***Three Memories***

**Acts 2:22-41 May 30, 2021**

***“God has raised this Jesus to life, as we are all witnesses of the fact.  
Exalted at the right had of God, he has received from the Father  
the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear . . .   
Therefore let all Israel be assured of this:  
God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*Acts 2:32-33 (Peter’s Pentecost sermon)**

**Peter’s message**

1) Two events: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

23 *This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*

*Acts 2:23-24*

1) Two witnesses: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

31 *Seeing what was ahead, [David] spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.*

*Acts 2:31-32*

1) Two responses: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*

*38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ* . . . .

*Acts 2:1-4*

1) Two promises: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

38 *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

*40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

*Acts 2:1-4*

**Why memory matters**

23 *This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*

Acts 2:23-24

25 *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

**5** *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

*6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! 10 For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

Romans 4:25-5:11

1) Historical

2) Theological

3) This memory still “cuts to the heart”

**Memorial Day lessons for remembering**

1) There is still great power in sacrifice

2) Cross and resurrection are the clearest revelation of God’s love (back to Romans 5:1-11)

3) Jesus’ cross and resurrection still requires a response of repentance and faith



**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has sermons on this text at [*http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols43-45/chs2586.pdf*](http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols43-45/chs2586.pdf) *and* [*http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols34-36/chs2102.pdf*](http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols34-36/chs2102.pdf)

Deffinbaugh’s introduction at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts*](https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts )  
and Acts series at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts)

Tim Keller has a wonderful sermon at [*https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47*](https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47)

John Piper has a helpful look at repentance in his “Repentance, Forgiveness and the Gift of the Spirit” at  
[*https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/repentance-forgiveness-and-the-gift-of-the-spirit*](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/repentance-forgiveness-and-the-gift-of-the-spirit)

I have really appreciated John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984).

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

# Signs of the King – Acts 2:37-47

### by Timothy Keller at [*https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47*](https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47)

***37When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”***  
***40With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. 42They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.***  
***44All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*** – ACTS 2:37-47

Last week we began a series of messages, of talks, on the church. Have you noticed how often I talk about us launching a church? Why do I like to use that word launching? Is it just because I’m a frustrated sailor? No. Actually, I think of a rocket ship, and I think of how important liftoff is, because if you’re aiming at the moon and your rocket ship down here is just a silly millimeter off, it could be thousands of miles off when it gets there.

Therefore, if this church is not going to join the thousands and thousands of cultural institutions that are totally ineffective in this country within just a few years, it is vital we strain every nerve to think about the church aright, to envision it, to see exactly what it is and what it can be. Now last week we said there was a central fact, the most important thing you have to understand if you’re going to understand what the church is. That central fact is the church is the place where God dwells, where God comes down as it were and meets us in all of his transcendent love and light and fire and majesty.

That’s what the Bible says, and the church has known this for years. Not programs. Not busyness. Not work, but that. You know, one of the greatest hymns ever written about the church was written by John Newton. It says,

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, City of our God!

He’s talking about the church.

He, whose word cannot be broken, Formed thee for his own abode.

The first thing Newton says in that hymn is the church is the place where God dwells. Now this particular passage is very critical because it gives us the birth of the New Testament church. You see, there’s a little group of people. Jesus, when he left, had only left a small handful of people. Peter preaches this remarkable message on the day in the history of the church we have always called the day of Pentecost, and on that day, Peter preached a message, and the message that formed that church, that gathered those 3,000 souls that first day, was through Jesus Christ you can have the presence of God in your life.

We’ll look at that just for a minute because I want to show you that was his message. That’s what formed the church. We see that in verses 37–41. That’s the message that formed the church. Then in verses 42–47 we see the marks of the life of this early church. In other words, if a group of people actually come together and build their lives on that reality that God is present in the midst, if a group of people come together and actually take that seriously (not cynically) and say, “This is what we’re going to build our lives on,” the presence of God expresses itself.

There is a cosmic vitality that expresses itself through a church like that, and I want to show you the signs of it. It’s right there in verses 42–47. There are five signs of that cosmic vitality. It’s the way you can tell whether a church is realizing the presence of God. What we’re trying to show and what this passage tries to show is first of all, before we can run off to our busyness and run off to our ministries and our programs, we have to stand before God and realize his presence and know it and yearn for it.

