

Three Hallmarks of a Biblical Church Member – Part 2

Selected Scriptures

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Well, we began last week to consider the hallmarks of a biblical church member. I borrowed the word ‘hallmarks’ from the Goldsmiths’ Hall in London, an institution that was founded in the 1200’s and still exists today, although not by that name. The Goldsmiths’ Hall had one primary responsibility, and that was to test the purity of precious metals such as gold, and silver, and platinum. When a piece of metal met the standard for purity, for genuineness, then it received the Goldsmiths’ Hall’s mark, which eventually came to be known as the ‘hallmark’. It’s where our word comes from. Eventually, of course, the English word ‘hallmark’ came to be used of whatever marks show that something is, in fact, genuine. That’s its hallmark.

In 2011, many of you were here when I taught on the hallmarks of a biblical church. What are the marks that distinguish a biblical church from those that are not? Well, sort of in conjunction with that, as a complement to that, we are considering last week and this week, what are the hallmarks of a biblical church member? We should all be rightly concerned about finding and belonging to a biblical church. But let me ask you this. Are you equally concerned about being a biblical church member? You see, of all the possible ways in which you can be involved in a local church like this one, what are, in the end, the absolute essentials of church life? What are the things that must mark you if you are to be a biblical church member?

Well, there are three hallmarks of a biblical church member. There are three priorities, that if you’re going to be a follower of Jesus Christ and rightly engaged in His church, that you must be engaged in in order to reflect the teaching of the New Testament. Last week we considered the first of those. You will be engaged in a weekly pattern of corporate worship, exalting God with the church. You will come together. Not only will you worship God individually, of course, as believers we do that, but as a member of God’s family, you will come together with the rest of the family on the Lord’s Day to worship with them. And that means, as I described it to you, it means coming with your own heart engaged in individual worship, and continuing that throughout all the elements that God has prescribed for our worship. And it means that you not

only worship individually from your heart, but you intentionally worship with the people around you, and even for their benefit, as we talked about last Sunday.

Now, today, I want us to consider the other two hallmarks of a biblical church member. There must be a commitment to corporate worship. And secondly, there must be a commitment to service; ministering to the church. You see, Christian, you were saved, at least in part, to serve just like our Lord. Remember, the goal of the Christian faith is ultimately becoming like Jesus Christ in order to bring Him glory. Well, what did Christ do in this world? He Himself said, “I did not come to be served but to...” (what?) “...serve.” He came in order to serve His people. And if we're going to be like Christ, then we have to be serving His people.

How does that actually happen? Well, the New Testament is clear about the plan for your service. Do you understand? Christ has a plan for your service and that is serving His church. That's Christ plan for your service to Him. It's serving His church. Let's look at it together. Turn with me to Ephesians 4. Paul is just finished, in the first three chapters, unfolding the eternal plan of God for Christ, for the church and for you. And then he turns in the beginning of 4:1 to apply all of that. He says, “Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” And he goes on to explain how we should live out the reality of all that God has done for us in Christ. And it's not a surprise that he begins with how we interact with His church.

He talks about the unity that we are to preserve in the church. And then he gets to our service in the church. Look at Ephesians 4:7. “But to each one of us, grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In the interest of time, I want you to skip down then to verse 11. Verses 8-10 sort of expound on that, but go down to verse 11. “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as...” literally pastor-teachers, “... for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

Now folks, those are three remarkable verses, because in those three verses we discover Christ’s plan for His church. Here it is. This is how the church is to function. Let me give it to you and I'm just going to give you an outline. If you're interested in delving into this more, I preached

through this at quite some length when we were working our way through the Book of Ephesians. You can go back and listen online. But let me just give you an outline. Here's Christ plan for His church.

Number one, Christ distributes spiritual gifts to the church. That's verse seven; "...to each one of us..." every believer, "...grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift." Now, that's all Paul says about it here. We're going to look at another passage in a few minutes in Peter, so I'm just going to give you that outline point, and we'll move on. Christ distributes spiritual gifts to the church.

Secondly, Christ appoints the leaders of the church. Verse 11: "And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers." These are leaders, men that God has given, in Christ, to the church. You see, not only did Christ give spiritual gifts to every member of His church, but He also gave gifted leaders to the entire church. And in that last expression, 'pastor-teachers', He gave gifted men to each church. In fact, notice that final office, 'pastor-teachers.' The Greek construction, by the way, points to this as one office. These men that he's talking about here are teaching shepherds.

