anything that goes against what you already think, then you're unable to have a relationship with anyone other than yourself.

In contrast to contemporary culture, the early church was devoted to the truth that was taught by the apostles. And friends, I would say that you will never be able to grow as a Christian unless you are devoted to the Scriptures and allow yourself not only to examine the Bible so that you can find things you don't agree with, but you allow God to say things to you about your life that he doesn't agree with.

Here's a third reason that the church is still the hope of the world:

Over against the isolation of many Americans, the church provides community for disconnected people.

Thirty percent of younger adults under the age of 35, report that they regularly or always feel lonely. Up to 60% say that on a weekly basis, they feel isolated and lonely. And while the stats for older adults are a little better, there is a significant percentage of Americans today who say they regularly feel lonely. It says in Acts 2:42, that the early Christians were not just devoted to the apostles' teaching, but to fellowship. The church was not just a learning church, it was a loving church. I love the balance that the Holy Spirit created in the early church. The church wasn't just full of truth devoted to the apostles' teaching. It was full of love, devoted to fellowship. And that's so radically countercultural because there are so few environments that you could come into today in contemporary America where you will experience warmth and acceptance and love regardless of who you are.

Let me tell you a personal story. A week ago, my wife Marlene and I flew out to California to celebrate my sister's seventy-fifth birthday. She's my oldest sister. She went through a divorce some years ago. She has experienced a lot of health issues over the last few decades. She found herself in California living in a little house and was totally isolated. She experienced intense loneliness and depression. What do you do when you're an older adult and you're living by yourself and you're lonely? How do you find community?

Well, a Christian woman reached out to her. They became friends. Then this Christian woman invited my sister to church. Now, my sister had made a Christian profession many years ago at our church and I had the privilege of baptizing her forty years ago. But after she moved, she never got involved in church again and had been apart from church for 35 or so years. In any case, she accepted her friend's invitation to church and for the last four years, my sister has been regularly attending this little church in California. It has revolutionized her life. She is way more joyful. At her 75th birthday party, there were about 35 people who came to celebrate her birthday with her. Person after person stood up and told how much they loved my sister and how wonderful it was that she was part of the church. Not only has her emotional life changed, but she has become spiritually transformed because she joined this church. She's a radically different person than she was four years ago. What other institution on earth would have loved and included and cared for my sister other than a local church?

Fellowship. And if you look down in verse 46, we read this. **“Every day, they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”** The early church had this pattern of large central meetings in the temple and then smaller fellowship meetings in their homes. Here at this campus, they're trying to imitate the early church's pattern. We come together in large gatherings for our weekend services, and then the plan here, starting in September, is to break down during the week

in several different small groups so that we can really share life together, koinonia. You see, the word fellowship comes from a Greek word *koinonia*, and koinonia was not just about the relationship we have with each other. Koinonia literally means sharing. Sharing.

The point is that in a small group setting, we're not just sitting in rows, where the front of us looks at the back of someone else. In a small group, we sit in a circle where we can all face one another. We can share life together, we can share our concerns, we can pray for one another. We can open up God's Word together, we can share a meal together. We help one another financially.

Now you might say, "I'm not lonely - I don't feel isolated. what do I need church for? I have a community. I get together with a few friends whose company I enjoy. We talk about things we care about. Some of them are Christians. We talk about the Bible. We talk about craft beer and politics and bourbon. We roast our own coffee beans. I have community with my yoga class or my spin class, or my pickleball team and, a few of us have coconut water together after we go out for a vegan lunch. What do I need church for?

One of the things that I've always loved about church ever since I got involved with church 52 years ago, is that you and I don't pick the people who are part of the church. God picks the people. The church is not just a group of friends that we select. The church is a collection of people who God selects. The church is

not just people that we agree with about politics or sports or about our common interests. The church is a supernatural creation of God.

God, supernaturally, breaks down dividing walls, and he brings people together who would never otherwise be together. What other place do you ever go to where a group of people hang out together who are as radically different as the folks in most churches? You could have a guy who's coming out of prison, whose background is from Southern Ohio and there's another guy in the church who's got his PhD in Chemical Engineering from India. They're there with an older American widow. and a young student from Iran who's come to the United States to study. All these people come together because they are, first of all, connecting to another person, Jesus Christ. The church is not about our common interests. It's not about our common socioeconomic backgrounds. It's not about our common culture. There's one reason that we gather together and that's because we've had an encounter with this one supernatural person, Jesus Christ.

The diversity of church in terms of age and race and socioeconomics and politics and personalities can cause friction. There are some people we easily like and other people that are hard for us. And yet, this diversity is such a good thing for us. We are forced to grow because of all of the diversity in the church. Why is that? Why does hanging around with people who are very different from us force us to grow? How else do we learn to love unless we find ourselves with people who are difficult to love? How else do we learn to forgive unless we find

ourselves with people who have hurt us and who we need to forgive? How else do we learn to share our possessions unless we encounter people who make demands on our money? And where are we going to find difficult people and people who hurt us and people who want some of our money? In church! Again, the church is not some self-selected group of people who place no demands on us. God puts the people in the church. And he does so because he knows that all of us need each other.

Here's a fourth and final reason that the church is still the hope of the world:

Over against the rampant secularism of our culture, the church continually focuses our attention upward to God.

Acts 2:42 says, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." And we read in verse 43, "Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles." Now, the breaking of bread might include the sharing of a meal together in one another's homes. But it almost certainly involves the taking of communion. The bread and the wine point us to the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. And in addition to communion, the church prayed and they saw miracles.

You see, church is more than individuals connecting with one another, building community together. So many folks these days acknowledge that you need to be part of a community and so join the church. But that's only one dimension of living, the horizontal dimension. Christian living, also has a vertical dimension. We take communion, which points us to Christ. We pray, we worship God.

We live at a time where the majority of Americans don't know where to find ultimate meaning, for ultimate purpose. We try to find that through our work, in our marriages and families, in a relationship, maybe in doing something great, like writing a book. or in our research. or developing a skill or a talent in music or art.

The problem is that nothing in this world is big enough to give us ultimate meaning and purpose. Only reaching up vertically of life, connecting with Almighty God can give us a sense of meaning and purpose that we all crave. And that's what church does. Week after week through the worship, through the church's prayers, through the taking of communion, we are being challenged to lift our eyes to God.

Church will always point people not only towards each other, but up toward God.

And friend, I don't know what you do. During the first part of the church service here, when we sing, But I can tell you that if you want to grow as a follower of Christ, you have got to practice personal worship and personal prayer. It can't be

all about horizontal activity. You've got to allow your heart to connect with the living God.

Listen, if you center your life and identity on anything other than God, it will eventually break your heart. You see, created things are finite and fragile. People move. People disappoint and hurt us. And even in the best relationships, eventually someone will die. No relationship in this world lasts forever. We lose our jobs through layoffs and corporate mergers and retirements and reorganization. Our possessions break, or they wear out or they get stolen. And no matter how much we exercise and try to eat right, our own bodies will break down. The late Tim Keller who I quoted earlier in this talk, wrote that "Only God can provide us with a stable identity that's not subject to circumstance of failure." He said this, "if Jesus is your center and Lord and you fail him, he will forgive you. But if anything else is your Lord, and you fail it, it will never forgive you."

Let's pray.

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- II. Over against deciding truth for yourself, the early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching.
- III. Over against the isolation of many Americans, the church provides community for disconnected people.
- IV. Over against the rampant secularism of our culture, the church continually focuses our attention upward to God.