

Church 101: Joining, Committing, Loving (Acts 2-5)

We are beginning a brief series of studies from the book of Acts on the NT church, on its fundamentals in a series I'm calling Church 101. Our main SS classes are book studies, we also have elective classes on the fundamentals. We can teach advanced doctrine but it's good to also review and not assume the basics. What is a church? It's not a building or bodies in a building, it's Christ-followers in the body of Christ. Churches can be outdoor gatherings like I experienced in Ecuador's jungles, that was the church we experienced on the Lord's Day, sitting on logs outside, singing, church leaders teaching. Not having a building didn't make their Sunday gathering any less a church, because the church in Scripture is never a building, it's believers in Christ's family. The same was true in Congo as we met on Sunday under a tin roof structure. Africans have a very different style of worship than this church. Church is not about us in the sense of our style, traditions, ideas, it's about Christ, or should be, focused on Him and what He said to do till He returns.

In Acts 2, where we'll be again if you want to turn there, we'll see the early church met in the temple and they also met in houses and in other settings. We'll also see they met more than once a week, and not because they had to, but because they wanted to. In the evening if there was opportunity to again gather for worship, we see them eager to. Day by day in the early days they were gathering as an assembly, and not being content with that, they invited believers to their homes to continue fellowship and relationships. The love I see in this chapter is a challenge to me, the hospitality and community in the early church should be a challenge to you as well and to our church to grow. I need to grow here, so do we. The American church is often individualized and privatized, but let's go back to the basics or fundamentals, in God's eyes

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul [or 'they were filled with awe', like the hymn 'sweet and awful'], and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

v. 41 says 3,000 souls were baptized and added to the church, quite a jump in members from 120 (1:15)! Church wasn't a thing they did for an hour and a half Sunday morning, it's something God's Spirit did in and through them day by day, night by night. This is describing what God did by His sovereign Spirit, it's not prescribing how man can duplicate revival by this formula. But the fruit of the Spirit is love which *is* prescribed to us all. We need a revival in love. I know narratives aren't imperatives. A story isn't a command. But the story of Acts 2 shows how the disciples applied Christ's commands from John 13-17. We may not be able to replicate these results in numerical growth (3000 saved in a day) but we may/must emulate love and grow in it. I'm thankful for this church's love but we need to excel more

Love is expressed in commitment and action, not just in words but in deeds. Love in a local church is also expressed by commitment to the church, and actions that follow what you commit to, not being ashamed to express that commitment in words but also in deeds of service to fellow members of the body. We ask our members to express that commitment in words before the congregation when they join, as a way to apply the commands of Scripture, and commit to love in action. Our member commitments flow from Acts 2:

- v. 42 has a strong word for steadfast commitment, continual devotion to the church's *teaching, church fellowship, breaking bread, prayer*
- this isn't just a narrative of one church, other imperatives/commands call all Christians to be devoted to these same things in local churches
 - o 1 Tim 4:13 is one command: *devote yourself to...teaching*
 - o 1 Cor 1:9 says to the church: *you were called into fellowship*
 - o 1 Cor 10-11 also commands *breaking of bread/communion*
 - o James 5:16 commands us the church to *pray for one another*
 - o These aren't just 4 commitments of this church, these are 4 commandments in other places, means of grace for churches.
- God's grace flows as we pray, fellowship, commune, learn.
- in v. 44-45 when it says they shared their things in common and were meeting the needs of the saints, the same root words are commanded of us in Rom 12:13: *Contribute to the needs of the saints* [the church]
- The NT doesn't command selling possessions, some voluntarily did in Acts 2, but the NT calls all to give sacrificially to fellow members
- when v. 46 mentions their regular worship together, the same Greek word is commanded in Rom 15:6 for our corporate worship together
- when it mentions their hospitality in having others over for meals with glad hearts, the NT commands us to do the same in 1 Peter 4:9
- asking members to commit to this isn't radical, it's NT Christianity

Title of today's message: Church 101 – Joining and Loving a Local Church

This is part of a brief series for a few weeks from the early chapters of Acts looking at the church in the NT, reviewing why we do what we do. Loving the church is the most important fundamental, we'll spend more time there, but joining is also important *as a platform or place to show committed love*.