Then it’s the presence of God that becomes like the motor or the driveshaft for everything else the church does, and that’s what we’re going to see. First, the message that forms the church is that Jesus Christ is the way to know the presence of God. Secondly, the five signs of life that flow out of that should characterize every good church. Let’s look at the message and then let’s look at those five signs which are the evidences of that kind of vitality.

First, the message. In a way we talked about this last week, but I just want to show you again what it is. Peter says to them, ***“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*** He says, ***“Repent and be baptized …”*** That is virtually the same thing Jesus said when he came out of the wilderness and first began to preach in Mark 1:15 and said, ***“Repent, and believe the gospel.”***

Those two things are always there: repentance and trust. Repent and trust your sins can be put away through Jesus Christ so they are no longer a barrier between you and God. Repent and believe. Those are not two different things; that’s one thing. It’s repentant faith, turning from your old ways, resting and trusting in Christ, and making him your only hope in life and death.

They are really two sides to the same coin, and that’s how you receive Christ as Savior and Lord, through repentance and faith. Obviously, we could spend quite a bit of time talking about repentance and faith, but right now let’s move on to how this creates the church. If a person receives Christ as Savior and Lord, Peter says you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now let’s take that apart for a moment. Give me a 90-second tangent for some of you.

Even though you have repented and believed, the Holy Spirit comes in as a gift. Your repentance and your faith do not earn the Spirit; it is a gift. Now the only reason I say that is because I continually meet people who don’t know where they stand in the Christian faith, and they say, “I know you’re not saved by your efforts and your good deeds. You’re saved strictly by faith alone, but I don’t know whether my faith is good enough. It just doesn’t seem to be very strong. It doesn’t seem to be very pure.”

Repentance and faith receive the gift. Your repentance and faith don’t have to be pure enough to earn it. Then it wouldn’t be a gift. Let me put it this way. It’s the fact of your repentant faith, not the purity of it, that brings it in, and anyone who is worried and always saying, “I don’t know if I repented well enough. I wonder if I repented well enough.” I can clear that up for you right now. You haven’t. Nobody has ever repented well enough. Who in the world has ever been sorry enough for the things they’ve done wrong?

You say, “I don’t know whether my faith is good enough.” I can clear that up, too. My friends, here is the bad thing. If you’re worried about it, there is pride in there. As humble and as despairing as you seem, what you’re saying is, “Oh, I have to get good enough. I have to be pure enough. I have to be faithful enough so Jesus Christ can give me his Spirit.” My friends, receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is a gift. Eternal life is a gift. The Holy Spirit is a gift. Your faith receives it; it doesn’t earn it. It can’t. Don’t you see?

Now it’s the gift of the Holy Spirit I want to look at here for a second. Peter is telling us something I’m afraid most of us here cannot really understand the momentous nature of. (How do you like that for a sentence?) I don’t think anybody in this room can understand how momentous a statement this was unless we spend some time reflecting on it. Peter didn’t just preach this sermon. Years later, he wrote a couple of epistles which are in the back of this Book. He wrote a couple of letters to some other churches.

In this sermon he says there is a tremendous promise. He says, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off …” You can come near to God. You can come near. You’re far off. You can come into the presence of God and receive the Holy Spirit. Now he says it a different way in his second epistle (letter) in 1:4, where he says, “Through his great and precious promises, we participate in the divine nature.” That’s the same thing.

See, what is the Holy Spirit? It’s the glory of God. It’s the lifeblood of God. I’m sorry. You see, this promise beggars description. It’s his very glory, and Peter is saying that, through receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, can flood into your life. Now get the hang of this. Remember Moses said, “Show me your glory.” What he was saying was, “Oh, Lord, I want your glory to come into my life. I want to see it,” and God said, “You can’t. It will kill you. Your poor, bitty, little soul would crack under the strain of it, so I’m going to let you see the gleam of my brightness through the back door,” in a sense.

He said, “I’ll put you in the cleft of the rock, and I’ll let my hind parts go by you.” We don’t know what in the world that means except God was saying to Moses, “Moses, you can’t take my glory.” When Isaiah got just a glimpse of God in the temple, what did he say? He said, “Woe is me! for I am undone …” which is a good King James Version way of saying, “I feel unzipped! I feel I’m being unbuttoned. I’m unraveling.” Why? He said, “… for mine eyes have seen the King …” “The King is here, and even getting this close, I feel like I’m coming apart.”

