

Live Large and Live Little

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[0 : 00] A good church is always learning to live large and live little.

A good church is always learning to live little and live large. A few years ago, I don't know, four, five, six years ago, an organization that I am a part of, we organized a group of bishops from the Anglican Church of Canada to meet with me and a couple of other people before, no, I guess it was after the House of Bishops met.

And so there were 13 bishops, if memory serves me correctly, that were going to meet with me and with a professor who teaches at Regent College and two other people, all far more important and smart, smarter than me and all that stuff.

And there were some problems getting cabs in Quebec City, which is where the meeting was taking place. And finally, I came in the very last cab. I was making sure that everybody got there.

And so I came in the last cab with two bishops. And I get in the room and I come in and sit down. And as soon as I sit down, these 13 bishops and this learned theologian and these other important people, they all get silent and they look to me.

[1 : 23] And I have this moment of stark terror when I realize that they're waiting for me to say something and that I've gathered them together. And I'm just really used to those types of people telling me what to do.

And it was just this moment of complete and utter stark terror. And then I realized, well, at least I do have an agenda. And we were able to go on. Many of us have been parts of groups where the very first thing that they do when the group gets together is somebody asks the question, what should we do?

And if you've ever been a part of that type of group, you all sort of look around and say, well, I don't know what on earth we're going to do. And the church, if it's to be a good church and a healthy church, not only has to provide times when a large number of people gather like this for public worship, but it also has to provide times when smaller groups of people gather together to do things.

And let's say we were just to understand that and try to get together. We'd say, okay, well, now we're together. What on earth do we do? Well, today we're going to look and see what the Bible tells us that we should be doing.

Please turn in your Bibles to page 944. Page 944. And some of you who are guests this morning, in some ways the month of January is focusing, for four weeks we're really focusing, on Acts chapter 2, verses 40 to 47.

[3 : 00] And in particular, a couple of aspects of this. Because these texts show, this text shows sort of in a very brief form, sort of the very, very heart of what the church is to be.

And so it's really important for us time and time and time again to go right back to the scriptures, to a key text like this, that we can be, in a sense, formed and reformed and corrected and deepened in the fundamental things that we should be about.

Peter has just preached the first Christian sermon, and it goes like this. And with many other words, he testified and exhorted them, saying, Be saved from this perverse generation.

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized, and that day about 3,000 souls were added to them. And here in verse 42 are the four of the key marks of the church.

They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

[4 : 15] Now all who believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all as anyone had need. 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, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. So we see that there are four marks of the church in verse 42, that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine or teaching.

They continued steadfastly in koinonia or fellowship, which is what I'm going to look at next week, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. So what does it mean that every sort of daily, look at verse 46.

You know, I began the sermon by saying, a good church is always learning to live large and live little. That's verse 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.

They continued daily with one accord in the temple, that's living large, and breaking bread from house to house, that's living little. You see, they both had big public worship, and they had smaller gatherings where they met in house to house.

[5 : 40] And what do you do when you gather in a house? Like, what should we be doing? Well, we should be trying to do, even there, the marks of the church. We should be gathering around apostolic teaching.

It's one of the things which should mark our little gatherings. Some people from this church have moved to another city for a period of time, and they were talking to me.

They've been talking to me several times since they've moved, and one of the problems they've had in finding the church in their new city is the church has some small groups and fellowship groups.

In fact, they were very, very friendly in inviting them. I might get some of these analogies a little bit, some of these examples a little bit wrong, but, you know, one of the groups goes to a spa on a regular basis. You know, another one sort of listens to music.

Another one tastes wine or does that. Like, they all just do all of these social types of things, but none of the groups there do any of the four things which should mark the life of a healthy church, which is gathering around apostolic teaching, being involved in fellowship or koinonia, the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.

[6 : 51] So the first thing that, when we're learning how to live little, one of the first things that little groups have to do is that they have to open the Bible.

What we're going to do today is, look, you still have page 944 and 945 open, and at the very, very top of page 944, we get the beginning of Peter's sermon.