The word in v. 42 for their church commitment/devotion is also translated as those who *give their whole time to* something (Rom 13:6 NIV). It doesn't mean literally 24/7 they did nothing but v. 42, but it implies a lot more than the devotion a typical American Christian has to these things in his church. Greek dictionaries say *devoted* means '**associate closely, join, adhere to ...serve personally, be faithful**' (DBL, 4676), or 'to be loyal to...to occupy oneself diligently with...hold fast to...clinging' (TDNT, 3:618-19). The EDNT (3:172) says in Acts 2:42 it 'emphasizes...submissive *perseverance* ...of a...group collectively oriented toward specific goals; this also includes Acts 2:46.' So it's a commitment word, including submission to a group.

[the submission aspect we can consider in a future message on leadership]

However that 'joining in close association' worked in the 1st century versus the 21st century isn't the key thing as far as procedure or paperwork (it may have been just a confession of faith before the church in baptism, 1 Tim 6?). I know some people resist the idea of *joining, members*, but they are Bible words, and whatever terms we use, and whatever way local churches try to follow the NT pattern, the NT language doesn't fit our casual relationship ideas. There's commitment in this text and we encourage commitment to the same things: teaching, fellowship, the ordinances, prayer, care, love, etc. It's devoted *to people*. Rom 12:10 '*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love*'¹

[we ask members to express that verbally as you've seen here]

If you turn to Acts 5, we get another snapshot of early church commitment. 5:12: *many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.*¹³ *None of the rest dared **join them**, but the people held them in high esteem.*

So the Jerusalem church gathered in the temple at Solomon's Portico (KJV says '*they were all with one accord*' - that's older English for their close association, bound together, united). Chapter 3 says other people came to hear Peter preach in this place, some were interested in the miracles and some were interested in the teaching, and here v. 13 says some of them esteemed the church highly, but didn't *join them*, or associate, unite with, or bind themselves together with the church. Some came for their own desires and some came to listen and even respected them, but to 'join' meant more.

That Greek word *join* was used in Scripture² for committing in allegiance to a king and being loyal to fellow soldiers in his army (2 Sam 20:2). It was used for clinging to, like leprosy to skin (2 Kings 5:27) or bone to flesh (Ps 102:5) or a belt bound around the waist or loins (Jer 13:11). It's not just a loose association, or being with, it was used of gluing, cementing together. It's not just a word for informal casual occasional being together somewhere

The most common use of this word is in marriage covenant contexts. 4x this word is used for a man being joined to a woman when the 2 become 1 flesh (Mt 19:5, Mk 10:7, Eph 5:31, 1 Cor 6:16). The word was also used of hiring oneself out, or contracting work (Lk 15:15), employment agreements either by verbal commitment or on paper (or both, like marriage contracts as well)

So this word often included verbal or written commitment. If you look at Acts 9:26 it says Paul came to the Jerusalem church and '*attempted to **join** [same word] the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.*²⁷ *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord ...* Paul wanted to join the Jerusalem fellowship but they weren't sure he was a disciple yet. He spent time with them and shared his testimony with a leader named Barnabas who shared it with other church leaders, then in a public way they let Paul join and he later became a missionary sent out from them. That's essentially the process we go through when people want to join here, and we find it practical to use apps to fill out with testimony, and we meet.

In Gal 1:15 Paul explained he spent 15 days getting acquainted with Peter, then Paul says in Gal 2: '*when James and Cephas and John [leaders of the church], perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to...me'* (v. 9). Some fellowships like to use that phrase instead of membership, 'giving the right hand of fellowship' and that's fine with me.

In my old church, GCC, people would join after getting to know at least one of the leaders who made sure they were Christians and wanted to submit to the teaching and shepherding of the leaders. Then in a public way after PM service they called it 'the right hand of fellowship' as we stood up front and people in the church shook our hand and welcomed us. In Congo, the whole church forms a line and shakes hands. There's different ways it can be done and different things it can be called (membership, right hand of fellowship), and different ways leaders apply NT language and patterns to join a church, but let's be different than those in v. 13 who respect it but dare not ever join.

