



May 7, 2017
Acts 2:42-47
Pastor Larry Adams

The Witness of Christian Community

Hi Everyone. My name is Larry Adams and I want to take a moment to thank you for reading this message. At Golden Hills we are committed to exalting Jesus and preaching the Word. Your downloading of this message is a great encouragement to us, as we know that our ministry is going out to spread God's Word all over the world.

We want you to know, too, that in no way do we intend these messages to be a replacement for your involvement in a good local church, where, sitting under the authority of pastors and other teachers, you can learn to worship, grow and serve and be engaged with a body of believers where you can grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We realize also, that some of you may be in areas of the world where there is no local church. Therefore, we hope these messages you are using, to gather with your family or other believers, or people from the community that it will be a great encouragement to you, as you hear God speak into your life, helping you to become disciples who are true, reproducing followers of Jesus Christ.

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When I was growing up, my earliest remembrances are being in a community. If you can imagine this, my parents, their best friends, my aunt and uncle, and my grandpa all lived in the same house, in this rural New England village. It was an old farmhouse that had been converted into four apartments, but it was a sense of all of us being in the same house. I grew up with community. In fact, my mom used to say, when you were a little guy, you'd go around to each household and tell them you hadn't eaten breakfast yet, and they'd all feed you. Five times! You'd be eating all the time.

As I grew, I realized that the community got even bigger. I grew up in a village where I knew just about everybody and they knew me. Can you imagine – at 8 years old, I'm going out, door to door, by myself, selling Christmas cards to earn money to get a bike. My parents weren't afraid, because they knew – he knows everybody and everybody knows him! I had a great sense of security because I knew that if anything ever came up, there are 100 doors I could run to and I would find a welcome there.

In my early twenties, I moved to a Seattle suburb. I went there to go to work. I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. I moved into a fairly new community and it struck me that the first thing people built when they moved in was a fence! They were closing off their little space. Nobody knew each other. They didn't talk. They didn't visit. Where I grew up, there were hardly any fences. Every yard was your yard.

I began to see that there is a loss of the sense of community. It is ever-increasing.

In fact, I was reading a piece by Jonathan Franzen, a novelist who was writing about this loss of community. He put it like this: (from "Imperial Bedroom," Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002)

In the suburbs and exurbs where the typical American family lives today, tiny nuclear families inhabit enormous houses, in which each person has his or her own bedroom and, sometimes, bathroom... It's no longer the rule that you know your neighbors. Communities increasingly tend to be virtual, the participants either faceless or firmly in control of the fact they present.

Transportation is largely private; the latest SUVs are the size of living rooms and come with onboard telephones, CD players, and TV screens; behind the tinted windows of one of these high-riding, I-see-you-but-you-can't-see-me mobile Privacy Guard units, a person can be wearing pajamas or bathing suit for all anybody knows or cares.

Community in the truest sense is being somewhat lost. But community is something everyone needs and most people want. So the question is, where do you go today to find real, genuine, community? However imperfect it may be, where do you go to find that kind of connection?

Well, God has always intended that the greatest community anyone could ever find would be His body, the church. It was that way in the first century, and it's that way today. That's the way God established things from the very beginning. That's why Luke said (Acts 2:42-47)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This was a very diverse community: different languages, different backgrounds, they'd come from all over the Roman world to the Passover in Jerusalem. 3000 turned to the Lord that first day, and the reality of the Kingdom of God and what happens when Christ comes to live as King among them, was beginning to be seen all over Jerusalem. This was a community of people bound together by their love of God and each other. It was a community in which Christ lived in and through the people in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Jerusalem community was watching this. God was using this as a powerful witness to testify to His glory and what can happen when Jesus comes to rule His kingdom reign over any people.

As Luke teaches us, **the Kingdom of God is displayed in the witness of Christian community. How is that kingdom witness displayed? In their mutual devotion to God, and in their mutual devotion to one another. The Kingdom of God is displayed in the witness of a community mutually devoted to God.** Here is the way Luke put it (Acts 2:42-43)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

A person's view of the church will effect how they connect in community with that church. I was reading a piece by Colin Smith, from a message he gave called *The Church: Sharing the Passion of Jesus*. He mentioned four images of the church today that sometimes distort people's view of what the church is about, and what it is. He said:

The following list contains four distorted images of the church:

- The church as a gas station. For some people today, the church is a place where you fill up your spiritual gas tank when you're running low. Get a good sermon, and it will keep you going for the week.

