

Marks of a Church

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Acts 2:42-47

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Movement 1 – The New Community

The Bluth family was gathered together for a Valentines Day party. They were enjoying the food, the company and having a good time. During the party, one of the adult children starting clapping his hands in a slow, rhythmic fashion chanting, “speech, speech, speech.” It had a regular pattern to it, starting low and slow and slowly picking up energy. Soon another person was clapping and saying “speech,” and then another and another. In a matter of minutes all were clapping their hands, clinking spoons on glasses and saying “speech, speech, speech.” It is the chanting that one would expect to cajole an individual to actually make a speech. Five minutes of shouting, clinking and clapping later, still no speech had been made. Everyone who was taking part in the ritual realized that no one was going to make a speech; no one was going to offer words of wisdom, or follow through with the small gathering’s request. The chanting quickly died. In a brief moment a movement started, gathered followers and then diminished (from the Television show, *Arrested Development*).

John Stuart Mill once said, “Every great movement must experience three stages: ridicule, discussion, adoption.” Perhaps the ridicule and the discussion occurred briefly and within the inner thoughts of the Bluth family members as the clapping and chanting occurred, leading all to eventually join in the movement and adopt the actions. What Mill does not mention, at least in this quote is how a movement survives. How does a movement continue to live, exist and thrive? How does one achieve longevity in a movement and avoid the loss of interest, the lack of direction and the diminishing focus that can and does so easily occur? How can a movement survive?

The passage we encounter today, Acts 2:42-47, may lead one to ask such a question, specifically within the context of the church. Just before this passage, in verse 41, the scripture describes three thousand individuals baptized and becoming a part of this new Jesus movement. You can imagine the excitement and energy as more and more gathered around the disciples to hear about the teachings of Jesus. Multitudes have committed to Christ in a short amount of time; the movement was mushrooming beyond anyone’s expectations. Now what? Now what shall the leaders do, how should the followers live to keep this movement and momentum alive? How shall this new community continue to maintain its vitality? How shall this movement establish its longevity? How shall this movement survive?

This is an important question to ask because every movement in its nascent stage finds itself at one point or another preciously perched in at a place of possibility; it is a place of moving forward or dying. Like rolling a rock down a hill it can gain more and more momentum until it reaches the bottom of the hill and at a certain point the momentum will not carry it any farther. At that point you need to ask yourself how you can continue to keep the rock rolling. Nature, friction, the laws of conservation have

dictated that the movement could not maintain momentum on its own forever. How do you keep the movement going?

Think of this with your individual faith. We all go through those moments when we are new to the faith. We remember the time when we just recently joined, when we recently said “yes” to Christ and the excitement of the newness is intoxicating. All you can think about is Christ. All you can talk about is God. You are caught in the excitement of the movement. Yet as the days pass to years maybe the excitement ebbs, slows and dwindles. Maybe you find yourself, years later, in a place where you do not have the same energy for your faith that you once had years ago. The chanting has stopped, the ball is motionless and you find yourself wondering how you keep your faith alive.

Churches face this question again and again. How does one keep the vision, the excitement and the faith of a church vital and alive? How does a church stay alive? How will this movement survive?

It is like we are running with Forrest Gump across America. We are that great crowd which started following him as he ran across America. Yet the time came when Forrest decided to stop running. The day came when he was done, and we are left wondering what to do next. We are left wondering “What do we do now?” What do we do now? What do we do when the excitement dies down, when the initial interest passes and the movement passes from its early infant stage to adolescent. What do we do to keep the movement, to keep the church, to keep our faith alive?

Movement 2 – Church Envy

Look at those around us. Look at those churches which have survived the initial wave of excitement and are now flourishing for an example. Look at those Christians who have managed to maintain a strong connection to their faith. Look at those movements which model for us a method towards carrying the ideals and the vision which encapsulate the gathering and the longevity which we desire to have. Perhaps we should look to those who were and are successful as a model for our own success.