The purpose of committing is more important than the process. I want to talk about the motive and the main thing that stands out in Acts 2-5: *loving the church* (which, again, is the people, not the building). Many of you have joined on paper or in public commitment, but I want to move to loving the church, the 2nd point, the rest of this message. We need to remind ourselves of love, remember our commitments to love each other, repent of our lack of love, and renew our love not only in words, but also works of love. Rev. 2:4 says '*you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.*'

Point #2 (the main point, 2nd greatest command): loving the church

To apply further, inside of your bulletin has an insert, GCBC commitments:

[1st bullet point pledges] • To walk together in Christian love, and maintain the unity of the believers in the church (John 13:34-35; Ephesians 4:3-6):

• To strive for the advancement of this congregation in knowledge, holiness, and love (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Peter 3:18):

• To sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 11):

• To contribute cheerfully and willingly to the support of its ministry (2

Corinthians 9:7, Ps 100:2 'serve the Lord with gladness');

[skip down one] • To watch over other believers in brotherly love, through prayer, and giving aid in times of need (Galatians 6:1-10; Philippians 2:1-7; 1 Peter 3:8-9):

[last one] • To not forsake the assembling of myself together with believers even if it becomes necessary to leave this congregation (Heb 10:25); if at any time I find myself out of harmony with the leadership and practices of this congregation, and am not able to resolve the issue after proper appeals are made, I will quietly remove myself from membership, and refrain from dissension among the church.'

This is what all the members of our church have signed and in recent years have said before the church and we ask them to re-affirm regularly this love as we welcome others. It's not like in a wedding "till death do we part," it's a commitment to share life *till we part*. It's a pledge to *be a part* of a family, and where we have problems, to try to be *a part of the solution*. Some say 'yeah, but the church has problems...' Listen, I know more problems in our church than any of you ... but I commit and hope I can be part of helping. I not only see problems with persons, I'm a person with problems! That's *why* I commit to church! I don't withdraw, I need and seek help from elders. James 5 says if you're struggling, seek help, ask for prayer from your elders.

Some may say 'I don't agree with some things, or I'd like to see things done a different way. If I was the pastor, I'd like to see us go a different direction, or the church doesn't match all my preferences.' My reply is 'join the club!'

I don't get every preference either! And I *am* a pastor here! I'm a pastor not a Pope. I don't speak ex cathedra or make binding pronouncements in Latin. As a minister I won't violate my conscience but I don't get every preference either. I submit my constructive thoughts to the elders as any member can. If everyone agreed with me on everything, I might be in a cult and its leader ... that's the #1 'you might be a cult leader if...' if everybody agrees with you.

Later in Acts, the Bereans are commended for examining the Scriptures to see if what even the Apostle Paul taught matched the Scriptures (17:11). In Acts 2:42 their devotion to teaching didn't mean they didn't have questions, we see disagreements debated in Acts 15, but their authority was Scripture. Christians won't see everything eye-to-eye but they should be able to walk arm-in-arm in the local church in love, united in Christ and in His gospel. In applying love in the body, we must first love Christ and His truth above all.

[to love the truth is salvation in 2 Thess. 2:10]

What's *the apostle's teaching* in Acts 2:42 to be devoted to? We have it in the gospels and the NT writings. It's core truths we sang in that "we believe" song (virgin birth, Trinity, etc.). There are secondary doctrines not all unite on that don't have to divide; sovereignty vs. responsibility, exact end times details before or after 2nd coming. Peter found some of Paul's writings hard to understand, but young and adult can grasp the gospel's essentials. One of today's bulletin inserts is What We Believe: Essentials of Statement of Faith

The following are required for all members and those who serve at GCBC to affirm. See also "What We Teach" with our Philosophy of Ministry and GCBC Constitution for more on GCBC leadership's convictions, including areas Christians differ in. The essentials below from our Statement of Faith are orthodox truths we consider primary, centering on the gospel and a high view of God and His Word, categorized under 5 Sola statements (Sola is a Latin word for "alone/only," used here to distinguish the true Christian faith)

"Sola Scriptura" - Scripture Alone is our ultimate authority and standard

We believe the Scripture (Old and New Testament) is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and is the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men, and has supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

"Soli Deo Gloria" - to God alone be all glory, none to us, in salvation and all of life

God's Glory and Triune Nature: We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that these are equal and infinitely perfect and (for God's glory) execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption. **Man's Responsibility to Glorify God:** We believe a Christian should live for the glory of God, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and for the well being of his fellow men; that his life is to be motivated by love for other members of the body of Christ as well as those who are outside of the family of God.