- The church as a movie theater. For many people, the church is a place that offers entertainment. Go for an hour of escape, hopefully in comfortable seats. Leave your problems at the door and come out smiling and feeling better than when you went in.
- The church as a drug store. For other people, church is the place where you can fill the prescription that will deal with your pain. For many the church is therapeutic.
- The church as a big box retailer. Other people see the church as the place that offers the best products in a clean and safe environment for you and your family. The church offers great service at a low price – all in one stop. For many people, the church is a producer of programs for children and young people.

While we hope that every church is a place of spiritual refreshment, enjoyable worship, help, healing and with programs that meet needs, none of those are the primary reason that you or I or anybody else should ever be a part of a church.

The primary reason anyone should come to be a part of a church is that they desire to be in a community where being devoted to God is truly lived out and each person is encouraged to do that even more. A witnessing community that is Christian should be living in devotion to God. The early church was a powerful witness of this. It began to impact the entire community.

Luke said (Acts 2: 42-43)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

They were devoted to the apostles' teaching. They were devoted to the doctrine. Good theology. Bible teaching. You see, here were a group of Christians who were giving over their lives to following this Jesus. All they knew about Jesus is what they had seen and heard through the apostles. Some may have been there to witness the death, burial and resurrection, but they didn't understand what it all meant. Now, in relationship with God, they want to grow. They want to know this Christ. They want to know what He taught. They want to know how He lived. They want to know what it was like to be with Him. Where better to do that, than to be with the apostles, who lived with Jesus, taught with Jesus, served with Jesus and suffered with Jesus. So they gathered everyday to hear what these guys had to say. They were learning from the apostles' teaching.

Where do you get the apostles' teaching today? You get it in the Bible, the word of God. Peter said that this is the apostles' word, the word of God written down for us to read. That's why every church, if they are to build the kind of community that becomes a witness, needs to be filled with people hungry to hear the word. That's why no church is there to just dispense therapeutic thought, or to help people to feel better. Or to tickle their ears. Or to do things that draw a crowd. That's not why the church is there. The primary responsibility of the church is to be a place where the word of God is clearly taught, clearly believed, clearly followed and made known. They need to be a people devoted to that word, so as they live it out in the community, people know – when they want to hear what God has to say, there is a place they can go. It's called the church of Jesus Christ. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching.

Not only that, they were devoted to fellowship, "koinonia," sharing in common. This was a very diverse group of people who, on their own, would not normally hang out together or spend much time together. But what brought them together, what they shared most in common, was their love for Jesus and their relationship they shared with Him. Their fellowship was rooted in their mutual love of Christ. People, no community can call itself purely Christian if the people are not living in love and obedience to Jesus,

and demonstrating that by the way they treat each other and care for each other and love each other. Any kind of congregation that doesn't do that cannot be rightly considered devoted to God or a Christian community.

There was also the breaking of bread. They were devoted to that. The phrase is literally "breaking off pieces of bread." That's what it means. That makes this a very interesting phrase, because it could mean everything from them sharing food together, to the shared Communion together. The word was used for both. This early church often ate together, not just in the large group, but in their small groups as they went back to their homes. Very often those meals were accompanied by a regular observance of Communion. In fact, when you read in Matthew and Mark and Luke, that phrase, "breaking of bread," is most often used to describe their time together in Communion, remembering the Lord's sacrifice.

When Luke was writing about it earlier in the gospel of Luke, he said (Luke 22:19) ¹⁹ "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'" That "broke it" is that same phrase, the breaking of bread. No church community who fails to remember significantly the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, as remembered in this sacrifice at the Communion table, can really be considered a church devoted to God, or building a real Christian community.

They were also devoted to prayer. Isn't it interesting that the early church was noted for being a people who prayed. It was their vital link to relationship with God. Remember, these are people who have come to know the Lord. These are people who are not in relationship with God and they realize that God is hearing them when they pray. I can talk to God and His is listening! I can come to Him in Jesus' name, knowing that I'm being received! These people had a vital link with God through the prayers they were praying. In fact, when you read through the prayers recorded in the book of Acts, it shows them praying for their leaders, for the sick, and for the lost. They prayed for strength and for boldness to witness. They prayed for God's glory to be seen, for His gospel to be heard.

