

Jump Start

Lesson 5

Meeting with God's Family

Opening Prayer

I. Introduction to "Meeting with God's Family"

Q: When you think of the church, what images come to mind?

A: Scripture gives a few ways to think of the church. First, the church is pictured as a **building**. When Paul addressed the Corinthian church, he reminds them, "...we are Gods fellow workers; you are God's field, Gods' building (vs. 9).

The church is also pictured as a **body**. In Romans 12:4-5, Paul writes, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

Now these two images are very useful and important and could be developed into insightful classes, but the name for this class is derived from a third image seen in scripture, which is a **family**.

As Paul writes to Timothy, he explains the church not in terms of a place we meet, but in terms of a family. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul writes, "...if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God..." The key term here is *household*...

Q: What's in a household?

A: Well, families are in households. Terms associated with family relationships are used richly throughout Scripture. In Ephesians 1, we are told that God has chosen us to be adopted as his sons. In last week's class we discussed talking to God. And there in Luke 11, Jesus very powerfully used the relationship between a father and a son to teach us about our relationship to God and how to pray. The Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ in Revelation. And New Testament writers refer to other Christians as brothers in Christ.

Q: When you think of a family, regardless of whether we all had particularly good family experiences, what characteristics or qualities should typify them?

A: Love, care, protection, discipline, unity, meaningful relationships.

And these are the qualities should also characterize the church and we hope to develop them a bit more today as we look at Acts 2:42-47. The goal of class today is for a new Christian to walk away with a better idea of what should be expected when we meet with other members of God's family. The relationship between the passage and the church as a family won't be perfect, but it will be instructive as we consider the importance of the church to our lives as Christians.

As we begin talking about the Church, it occurred to me that it might be helpful to have a clear idea of what we mean when use the word *church* to describe God's family.

What is the Church?

God choosing of a distinct community of people to display His glory is a central theme in both the Old and New Testaments. In I Peter 2:9, Peter writes the essence of what the church is: "But you [Christians] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Exodus describes OT Israel in a similar fashion. So, Just as the nation of Israel was called out from among the nations to proclaim and be a witness to God's glory, with the completed work of Christ, the church has become the new Israel and individuals from every tongue, tribe and nation have been called out from the world to bear corporate witness to God. **We corporately, as the family of God, the Church, praise God and bring Him Glory.**

Universal versus Local Church

There are two primary and interdependent ways to understand what it means to be a part of God's family, the church, both of which are defined for us in Scripture. First, when become a Christian and are, as Ephesians 1 says, included in Christ, we become a member of the universal church.

Q: Does anyone know what I mean when I refer to the universal church?

A: The universal church is defined as the community of all true believers for all time. This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved, both believers in NT age and OT age as well --- all those whose names are written in the Lambs Book of Life as described in Revelation.

Secondly, as evidence that we are truly apart of the Universal Church, we are also called to commit ourselves to meet regularly with other members of the universal Church in a local church, such as CHBC.

Now you won't see the terms Universal or Local Church in the Bible, but the dual use of the word church can be seen in many instances throughout Scripture.

An idea that was somewhat prevalent when I was in college, was that as Christians we are part of the church universal, so it doesn't matter so much about the local church. The local is just some man-made institution without much merit.

Q: What might/is wrong with this idea?

A: This clearly disregards clear Biblical commands to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb.10:25). Moreover, it disregards the assumption throughout scripture that Christians meet together locally, or in a congregational setting. (Epistles are written to address issues in local churches. And the list of references and passages where the word church refers to a local congregation could go and on.)

In fact, of the roughly 115 times Eklesia, the word for church, is used in the NT, it refers to a local church gathering of believers 90% of the time, which is why William Tyndale in his first translation of the Bible into the English language in the 16th Century translated the word eklesia with congregation.

The point is that local church is assumed in Scripture. A local congregation is the visible manifestation of the Church and the primary way through which God carries out His purpose.

II. Meeting with God's Family: the Local Church

Now that we've established the biblical grounds for the church, its importance in God's plan--- So what happens in church? What does our time together look like?

To answer this, we turn to **Acts 2:42-47**. As part of our discussion today, I want to discuss the characteristics of the Acts church in light of how we approach church here at CHBC so that you can make connections between the witness of Scripture and our practices at this local church.

For background, the Holy Spirit has come at Pentecost, and Peter has just preached his first sermon, calling all to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Would someone read 2:42-47.

Much like we did last week, with the Lord's prayer, we're going to discuss the characteristics of the local church described here in Acts 2 and try to demonstrate what you should expect from a meeting of God's family, and what you will experience as you continue in attendance here at CHBC.