"Sola Gratia" – the gospel of salvation is by *grace alone*, all of God, nothing of man

We believe that man was created in the image of God but fell into sin and is therefore lost and under condemnation, and only through regeneration by the Holy Spirit can salvation and spiritual life be obtained. We believe that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and that during this age He convicts men of sin, regenerates and seals believers, indwells, guides, instructs, empowers and enables them to live Godly lives and to serve God faithfully.

"Sola Fide" - saving grace is a gift received *through faith alone*, not works or merit

We believe that the shed blood of Jesus Christ and His resurrection provide the only ground for justification and salvation for all who believe, and that only those who receive the Lord Jesus Christ by faith are born of the Holy Spirit and thereby become the children of God. We believe that two ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) should be observed and administered by believers until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, but are not necessary for salvation.

"Solo Christo" - *Christ alone* is Savior and should be the ultimate focus of all we do

We believe Jesus Christ is true God and true man, having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary; that He lived a sinless life, died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins according to the scriptures, was buried, and arose bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of God the Father, He is now our High Priest and Advocate interceding for His people. We believe in the personal, visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth and the establishment of His kingdom (in its final form). We believe there will be a final (resurrection with) eternal judgment of God on the unbeliever in Jesus Christ and on Satan and his angels, and that there will be eternal blessedness for the believer. ~ *In essentials unity, in non-essentials humility, and in all things charity* ~

If you haven't joined but want to and agree with this 2-sided sheet, see any elder after. This is '*the apostle's teaching*' we devote to like Acts 2:42. It's taken from what Pastor Dale wrote 30-some years ago. There are also other things he and I and others have taught that aren't on this insert and we have other documents online that summarize what we teach, bylaws, etc., but the essentials here are what we require for members. Basically we want to make sure you're a member of God's family to be in ours, so our process is to ask for your testimony also, and if you disagree on other things but can agree to study and submit to the text and not stir up controversy or speak contrary or be divisive, we want you to be a member of this church family. If people think they can't join because they don't agree on other things, I'd say 'join the club!' My wife's a member and doesn't agree with me on everything, but I love her! And I love you who have different ideas but love Jesus above all

[and I hope you love me even if I say something you don't love :)]

I love when on secondary points we can disagree with humility and charity. Joining a church with people not like us tests the 2 greatest commandments. Look at Acts 4:32: *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul*, [i.e., in their heart/affection, the congregation united in love]

... and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common ... [i.e., each one knew it wasn't about him, it was about Christ's body. Now notice the result of their love in v. 34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

They loved each other in remarkable ways that seem radical to us today, but not too radical to those who heard Jesus say in the upper room: "*love one another as I have loved you...*" then they saw Him lay down His life for His friends, His followers (Jn 15:12-14). Acts 4:34 is a narrative, not imperative for everyone to sell their homes (and we know not all Christians sold their homes because they met in homes in Acts). But there is an application in the very words in v. 35 that one of this church's leaders later wrote about: *laid down ... to each as any had need.* Elder John later used those very words:

1 John 3:16 *By this we know love, that he **laid down** his life for us, and we ought to **lay down our lives for the brothers.***¹⁷ *But if **anyone** has the world's goods and sees his brother **in need**, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?*¹⁸ *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth [this is how the NT applies this point]*

It's one thing to talk about it in a church service, but how can you show it to people before or after the service? Are you quick to leave the building or do you show others you love them by wanting to stay to talk with them? There are people in need here, some who are just lonely or hurting, who don't feel noticed, or who are just in need of an encouraging word or greeting. If Jesus laid down his life, we can lay down some of ours, give up time or attention or some of our privacy or comfort zone to love our neighbor as ourselves. It may be some need to start by loving in word, greeting, speaking to others.

[He laid down His life, we can at least pick up a phone]

But John says we're also to love *in deed* for those in need. The benevolence fund of our church is a way you can apply v. 35 by laying down funds that our deacons distribute to those who have need, just designate 'benevolence.' Other needs you see you don't need leaders permission, meet 'em if you can. Or if you have a skill you'd like to use to serve others, let any deacon know. Jeff Woodward is a brother in need of help with practical things around here and that orange-ish insert in the bulletin mentions immediate needs for 7/26. Jeff is our facilities deacon and volunteer coordinator you can see for other needs as well and I like how it says serving together is a time of fellowship.