I am sure that some of you remember the *Grateful Dead*. I am sure many of you remember the following this band had; a subculture of youth called “dead-heads.” People would put their lives on hold and tour with the band for months or years at a time. A community formed; people, who would camp out in the town, would camp out in the parking lot, and live with the band. This community existed for years and years. In the late 80s and early 90s a new band was growing in popularity called *Phish*. This was a band that had its own group of followers and fans ironically called, “phish-heads.” This was a new movement in a new generation, and for inspiration, lessons and guidance, many of these “phish-heads” looked to the “dead-heads” for a model of how to follow their own beloved band. They looked to those who were successful for guidance and ideas.

William Willimon reminds us that religious outbursts are short and superficial at best, especially on the popular level, and groups should look to organize themselves if they want to survive. So we often find ourselves looking to the “successful” church down the street, in the next town over or around the world for guidance and inspiration on how things should be done and copy their actions. Should we focus on a children’s ministry? Should we focus on the style of the worship? Should we focus on way the building looks? Such questions race through our minds as we look at other established and successful

churches which have captured the movement and transformed it to institutional longevity. A Christian claims that the secret to his faith is thirty minutes of prayer every day – should we do the same? A church claims that the adherence to creeds as rules and guidelines is the secret to its longevity – should we do the same? We find ourselves adopting a case of church envy as we look to the ways other churches have been operating and asking ourselves, how can we be more like them?

Think of the early churches all around Asia and the Mideast. No doubt the Ephesians were looking at the Philippians, and the Corinthians were considering the church in Jerusalem when trying to discern how they were to be a good Christian community. No doubt they were craning their necks peering and watching the successful churches grow and wondered how they also could follow these examples.

This is what happens – we become envious and infatuated with other churches and other Christians, and it is dangerous when we become envious. We begin to desire what the other has and we run the risk of losing the focus on what we can do. It is like a father buying a bicycle for his child. The father works all night to put it together, follows the directions, lets loose a lot of cursing, but finally has something that in some way resembles a bicycle. Yet the mass of metal does not match the model in the instruction and the picture on the front of the box. The father looks at the picture, and the handsome father in his nicely pressed kakis and polo shirt, hair combed and obviously at ease with bicycle construction. Beside him is a young boy, also in nicely pressed kakis and polo shirt, hair well combed, open eyed, and smiling because even watching his father put together the bicycle is fun. The father in reality looks at the picture and desires the picture, becomes envious of the father in the picture showing his wide-eyed son the great gift that he put together. “Why can’t I put this together? Why can’t I be good with tools? Why can’t I have a bike that actually looks like a bike? Why can’t I be that handsome and my son that well groomed?” The envy grows and the father becomes more focused on the bike and the father and son in the picture, than the one before him.

Why can’t I have the faith that he has? Why can’t I be able to read the Bible with the same conviction that she does? Why can’t our church have hundreds of people and money? Why can’t we be overflowing with children?

As we try to structure ourselves, as we try to keep ourselves alive past the initial excitement we find ourselves looking to other churches, other Christians and wanting to be like them drowning ourselves with the envious “why can’t” and finding ourselves stunted in our own potential for growth and vitality.

Movement 3 – Four Simple Steps

We need some simple rules, some simple steps which we can follow. We need something that we can focus on without having to worry about what other churches are doing. We need some guidelines.

When the *Fight Club* was started there were some very simple rules and regulations offered to keep each club focused as the movement grew. There were some things that people could not do. The rules were simple and basic, not complicated, but just enough to maintain some order. For example, no one could talk about Fight Club, if someone says “stop” or goes limp then the fight is over, and only two to a fight. These are simple, basic rules which maintain order among the many clubs which emerged throughout the United States (from the movie, *Fight Club*).

We need some guidelines. When an addict is looking to recover, he or she looks for some basic steps and rules. They know that each path to recovery is different, but that all hold to some of the same parameters.

We cannot mimic other churches; we cannot mimic other Christians, because each church and each Christian is different and should be different. We all walk with Christ to our own drummer and need to be true to who we are. Yet at the same time we need something to give us focus, guidance and structure. We need rules to keep us together as a church. We need some rules.

Some of the early creeds, in an attempt to capture the essence of the church so that Christians could have something upon which to focus claimed that the church is to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” Yet, especially to those of us in the Baptist and other Free Church traditions, such descriptors seem arcane and off-putting. We are not used to turning to creeds for guidance but to the Word.

Some church gurus offer foci of vision, of outreach, but they seem to be to current, to modern, and we worry that we may be missing something, and wonder if they are couched in the word.

The theologian Avery Dullis offers models for the church, claiming the church can be considered as an institution, a sacrament, a herald, a servant, a mystical communion, or a community of disciples, but Dulles’ terms are lofty and weighty and confining. We may be pulled to one model at the detriment of others. We need something simple and yet profound to give us focus.

The scripture today gives us some guidance for achieving the church that we are called to be. The passage from Acts gives us the basic pattern for living as Christians as existing as a movement. Remember, the community in Acts has just gone through its own spiritual outburst. It has just experienced its own growth and excitement and now is looking to structure itself and maintain its focus. In verse 42 we are given a sparse description of the life of this early Christian community. We are told that the people devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, broke bread and prayed. Maybe this is what we are looking for. Maybe this simple description of the life of the early Christians contains the guidelines we need. They are sparse, they are vague enough and they give us something real and tangible to work with.

The people devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching. They learned the stories of Jesus. They learned about his words, his teachings and his miracles. They learned about the crucifixion, the resurrection and the hope promised by our Lord. They listened and studied and learned about the divinity of Christ, the power of his message and the love of God that one could know and experience through Christ. The people devoted themselves to the teachings of Peter, of James, of Andrew, of Thomas and of Paul. They listened to the teachings and passed on the teachings. They studied, committed to memory and embraced into their lives the teachings of the apostles.

We are to continue this practice. We need to devote ourselves to the apostles’ teachings. We need to read the Gospels which come out of that tradition of witness. We need to read the epistles. We need to learn and know the Hebrew Scriptures. We need to devote ourselves to learning about the crucifixion, the resurrection and the promised return. We need to devote ourselves to the words, the actions and the teachings of Christ. We need to devote ourselves to considering Christ as the divine, son of God. All of these teachings come out of the tradition of the apostles’ teachings. We need to devote

ourselves to the teachings of the Christian tradition as we grow as a church and as Christians.

The people had fellowship. They gathered as a community to worship together, pray together, study together and grow in their faith together. In this passage we find the first example of the word in scripture: “koinonia” or fellowship. It is a word that has a deeper meaning than fellowship and cannot accurately and fairly be portrayed in an English translation. The relational depth of koinonia goes beyond what fellowship connotes. It is like the bond of a family, of a close knit community. Koinonia is more than coffee hour and potluck dinners, although those are important aspects within the work of a community. It is sharing your fears and your concerns; your joys and your hopes and knowing that your brother and sister will take them to the table of Christ.

We are to continue to strive for this depth of community as a church. We are to strive to have koinonia as a community. We are to have the relational depth, the trust and the love for each other that binds us together. Here are the people you can look to for help. Here are the people you can look to for hope. Here are the people you can look to for grace. Let us strive for fellowship, for koinonia with our brothers and sisters in Christ and as a community.

The people broke bread. This is more than sharing a meal, but is sharing the final meal. The people broke bread in an act of remembrance of the Lord’s Supper. The people came to the table, remembered Christ’s life, death and resurrection with each other. They shared the bread of forgiveness and the cup of salvation with each other, living the story of Christ’s final days.

We are to continue to gather around the table and break bread. We are to continue to remember the Last Supper with Christ. We are to continue to remember the words that Christ offered to us, that his body was broken for us and his blood is the blood of the new covenant shed for all of us. At the table we are at the fullness of who we are as a community, for at the table we are connected with all those who have gone before us. We are to continue to gather around the table and break bread.

Finally the early Christians prayed. They prayed for each other. They prayed to God for guidance. They prayed for hope and prayed for strength to continue in their faith. Prayer was an important part of the community, for the prayers of the individuals were interwoven as a net holding up all those within the community. The early Christians prayed.