Devoted Themselves to the Teaching of the Word (vs. 42). Specifically it says that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. In other words, the early church devoted themselves to what the apostles had to say about Christ, the meaning of His death and resurrection, as well as how the OT pointed to and was fulfilled in Christ. Here we see that the authority of the apostles was clearly recognized and established among early Christians.

Notice that the emphasis on the apostle's teaching is the first thing Luke records, and I don't think it is by accident. The Word is foundational to our lives together. In week 3, we noted that it's primarily through the Word that God speaks to us. In I Timothy 2:4, we read that the chief task of the preacher is to preach the word; to herald or proclaim the gospel.

A couple of points to make here as to why Scripture should be at the center of everything we do as a church.

- ◆ First, as we noted in our second week together, Scripture points the way to salvation and knowledge of Christ. Again in I Timothy 3:14, Paul writes that it is scripture that makes us "wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

So, it is the Word that brings light and life, and reveals God to us. Both Old Testament and New Testament reveal God's character to us, His plan of redemption for us, and is the rule of faith for our lives while on this earth.

Not only does it make us wise unto salvation...

- ◆ Secondly, the Word protects us from ignorance and error concerning the things of God. In his book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, JI Packer writes, "Because the church on earth consists of imperfectly sanctified sinners, there are always two defects in the lives of its members, both corporately and individually. These are ignorance and error, which cause omissions and mistakes in belief and behavior."

The Church, therefore, has two constant needs: instruction in the truths by which it must live, and correction of the shortcomings by which its life is marred. Scripture is designed to meet this twofold need; Quoting I Timothy, Packer says scripture is "profitable for teaching...and for training in righteousness on the one hand, and for 'reproof' and 'correction' on the other."

- ◆ Thirdly, Scripture equips us to the good works in the service of God's glory. In that same passage from I Timothy, Paul makes this connection between knowing the scripture doing good works. Paul says that all Scripture "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The more we are taught from God's word, the more we will mature and know Him, and the more we will be equipped to serve other Christians, other family members, as we are commanded in Scripture.

Summary: The word is profitable for 1) salvation, 2) protection, and 3) training.

So, if you've spent time at our church, you notice that everything we do is built on properly dividing the word of truth: from our prayers, to our morning sermons, to our Sunday evening sermons, core seminars, inductive Bible study on Wednesday nights, and so on. Priority is given to understanding what Scripture says, what it actually means, and how it should practically challenge us as Christians to live.

Strong Sense of Community (vs. 44-45). The second thing to notice here is the strong picture of community in this passage. These Christians weren't lone rangers, traveling the journey of life alone, autonomous individuals without responsibility for anyone else. Rather they were part of a very distinct community that was marked by commitment toward one another.

Perhaps, the most notable aspect of their community is the **responsibility** they took for each other. "*All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.*" They weren't hopping from Christian community to Christian community because their needs weren't being met. Rather

they were serving each other and focused on meeting others' needs, with at least some material cost to themselves.

Disclaimer...This is not indicating that early Christians lived in a commune, and that we then are required to do so, as well. We have a clearer picture of what is likely meant when it says that they held "everything in common," if we look at Acts 4:32-37. "³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. ³⁶Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Also, Ananias, Sapphira punished for lying, not necessarily for withholding part of their proceeds)

So, it's not they didn't have any possession, it's that they regarded them as God's to be used for the benefit of others. It's also indicated that wealthy Christians would sell possessions from time to time if needs arose with their congregation---not all at once as if such a move would have been required to be a part of the church.

What lies behind this testimony of early Christians described here in Acts 2 is that they "were so bonded that if one was in need, the others did not feel they had the right to live on in prosperity without giving up something to meet the need. So they would sell possessions and use the money to meet the needs of the poor in the church." (Piper). Of course, this is a good model for us, in terms of how we view and how we use what we own. So Christians took responsibility for meeting one another's needs.

The picture of a family or a household fits well here.

Q: How can you have a meaningful community, or a healthy family, if you don't take responsibility for each other?

A: You can't.

My wife Jayna and I were married two years ago last week, and it's been very interesting for me to see how foundational commitment is for growth. As Jayna and I meet different challenges and persevere with each other through them, our relationship grows much stronger and much deeper. It's the same way with the body of Christ. Commitment is essential to growth and healthy church. And such commitment appears to be a hallmark of the early church described here in Acts.

Consequently, it's this idea of community and responsibility that underpins our church covenant here at CHBC. Implicit in the covenant, among other things, are at least two beliefs: First is the belief that to live a faithful Christian life one must commit themselves to other believers. This includes participation in the life of the church, such as regular attendance, financial giving, participation in member's meetings, praying for one another, rebuking, encouraging one another and so on.

The second belief, closely related, is that we cannot live the Christian life and become mature in our faith without the aid of others. So it's the goal of this church that when you join you see yourself as becoming a part of a spiritual family, where you are committed to others' spiritual well-being and they are committed to yours.

Closely related their strong sense of community is their Fellowship. The way it's translated in the NIV, seems to indicate by the article "the" that the fellowship noted here is a specific group that may have been called the fellowship. In actuality, it's more likely referring to the quality of their meetings...Their lives together were characterized by fellowship (Koinenia)

The word that's used for *fellowship* has a deeper more substantive meaning than the casual sense in which we often use it today -- as when we discuss the three pillars of every good Baptist social gathering: Food, Fun, and Fellowship. The Greek word used here doesn't imply socializing. Christian fellowship is more than that. The relationships we are to cultivate with others are first and foremost spiritual relationships.

They are relationships built up the commonality of our relationship with Christ and our membership in God's family. This is what's indicated by the term *fellowship*: commonality in Christ. *So in Christ our relationship to each other cuts across socio-economic, age, marital status and every other barrier there might be in ways not experienced outside the body of Christ!*

Now, in addition to the commitment toward one another evidenced among early Christians, there are a couple of other keys to understanding the fellowship described here.

Q: First, in verse 46, where does it say they met?

A: The Temple Courts. It's important to note that the temple court is where teaching and discussions about God took place. And we've already noted that central to their time together was the Word, or the apostle's teaching. So they weren't just meeting for coffee to "catch-up" with one another but to learn about God.

Q: Secondly, how often does it say they met?

A: Regularly. This wasn't sporadic fellowship. They weren't simply casual acquaintances. As we've already noted, they were committed to one another, gave to one another according to their needs. To revert to the analogy of family..Healthy families spend time together. Likewise, regular fellowship, built upon Scripture and a commitment to one another's spiritual well being, is essential to a healthy church.

In his book *Spiritual Disciplines of the Church*, Don Whitney writes, "If a child is going to be emotionally healthy, he needs the socialization and encouragement a family can provide. In the same way, every child of God needs the fellowship and encouragement that God intends for him to receive from a church family if he is going to be spiritually healthy."

Third and finally, notice the picture of hospitality presented by these early Christians. It says in the second half of verse 46 that "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts..." So, their fellowship was rooted in the teaching of the Word, but it

extended beyond the temple court into one another's homes. The picture we are given is of believers opening up their homes, in essence their lives, to other believers for the purpose of edification – or building up one another's faith in Christ. (with joy...joy springing from the commitment to God and subsequently one another.)

So, when we as Christians exhort one another to live Godly lives and even rebuke one another for sin, if we have cultivated relationships with one another, it should never be an exchange between distant relatives who have heard of one another but don't really know one another. Rather, it should be as a brother speaking lovingly to a brother --- as those who share their lives together and know one another intimately.

At CHBC, among other things, we try to foster fellowship in very specific ways:

- ◆ *After service refreshments.* We have refreshments after the service so that people can meet and get to know one another. To have any kind of relationship you must first meet others.
- ◆ *Regular Worship.* We also emphasize that members attend regularly in the morning, as well as attend our Sunday evening service. There we share members' individual requests and pray for one another. We purposefully try to make Sunday evenings as intimate as reasonable to cultivate a spiritual community and relationships with one another. Sunday evenings are less formal, we share prayer requests and testimonies of the work of the Spirit of God in our lives, we pray for one another. So, I would encourage you, especially if you're a newer Christian whose not yet begun to attend regularly on Sunday nights, to begin attending these services. It will help you connect more intimately with the life of this local congregation.
- ◆ *Discipleship and Accountability.* We encourage discipleship and accountability one on one and in small groups, where members get together for the purpose of studying the word, encouraging and building up one another in the faith.
- ◆ *Emphasis on Reaching Out to Others.* Finally, one of the things I appreciate most about our pastoral staff is their constant exhortation to be hospitable to other members of this congregation – especially those who aren't like you. In other words, we are constantly encouraged to go out of our way to meet members we don't know, get to know them, learn from them, and encourage them.

There are some real practical examples of how some members do this:

- ◆ Some members will attend membership matters weekend courses to get to know those who will become members shortly.
- ◆ Once or twice a month groups of singles will have members they don't know well over for Sunday lunch.
- ◆ One of our elders every so often has dessert at his house one evening where he gets Christians together who may not know one another very well.