And we're going to read that as a way for us to understand what exactly apostolic testimony or apostolic teaching is. Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words.

For these are not drunk. Just sort of pause there. The Holy Spirit has just fallen upon the 120 disciples, and they've started to engage in this really, really odd behavior of speaking out loud and sort of praising God out loud and seeming to speak in all sorts of different languages.

And so the crowd has thought that they're all drunk. Peter says, These are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.

[8 : 09] And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions.

Your old men shall dream dreams. And on my menservants and on my maidservants, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy.

I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord.

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Now, one of the four marks of the church is that they gather around a gospel church, a good church gathers around the apostolic teaching or the apostolic testimony.

This sermon is the very first example we see of the apostolic testimony or the apostolic teaching. And the really remarkable thing about this is that the very first thing that we see is that the apostles open the Bible.

[9 : 22] The apostles open the Bible. They could have talked about how they could have gotten up there and just strutted their stuff.

They could have said, well, folks, now that we've got your attention, we want you to know that we are one of only a very select group of people who've actually seen Jesus rise from the dead.

Or they could have gotten up and talked about their profound mystical visions or their profound times that they'd had with Jesus. Or they could have gotten up and talked about philosophy or they could have talked about tradition.

Or they could have done all sorts of things. But the very, very first time when we can see what the apostles testified to, we see that almost immediately what they do is open the Bible.

Because that passage, when I was just reading Acts chapter 2, the very, very first thing they do is they go to the book of Joel. And as we read through the rest of the summary of Peter's sermon, we'll see that Peter not only looks to Joel, but he looks to two different passages in the Psalms.

[10 : 23] This is really, really important for us. At the very, very first thing that the apostles do in their testimony is open the Bible. That's what they do first.

They don't do anything else other than have them all, in a sense, figuratively speaking, because they wouldn't have had Bibles there. The people would have just memorized it. They, in a sense, immediately open the Bible.

And the second thing they do is they explain it and they understand it. Now, we, many, many years after the apostles, have another advantage over them because we now understand that, in a sense, the summary of the teaching of the apostles is what we now call the New Testament.

You see, the New Testament itself is an interpretation. The New Testament itself is an explanation. God wrote, had it written so that we would understand.

He doesn't want us to be ignorant. He doesn't want us to be foolish. He wants to speak to us. And so the New Testament itself is apostolic testimony, and it is apostolic testimony, which explains.

[11 : 35] It explains itself. It explains Jesus. It explains the Old Testament. So the first thing the apostles do is they point us to the Bible.

And one of the things which is so wonderful about being part of a small group when a church learns how to live little is one of the wonderful things about being in a small group that studies the Bible is that's where you can get the real questions.

Like already today, probably some of you might have some questions. Is that really the way that this should go or that should go? And that introduction wasn't very good. And how would you deal with this? And what exactly does blood and fire and towers of smoke mean?

And some of you might have all of those questions, but you don't have any opportunity to ask me any of them. One of the wonderful things about having a small group that gathers around the Bible is that the real questions of the people who are gathering around to study the Bible can come out.

Somebody can share. I remember so much. And these real questions can be ones that completely surprise us. In my first church where I was the pastor, not an assistant, but the pastor, I was taking a couple of men through the Gospel of Mark.

[12 : 49] And there's a story in Mark of Jesus being asleep in the boat in the midst of a storm. And one of the men in the Bible study had become a Christian just about a year earlier and he was really, really, really growing.

And he accepted the Bible. He believed in the resurrection. Like he believed it was God's word written. And it was a delight to teach him the Bible and to study the Bible with him.

But as soon as we came to that story, he said to me, George, I don't believe that story. And I was completely, utterly shocked. He was an old Navy guy, a retired Navy guy.

And he said, George, I've been out in the water when there's a big storm. And I just don't believe that anybody could stay asleep in the midst of a big storm in a little boat.