We are to continue to pray. We are to pray as individuals and as a community. We are to pray silently, just listening for God’s word and out loud, sharing with God where we are here and now. We are to pray for each other and to ask others to pray for us. We are to pray.

Here are four simple rules, guidelines for how to be a good Christian. Here are four simple guidelines structuring how we are to be a church.

Movement 4 – Failing Grades

Yet even these four simple rules may seem to be overwhelming. Even these four simple marks of the community may seem to be more than possible to follow.

For there are times when we grow lax in our devotion to teaching, to scripture and to the ways of the Lord. There are times when we neglect studying the scriptures and deepening our knowledge of God.

There are times when we grow lax in our fellowship. Sometimes, even in the church, we rub each other the wrong way. Sometimes, even in the church we find it hard to share with each other, to trust each other and to lean upon each other.

There are times when we are obstructed from approaching the table. We hold ourselves back because we do not feel as if we are worthy. We are held back because we do belong to the right church, say the right words and ascribe to the correct doctrines. We are held back from the table because our broken relationships get in the way of the fullness of the table. There are times when we find we cannot approach the table.

There are times when we fail to pray. There are times when we gather with our brothers and sisters, but we cannot join our voices or our hearts in prayer. There are times when the hardships of life and the despair of life are so heavy that when we are alone we cannot bring ourselves to pray. There are times when we may mouth the words to the Lord's Prayer, but we are still saying nothing. We go through the motions, but we are doing nothing. There are times when we fail to pray.

Even with the four standards, there are times when we cannot make the mark. There are times when we fall short and do not reach the standards that we find before us. We try, we try to do everything right and try to be true to the Lord, but we cannot seem to get our feet off of the ground. Like the student who studies and studies and studies but cannot get a passing grade, as Christians and as a church we try and we try but invariably we find ourselves failing, missing the mark and falling short of the standards given to us.

Movement 5 – Grading on a Curve

Yet we need to remember the place of grace. Let us remember that as we struggle, as we try, that we can rest on the grace of the Lord. It is a reality that we, as a movement, as an institution, will miss the mark. It is expected that we will fail in our teaching, our fellowship, or breaking of bread and our prayers. We will not be a perfect church no matter how hard we try. Yet we can rest on grace. We can rest on the grace of Jesus Christ that we are still the church even when we fail as a church. We can rest on the grace of Jesus Christ that we are still his followers even when we fail as his followers. We can fall on the grace of Jesus Christ that we find through the cross. We need to remember the place of grace in our lives.

Imagine that you are in a class and you find out that the grading will be on a curve, and your worst performance will be lifted up to a better grade. This is grace, except that now we are all given an 'A' in our performance, regardless how we have done. If you love the Lord, if you have accepted him into your life, if you have given your life to Christ and have promised to follow him, then you can rest on the grace of God. You can rest on that grace that says I know you have tried, and that is enough. You can rest on that knowledge which says, your works are good, your efforts are good, but my grace is sufficient. We need to remember the place of grace.

Movement 6 – Sharing all Things

With the grace of God as our foundation, let us turn to each other and support each other within this movement of Christianity. In this passage not only are we given the picture of a church focused on the teachings, fellowship, communion and prayer, but of a group of people who support each other, take care of each other and help each other. We have a picture of a community that offers its gifts for the support of others. Can we do the

same? Can we look to our brother and sister here for support and help in our times of need? Can we look to our sister and brother and offer support and help in their times of needs? Can we, as a church, look to other churches for support and offer support to other churches? Can we let go of what we have and give it to others for the sake of Christ? Can we give what we have for others and for Christ? For in doing that, our learning, our fellowship, our communion and our prayers will be strengthened. When we worship together, break bread together, and praise God together, our community as a church will be strengthened.

We are a part of a movement, a movement that is exciting and passionate about Jesus Christ. Let us work to learn, to pray, to share and support and to break bread together, being the church that Christ calls us to be. Let us rely on the grace of God, and the leading of God and rest assure that in the Lord's hands this movement will continue to eternity.

AMEN