- ◆ Or it's even as basic as, after the service, introducing yourself to that person standing alone by the door rather than talking only to those people you might know.

All these things, accompanied by constant exhortation from the pulpit to cultivate true Christian fellowship, are done to foster deeper, spiritual relationships among the members of the church.

Not long ago I talked with someone who, at the time, was not regularly attending CHBC, but came to a Sunday service, and she said what I said after first attending, at night: It felt like a family. People were connected and interested in one another. There was unity that seemed very unique. Well, this doesn't happen coincidentally, but is nurtured by our commitment to regular and intentional spiritual fellowship with other members.

Of course, we're sinners and do this imperfectly, but a sense of unique Christian fellowship is what we hope visitors experience when they come to our church and it's what we desire to cultivate.

Breaking of bread (vs. 42).

Q: What is meant by breaking of bread?

A: Specifically, in verse 42, this seems to refer to the Lord's Supper or communion. We've already alluded to the truth that Christ binds us together as Christians. We become a member of God's family when we are included in Christ, as Ephesians 1 says. Every time we get together to celebrate communion we remember what Christ has done for us, without which our lives together would not be possible.

In some ways the act of communion is like a family gathering where members of the same family get together to celebrate what they have in common...their bloodline or relationship to a common ancestor. In communion we as a spiritual family celebrate what we have in common: Christ.

Again, this is why we particularly emphasize that members make it a priority to attend communion, which we have once a month. In remembering Christ through communion, we remember why we are here and why we covenant together as we do. In other words, we remember what truly makes us a family.

Now more generally, this breaking of bread could also indirectly point us to the other sacrament of **Baptism**. Although it doesn't specifically mention it here, in other places, Scripture is quite clear that our life together includes not only communion but also believers' baptism. Baptism and communion are the two ordinances that Christ commands.

Can anyone recall where else we are commanded to baptize believers or example of baptizing new believers?

We have record in John 4:2 of Jesus baptizing his disciples. Christ commanded us to baptize new disciples as part of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19). And in Acts there's Philip

baptizing the Ethiopian Eunuch upon his conversion. So the sacrament of Baptism was clearly an important part of the early Churches' life together, as well, and remains so today.

You'll notice that CHBC has regular baptismal services. Essentially, when someone is baptized at this church, it is a formal recognition that a person has identified with Christ and the family of God. And if they join our church, we as a congregation embrace that person as a member of our local family and commit to sharing our lives with that person.

Prayer (vs. 42). It also says that they devoted themselves to prayer. The word devotion implies intentionality; they purposed to make prayer a priority of their lives together. Last week we discussed the importance of talking to God individually, but prayer is also to be a mark of our corporate lives together.

That's why we spend 30 to 45 minutes on Sunday nights simply taking requests and praying for one another. In fact, we spend as much or more time praying than we do anything else during that time.

Well, if prayer is to be central to our lives together, you might wonder what it should look like. You may experience different ways to pray at different churches. Here, I'll just briefly mention the link between the Word and Prayer. The two are really interdependent.

If God's primary way of speaking to us is through the Word, then it makes sense that if we want to align ourselves with God's will, we should look to Scripture to guide our prayers. In his book *Spiritual disciplines for the Christian life*, Don Whitney mentions that a good way to practically improve our personal prayer lives is to let Scripture drive our prayers. Well, at CHBC we believe Scripture should also drive our corporate prayers.

If you listen closely to our service prayers of adoration, confession, and then our pastoral prayer, you'll notice how infused they are with scripture. We are **praising** God, based upon what He has revealed about Himself to us in His Word. We are **confessing** our sins, based upon what God revealed to us about ourselves in His Word. When we pray for **others**, we, much like Paul, pray that God would grant wisdom and insight, and discernment to those who especially need it.

But the idea is that prayer is central to our lives together and it finds its most rich expression using the very words God has so graciously given to us.

Evident power of the Spirit (vs. 43). Last week we noted that the presence of the Holy Spirit is a distinctive trait of a Christian. It's what marks out Christians from non-Christians. And, according to Acts, the power of the Holy Spirit was evidence in their lives together. It says that many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. Now how this manifests itself (special visible gifts) we can leave for future discussions. But clearly, we should expect the Spirit's power to be present within the church.

And we really need to look no farther than the fruit in lives to see the Spirit of God powerfully moving. For instance, we witness the power of God in our 1) salvation, 2) sanctification, 3)

provision. What displays the Spirit's power more than seeing someone dead in their transgressions come to spiritual life? Or to see the Spirit powerfully sanctifying one another, conforming us more to the likeness of Christ? Or to see how God provides for all of our needs and others' needs at just the right time?

The point here is that our lives together should be marked by the miraculous, by the Spirit's power. This was clearly the case for the church in Acts. If we are faithful to teaching God's truth we should experience God's presence among us, and see it reflected in our lives together.

Conversions (vs. 47). "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Up to this point, with the exception of the Spirit's power on display, everything we've discussed has been our response as the church to the gospel. We teach the Word, we commit ourselves to one another, we cultivate Christian fellowship, we pray, we practice communion.

As a result, according to God's pleasure and will sinners are converted. So, in a way, it seems appropriate that Luke mentions this last, because conversions should be the fruit of teaching God's Word and a community marked by commitment, fellowship, prayer, and the fruits of the Spirit's power.

Our corporate life together marked by loving commitment to one another, and which includes teaching, prayer and the Spirit's power is a powerful witness to the Gospel's truth, and speaks the love of Christ loudly and convincingly to non-Christians. So, it's not surprising that a church characterized by these things would see conversions in their midst, as portrayed in Acts.

Notice how CHBC's Statement of Faith reflects what we see in Acts (printed on your handout)

"We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by His laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His word..."

III. Meeting with God's family: Three Reasons Why New Christians should commit to a local church

Finally today, I want to give just a few reasons why it's important for all believers, but particularly new Christians, to commit to a local church:

- ◆ **Involvement in a local church is given priority in Scripture.** As we've already mentioned in Hebrews 10:25, God has called us not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more so as you see the day approaching." If we profess to be a Christian, we should be regularly in church. Again using the family analogy...we as humans have a basic need to be connected to our families and we desire to have meaningful relationships with them. As Christians, whose primary identity is now as a member of God's family, it only makes sense that we would desire to be other members of our new spiritual family. Desiring the

fellowship of other believers is a sign of our new life and the hope that we have in Christ.

- ◆ **The local church is where the fruits of the Spirit and love for other Christians that evidence the reality of our salvation are played out.** Throughout the NT, and particularly in I John, our salvation is understood in light of the love we have for our brothers in Christ (or other believers). Our love for one another distinguishes us as God's elect. John 13:34-35 says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." It is within a local church that our love for God and for one another is most visibly manifested.

An added benefit from this truth is that when we as individuals display these fruits over time, then it also helps to confirm our salvation in way that can't be done if we are isolated and not involved in other Christians' lives.

- ◆ **Going to church promotes spiritual growth and protection against sin.** Left on our own and apart from the teaching of God's Word, we can quickly forget what God has called us to and slip into error. Ephesians 4:11-14 summarizes the importance of God's word in maturing us and protecting us from every wind of doctrine. And in our Membership Matters course, which you take to become a member, we emphasize that absence from the body is either a reflection of sin or a portal to sin. Especially as a new Christian, commitment to a local church can help you more effectively live out your new life in Christ.

And there are numerous other important reasons to become a part of a local church. If you haven't joined CHBC and intend to, those reasons are laid out very clearly in the Membership Matters course.

Are there any questions before we conclude?

That concludes our discussion for today, but I would encourage you to see yourself as part of God's family and commit yourself to other members of that family. Next week our topic will be meeting the world, where we will discuss the role of evangelism in the Christian life.

Notes:

*** A Display of God's Glory, "The pages of the New Testament are full of examples of how the early Christians structured their churches. In its pages we find that there were clear times of meeting together (Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:25), elections (Acts 1:23-26;6:5-6), officers (e.g., Phil. 1:1; Acts 20:17, 28), discipline (I Cor. 5), contributions (Rom. 15:26; I Cor. 16:1-2), letters of commendation (Acts 18:27; II Cor. 3:1), the administration of the ordinances (Acts 2:41; I Cor. 11:23-26), and qualifications for membership (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:47). Clearly, God has given us in His Word direction about many aspects of the structure of a church's life together. -M. Dever*

***When considering the practices of the early church, an important distinction to make is between the ordinance / practice set forth and the application of the ordinance. Take for example communion: The practice or ordinance of communion is one we should follow; it's recorded in Acts and clearly commanded in other parts of Scripture.*

However, the application, such as where it was administered may change. For various reasons the early church may have done it in a house. But that doesn't mean we can't administer it in a building. They may have used a form of fermented drink for the cup, but that doesn't mean that grape juice doesn't work just as well.