Some don't have physical or financial needs, some need fellowship beyond Sunday. Could you lay down an evening to invite them over to your home, or to get together in another venue? I've been convicted that I need to be a better shepherd in expressing love. I think it's also an area for all of us as a church to grow. I need to grow in how I show love. Forgive me and us as leaders for where we've failed, and help us as you love, we need all of you.

[turn to 1 Cor. 12]

I can't effectively love 350 people in the way all of them need or desire, but right before the great love chapter (1 Corinthians 13) Paul says God puts in a local church members as He desired and designed to support each other in love, not 1 man meeting the needs of 350 but 350 meeting the needs of 350! In Eph 4:16 Paul says every member has a part in building up their church.

1 Cor 12:18 *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.*¹⁹ *If all were a single member, where would the body be?*²⁰ *As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.* [then he talks about eyes or hands, head to toe, weaker parts, more visible parts, and hidden parts, or behind the scenes members, v. 24] ... *which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,*²⁵ *that there may be **no division in the body**, but that the **members** may have the same **care** for one another.*²⁶ *If **one member** suffers, all suffer together; if **one member** is honored, all rejoice together* [i.e. local church].²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ and **individually members** of it.*

Being a member of a local body of Christ is a platform, a place to show love to the people God arranged and chose to be fellow members with us. It's a spiritual reality made a visible reality by members of a local church. I don't choose who's in my family or who's in the family of Christ where I worship, God puts it together with people to help where I lack and hopefully where I can help where others lack. The fact that we lack in v. 24 isn't to cause us to divide in v. 25, it says all members are called to the same care for each other

The context of 1 Cor 13 isn't a wedding (though it can apply), it's a church: 13:4 *Love is patient* [remember the context is church, love is patient with its church] *and kind* [to the people of the church]; *love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant*⁵ *or rude. It does not insist on its own way* [in the church]; *it is not irritable or resentful* [about the church, one translation says 'does not take into account a wrong suffered' - many keep books on wrongs done by people in church, but v. 7 says]⁷ *Love bears all things* [church context], *believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things* [insert in the church]

If you feel the church has failed to love in a certain way, remember you're a part of the church, and consider how well you've loved in that certain way, or other ways that may not be as natural for you. Don't complain about the love you're not getting; you're the church, be committed to giving that love. Ask not what church can do for you, but what you can do for/as the church

On the back of that colored half-sheet is the 'one another's' Dean mentioned last week. I've subtitled it: 'Ways to Apply Christ's Love to Christ's People.' There are hundreds of ways we could apply love and are called to. Here's 32 as a start to study later to apply further, these are all quotes from Scripture. How do we stir our hearts to love in this way? We do need to practice agape love even when the feelings aren't there, but we also need the power source. What Jesus calls us to practice, He graciously gives us power for: *the gospel*

#2 on the list is Jn 13:34: *Love one another, as I have loved you* [the gospel] In that context Jesus explained this love would only be possible by abiding in Him (15:5) and His Spirit is our Helper (15:26). In the same passage love for one another is how men know we're His disciples, seeing how we love one another in the church as Jesus loved us in the gospel of John (13:34-35)

We can't love in the fullness of how Christ loved in laying down his life on the cross and dying for sin, but we are called to take up our cross, lay down self, and die to sin and self daily. And in John 13, Jesus makes it practical in that His love not only washes away sin (v. 10, which I can't do because I'm not Jesus), His love also washes feet as an example of how we should serve the practical needs of others, humble lowly non-glamorous service (v. 1-16)

And if the gospel is as central to us as it was to the early church, as we think of what Jesus laid down, it's not as hard to lay down far less to help others. The love of Christ compels us so we don't live for ourselves (2 Cor 5:14-15) and so I want to compel by the love of Christ: commit to love Christ's bride like Eph 5:25 says '*...Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her...*' He loved her blemishes and all, but commits to her, seeking to make her more like Jesus. May we love the church like Him.

I love thy church, O God: Her walls before thee stand,
Dear as the apple of thine eye, And graven on thy hand.
Beyond my highest joy I prize her heav'nly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, Her hymns of love and praise.
For her my tears shall fall, For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be giv'n, Till toils and cares shall end.³

¹ NASB.

² Septuagint (Greek OT).

³ Timothy Dwight, "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord."