

Our Kind of Fellowship

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[0:00] Amen. So what kind of fellowship are we going to have? And I think there's some barriers for us to work through as we think of this. As you turn to Acts chapter 2, verse 42, we're dealing with this key passage.

This is a passage that is fundamental to who we are as a church, who you are as a believer. It's fundamental to who you are as a believer in ways that demonstrate the needs of your heart. God has designed you in such a way that you have needs that will be met in the church as the church meets together. And so, was that me or is that the mic?

Okay. All right. If it goes out, I'll just start, you know, raising my voice more. Okay. We'll get through it. But the question is, what kind of fellowship are we going to have?

What are the barriers that we have? I think I thought of this as I saw one of those facts that was presented this week that said, one-third of Americans have never interacted with their next-door neighbor.

[1:13] One-third of Americans have never interacted, not even one time, with the people that live next door to them. And some of you said to yourself, without looking around and pointing fingers, you just said, I really haven't met my neighbors, right?

Because the reality is, is that this is typical. And even for those of us who have met our neighbor, we don't know them very well.

For most of us. Now, some of you do. Some of you are social butterflies. You get out. You meet everybody. You know everything about your neighbor. You know everything about your neighbor's neighbor.

Your neighbor's family. You know everything that's going on. You're Mrs. Kravitz in your neighborhood. You're the neighborhood watch program. You know, some of you are really good about that.

I mean, Brandy will stand out in the front yard sometimes when somebody strange drives by, and she'll give them a look, like, what are you doing in my neighborhood? Because, I mean, she's paying attention, knowing what's going on.

[2:18] But the reality is, most of us, we don't even know our neighbor. You think that the answer to this is social media, right? Because social media creates an avenue for you to get to know people.

But the reality is, you really don't know those people. You don't know. I know this is a news flash to some of you because you think you really know all these people in the relationships that are primarily through social media.

And the reality is, you don't know them. You don't know them. This one study that came out recently just talked about the different effects of social media.

61% of the participants feel bad about finding out that someone unfriended them on social media. 61%. It affects you.

Have you ever been unfriended? Yes, many of us have, okay? Some more than others. 59% upset because someone posted a negative or critical comment about them.

[3:21] I mean, it upsets you. You feel like it's something real and it's out there. 57% said after going on social media, they felt that someone they follow has a better life than them.

And it brings about some depression in their life. And this is a real fact, you know, more applicable to teenagers and younger, but it's everybody. 54% felt sad after seeing photos from a party they didn't attend or were not invited to.

It felt sad because they see something on social media. 54% felt upset when no one liked or commented on a photo that they posted. 42% jealous when they saw a friend had more likes than they did.

And this person concluded in this study as they were looking at Gen Z, this younger generation. And the assumption may be that younger people are actually, you know, way more involved in social media.

But the trend is actually plateaued and declining. And what they said was, to understand what's driving this shift, you only need to talk to young people.

[4:35] They're saying that after years spent constructing carefully curated online identities and accumulating heaps of online friends, they now want to be themselves and make real friends based on shared interests.

They're craving privacy, safety, and rest from the throngs of people on social platforms. They're craving gatherings where they share in private or public forums where they can participate. They're craving private and public forums for shared experience, often around shared interests with a like-minded community.

Doesn't that sound vaguely familiar? I mean, you think of shared experience, shared interest, and a like-minded community.

What a novel idea. And this is actually God's plan. I think for some of us, we think when we're a friendly church and we receive people, and they come in and we're friendly, and man, they'll say it over and over again.

[5:53] Oh, what a friendly church this is. What a friendly group of people. And we think, man, see, that's us. We are an integrated fellowship that way, and we are friendly.

But in a hot minute, they realize that although we want to be people that are deeply connected to each other, although we want to be people that are super involved in each other's lives, typically, we're not.

Now, am I right? Now, I'm not just pointing fingers so that you'll feel guilty, but there is a reality here that we need to address as we decide what kind of church this is going to be.

Because the reality is most people don't have those kinds of relationships, but they need those kinds of relationships. And the reality for this generation is they're craving those kinds of generational relationships, but they're not finding them when they come to the church.

Because church is just a show. It's just entertainment. There's people up there singing, and I'm at a concert. And most of the time, they're smoking lights, and it's a great show.

[7:17] And I walk away, man, what a great show. Was it great worship? How was worship this morning? The music was awesome. What a great show. The preaching was great.

What a great show it was. Well, I've got news for you. It's not a show. This is not entertainment, and I'm not an entertainer. In fact, I stink at entertaining.

I can juggle, but not real well. And so the fact of the matter is, it's got to be more than that. It's got to be deeper than that. I think the reality is seen actually here in Acts chapter 2.

When we start looking at what the church is supposed to be. Because I have people tell me all the time, man, I just want to be a part of a church that's more personal and relatable. And I want a church where there's relationships where people are actually in each other's homes and doing stuff with each other.

And I hear that. I've been in ministry almost 30 years. I've heard that every year of my ministry. There's all the time I've heard those kinds of phrases. And then I will look into the life of the people that say that.

[8:24] And they never have people over to their house. And they're never engaged in other people's lives for the most part. They're not doing things to engage with other families.

They're not pouring into other families' lives. And yet they're saying, that is exactly what I want. But they're not being that. Something's got to change.

I don't want to be a part of that kind of church that's just a show. I want to be a part of a church, and you do too, where people are integrated into my life.

And when I suffer, people suffer with me. When I rejoice, people rejoice with me. When great stuff happens, I know they're going to surround me and be with me.

When stuff goes down that's hard and hurts, I know they're going to be with me. That's the kind of church that we see in the Scripture. My brother shared a story with me, and then we'll get into the text.

[9:36] Several years ago, he shared a story with me, and it stuck with me. He was talking to his church and a group of people. They were really trying to go through some renewal as a church.

And they got in a room, and they gave everybody a chance to have some input. And he went around. Most of the time, people are just quiet. But he went around the room and had everybody say something.

And at the end of it, one of the guys stood up, and he called out to one of the other guys across the room. And he said, John, how long have we been in church together?

And John thought about it for a minute. He said, I guess probably around eight or nine years. He said, eight or nine years.

He said, do you realize that this is the first time I've ever heard your voice? Nine years of going to church together, and I've never heard your voice.

[10:40] The reality is, that is to come. Sometimes that's us. And what we need to do, is we need to repent.

That's what we do. When we're confronted with Scripture, we see what God says, we repent, and we change to conform ourselves to what He says. So that when we look into the Scripture and say, this is what the church looks like, I say, then that's going to be me.

I'm going to be that. Right? Can I get an amen? Are we in this together? We are. Acts chapter 2, verse 42. Let's stand together.

We're going to read this. Acts chapter 2, verse 42. We started here last week. See how far we get through it today.

Not getting very far. Long-winded pastor. All right. Verse 42. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread and prayers.

[11:52] And awe came upon every soul. And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and their belongings and distributing them, or distributing the proceeds to all as any had need.

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their numbers day by day those who were being saved. Father, may you bless the reading of your word today.

May you speak to us. May you change us. May we repent at the command of your voice. May we be sheep who hear you and respond.

[13:05] May we be hearers of the word, but not that only. May we be doers of the word. And may this be a place where people come for real biblical fellowship.

We pray that you would just be with us today to that end. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Amen. So Acts 2, 42 through 47 is really a summary of the results of Pentecost.

Okay? You've got to think of it that way as a bullet point summary of here's the results. What happened? Pentecost happens. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the church in a unique way.

The apostles have now been filled with the Holy Spirit. Those present filled with the Holy Spirit. And because the Holy Spirit is now at work in them and indwelling them, something unique is happening with God's people.

And you see it in the transition in the verse before, verse 42. In verse 41, it said, and so those who received His Word were baptized and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.

[14:17] They heard the message of the Gospel. They were changed. They heard the message of Christ coming and dying for sin and being resurrected. They heard of the anticipation of Him coming and knowing...

Am I... Keep it down in my hand. All right. Now hold it up. All right. All right. Getting some instruction here.

Let's say it together. We are a work in progress. Okay? Everybody's good now. So... Acts 2.42. The result of the Holy Spirit being at work first is salvation. People that are saved. People that are changed. And they're baptized, symbolizing what's happened in their life.

And they're added to the group. So keep in mind that this group has just added like 3,000 people in a day. This church is enormous.

[15:25] This is mega church happening at Jerusalem right now. And so you've got to think. This church that's growing now is not just meeting in one house.

It's probably meeting in multiple houses and at the temple and wherever they can find to meet. Because you can't come unless you've got a really big house. 3,000 people aren't meeting together today.

And so we start seeing this unfold in the text. They were meeting in the temple and in their houses of breaking bread in their homes and meeting in the temple day by day. And so you see them meeting in all these places.

They are... They've been one to Christ. They've become a part of the church invisible. Right? The church invisible is the church that God sees. He knows everybody from every age that's been born again into the kingdom.

You get saved. You put your faith and trust in Christ. Your life is changed. And all of a sudden you are in the kingdom of God. Isn't that great?

[16:29] So the thief on the cross if he were crucified right now he wasn't baptized. Right? It wasn't baptism that got him in the kingdom. The Lord said you're going to be with me in paradise today.

This is the reality. The invisible church is something I become a part of when I become a believer in Christ. But there is the visible church what we can see.

It's what we conform to in scripture. It's how the scripture describes the church and now we have conformity in our life to live out the character of God and be the church that he's called us to be.

That's the visible church. So I'm a part of the invisible church when I'm saved and then I come and I join a visible church. I'm part of the universal church when I'm saved.

It's glorious. We love the church and we talk about the universal church. Jesus said I'm going to build my church and he's talking about church believers of all time all ages.

[17:32] but I don't stay just a part of the universal church. I've been commanded to be a part of this local visible church.

Because as part of the local visible church now we get to work together and play out what the invisible universal church looks like to God. So that's where we're at.

It's the progression. I like what Leonard Ravenhill said he said has great preaching died? Is soul hot preaching a lost art?

Have we conceded to the impatient modern snack bar sermons spiced with humor to edge jaded spiritual appetites? Or do we endeavor to bring the power of the world to come into every one of our meetings?

Pentecost he said meant pain and we have so much pleasure Pentecost meant burden and we love ease Pentecost meant prison and most of us would do anything rather than get there for Christ's dear sake Pentecost relived he said would put many of us in jail well I'm here to tell you it's not just Pentecost that will put us in jail but we practice New Testament belief in these days in our nation there's coming the moment in our lifetime when it's going to put you in jail it's going to be the kind of life that's going to cause you to lose your job it's going to cause you to be the non-conformist and the reality is that's who we are in Christ we're not conforming to this world the Holy Spirit's come in and he's changed us and we're looking at the church as having identifiable features that they as he said in verse 42 devoted themselves to this is where he starts the summary and they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching the result of being saved filled with the

[19:46] Holy Spirit this is what it drives people to do so when someone says I love Jesus I just don't love the church there is something broken in them spiritually that needs to be repented of or healed from and they need to get back on God's program about what his purpose is in believers coming together he's called us in this together amen you're not this

isn't you being lone ranger christian out there just doing everything on your own it's you called into community into the community of faith it's God's plan and so the early church has key features that we're looking at as we said about even what this generation is looking for it fits right into the passage they want to be a part of something that's like-minded well guess what that's what the church is supposed to be this is not a conglomeration of everybody's ideas pulled together into one cesspool of ignorance this is us coming together and looking to the scripture and trying to discern what the scripture says we ought to be and us together determining that that's what we're going to be and so what does it say in verse 42 what did they devote themselves to first not a rhetorical question apostles teaching they devoted themselves to the apostle teaching so as we said last week this is the key feature of the church that the church is identified so closely with something that when you think of this you think of them and so what were they so closely identified with they were identified with the apostles teaching when he describes this he's talking about everything that

Jesus has taught them up to this point because keep in mind this is the great commission for us go and make disciples of all the nations teaching them to observe whatsoever he has commanded this teaching is what we do with disciples it's what I am a disciple I've gathered together with other disciples we are in a community of discipleship now where we're encouraging one another teaching one another through different avenues sometimes pastor from the pulpit sometimes in smaller groups meeting sometimes one on one sometimes in your family the reality is we are a community of disciples the early church lived in and around and under the word now we're not disagreeing with that and as we said in the steering team meeting Wednesday night every church will say that right I mean what church is going to say well we don't believe the bible no church usually says that they usually say yes we believe the bible of course we believe the bible go talk to disciples christian church down the street down 75 and they'll say yes we believe the bible that is not what they practice when you when you're doing homosexual unions and reading from indian spiritism on Sunday morning you're believing a lot of things and you might include the bible but that's not the bible that's not that's not a biblical church that's not what we see identifying the early church what identified the early church is this devotion so closely related to the apostles teaching that that's how you identify them as the church so when someone says

I'm a church and they're not teaching the apostles teaching but they're teaching things contrary to the apostles teaching you can say to yourself oh it's a church it's a false church false church the teaching of the word of god is what identifies us that's why we have a confession of faith a confession of faith is just a summary of what we teach it's like you believe the bible yeah we all believe the bible what do you specifically believe about the bible well here's our confession of faith and now you can see this is what we're saying when we say we believe the bible and so you look into our confession of faith and it says something about the church in there even in our 1689 confession it says in exercising the authority entrusted to him the lord jesus through the ministry of the word by his spirit calls to himself out of the world those who are given to him by his father they are called so that they will live before him in all the ways of obedience that he prescribes for them in his word those who are called he commands to live together in local societies or churches for their mutual edification and the fitting conduct of public worship that he requires of them while they live in the world it goes on to say the members of these churches are saints by calling visibly displaying and demonstrating in and by their profession and life their obedience to the call of christ they willingly agree to live together according to christ's instructions giving themselves to the lord and to one another by the will of god with the stated purpose of following the ordinances of the gospel notice how many times he refers to the word of god as being the authority or the the authors of the confession of faith how they refer to the authority of god's word as the driving force for who the church is going to be the stated purpose of following as it says the ordinances of the gospel what are the ordinances of the gospel what does that mean the commands of the gospel well usually when they're talking about the gospel in in generations past it's not just the gospel proper usually the kerygma the core of the gospel that jesus came according to the scriptures that he died he was buried he rose again he's coming again to judge the living and the dead and therefore we're to

repent that's the core of the gospel message kerygma means the message proclaimed that's what we preach but the didache is the teachings that's the word that he uses here in Luke uses here in Acts 2:42 the teachings of the apostles so in this is referring to the whole body of teaching and so when generations past would refer to the ordinances of the gospel what they're saying is the church is to be somebody that not only believes the core of the message of the gospel but it's people who have wrapped themselves and so identified themselves in the implications of the gospel they're people that are changed by the gospel and are living out the gospel people that are not only repenting from sin but they've learned to identify sin by what the scripture teaches they learn what righteousness is by what the scripture teaches this is a church that's why Calvin and Luther would say to identify a church you're identifying them by the teaching of the word wherever the preaching of the word is there you have a true church that's the reality our confession is just a summary of what we teach and that helps us to identify what we're saying what is the apostles teaching so we take the 1689 baptist confession and that's the broader or the more detailed version and then you have the baptist faith and message 2000 which is which is the boiled down version it's like the basic minimum for cooperation and if you believe the 1689 you automatically believe the other one because it's more basic you if you're going to believe the 1689 confession it's very detailed it walks through there's 25 pages of it you know as you're walking through talking about who is God who is Christ who is the Holy Spirit what is the church what is man and as you walk through each of these things we're saying this is what we believe the apostles teach about these things it's the importance of us coming together around a confession of faith so churches have fellowship together and I've experienced this on the mission field where missionaries when we were in northwest China missionaries from all different organizations would get together and they called themselves a great commission community I still don't know what that meant exactly looking back

I think they meant they were there to preach the gospel in some way but the reality was you got people from all kinds of denominations some very strange denominations some that I knew were heretical they would vary from fundamentals that we believe and they say oh we're all part of one community we're going to come together and do the Lord's Supper and I would say I'm not going to participate I appreciate the offer but this is an ordinance for the church and as I don't know what people believe in this group and we refuse to because I tried to say hey let's talk about what fundamentals we're coming together on and they said well well we don't want to get into details because doctrine brings division you ever heard that of course it does doctrine does bring division darkness light sheep goats it brings division yes it brings division our goal is not to just work toward unity for the sake of unity our obligation under the gospel under the teaching of God's word is to unite around the teachings of the apostles so we must figure out what we're going to believe in these things and say if we believe that then we're going to unite with everybody that believes that and we're going to fight with them and we're going to stand with them we're going to not fight with them fight together with them usually churches fight but this is what

[30:21] Paul told the church at Corinth if you remember no I'm not going to preach the whole 1 Corinthians again but 1 Corinthians 1:10 what did he tell them I appeal to you brothers there's division in that church I appeal to you brothers by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ why because you've been saved by Christ you've been redeemed you're under obligation of the gospel the gospel has changed your life you've been bought with a price the precious blood of Jesus by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment and he is talking in the context of the teaching of God's word which he comes to in 1 Corinthians 4:17 where he said that this is why I sent Timothy to you you might be wondering why I sent him why did I send Timothy I mean he's a great guy wonderful warm personality very winsome he's a young guy filled with enthusiasm he's there to encourage you yes he is there to encourage you why did

I send him to you verse 17 that's why I sent Timothy to you my beloved and faithful child in the Lord to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church oh so there are fundamental things that we need to hold to as a church that are taught in every church the

commands of Christ as spelled out by the apostles thus the apostles teaching see where we're at do you see why we're in trouble in our generation because we're wanting to be so wishy washy and so so overly kind unhealthily kind about everything to the point that we disregard the scripture I'm more willing to offend God than I am my neighbor right am

I right I'm okay with violating something that I've clearly seen in scripture because I'm afraid it's going to jeopardize my relationship with my cousin or my next door neighbor or my or Lord help us or my church member friend like minded you know that people are actually longing for that they're longing to be a part of like minded group so you might come in and say well I'm hearing these things and man I'm not with you at all on this hey that's good we're going to be a like minded group and maybe you don't belong here we want everybody right now we love your guest here we love you we're glad you came you may come and say man these people are out of their minds

I am never coming back to this place hey we love you we wish you the best there might be a better place you know we are dogmatic about this we want to be a part of a like minded group go find another like minded group there's probably one out there for you this is what this one's going to do because we see it in the scripture and we're saying I want to be that and so he moves on see I'm not getting very far shared experiences not only are they like minded but they have shared experiences what are the shared teaching and the fellowship notice the definite article there the fellowship the fellowship not just fellowship fellowship is generic the fellowship the fellowship of believers the fellowship of

God's people the called out ones those that have been called together in Christ word fellowship is from the word koinos it's koinonia fellowship but it's from the word koinos and you can hear it in there you you're saying man it sounds a lot like an English word coin coin what is a coin common currency there's something this is speaking of commonality fellowship together we're in this together there's something that we have in common together this word koinonia means a relationship between individuals that involves common interests and a mutual active participation in that interest and in each other an actual interest in each other you hear that I mean we're talking about having you know groups of this generation saying boy

[35:48] I just wish I could be a part of something where where there was you know like mindedness in a group and common interests that would draw us together isn't that awesome this is so novel so unique we actually meet that need if you come to Christ and you're changed by Christ and the Holy Spirit lives inside of you and you get a love for his word you're going to love this place that's what happened to me I was 20 years old I was in the army I was so far from God I couldn't imagine walking with Christ or being in a church and something happened when the gospel broke through and I realized I was a sinner separated from God and all of a sudden as a 20 year old soldier at Fort Sill Oklahoma I was gripping the pew and saying I'm not going to listen to this until finally the Lord said turn from your sin and come follow me and I'm hearing the gospel and I was like okay I can't hold on anymore and

I surrendered my life that day to Jesus and he changed me and that next week a week later I mean just I'm going from being in a bar one week to being in a church the next and they were just singing old hymns I didn't know there was better music no I didn't know you had to have a band you know I didn't I didn't know I just man Jesus changed my heart he changed my life I came in they're singing songs I was like man this is awesome and I'm singing old rugged cross and I'm going man that's awesome I love it why because my heart had been changed I wasn't just looking for somebody to be like me I was looking for something where I fit in as a changed person in Jesus he changed me now now now

I found fellowship common interest and all of a sudden people started coming into my life that were pouring into my life and teaching me scripture and I'm hanging out with people and identifying with people that I didn't know before all of a sudden my circle of friends just changed and all my guys that I drank with and ran with they didn't want to run with me anymore it's kind of weird and they're saying yeah you go do your church stuff I was like alright I'd love for you guys to come with and none of them came man I found a whole new life I found fellowship it changed me it was what I needed the word is translated fellowship it's translated communion it's translated participation it's in Christ first I mean my fellowship is in

Christ I've been born again my fellowship is with the Lord my fellowship is in the gospel Philippians 1:5 your fellowship in the gospel is what Paul referred to it as and this fellowship is being played out and he describes it the grammar here is breaking this down in a way that shows the breaking of bread and prayer as being in position with the fellowship so the fellowship now is being seen in terms of this breaking of bread and the prayer or the prayers plural and you're going well what are the prayers that he's talking about here well you've got to understand the context they're coming from the synagogue they were still doing the three times of prayer a day or they were going to the temple and praying three times a day and the prayers were those times of day they'd go and they'd meet there and they'd meet together and pray and this is not talking about private prayer it's not talking about their private prayer life it's talking about believers being so characterized not only by the teaching of the apostles but by this breaking of bread and the prayers that they were engaging them themselves in the breaking of themselves in the breaking of themselves in the breaking of bread and the break of bread and the breaking of bread and they were eating together and sharing food having a meal together they called it as it's referred to in Corinthians a love feast 1 Corinthians 11 as you're having your love feast and then experiencing the Lord's supper together they were doing these two things together and so they're they're kind of inseparable in the early church where you're going man they were identified by the Lord's supper for sure showing their identity in Christ. But then it's also their identity with each other. They're eating together and having fellowship together. The fellowship. A love feast where they get together and they eat together because they actually love each other.

[40:51] That's good stuff. Fellowship. So do we want to celebrate the Lord's Supper?

Of course we do. And like Baptists at heart, we're going to eat together from time to time. A casserole is biblical.

Last week it was tattoos, now it's casseroles. Okay? We'll go with that. The Lord's Supper is where we see the unity. It's also where we see the discipline. You realize that the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Table is where we see church discipline at work too?

And the love feast, the eating together, that's the context where Paul is often saying, like in 1 Corinthians or 1 Thessalonians, he's saying, when you see somebody acting contrary to the epistle that we're writing to you, do not even eat with such a person.

Ooh. There's a context for that. Actually, at church discipline, when somebody is living in such a way that their character is out of step with the gospel and they've been confronted with that sin and they're unrepentant, and you've gone to them with two witnesses, and then you've taken it before the church and they still won't repent, then at that point you've got to say, hey, we love you, but the Scripture says to count you as a sinner and as a tax collector.

[42:20] Now you see church discipline playing into this table. I remember reading 2 Samuel about Mephibosheth. Say it 10 times fast.

Mephibosheth, the club-footed son of Saul, or son of Jonathan, and how he got a seat at the table with King David when he deserved to be put to death, being a traitor, being in Saul's camp, but then being a traitor personally, and how he could have been put to death, and yet David has mercy on him and says, bring his servant to me.

And he tells his servant, you're going to create a garden for his house, and he's never going to lack. And in fact, not only that, but he's not even going to eat of that produce that you make because every day he's going to eat at the king's table, and the Scripture said, and he ate at the king's table as though he were one of the king's sons.

And you talk about a picture of the Gospel where Christ has brought us to the table, and at the Lord's Supper, you can imagine every time that a believer experiences the Lord's Supper together, you should be reminded that you have been bought there by the grace of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, of whom David was only a type.

The Son of God brought you to the table by mercy, and you've got access, and he treats you like a son and daughter at his table. And we see the unity.

[43:59] We're together. They lived not only in that kind of unity together, that's what fellowship implied, but also they lived in prayer.

They had fellowship in the prayers. And prayer really has to become a part of who we are. It can't just be the tack on to the end of the service or just a way to transition.

It really has to be a part of who we are. It says they were in the temple and house to house. We didn't know where they were meeting. And so they're praying in these places.

John Stott said, perhaps we who get understandably impatient with the inherited structures of the church can learn a lesson from them. For myself, he said, I believe that the Holy Spirit's way with the institutional church, this is the way with the institutional church, which we long to see reformed according to the gospel.

It is more the way of patient reform than impatient rejection, though. And certainly it is always healthy when the more formal and dignified services of the local church are complemented with the informality and exuberance of home meetings.

[45:20] There is no need to polarize between the structured and the unstructured, the traditional and the spontaneous, for the church needs both. And we ought to be a praying people in these places.

It's what we see. The definite article here is identifying these times of prayer. We see this played out in Acts 2.15, even at Pentecost itself.

For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day, it says. This is the hour of prayer. They're at prayer time. What a time for God to pour out His Spirit, right?

At the sixth hour in Acts 10.9, as Cornelius is involved in this thing and Peter's having a vision, it says the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up to the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.

Why? Because this is the prayers. This is what he's referring to of the early church, that there were specific times where they met to pray. Or like Acts 3.1, now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

[46:27] These are the times of prayer. These are the times of prayer. And these believers were so devoted to times of public prayer that they were identified not only by the apostles' teaching, but by the fact that they were eating together, fellowshiping together around the Lord's table, and praying together.

So you might say, well, I'm engaged in my private prayer life, and I'm going to focus on my private prayer life, and that's enough. That's not enough.

That's not what you've been designed to do. To just be, yes, you should be praying alone. Yes, it should be the outpouring of the time alone with God. No person is beyond their personal prayer life, no matter how bad you fool yourself.

When you think of your prayer life and your time with God, or how little you spend, you can do a lot of pretending, but you can't pretend beyond that with God. I'm telling you, this is the same truth with the church.

So identified with prayer. And you see it, as even on the day of Pentecost, before the church comes together, all these with one of cord were devoting themselves to prayer.

[47:46] Together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers, they were all together praying. In Acts 4.31, after Peter and John are released from being questioned by the Sanhedrin, they go back to their people and they pray for boldness to speak the Word of God.

In Acts 12, Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was being made to God by the church. And when he gets out of jail, where does he go?

He goes to Mary's house where they were doing what? Praying. Together. united in prayer. When they sent off Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13, the church at Antioch prayed and fasted before sending them off.

In Acts 21, as Paul is departing for Tyre, it says, When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city, and kneeling down on the beach, we prayed.

What were they characterized by? Everywhere they went. Homes, temples, jails, beaches, wherever you find these believers, what do you find them doing?

[49:06] They're praying, and they're preaching. Everywhere they go. They're so closely identified with this, that this is how you know that they are a true church.

When you see them constantly in prayer. Leonard Ravenhill said, The true man of God is heart sick. He's grieved at the worldliness of the church.

He's grieved at the toleration of sin in the church. He's grieved at the prayerlessness in the church. He is disturbed that the corporate prayer of the church no longer pulls down the strongholds of the devil.

He's grieved by this. I mean, I know you are people who are grieved by this. We see it every day. And as we're forming as a church, what we've got to say is, Lord, I repent of the lack of priority your word has had in my life.

I repent of the lack of priority that your word has had in the formation of my church experience. I repent of the lack of involvement that I have had in the lives of the people around me at the table.

[50:16] I repent of my prayerlessness. That I have been a person who has lacked being a part of that kind of fervent prayer that should characterize every New Testament church.

I repent. I repent. These are the features of a church. That's what I see in the word.

That's what I've got to say, Lord, I want to be that. And the scripture comes riding in like a horse with the answer.

This is how you be that. Gather around the teaching of the word and unify in the teaching of the word. Gather together and be involved in the lives of those who surround this table.

Gather together and be characterized so much by prayer that that's how people know who you are. And this, along with what's going to follow, is how people are going to identify us as the church of the living Christ.