And they prayed for the people who were watching them. Imagine standing in the crowd. Some of these people were persecutors! Or not in favor of this Christian community. There they are, hearing these people, praying for God's blessing on them! It was a powerful witness.

That's why Luke wrote (Acts 3:43) ⁴³ "Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles." By the way, the "everyone" there isn't all the Christians – it is everyone! Everyone who witnessed this! Everyone who saw the fruit of their prayers. Everyone who witnessed the power of the miracles that were being worked through the apostles, through the prayers of God's people. They stood in awe of these people and what God was doing in them and through them.

That was their witness. These people in Jerusalem knew that these Christians were devoted to God. They could see it. That's the very same witness that God wants to work in us today. A witness that flows out of our genuine devotion to God.

The world is hungry to see people who know God. The world is desiring to find a people who genuinely know Him and live it out, who are the real deal, who can point them to His word and have lives that demonstrate that He is really alive in their lives. The church was always meant to be different. To be known as different for all the right reasons. So if people had a Christian neighbor, or a Christian work associate, or met a Christian anywhere, they would know – if I go to those people, or go to their church, I'm going to hear about God and I'm going to know who He is. The church is to be the community where the devotion is seen, and the devotion becomes a witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Not just in our mutual devotion to God, but the **Kingdom of God is displayed in the witness of community, mutually devoted to one another.** That's why Luke said (Acts 2:44-47) -

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Christians like to hang out, generally. They usually need a reason to do it, so churches give them a reason. We have a He Brews Bistro (if you've never been over there, you get free coffee, buy some snacks, sit around and visit, have a good time.) Many people use it and I hope you do. Churches have potluck suppers, fellowship times, all kinds of ways to bring people together. Small groups. Because they want people to connect. Leaders have learned over time of the importance of these gatherings.

I was reading about this one guy, Richard Blake, from San Luis Obispo. He said,

Right after church, after the sermon is done, we have a coffee time every week in our church. Everybody goes to it. It's always right after the sermon. One day, a few weeks ago, he was standing in the coffee time and the pastor came by. Everyone was standing around, drinking coffee and talking. The pastor walked up and a little boy was standing there. The pastor said to him, "Son, do you know why we have everybody drink coffee after the sermon every week?"

The little boy said, "Yeah, it's to wake them up before they drive home."

I'm not exactly sure that's what the guy wanted to hear! But that's what the kid said. I realize that many of you sleep through the sermon. I'm very glad you can get some rest! We have pews and some of you have found that, by getting a pew that isn't too crowded, you can actually lie down. No one will see, as long as you don't snore. But we have a He Brews Bistro you can get a cup of coffee and we hope it perks you up before you have that dangerous drive home, trying to fight the nods!

One of the reasons churches have coffee times, potluck suppers, small groups and all these things is to get people connected, and if you don't offer these things, many times, people will just come to church and go. They don't connect.

I find it very striking that in the early church, they were meeting together every day in the temple courts. They were meeting together every day in their homes. The reason they met together was because they wanted to be together with the people. They didn't have the potluck going on. They didn't have the coffee time after the sermon. These people weren't motivated by that. They were coming together to be in fellowship with other believers, who understood what it was like to follow Christ in a hostile world, who knew what it was like to sometimes lose your family or anything else because you follow Jesus. So they wanted to be together with people who understood, who were learning about God and loving Him together. They wanted to be there for that reason. It's all the motivation they needed.

So, Luke said, all the believers were together. They met in the temple court. The far eastern end of the temple court was a place called Solomon's Colonnade. It was a covered porch, where it was very common for people to meet. The Christians met there. In fact, after the first day, it was 3000 of them. They were filling the court, spilling out through the gates, down the steps going up to the temple, and the Lord was adding to their number every day.

In fact, it leaves with you the very distinct idea that there wasn't any place in Jerusalem you could go, if you wanted to know where the Christians were, everybody would tell you – they're down at the temple. Do you want to know where the Christians are? They're down at the temple. They're down there by the thousands! The apostles are teaching, they are eating together, they're doing this thing called Communion, they're praying together like crazy. They are even praying for us! If you want to find the Christians, head down to the temple – that's where they are.

I wonder sometimes, if people in our community said, where are the Christians? The true Christians who love God and are devoted to Him and care about each other – where are those people? They're down at the church, man! They are down there meeting all the time. You should be with those people. What a difference their lives are making.

Luke said they had everything in common. They were knit together out of their shared love for God and each other. There was not real organized persecution going on at this time. That would come later. These people had favor with the people. In other words, people were admiring what they were doing.

That didn't mean some of these people weren't suffering. In fact, in their day, they were suffering the family and social sanctions that left some of them destitute. That's why people were having to sell properties and other things, to take care of the people who had needs. You see, to follow Christ could mean being cut off from your family. You'd have no place to live. It could mean being cut off or blacklisted by the Sanhedrin, which meant that you couldn't get a job anywhere. No one would hire you. And if you owned a store or a shop, you'd be blacklisted so nobody would shop there. You could quickly become destitute. Finding enough food, clothing and shelter for you and your kids became an issue, but the early church stepped up and took care of that. They understood why it was happening.

There were no government agencies. No welfare. No food closet. No Social Security. These people had God and they had each other. That's it. And the way they cared for one another became a testimony to an unbelieving world. In fact, Luke would later write (Acts 4:32-35)

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. [There was no giving problems in this church] ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Now, these people were no perfect. In fact there were people coming into this fellowship that, a little later on, were pretenders. They wanted all the credit of being generous. They wanted all the credit of being loving. They wanted the appearance of caring – but they really didn't. In fact, by the time you get to Acts 5, we're going to learn that there were some coming into the church who were saying they were giving everything, but they weren't. They were pretending to be praying but they weren't. They were not the real deal. God comes down in Acts 5 and says, "Hey! You're not doing that to this body! This is My body. They are really united, they are devoted to Me, they are devoted to one another. You're a phony!" And He exposed them and dealt with them publicly in the church, because God wants to protect the witness of a Christian community.

It was Jesus that united these people. Remember, at the Last Supper, Jesus said in John 13:35. ³⁵ "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It was the witness of their mutual devotion.

There was tremendous racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and economic diversity in the early church. Remember from Acts 2, there were people from 15 nations that were a part of that original 3000 that got saved. They didn't speak the same languages. They were of different races and backgrounds and cultures. Our world today is divided by so many of those same things. Racial, cultural, ethnic, and economic tensions. But where do all of those people come together and live like this? It's only in the church. You're not going to see this anywhere else. The church has the answer the world is looking for.

That's why these people were such a powerful witness. People would look at this and ask, how do you have so many people of so many diversities and yet you're all together? It's a miracle!

I was reading a piece by Philip Yancey in *Christianity Today* (Nov, 2008) called Denominational Diagnostics, how do you determine whether or not you're a healthy group of believers? He wrote:

As I read accounts of the New Testament church, no characteristic stands out more sharply than [diversity]. Beginning with Pentecost, the Christian church dismantled the barriers of gender, race and social class that had marked Jewish congregations. Paul, who as a rabbi had given thanks daily that he was not born a woman, slave or Gentile, marveled over the radical change: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

I have a friend who pastors in India. I've never met the guy. We met on-line and we've been fellowshiping and praying for each other and our congregations. He tells me, he has people, when they have prayer days, some of these people walk 5 – 10 – 15 – 20 miles to spend the day praying. He emails me and says, we are praying for you and your congregation today. I'm thinking, *wow! How humbling is that?!*

In India there is a strict caste system. You are born in a certain caste, a certain level or strata and you don't get out of that. The castes don't mix. The races don't mix. But my friend Frank sends me these pictures of his church, a room full of people – men and women in there, people from every caste, rich and poor, boys and girls. They are all together in this room, worshipping and praising God. Do you know how rare that is in India? Only God can accomplish that kind of unity amidst that kind of social separation.

I was reading about this one Indian pastor who said:

Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races and social groups. That's the real miracle.

The kind of miracle that becomes a witness of what the Kingdom of God looks like when Jesus comes to reign in the hearts of His people. He creates a God-given oneness, a oneness we remember and demonstrate every time we come to Communion. Every time we gather together with great diversity, coming together in great oneness. Christian community, devoted to one another, however imperfectly, there is nowhere else in the world you're going to find that.