Now, just for clarity's sake, let me just say that a 'pastor-teacher', as he's described here, an 'overseer' as described elsewhere, and an 'elder' all refer to the same office or position. In Acts 20, 1 Peter 5, the terms 'elder,' 'overseer,' and 'pastor,' or 'shepherd,' are used interchangeably of a New Testament elder in a church. In Acts 20 and 1 Timothy 5, we learned that the church in Ephesus, a church that was a significant church, but not a large church, had a plurality of elders who shepherded it. Some of them were paid, and some of them were lay, 1 Timothy 5:17. So one church with a plurality of leaders, pastor-teachers whom Christ had put in place over that church. That's why our church doesn't have just one pastor, me, but rather our church is led by a plurality of elders, and I am one of those elders. Because this is the New Testament model.

Thirdly, the leaders equip the members of the church. Verse 12, "... for the equipping of the saints." So notice that He gave these spiritual leaders, including pastor-teachers, to what purpose? "For the equipping of the saints." The primary role of the elders of this church is not to do the ministry. If you were used to the concept of a clergy-driven church, that is, just the pastors

did all the work, just the elders did all the work, you have a skewed view of Christ's plan for the church. That's not my role. That's not the role of the other elders of this church. The primary role of the elders is not to do the work of ministry, but to equip you to do the work of ministry.

That brings us to the fourth element in Christ's plan. The members do the ministry of the church. Notice verse 12, "...the equipping of the saints..." (to what end?) "...for the work of service." That's what leaders equip the saints to do, service. Now, the word 'service' is a word that's used for any kind of service. It's used, for example, in Acts 6:4, of the ministry of the Word. But that same word 'service' is used in places like Luke 10:40 and Act 6:2, of preparing and serving food. So it's a word with a huge range of meaning. It means to serve in all kinds of different capacities.

Here's the point. Every member of the church is to be involved in service at some level. Everything from teaching God's Word in the public proclamation of the pulpit in the corporate worship, as I'm doing right now, all the way down to serving menial acts of service across the church. But everyone is to be serving. The members do the "work of service."

The fifth part of the plan is when all of that happens, when the first four pieces come together like they should. Then the plan, Christ's plan, results in the growth of the church. Notice verse 12 says when all of that happens, it is "to the building up of the body of Christ." You understand as this plan unfolds, as we serve like we're intended to serve, then the church as a whole grows spiritually. This is Christ's plan. So service then, what I want you to see is, service is not something peripheral. It's not something that is sort of an add-on that might be good when you get around to it. It is integral to Christ's plan for the church, including the spiritual growth of every one of us. Christ's plan, His plan, get this into your mind, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, His plan for you is to serve in His church.

The question is, how? Well, that brings us, secondly, to the means of your service. So we can continue to consider this issue of service, the means of your service. And that is, using your spiritual gift. Turn over to 1 Peter, because Peter fills this out for us in 1 Peter 4. There's a lot of

places we could look, but I love this text. 1 Peter 4:10-11, you follow along there in your copy of the Scripture. He says,

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Again, I want you to notice that when gifts are used as they ought to be used, it results in what? The glory of Jesus Christ and of the Father. Now let's watch Peter unfold this concept, here, of using your spiritual gift. Notice, first of all, he begins in verse 10 "As each one..." In English as in Greek, the "each one" here is emphatic. He intends to say, "Every single, true Christian; every one of you, each one." This is the message of other places in the New Testament about spiritual gifts. Romans 12:3, God has allotted to each member of the body, gifts. 1 Corinthians 12:7, "...to each one..." that is, to every believer, "...is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Again, the context of spiritual gifts. Just as every member of your body has a function, so does every member of Christ's body. "As each one." And notice, he says, "...as each one has received..." That's a Divine past and it means "receive from God", the Source of the gift is God.