And the question completely and utterly floored me. And that's good. Because his question forced all of us to look at the text far more concretely and to think about who Jesus was and what was going on in that story, it forced us to look far more deeply into the text.

[13 : 58] And it came because we were gathered around the scriptures and we were in a little group where people can ask questions and that we can all together try to figure out what the answer is.

When we gather in large groups like this, part of my job is to try to equip you to understand the Bible. If five years or after you've been coming to the church for several years, if you are more ignorant of the Bible than when you came, I have completely and utterly failed.

If you feel after you have been in this church for a while that you can't possibly ever understand the Bible, that you need me to explain it to you, then I have failed.

But if after you've been in this church you have a sense that the Bible is God's word written and that he has written it for you and me and for ordinary people and that God delights in us coming to his word and reading it and that he trusts ordinary people to come to his word and learn from it.

If you have learned these things, whether you can put them into words or not, then I have been doing my job. And one of the things that you can pray for me is that not only me and other people who preach in public like this in this pulpit is pray that as we open the scriptures together in this large setting that you will not only grow in love with Jesus but grow in confidence of God's word and a confidence that you yourselves can plunge into it and can know.

[15 : 39] So, many people are gifted to open up the Bible and to teach it. It's not dependent only upon clergy like me.

You see, as our church learns to live large and live little, part of what it means to learn to live little is that there's going to be, and hopefully as a result of this sermon some of you will say, you know what, maybe I should be starting a Bible study group in my neighborhood.

Maybe I should be talking to Nat over the next week and trying to gather a couple of people that I've met here in this church together so that we can open the Bible and we can study it together. And the fact is that I can't go to all of these groups and I shouldn't go to all of these groups because God, through His Holy Spirit, has gifted many people with the ability to teach.

And God desires that the Bible be opened and He desires that we, in a sense, look at the text of Scripture and we come to Scripture and we read and we learn together and it's not dependent upon me.

When the Communists took over China, there were one million Christians and when they took over China, they persecuted the church quite strongly and they put many of the leaders of the Christian church in China into jail and they cast all of the foreign missionaries and seminary professors, they kicked them all out of the country.

[17 : 12] And humanly speaking, we would then think only a million Chinese Christians, great persecution, all of the leaders and all of the pastors and ministers put in jail or kicked out of the country.

The church has no hope. Today, there are over a hundred million Christians in China and it all came because ordinary people would gather in small gatherings and they would open the Bible and they would desire to know Jesus.

And so we see that the very first thing about living large and living little is that when we gather together, we gather to open the Bible.

Let's just continue very briefly with this sermon, verse 22. Paul has just, I mean, not Paul, Peter has just quoted the book of Joel. He then says, Men of Israel, hear these words.

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves also know.

[18 : 18] Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified and put to death, whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it.

Just want to pause there and draw two things to our attention about the apostolic testimony. Remember, when we live little and we live large, we gather around the apostles' teaching, which means that we gather around the New Testament, we gather and we open the Bible, and when we open the Bible, what we fundamentally want to do is we want to focus on Jesus.

We want to know Jesus. You don't want to know what John Maxwell has to say. You don't want to know what, oh, I can't think of famous, you don't want to know what Billy Graham has to say.

You don't want to know what George Sinclair has to say. You want to know Jesus. That's the whole point of gathering together. That's the whole point of church. It's the whole point of gathering together. Yesterday, I did a funeral, and some of you have been to some of the funerals that I have led, and this was a funeral in a funeral home, and every time I do a funeral home funeral, I say something along these lines in my very brief sermon.

I say, I know, after the scriptures have been read, I say, I know that there are many people here who maybe aren't Christians. Maybe you're a member of some great faith which is not Christian, maybe you are inventing your own or seeking out your own particular way, but I would just like to take a few moments to share with you what my faith is as a Christian.

[20 : 03] I would just like to share with you personally what my faith is as a Christian in the face of death. And then I go on to tell them about Jesus. I go on to tell them about how he died upon the cross, how he tasted all there is to taste of death, and how on the third day he conquered death and conquered sin.