Mark Buchanan is a former pastor, now an associate professor at Ambrose Seminary, Calgary, Alberta. He was telling a few years, while he was pastoring a big church, how a bunch of his buddies, guys his age from his church, they got together to lay some sod in one of their friends' back yards. They were all together, huffing and puffing, laying this sod down. Mark wrote (*Leadership Journal*, Spring 2008):

One guy, Al, said, “Guys, do you realize something? This is it! This is it” We stopped.

“Al, this is what?”

“This is community.”

We all murmured our assent and congratulated one another. Yes. It is.

But then I said, “Al, this is great, but I don’t think this is it. I like you all too much. Add a person or two to this company who lacks social graces, who looks different, who’s needy, smelly, and irritating. If we truly loved a person like that, then that would be it.”

Silence. Then one of the guys said, “Uh, Mark, we’ve accepted you, haven’t we?”

We all laughed, but they granted my point.

Then he said this:

A year or so after our sod-laying party, Wanda arrived. Wanda was not our kind of people. She was thirsty alright, for beer, port, rum, vanilla extract, whatever. She had only one way to pay for that. I’ll let you guess.

But she was desperate, and thirsty for something else. She called the church one day, wondering if she could see a pastor, and now! Two of us met with her. She told us her troubled story. I told her about the woman at the well, whose life, like Wanda’s wasn’t going well. But she met Jesus and he offered her living water. I explained what living water was, and asked Wanda if she’d like some.

“Oh, yeah!” she said. We prayed. She confessed, repented, surrendered. Drank deep.

The other pastor said, “Now, Wanda, this Sunday will be your first time in church. Don’t feel you have to fit in right away. You can sit at the back if you like, come late, leave early. Whatever is comfortable.”

Wanda looked at him sideways. “Why would I do that?” she said. “I’ve been waiting for this all my life.”

That Sunday, Wanda was the first to arrive. She sat at the front, and loudly agreed with everything I said. She was the last to leave. The next Sunday, same thing except she brought a friend, one of her kind of people. I preached on servanthood. My main point: if you’ve tasted the love of Jesus, you’ll want to serve. It was Communion Sunday. In those days, we called our elders the Servant Leader Team. I asked the Servant Leaders to come and help with Communion. That day only two of our team were in church. They straggled to the front.

All Wanda heard was the word servant. She had been listening intently to my sermon: if you’ve tasted the love of Jesus, you’ll want to serve.

She walked straight up to serve Communion with the other two “Servants.”

I flinched.

Then I remembered Luke 7, Jesus’ words to Simon the Pharisee as a woman, not unlike Wanda, washed Jesus’ feet: “Do you see this woman?”

Do you see her?

I leaned over to Wanda and said, "Since this is your very first time doing this, do you mind if I help?"

So Wanda and I served Communion. The best part was watching the faces of the people I love and serve and pray for and preach to.

Not one flinched. They saw her.

This is it.

A former prostitute and the pastor, standing at the same table, serving Communion to God's people together. This is Christian community. When people who are so different, can come together and be the same. Because they're both devoted to God, and they're devoted to each other.

The best part was, the entire congregation didn't miss a beat. They realized this is the church God called us to.

Do you know, that's going on here all the time? I think you would be shocked at times, and rejoice at times, to learn who is sitting next to you. You see, the thing that brings us together is not us, it's Jesus. Our mutual devotion to Him, and we learn in mutual devotion to each other.

That was the witness of the early church. The world had never seen anything like it. It was turning Jerusalem upside-down. It eventually turned the nations upside-down. This is the kind of witness God wants to display in us and in every church. A witness of people so devoted to God and each other, even with all of our faults and all of our blemishes and all of our mistakes and all of our disappointments. We are an imperfect people, serving a perfect God. But there is something that brings us together that the world has never seen. When they do see it, it testifies to the Kingdom of God in our midst. No time is that kind of unity and devotion to God and each other seen, than when we come together to a table like this. No matter where you've been, or what you've done – this is His table. We're coming today to remember that.

Father, I want to thank You for this. I thank You for our church, God. I thank You that a guy like me could be a part of a church like this. I'm so grateful for what You're doing. We don't get it right all the time, but if You did this for these early believers, You can do it for us too. And the light that shined through them is the same light that is shining through us. So God, we're trusting today that You are going to use us to make a difference. We are that witness to a lost and dying world, of what devotion to God and each other really looks like: a Christian community. As we come together at this table, it's You we remember. We thank You, in Your precious name, Amen.