And by the way, that verb "has received" implies that this gift thing happened in the past. Putting that together with 1 Corinthians 12:13, it seems clear that this gifting we're talking about happened at the moment of conversion. At the moment you repented of your sins and believed in Jesus Christ, you were already regenerated in that process. That was the first thing as God used the gospel to bring life to your dead soul. And he justified you; He adopted you. And at that same moment, the Holy Spirit gifted you. In fact, notice how Peter puts it in verse 10. "Each one has received a special gift." You'll notice the word 'special' in English is italicized. That means the translators have added it. It's literally just, "...as each one has received a gift." The Greek word is 'charisma.' Literally, it means "a gift of grace." It's a gift of God's grace. In other words,

just like your salvation wasn't earned or merited, neither is this gift. It's just an expression of God's grace His unmerited favor.

Specifically, here, by this “special gift”, Peter is referring to what we normally call spiritual gifts. Now there's a lot of confusion about what spiritual gifts are. Let me just give you a definition. A spiritual gift is a unique capacity for service given to every true Christian. Now, when you look at the New Testament, there are two basic kinds of gifts. First of all, there's what we could call temporary sign gifts. They're miraculous gifts. They are things such as miracles, healings, languages or tongues as it is sometimes called, and the interpretation of languages. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 12:12, we read about the signs of the apostles, which included a couple of these miraculous gifts. In Hebrews 2, we learned that even by the time the writer of Hebrews wrote, just before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D., already by that time, the writer of Hebrews says, those who brought us the gospel exercise these gifts, but no longer. And of course, you see that unfold in early church history.

Well, so what was the purpose of these temporary sign gifts? Their purpose was to authenticate the apostles and their message as the true Word of God, until the written Word was completed, and that written Word becomes, by the Holy Spirit, self-authenticating. So these miraculous sign gifts ceased early in the history of the church. Now, if you are personally unconvinced of that, or if you're convinced of that, but you really struggle with the evidence to convince anybody else of that, then let me encourage you to go online and search for a message I preached at the Strange Fire conference several years ago called “A Biblical Case for Cessationism.” It will lay out for you the seven primary arguments for why the Scriptures teach that the miraculous gifts have ceased. But that's a different message for a different time.

So, you have temporary sign gifts. The second category of gifts you have are what I would call permanent, edifying gifts. Now, how many spiritual gifts are there in the New Testament? Well, there are two lists, in the New Testament, of spiritual gifts. One of those is in Romans 12, the other in 1 Corinthians 12. And when we combine those two lists together, we discover that there are 18 total gifts. Again, that's Romans 12:6-8, and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, and then verse 28 of 1 Corinthians 12 as well; 18 total gifts. Now, four of those were miraculous sign gifts; miracles,

healings, languages and interpretation of languages; two occur in both lists. So that leaves us then, when we do the math, with 12 permanent spiritual gifts. But even that 12 may not be exhaustive, it may simply represent the potential diversity that the Holy Spirit can give people in. And regardless, I would say this: those 12 permanent edifying gifts are like a Divine palette. It's not that every person gets one gift and only one. Rather, the gifting is like a pallet the Holy Spirit can use. He takes those gifts and He blends a little of this one with a little of that one, and He paints each person with a special, better to say, giftedness.

We talk about spiritual gifts. I think it's better to say you have been specially gifted. You have a giftedness that you have been given by the Holy Spirit. Now, the question that always comes up at this point is, how can I discover what my gift is? And I understand that question, of course. We all want to serve in the way the Lord equipped us. So, that question comes up. I would encourage you, first of all, just to study this issue. Go back through these passages, and in the fall, when we get back into Romans in the early verses of chapter 12, Paul is going to deal with spiritual gifts, and we'll deal with it there at greater length. But, understand what the scriptures have to say. Pray for wisdom and direction. Seek the input and guidance of mature people around you who can help you understand what you are, and are not, gifted to do. But can I give you the most basic advice to discover your spiritual gift? Just get busy serving in the life of the church. Why do I say that? Because we tend to gravitate toward the areas of our gifts. And if we stray, the church has a way of helping bring us back into line. That's how it works.

I mean, think about your own physical body. So much of the function of the various components of your physical body is involuntary. You don't think about it. They just do their part. Your pancreas didn't have to take a three-page personality survey to determine what its gifts are and how it fits into the body. It just works because God made it just to work. That's how it is with our giftedness. Don't spend so much time worrying about what your gift is. Just get involved in the life of the church. And as that happens, you will gravitate toward those gifts that you have and to whatever extent you're confused the church will help direct you, the Holy Spirit will help direct you, and you'll end up where you need to be, filling the function that God made you to fill. It's a whole lot easier for the Holy Spirit to steer a moving car than one that's parked. So get busy, serve, get involved.

Now look at verse 10: “As each one has received...” this special giftedness, this unique capacity to serve, “...employ it in serving.” Now, look at those four English words, “employ it in serving.” That translates one Greek word, and it's the verb form of the noun “deacon.” It's used, obviously, for the office of deacon in the New Testament, but it's also a word for general, selfless service. You know what Peter's saying: “As each one of you has received a special gifting by the Holy Spirit, serve. Serve one another.” You see, your gift is to be the channel through which your ministry to others and ultimately to Christ himself flow. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says that each one has received this gifting, listen to this, “...for the common good.” It's for others. You've been gifted for others.

You know, I've been gifted to teach. And when I study, and when I teach, I benefit probably more than you do. The Lord uses my gift for my own soul. And hopefully He uses my gift for yours as well. But we use our gifts for the common good. 1 Corinthians 14:26, he's talking still about spiritual gifts and he says “...let all things be done for edification.” Gifts are intended to edify, to build up the entire body. So let me put it bluntly, God has given you (I want you to personalize this), if you're a Christian, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, God has given you a unique blend of special abilities and He demands that you use them to serve one another.

How is that to play out? He goes on in verse 10 to say, “...as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” That word ‘steward’ is literally ‘house manager’. It was the slave in the first century who was responsible for managing his master’s property. The point is this: we are not owners of our giftedness, we are merely managers. Notice how he describes our giftedness there, “...the manifold grace of God.” The word ‘manifold’ means many-colored, literally. It speaks of the variety. Corporately, there is a great variety of giftedness represented in this room, and individually, each of us is often a mix of various gifts. And he says, you are to look at those gifts; you're to look at that giftedness (notice what he says) as a steward. That is encouraging us to approach our giftedness with humility. When it comes to your spiritual giftedness, you are a slave using your Master’s resources to accomplish His business.

Now, I love what Peter does next, because we all love it when things become simple. And Peter has a way here, in this verse, of making it very simple for us. He condenses all possible spiritual

gifts to two categories, and then he explains how we're to exercise those gifts. Notice, in verse 11 you have speaking gifts and you have serving gifts; that's it. You either have a speaking gift or you have a serving gift, or you have a combination of the two. Those are the only options. Now, let's see what he has to say about these.

First of all, let's look at speaking gifts. Verse 11, "...whoever speaks..." The word for 'speaks' here often is used for public speaking like I'm doing this morning, the public teaching of God's Word. But the same word is also used of private conversation. So this word intentionally, the word 'speaks', is inclusive of all speaking gifts, from the public proclamation of the Word of God in the public assembly and the corporate assembly, to private exhortation. Maybe you're not a public speaker, but you have the gift of exhortation, and you're able to sit down with someone and help bring them along, and challenge them, and counsel them, and encourage them toward Christlikeness. Everything from A to Z, if it's a speaking gift, it's included here.

If you have a speaking gift, how should you exercise it? Well, he says "...whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God." 'Utterances' is not a word we use a lot. But this Greek word was used in classical Greek of the word of a deity, a message from a deity. It used the same way in the biblical languages as well in the Septuagint, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, it's used to translate that expression, "the Word of the Lord." It's also used in the New Testament of the Old Testament Scripture. We saw this in Romans 3:2, where Paul says the Jews received "...the oracles of God." That word 'oracles' is the same word. The utterances are the oracles of God. In other words, if you have a speaking gift, you are to speak as if speaking the very words of God.

Now, that has two applications. First of all, it has an application to your content. If you have a speaking gift, your content should only be the word of God. Listen, I don't have anything worth your coming to hear. And there's nothing I can say that should move you to be here this morning. Tom Pennington has nothing to offer you. It's only as I'm faithful to teach the Word of God, speak, as it were, the utterances of God. The same is true of you if you're a teacher. And let me just say, by the way, beware of those who say they have teaching gifts or who try to exercise the teaching gift, whether it's a television preacher or somebody down the street, and their teaching

is all about themselves. What they have to say is all out of their own mind. They are abusing the giftedness, if they have it, because the one who speaks is to speak, as it were, the oracles of God. It also deals with the way you deliver that message, if you have a speaking gift. You are to deliver it with authority. Speak, as it were, the oracles of God. So when I come here on Sunday morning, even at the risk of seeming arrogant to some, I'm going to preach the Bible for what it says, and say "This is what it says," because that's my job. I am, as I use my speaking gift, God's mouthpiece. I'm delivering His Word. That's why Paul said to Titus in Titus 2:15, "...teach these things with all authority." Teaching of God's Word by those who are gifted to do so is not to be, you know, a conversation over a Starbucks cup. It's the proclamation of God's Word. Speak, as it were, the very words of God.

What about if you have serving gifts? Notice verse 11, "...whoever serves..." Again, that's the verb form of the noun 'deacon.' You say, how do I know if I have a serving gift? Well, this is everything that isn't a speaking gift. So if you don't have a speaking gift, you have a serving gift. And Peter is now talking to you. He says, "...whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies." Now, that is a remarkable thing to say. I have, I believe, by the gift of God, the gift of teaching. But through the years, I've also had the opportunity to use the gift of administration in running some organizations, and doing some things like that. And I can tell you from experience, it's easy for those who have serving gifts to begin to depend solely on their own strength and their own resources. Peter says, 'Don't do that.' Don't approach your service in the church thinking you got this handled. No, he says, if you have a serving gift, that is, not a teaching gift, don't rely on yourself. Don't rely on your own experience, your own creativity, your own hard work. Instead, remind yourself of your need of God's strength to serve effectively, and ask Him for help to do so.

If you have a serving gift, do you do this whenever it is you serve? Let's say it's the Lord's Day. Do you start by praying "Lord, help me to use the serving gift You have given me in a way that would build up the church? Help me to use it effectively for the benefit of others for the common good?" That's what Peter's saying. Don't rely on yourself, your own strength; rely on the Lord.

So summing it all up, the means of your service - Christ's plan, is for you to serve Him in His church; the means of your service is to use your spiritual giftedness, imparted to you by the Holy Spirit at the moment of your conversion. Now, before we leave this issue of service, let's consider thirdly, the reality of your service. The reality is, you are serving your Lord. Turn back to Matthew; I want you to see this in our Lord's own words, Matthew 25. This is the end of the Olivet discourse. Jesus is describing a judgment that will occur; not the great white throne judgment that happens after the millennium, but rather, this is a judgment that happens at the end of the tribulation. When He returns at the second coming, it will be a judgment of all of those who physically survive the tribulation. It's called the judgment of nations, but it's really a judgment of individuals, as you see. Let's look at it, Matthew 25:31.

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations... (again, these are those who survive the tribulation) ...will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right...

So here I want you to notice how you get to be a sheep. It's not because of your good works. Here's how you get to be a sheep. "The King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of my Father'..." That is, the Father chose to bless you and inherit the kingdom that He prepared for you from the foundation of the world. This is sovereign grace. You're in because God showed you grace. It's not about your works, but Jesus goes on to say your works have provided evidence of your genuine faith.

Notice what he says, verse 35. "For I was..." (notice the pronouns), "...I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."

That's shocking. Jesus will say to people who survived the tribulation, who come to faith during the tribulation, "You did all these things for Me."

Verse 37, "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly, I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them...' (what does He say?) "...you did it to Me.'"

Now, "brothers of mine," here, is a specific reference to your fellow believers. There's nothing wrong with performing acts of mercy for unbelievers, for the world. We're called to be compassionate, gracious people. But He's talking here about believers doing these things, (feeding, giving a cup of water) in His name, to other believers. And He says, "When you do that. You did it to me." Do you understand that when you use your gifts to serve the people of this church, you're not serving Tom or Sheila or someone else? You're serving the Lord, if you do it with the right heart. That's how He sees it, and he takes note of it. And at the judgment, He will register that as if you did that for Him.

You take care of children in our nursery. Seems like a pretty thankless task at times. It's not. Jesus sees every child you pick up, done with the right heart. It's as if you cared for Him when he was an infant, that's His point. That's the reality of your service. Hebrews 6:10 says the same thing. "God is not unjust so as to forget your work..." Listen to this: "...and the love which you have shown toward His name." You show love toward Jesus's name. How? "In having ministered..." (and in still ministering) "...to the saints."

One of the primary ways you show your love for Christ, is by ministering to the people in this church. Let me say that again. One of the primary ways you show your love for Christ, is by ministering to people in this church. Let me say it the opposite. A failure to minister to people in Christ's church is to demonstrate a lack of love for Jesus. In fact, you remember in John 21 Jesus is restoring Peter, and He says to him, "Peter, do you love Me?" Three times: "Peter, do you love

Me? Peter, do you love Me? Peter, do you love Me?” And each time, of course, Peter says, “Yes, Lord, I love You” And he finishes by saying, “Lord, You know all things, You know that I love You.” And each time when Jesus says, “If you love Me” you'll do what? “You'll care about my sheep. You'll feed my sheep. You'll tend my lambs.”

Now, that's an apostle. But the same thing is true for every Christian. You want to show your love for Jesus Christ, love His people. You know, sometimes I meet people who will tell me (it's happened in this church, some folks who used to be a part of the church); and, you know, they'll come to me and say, “Tom, you know, I love Christ, but I'm just not, you know, I just don't need the church. I'm just not that concerned.” It's like, that can't be. That's utterly incongruous. You can't love the Head of the church and not love His body. You can't love the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not love His other children. It's impossible.

So, are you regularly serving the people of this church? Are you regularly serving the people of this church? If not, how do you begin? Well, first of all, understand that the Lord has equipped and commanded you to serve His church. Secondly, just commit that you're going to obey Him. Tell Him, “Lord, I'm done making excuses. I'm going to get involved. I'm going to serve You in the church.” Thirdly, just discover what this church needs and what you think you can do, and volunteer. Get busy; get involved. A great way to start that is visiting the Ministry Fair after the service, if you haven't already. So you should commit, number one, to corporate worship. If you're going to be a biblical church member, number two, to service.

But there's a third hallmark of a biblical church member, it's fellowship. Fellowship; loving the church. Now, I want to begin by looking at the meaning of fellowship. Turn with me to Acts 2:41. This is the day of Pentecost. Peter's sermon is done, people have repented. Verse 41 says, “So then, those who had received his word...” (Peter's message) “...were baptized.” They believed, they were baptized. “...And that day there were added...” to the church in Jerusalem, “...about 3000 souls.” That morning, they started the day with about 120 gathered in a room praying. By the time the day was done, the church was at least 3,120. It had grown significantly. Now, what did they commit themselves to, verse 42? This new church, the first church there in Jerusalem, “...were continually devoting themselves to...” four things: “...to the apostles

teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread..." here, that's the Lord's Table, "...and to prayer." Those four things they were continually devoting themselves to. So one of the four priorities that the early church committed itself to included fellowship.

Now, if you'd been in the church any time at all, you know that the Greek word here is 'koinonia.' Unfortunately, we misuse the word 'fellowship.' When Christians get together to have doughnuts and coffee, by the way, there's nothing wrong with doughnuts and coffee, I'm all for it. But when we get together for doughnuts and coffee, or just an activity, or even to watch a ballgame, we say people are getting together for fellowship. And there's a sense in which that's true, if you understand what's really happening. You see, the English word and its Greek counterpart originally referred to something more; it referred to a relationship. It referred to those who shared in something greater than themselves, something that would outlast them. When you think of the biblical word 'fellowship', think J. R. Tolkien and his use of that term in the title and book called *The Fellowship of the Ring*. That small group who bound themselves together with Frodo Baggins to destroy the ring of power, they were partners. They were in the fellowship of the ring. That's how the biblical word 'koinonia' is most often used.

We are in a fellowship. We're in a partnership with Christ, obviously, but also with other Christians, we're in the fellowship. And that doesn't mean we have a lot in common. In fact, we often don't, just like those who bound themselves together in the fellowship of the ring. But think about the New Testament churches. Think about the church in Philippi. Okay now, imagine if you'd belonged to the church in Philippi. The founding members of that church were three. One, there was a Greek business woman, very successful. Two, there was a former demon-possessed slave girl who was a fortune teller. And thirdly, there was a jailer. I expect it was a little awkward at the church Christmas party. What do you talk about? I mean, by the world standard, they had nothing in common. But Philippians 1:5 says that they had this in common, "...they were in the fellowship of the gospel." They were united by their shared commitment to Jesus Christ. And that's what unites us. I mean, some of us have common interests, some of us have common backgrounds, but many of us don't. And that's okay. What binds us together is not our demographics, but the fellowship of the gospel. We belong to this fellowship, we belong to this partnership. That is how the word 'fellowship' is most often used in the New Testament. But

that's not how it's used here in Chapter 2:42. Notice, here, 'fellowship' is not used of our relationship as partners, but of an activity. We're to be continually devoted to the activity of fellowship. What does that mean? Well, in the context of Acts 2:42, as we'll see in a moment, fellowship is the sharing of our lives with one another because of the relationship we have in the fellowship of the gospel. It's the practical outcome of the fellowship we belong to. We have fellowship, we engage in fellowship, we share our lives with one another.

Let me just sort of fill this out a little bit. Here are the expressions of fellowship. There are four basic expressions of fellowship in this sense. Number one, we share a common worship. Just look again at Acts 2:42. Surrounding the word 'fellowship' are the apostles' doctrine, that is, teaching the truth, breaking of bread in verse 42, that's undoubtedly a reference to the Lord's Table, and prayer; those are all part of worship. Clearly, the early church fellowship included worship. But that's not all it included.

Secondly, it included a common life. That's the primary focus of Chapter 2:42. Luke tells us that those who belong to the first church there in Jerusalem, notice what he says, "...were continually devoting themselves to fellowship." That is, to the sharing of their lives with one another. What does that look like? Look at verse 44. "...all those who had believed were together." Stop there. They were together. Look at verse 46. Day after day, daily in the temple, and "...from house to house, they were taking their meals together..." They were sharing a common life. You see, the New Testament describes Christians as members of one body, the body of Christ. As members of one family, the family of God. And that's true of us. Therefore, we share a common life.

One of the chief expressions of our fellowship is the sharing of our lives, especially our spiritual lives. How does that happen? How does the sharing of our common spiritual life happen? Well, it happens in two ways, as we learned in our conference on fellowship a number of years ago. It happens, first of all, side by side, as we're sitting next to each other like you're doing right now. There's a fellowship that happens even in the corporate worship, but that can't be the only kind of way that fellowship happens. Not only do we fellowship sitting side by side, but at some point that fellowship has to be where we turn our chairs and face each other. Where we sit down with each other, across from each other over a meal, or in a home Bible study, or in a conversation

before or after the service. Listen, you need to be regularly in venues like this where you fellowship side by side. But you also need personal face to face interaction with other believers.

Get together for coffee or a meal. Have them over to your home, somehow connect with Christians at a smaller level than you do in a room like this one. Get involved in a ministry where you can get to know believers on a more intimate level. Go to a Sunday school class where you can sit around a table with a consistent group of people week after week and learn more about their lives, and they learn more about yours. Attend a home fellowship. Somehow, though, you have to engage in sharing common spiritual life with other Christians.

Thirdly, this fellowship that we're to engage in has another expression. It's mutual care. This expression of fellowship requires you to know Christians well enough that you can practice what are normally called the "one another's" of the New Testament. All those places in the New Testament where it says "do this to one another, do this to one another, do this to one another." Listen, that doesn't happen here; doesn't happen in this room. It has to happen somewhere else. It has to happen where you know people well enough to be in their lives; mutual care. And that's what the New Testament church looked like. Look again at Acts 2:44. It says, "And all those who had believed worked together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need." By the way, this isn't Christian communism. They owned these pieces of property. Even in Acts 5, Peter says to Ananias, "Before you sold it, was it not your own?" So this is simply saying that the early church Christians held even those things they owned loosely, if they could benefit and bless other Christians. They were quick to share what they had to meet the needs of others. Look at 4:32, "And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own." Notice they did belong to him, but he didn't claim them as if they were just his own, and couldn't benefit others. But all things were common property to them. They thought of their stuff like, "This is the Lord's stuff, and I'm going to use it to be a blessing to other believers." There was a mutual care that kind of spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:25 says, "...the members..." of the body, us, are to "...have the same care for one another." I mean, this makes sense, right? I saw a member of our church coming in this morning who broke his leg in five places and the rest of his body is going out of its way to care

for that member. That just makes sense, right? Well, that's the way it's supposed to work in the body of Christ. There's a mutual care. 1 John 3:17-18 says, "How can you have this world's goods and see your brother in need and not act to meet those needs? How does the love of Christ abide in you if you're not driven to meet the needs of other people?" They're part of the fellowship. So there needs to be mutual care.