And I even do this in a modern culture and I say, and he conquers all the hostile spiritual powers which bind us and keep us from God. And that it really happened.

And then I say, you know, my hope in the funeral that I did yesterday, it was for Desiree Jirawar. Some of you know her. She was a wonderful woman. And I can easily say that she was, you know, in fact I began the sermon by saying that, you know, when I'm 95 I hope I'm as nice as she is, she was.

You know, I hope I don't get grumpy and crotchety as I get older. I hope I get slow to anger and gracious and gentle like she grew as she got older. And I shared, you know, my hope in the face of death isn't that I will someday be as nice as Desiree was.

And Desiree's hope in the face of death wasn't that she was nice. Our hope in the face of death is that we have said yes to Jesus' invitation to come to him.

[21 : 23] And by coming to him we share in his triumph over death and sin and hostile spiritual powers. That's the fundamental Christian hope that Jesus really exists, existed and still exists, that he lived a human life, that he walked among us, that he died on the cross, that he died and tasted all there is to taste of death with nothing left out, that on the third day he rose triumphant over sin and death and hell and all hostile spiritual, evil spiritual powers, and that he didn't do that in some remarkable way just for himself so that we could all marvel at one person could do something like that, but that he does it for you and for me and he does it for you and for me not for himself and he does it for you and for me and he says to you and to me he says it to us whether we're gay or straight old or young well educated or poorly educated whether we're good looking or ugly smart or dumb he says to every one of us come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light and Jesus defeats sin and death and hell and all hostile spiritual powers not as some marvelous thing that he's able to accomplish by himself but he does it for you and for me and he invites ordinary people like you and me to share in his triumph that's what I say in funerals and I say it in funerals because nothing focuses the mind like death that is the basic fundamental

Christian hope and so the heart of the apostolic testimony is expressed in the New Testament and the apostles when we're together to understand the apostolic testimony we are to open our Bibles and we are to read them confident that God wants to speak to us through his word that he is not sort of playing some type of peekaboo game with us but he desires us to know and that he welcomes us bringing our questions to the text of scripture and as we open the text of scripture the first and foremost thing that we want to know is we want to know Jesus and if you go through all of Peter's sermon you'll see that you see Jesus is the one who unlocks it's because of Jesus' triumph that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes it is because of Jesus' triumph that we can know the Father you know and Jesus is the one who opens up all of these things and so as we open up the scriptures the second part of the apostolic testimony and gathering is focusing on Jesus and you know and this this is this is so wonderful in a small group

I have learned so much more about being a Christian by being in some small gathering where I'm with other people because you see one of the wonderful things about the Christian faith and about Jesus is that it's not just what we're taught but what we catch Christianity is not just taught it's caught and you catch it by being in small groups with other people I don't have the time but one of the turning points in my life when I was in high school and you know I'm not sure now in hindsight whether I became a Christian when I was in grade 12 or whether I just reclaimed my Christian faith and that's something that I might puzzle about but God doesn't care the main thing is that I became a Christian and I can tell you that the turning points in my life that were so fundamental was this aspect of catching Christianity from others in a small group and seeing Jesus in them and that comes as we open the Bible as we focus on Jesus the third thing and this is a harder thing is that as we open the Bible and as we focus on

Jesus the Bible will convict us of sin listen to what Peter is very very bold just look back here at verse 23 he's just talked about Jesus and then he says him being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God you have taken by lawless hands have crucified and put to death the apostolic testimony goes right to the sin of the hearers let me tell you this I'm very Canadian if I had been back there with Peter I probably would have said oh Peter don't say that okay you're gonna make them upset you're gonna make them mad you're gonna turn them off you're gonna do all of these types of things like Peter just focus on the positives okay like leave this little problem of conscience and what they've done just to the side and you know talk about how wonderful the Holy Spirit is and just how wonderful like just do all these positive type of things don't focus on sin

Peter is what I would have said if you go all the way through the sermon at the end of the sermon the summary of the sermon 3,000 people come to faith 3,000 if I had been there and Peter had listened to my advice maybe there would have been one I don't know maybe there would have been nobody you see because we modern Canadians get really uncomfortable with this idea of being confronted about sin but you see the apostolic testimony opens the Bible points us to Jesus and then of necessity the Bible and Christ himself will point out to us the gap between being in Christ and not being in Christ like that just comes and so in a small group this is very very very hard in in many ways what happens in a larger group like this

[27 : 41] I can maybe talk about sins a little bit more easily because it's not as obvious that I'm speaking about the person sitting on the couch right there whereas you're talking about certain sins and there's five people in the room and we all know who the only one is who does that you know we all look around the other way you know that can be a little bit awkward and uncomfortable and a bigger gathering it's a bit safer you know inwardly a person might be thinking gosh that passage of scripture just hit me you know and others are thinking gosh I wonder who on earth would ever do something like that and and we're all blessedly unaware of the other and that's part of the reason why church is to be large and little but just and so while in a small group we have to be very careful about the convicting of sin but by the same token just as the scriptures are read and as Jesus is pointed to the scriptures themselves and

Jesus himself even in a small group will prick us in our conscience that this is me and that's good apostolic testimony convicts of sin the fourth thing very briefly because my time has gone out is let's look at the very end of the sermon verse 38 then Peter said to them repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for the promises to you and to your children and to all who are far off as many as the Lord our God will call you see the apostolic testimony says you hear all this stuff about the triumph of Jesus over sin and over death and over hell whoa is that ever dramatic sound effects eh the snow falling off the roof you know it's like the light of

God's word falling upon us and all that cold yucky snow that's in capturing our covering up our soul and making it frozen and hardened shriveled and as the light of the holy word of God comes and as the Holy Spirit convicts us all that ice falls away I just thought of that right now but you know it's pretty true that's that's what you know you know the Bible itself convicts us of sin Jesus convicts us of sin not to make us grovel but to make us know that he loves us and that he can be our savior and wants to be our savior and this part at the end that I was reading before I got interrupted by these dramatic snow slides is that you see the Bible constantly the apostolic testimony constantly calls us to choose it challenges us to choose all of the time and

I can tell you this that Christ only wants us to choose one way he never said I hope he chooses the devil today or I hope he chooses to be selfish or ungenerous Jesus that for us he is always desiring that we be more open to him more open to the Holy Spirit more generous more able to love more able to forgive and one of the wonderful things about a small group like this is not a small group like this but when you're in a little group that people can love and can encourage you they can know your struggles and in a big group like this you might sometimes come and go and come and go and you can do that for quite a while and there's nothing wrong with that sometimes we need anonymity and we need private space but we might need that for a short season of time but fundamentally what we need is somebody who knows our name and we can know in our soul that Jesus knows our name but it's love you and they can encourage you and they can help you to make the right choices they can cry with you when you've made a wrong choice and you've realized that you need to repent and they can laugh and celebrate with you when they watch you and you watch them making those wise choices and that's why

God in his providence has said that in a good church in a good church gather around the apostles teaching we open the Bible we look to Jesus we're being open to being confronted when where our lives are in contradiction to the perfect love and compassion generosity of God and we are able in that context to hear the word of God constantly asking us to choose God choose Christ choose the Holy Spirit choose to allow the snow to fall off our lives so that the sun will warm us and make us shine let's bow our heads in prayer father we give you thanks and praise that that you love us that you love us that you desire us ordinary people people with problems and people with mortgages and people who wish that they one day can have a mortgage and that father you love us and that you desire ordinary people like us to actually know you and to actually become wise in your ways father we you and and Father we are humbled and so grateful at your kindness and your complete and utter overturning of elitism that you desire ordinary people like us to know you and to know your word and to be used by you in helping others to know. Father thank you for this and we ask that you help us as a church to learn how to live large and live little. In Jesus's name, amen.

[34 : 40] Amen.