The glory of God (his face, his royal presence, his raw presence, what in the Old Testament they called the shekinah, the glory cloud of God) dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the center of the tabernacle in the temple behind the veil over the ark of the covenant. Who could get there? Who could go back there? Who could get near the presence of God? Only the high priest, the holiest person (supposedly) in Israel, one day a year on the Day of Atonement after spending days purifying himself in body and soul.

Then he would go back there with a blood atonement, sprinkling incense everywhere so he didn’t see anything that might kill him. He had bells on the tassels on his robe so the people outside could hear him moving around so they knew he was still alive. Now why was the presence of God so fatal to people? One of the problems is we have movies, and I know in a way Steven Spielberg wasn’t really trying to depict this, but you know in the Raiders of the Lost Ark, the power of God that comes out of the ark of the covenant is depicted as a completely abstract thing.

You remember, don’t you, through great special effects, the nasty Nazis opened the lid and they looked in? If I remember correctly, Harrison Ford and Karen Allen closed their eyes. Isn’t that right? You get the impression first of all, because they closed their eyes while the Nazis were looking at it, and secondly, you also get the impression because the Nazis are nasty and because Harrison Ford and Karen Allen were kind of good people, they didn’t get melted down the way all the other people did with all those great special effects.

In other words, the ark of the covenant is depicted as a kind of cosmic mouse trap, and the power is abstract. If you push the right buttons and you do the right things, you see, it won’t harm you; it will harm somebody else. My friends, that is not at all the way the Bible depicts the glory of God. The glory of God was fatal to people, and the reason it was fatal to people was because of the holiness and sin issues. Maybe the best way to understand it is the old orbit analogy.

God, because he’s completely pure, and he’s completely holy, and he’s completely just, everything he is and does and thinks centers on what is good and what is holy and what is just and what is pure. That’s why he does what he does. Now let’s think about ourselves for a moment. Remember everything we do centers on … let’s face it … our happiness and our comfort. We will take the good, the true, and the holy into consideration, but we reject it if it looks like its not comfortable, right?

Let’s be honest. What do we center on? Why do we do the things we do? Why do we make the decisions we make? What do we center on? We center on our own comfort and our own happiness, and here is God centering on what is good and what is true and what is right. My friends, when two planets have the same center, you have a solar system, and you have harmony.

When two planets come together and they have two different centers, you have an accident looking for a place to happen. It’s inevitable there will be cataclysm, and when a holy God and human beings who make everything revolve around their own pride and themselves … When a holy God comes into the presence of sinful man, there is trauma. There is clash.

When Moses said, “Show me your glory,” God said, “I can’t.” Even all through the Bible, you see, though Moses knew he needed the presence of God and we were all built for it, and he knew it would fulfill something deep in every human soul, he couldn’t have it. In the Bible, whenever it says, “Come into his presence with singing,” we know that was a relative command because the people could not come into the presence of God. They could come relatively into the presence of God.

They could come into the outer courts, but nobody could go into the presence of God except that poor high priest with his knees knocking. Then Peter has the audacity to say, “Through his great and precious promises, we are made partakers of the divine nature.” Through receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, because he is the real High Priest, because he is the final sacrifice, when Jesus died that veil was ripped and the barrier between the presence of God and the people was gone because Jesus is the door, and when you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, the very presence of God comes into your life.

The Holy Spirit comes in with all of his unconquerable mirth. Mirth! The Holy Spirit has enough joy in him to set a whole kingdom laughing. Why not? God is the center of joy. The Holy Spirit, with his absolute purity and boundless love and dynamic energy and strength, comes in and we’re never the same again. Don’t you see this is radical and this is what the church is built on? This is what the people responded to. Now just before we move on, quickly one thing.

You can’t have something like that coming into your life without turmoil. See, some of you are fairly new Christians, and that’s one of the reasons I’m here in New York to meet people like you. It depends on how new you are. I would say if it’s been a few weeks, if it’s been a couple of months, somewhere in there you experience the tough side of being a Christian. There are all sorts of tough sides, and I don’t have time to go into a catalogue of them now, but some of you are out there saying, “If God is my Savior and if my sins are forgiven and he accepts me and all these great things are true, why are all these problems happening to me?”

Some of you are saying, “If the Holy Spirit has come into my life like this, why does it seem to be taking so long for me to get better? Why in some ways do I feel like I’m actually doing worse? Am I really a Christian?” For something of this kind of power and magnitude to come into your life, it just does not sneak in. It doesn’t slip in. If you think of the Christian life as one unbroken, smooth road of peace from here on in, look out.

Suppose we were in the middle of a tremendous heat wave. I mean, we haven’t had heat waves this year, but like last year. Worse than last year. Day after day after day of 110 degrees. People are dying. Imagine being in a heat wave like that, and you start to say, “We are going to perish if we don’t get a cool, Canadian high.”

Then we find out there is one on the way. Well, how will it come and release us and deliver us from this heat? A thunderstorm, right? You see, a cold air mass coming and hitting that heat wave, the only way to move it out before everything clears off and the haze is gone, things get worse before they get better. Before the haze is gone so we can finally see the blue sky, things have to get a lot worse. That’s a normal approach.

My friends, when God’s presence comes into your life full of selfishness with his love, full of power with your anxiety, there’s going to be a clash. It has to happen. There will be, but don’t worry. The haze will clear out. That’s the only thing I need to tell you. Somebody says, “If God is a loving God, why is it he is showing me so many bad things about my life? Why is it that everything is going like this?” Well, listen, remember who he is. He is light, and he is love, and he is wise, and he is holy.

There is this tremendous quote I got out of C.S. Lewis’ book, The Problem of Pain, in which he says just be careful when you ask the living God into your life. He says, “In awful and surprising truth, we are objects of his love. You asked for a loving God; you have one. The great spirit [God] you … invoked … is present …” Now listen to every word here. “… not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not with the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate … but [he is] the consuming fire himself, the love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work … as provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.”

Yes, God has come in with his love. It’s a holy love. It’s a powerful love, and it’s going to renovate you, and it’s going to remake you, but nobody ever renovates someplace without a lot of dust and a lot of dirt and a lot of inconvenience, without it getting uglier before it gets more beautiful? Right? That’s normal! How can you expect it to be any other way? Trust him, though, you see. You trust in him, of course, but recognize when something like this comes into your life, there’s going to be a cloud of dust.

Now verses 42–47 tell us these people who took hold of this truth with both hands and said, “All right. We’re going to build our lives on this. Though we were far away from God, we can be brought near right into the presence of God and have the Holy Spirit in our lives.” I want to show you there are five signs of this vitality. Let me put it this way. Every one of you in this room who has received Christ as Savior and Lord have access to the presence of God when you sit down and pray, when you say, “Because of what Jesus Christ did, O Father, hear my prayer.”

You have access to his presence, but the Bible also says, “For where two or three [of you] are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of [you].” What that means, among other things, is when several Christians get together, though they individually have access to the presence of God, the presence of God expresses itself in corporate ways in the corporate life of those people. Here is what they are, five of them, and I want you to keep this in mind.

I’m going to go through them quickly because every one of them at some future date will get an extended treatment. I guarantee you. I want you to see at this point the importance is they all have to be together. Having one or two or three will not do the trick, and I’ll explain why. The five things are teaching, community, social compassion, evangelism, and worship. Let’s go through them quickly.

**1. Teaching**

It says here in verse 42, they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching. Devoted. A vital church understands truth is not just a subjective thing. Of course, it’s subjective, but we also believe there is a body of truth (the teaching of the apostles and the prophets) deposited here, and that truth not only gives us guidance for every area of our lives, but the truth isn’t an abstract thing. The Bible says about itself that it’s alive and active. It’s a transforming power that comes in and changes us.

For a church to honor the truth does not just mean people flock to hear the great teacher, nor does it mean the people of the church just run by their Bibles in the morning for five minutes and just expect inspiration to jump out of it onto you somewhere to take you through the day. Rather, it says the people of a church like this are devoted to the apostles’ teaching. They devoted themselves, you see. They dug in. They spent the time. They reflected. They thought. They meditated. They wrestled.

They said, “How do I get this truth into my life? What does this truth mean?” You see, they thought about it. One of the hard things to explain in a place like New York, especially in a place like Manhattan, is that wherever God’s presence is, there is an insatiable hunger for truth. Now the reason it’s harder to show in a college town or a big city is there are a lot of people around who are already predisposed to enjoy reading and studying. You become Christians and you continue to enjoy reading and studying.

It’s starkly obvious when you go to a place where people hate reading and studying. When the presence of God comes down in their midst, it’s amazing to see the change. I took a church in Virginia that, when I got there, as far as I knew, virtually none of the officers had finished high school. Especially the males in that particular blue-collar, southern community felt readin’ and writin’ were feminine.

I remember a man who came to Christ just before I got there. He had been an alcoholic. He had been a career army sergeant. He was a tough, rough person. He became a Christian, and this man who had only finished eighth grade (I don’t know how in the world he got that far) became hungry to study the Word of God.

He could barely read, and he would spend hours reading a passage, having to look everything up in the dictionary. After a while, he came to me and said, “I want to teach.” I said, “I don’t know how you’re going to do that.” He said, “Give me a chance.” So we gave him a Sunday school class. His wife told me absolutely for sure that he spent 45 hours a week preparing his lesson. He would spend hours just reading with the dictionary through the Sunday school teacher’s guide.

Then he would write out what he was going to say. He would speak it into a tape. He’d take the tape to some friends, and they would listen. He would say, “Now am I pronouncing these words right?” and “What does this word mean?” What did he turn out to be? A good teacher. Nothing spectacular. A mediocre teacher, but it was unbelievable to see what happened in this man’s life, and he changed. I remember after being there for nine years, one of the last days I was there, this man came up to me and said something.

He said, “Do you know what? Before you came to this town, before I came under your teaching, I was a racist.” Now I had never ever talked to this man. Of course, he was a racist! Everybody in town was a racist, and frankly, I had never talked to this man about it ever. That is one of the last things a blue-collar, Southern male over the age of 50 will ever say. What happened to him? Whenever God is present, the truth shines. Some of you may up till now have been saying, “I don’t even know I’m sure what you mean when you talk about access to the presence of God.”

Let me tell you what the sign of it is. Let me give you the most common way to experience it only through Jesus Christ, of course. You’re reading a passage you’ve read 100 times before and suddenly it shines like somebody plugged it in and you’re looking for the cord. You’re saying, “Why didn’t I ever see that before?” You see, the truth gets real. Real! When we talk about the presence of God, we mean it gets real. For example, the promise of God’s love becomes more real to you than the rejection you’re getting in your life, so you’re just not walking around with your head hanging down.

The promise of God’s protection, the truth of that, becomes more real to you than the things you’re afraid of, the threats that are coming to you. Do you see? That’s why Peter can say, “Through his great and precious promises, we participate in the divine nature.” It’s the promises. It’s devoting yourself to the Word. It’s getting and understand the truth. It shines only when God does it. You experience the presence of God when he becomes real to you through the Word, and that’s a sign of the presence of God. That’s the first sign, and that’s a mark of real Christianity. It’s the essence of a real Christian, and it’s the mark of a church like this.

**2. Community**

It says there they had everything in common and they didn’t claim anything they had was their own. Now I know the example it gives here is economic sharing, giving a lot of money and resources to each other, but let me just say they devoted themselves to fellowship and community. Community exists to the degree people are saying to one another, “What’s mine is yours.” We’re not just talking about money at all. As a matter of fact, you can have communism without any community at all, right?

You can have a forced redistribution of wealth without any community. Community has to do first of all with what is in the heart. For example, in the church if somebody comes to me and says, “Do you know what? I don’t like the way in which you are treating your children.” What if I say, “That’s none of your business?” I have no concept then of community, no concept of what the Bible says the church is. I’m a radical, American individualist, but I have no idea about this, because you see, my sins are your business.

The Bible says, “… confess your sins to one another …” “Bear one another’s burdens …” That means we don’t just share our bucks, though we do. We share our joys. We share our mistakes. We share our sorrows. Now this can be done in a very icky way, and you can very artificially press this kind of community on people. It grows, and it has to grow in an organic, natural way, but I tell you, we in America are absolutely against this. In his book, Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah says the one thing Americans hold dear is the idea I am not accountable to anybody but myself for the meeting of my own needs.

That, my friends, is worldliness. I know many churches have said what worldliness means is, “We don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls who do.” That’s worldliness. My friends, that’s not worldliness. Worldliness is saying, “I don’t want to be accountable to anybody.” The only thing that can really create community is the presence of God. I saw The Abyss the other night. It was pretty good. I’m just a frustrated film critic, so I won’t say anything about the movie.

That movie is a typical adventure movie in that you have a bunch of people who, for one reason or another, don’t like each other, but because they go through the same incredible experience that sets them apart from everybody else in the world, by the end they are lifelong pals. It’s like The Dirty Dozen. They all hated each other, but then they got on this great mission in the end. It had male bonding stuff. Oh, how great it is. Any two people, no matter how different they are in every other way, who through Jesus Christ have experienced the presence of God, there is community there.

The relationship between two Christians outweighs any other relationship you have on the basis of your race, on the basis of your gender, or on the basis of your social status. You are a Christian first and you’re white second. You’re a Christian first and you’re black second. You’re a Christian first and you’re wealthy or poor second. You’re a Christian first and you’re an American second. Do you see what I’m saying? Community can only be based on the presence of God.

**3. Social compassion**

It says here these people were unbelievably generous to anybody who was in need. The difference between a real Christian and a moralistic person is not that Christians repent of their sins. My friends, lots of moralistic people repent of their sins. The difference between Christians and non-Christians, the difference between real Christians and moralistic people is Christians also repent of their best deeds.

In other words, they also recognize even the best things they’ve ever done are filthy rags in God’s sight, and I have to rest wholly and completely in what Jesus has done for me. Now if you are a moralist, if you’re basically a Pharisee, if you basically believe God saves you and loves you because you’re a pretty good person, you’re going to look at needy people, and you’re going to say, “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. I did.”

If, on the other hand, you know you’re a sinner saved by grace, when you look at a person who smells terrible, who has no resources, no mind, nothing left, you say, “I realize I’m looking in a mirror. I realize this is what I look like to God spiritually, and you’re generous.” Only an encounter with God through Jesus Christ can you have that kind of spirit, and any church that understands and realizes the presence of God in its midst is compassionate like that.

**4. Evangelism**

Notice it says they enjoyed the favor of all the people and they grew every day. Now can I point out to you, though it says the radiance and the responsibility and the beauty of this Christian community was so great that people were attracted to it (they loved it), non-believers said, “What is going on here?” They had the favor of all the people. Don’t forget 2 Timothy 3:12. It says, ***“All who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”***

Now somebody is out there saying, “What do you mean, ‘Don’t forget’? Those two things seem to contradict. How can you keep them together?” It’s really pretty simple. Anybody who is living a consistent, Christian walk will polarize people. That means there will be some people who will say, “You are remarkable. You are amazing. You are fascinating to me. I want to talk to you about my problems. I want to find out what’s going on in your life. I want to get to know you better.” Or you’ll have people who are extremely upset with you, offended by you, and angry at you.

You may go through seasons where there is a lot of popularity and seasons where there is persecution. It might be happening at the same time, but only if you are absolutely not living a consistent, Christian life will nobody notice. The fact is, whenever the church is the church, it’s getting both: a terrific amount of growth through attraction and persecution.

I knew a man who was a college kid when I was a college kid. One summer he was going to work for the post office. He said to me, “The thing I want to know is how can I be a Christian postal worker?” So we sat down and said, “Okay. How do we integrate our Christianity into our postal working service?” We started to say to ourselves, “Okay. Does the Christian put the stamp on any different than a non-Christian?” “No.”

We finally figured out all he could do was get in there and do eight hours of a hard day’s work. In just one brief summer, he polarized that office because on the one hand he had people saying, “I like your style. I like your hard work. I like your savvy. I like your attitude.” Yet, other people were coming and saying, “You might get roughed up if you don’t slow down. You’re making us look lousy. You’re just a kid. You’re here for three months. We have to work here all of our lives. Your production is making us look bad. It’s putting heat on us. Cut it out!”

He polarized the place just by doing eight hours of good work. What I want to know is why that’s not happening to you and why it’s not happening to me and why it’s not happening to us. All I know is if you’re walking the way you ought to walk, there will be that polarizing, and the church will grow.

**5. Worship**

They praised God in the temple and in their homes. Verse 43 says there was awe, and intimacy and glad, generous hearts. You know, real worship is characterized both by an awe and an intimacy at the same time, not just sober dignity that eventually makes the place seem like a funeral home, and not just “gee, wish, golly, and God’s a wonderful guy who makes us feel warm and fuzzy,” but both together. There is both an awe and an intimacy, and the reason for that is God will reveal his face to us as a group when we come together and worship him.

That’s not an easy thing to understand, and I can’t explain it. All I know is I exist in this entire field of space right here. Six foot four of it and 220 pounds of it, I exist in this whole field of space, but if you come up and try to talk to me, you probably won’t talk to the back of my kneecap, will you? Why? Because that’s not the way in. This is the way in. Isn’t that weird? The front of my head is the way in. You’re going to talk to the front of my head. You’re going to talk to my face, because that’s the way to make contact.

God is a spirit. He is everywhere, you see. In fact, he’s more than everywhere. It says, “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you,” which is pretty hard to figure out. He’s bigger than everywhere. The greatness of God! The place to communicate with him is at his face. How do you find his face? Well, how do you find my face? It’s pretty easy. It’s up here at about six foot four. How do you find the face of a spirit? He has to reveal it to you, and he promises to reveal it to those in worship who receive Christ as Savior and Lord.

In conclusion, let me just say how can any church be a church like this? The answer is on the one hand, we do have to be careful to balance our programs. Yeah, we do. If you don’t have all five of those things, do you realize how bad it can be? It’s possible to have social compassion not because of the Spirit of God … listen to this … but just out of a pride and a humanism, a pride in human beings. A social compassion like that, which arises out of humanistic pride, will not go along with teaching, and it won’t go along with evangelism.

You can have a church or group who loves great teaching and indoctrinating people because it likes tidy systems, and it likes telling people they’re wrong, but there won’t be a lot of fellowship or celebration in that church. You can find people who love celebration. They love great music. They love to get together, and they say it is worship, but it’s probably just an emotional catharsis because there is no truth and teaching in that church. You see what I mean? You can have a church that seems like its full of fellowship and full of community where people love each other because they’re lonely, but there is no outreach and there is no social compassion.

What I’m trying to say is only if you have all five is that a sign that the Spirit of God is there, and you have to work for balance in your programs, yeah, but ultimately, my friends, you and I have to create little altars in our own lives for the fire to come down on us if we expect a church to be a big altar on which the fire can fall. That little altar is right there in verse 42. I suggest you circle it. I suggest you take it home with you. It says you have to be devoted to three things. ***“They were devoted to the apostles’ teaching.”*** That’s study. ***“They were devoted to fellowship.”*** That’s real communication and accountability to other believers. ***“They were devoted to prayer.”***

My friends, if you give those things short shrift, do not expect the fire to come down. In the Old Testament, you built the altar. You put the sacrifice there, and the fire came down, you see. The fire is the reality and presence of God. I have three sons, and I can’t spend all of my time in their faces. I’d love to do it. I love at night to climb into their bunk beds, to read them a book, to communicate my undying love and affection, to hug them, to touch them. I can’t do that all the time.

I love to buy them gifts, and I love them to hug me. I can’t do that all the time, but I do tell them this: “If you listen to me, if you obey me, if you love me, if you follow me, those times will become more and more frequent.” God says the same thing to you, and you have to look at your life, and if you say, “This reality is just not part of my understanding, my knowledge at all,” dare I say it … you really have no excuse. There is a three-pronged tripod there. They were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer, and to fellowship.

Look at yourself. Is there anybody in fellowship you are accountable to for your life who you really talk to, not just in general about the weather, but about what God is doing in your life? Do you have anybody like that? Can you really be said to be devoted to study? Can you really be said to be devoted to prayer? If not, you can forget about access to the presence of God. It’s not automatic.

Lastly, if there is anybody in this room who has had a religious experience, has had maybe God answer prayers, has asked God for help in changing some bad habits and you’ve changed them, and you say, “Well, I think I’m a Christian,” let me tell you this: The purpose of Jesus Christ is not just to give you a lift, just to help you overcome your bad habits, just to answer your prayers. He does all that, yes, but the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to give you something that enables you to stand before God face to face today and on the day of your death. If you don’t know you can do that, then you still don’t understand what the gospel is.

Jesus Christ, if you repent and believe in him alone and receive him, then you can look at him face to face. To stand in the presence of God, that is what the gospel is. The gospel is not primarily about forgiveness. It’s not primarily about good feelings. It’s not primarily about power. All those things are byproducts, sparks. It’s primarily about the presence of God. Do you know that in your life? Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you this is available, and we ask you would enable every person in here to realize it. Now many of us belong to you, yet we’re dry as a bone. We’re cold, and we need your fire, and we see there is an altar we have to build. Enable us to build it. Father, there are people here tonight, I believe, I know, who have never actually received you in repentant faith and therefore, do not know.