A fourth expression of fellowship is mutual edification, mutual edification. Romans 15:2 says, "...each of us..." listen to this, "...each of us is to please his neighbor for his good to his edification." The word 'edification' simply means to his building up spiritually. By the way, the context of that is Christian liberty. You ever thought about your Christian liberty like this? Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good to his edification. That's how all Christians respond to their Christian liberty. The church would be a simpler place. But that's our spirit. In Hebrews 10:24-25, remember, we're not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, we're to get together; and why? To what end? So that we can "...stimulate one another to love and good deeds." That's building them up.

Let me ask you a question. When you come here on the Lord's Day for worship, do you think, "I'm here to help stimulate others to love and good deeds?" Have you, by your interactions, ever stimulated another Christian in this church to love Christ more, to love other Christians more and to good deeds? That's fellowship, that's mutual edification. Paul in Romans 1:11-12 puts it this way; he says, "...I long to see you..." this is talking to the Roman Christians. "...I long to see you...that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine." That's a remarkable statement. Paul says, even though he was an apostle, even though he'd been a Christian for over 30 years, by the time he wrote Romans, he says, "I can't wait to be with you Christians in Rome, because in being with you, I'm going to be encouraged. I'm going to be built up in my faith." That is, by the way, a mature understanding. Maybe you haven't yet come to understand that you need the fellowship of other Christians in order to grow. But that is the reality. God uses fellowship with believers to strengthen you.

If you're not committed to fellowship, if you have to look at that list of those four expressions and say, "I'm not doing really well, maybe I've got the one, the corporate worship, down. But

those other three, I just haven't seen the church that way.” What do you do? How do you fix this if this isn't in your life the way it ought to be? Let me give you just some practical suggestions.

Number one, change your mindset about the church. You have got to get the modern concept of a consumer out of your mind when it comes to the church. You know, I said last week, a lot of people think of the church like a restaurant. They choose which one they want to go to. They choose when they go; when they get there, they order what they want for their own benefit only, and then they leave without any obligation. That's the restaurant you're going to go to in a few minutes. But it's not the church. You are an active, functioning member of this body. You are a member of this family. So change your mindset.

Secondly, connect with a smaller group. Do something to get you in connection to smaller groups of believers in this church so that you can practice fellowship. Maybe it's a home fellowship. Maybe it's a Sunday school class. Maybe it's a ministry, but somehow get involved. Maybe it's individually, but do it.

Number three, actively pursue individual relationships. You need to pursue individual relationships. Now, let me say this. And please understand, I'm not angry about this. I'm not upset about this; you guys do this well. But from time to time, somebody will say to me, “You know, I've been in this church three months and not one person has come up to me.” And, you know, if that's true, I'm sorry for that. I hate that. But on the other hand, understand that this is not just a command for everybody else to pursue you. This is a command for every Christian to pursue other Christians. So pursue individual relationships and then look for ways in those relationships to practice true fellowship in these four expressions.

So let me just ask you. Are you, Christian, a biblical church member? Are you faithfully committed to the weekly corporate worship? Are you faithfully serving Christ by serving His church? And thirdly, are you intentionally engaged in fellowship, in loving and caring for your fellow believers in this church? Those are the three great hallmarks that mark a truly biblical church member. May God help every person, every one of us who belongs to this church, to be

stamped as genuine by Christ. Because those three realities are marks of our lives. Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for the clarity of Your Word. Thank you for telling us Your plan. Thanks for uncovering to us the priorities that ought to be ours. Lord, help us to sort through our own souls, and Lord, to look at all we're involved in, but in the end, to ask ourselves if these three things are happening. There's so many things in this world we can be involved in and take our time, but help us to see that these are, in fact, Your plan. For our service in ministry, for our involvement in the church. Lord may these mark us. Lord, I pray for those who may be here this morning, who are not in the family, who are not in the body because they've never repented and believed. This message hasn't been a gospel message, but they have sung the gospel together with us. They have read it in Mark's presentation of the crucifixion. They have heard the gospel prayed. Father, I pray that today you would help them to see their need of Christ, that they would repent of their sins and put their faith in Him today. We pray it in Jesus's name, Amen.