

Features of the early church

Part 3

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Note: This text is a computer generated transcript of the sermon. In some cases it may contain errors.

[00:00:01] I'm going to ask you to turn to the Acts of the Apostles for our meeting tonight, and I want to read at the end the latter part of chapter 4, and into a few verses at least of chapter 5.

Now I will begin reading with verse 23 of chapter 4, where it says of the Apostles, particularly Peter and John, who had been called up before the religious authorities, it says of being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.

And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God, [00:01:04] with one word, and said, Lord, thou art God, which has made heaven and earth, and the city of all that is in them is, who by the mouth of thy servant David hath said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagined they were kings? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a group against thy holy child, or servant, we are told of the letter rendering, thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.

[00:02:07] And now the world be opposed as reckonings, and grant unto thy servant that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal you, and that signs and wonders may be done, in the name of thy holy servant Jesus.

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken, where they were assembled together, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness, and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul, neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, [00:03:02] and that they had all things common, and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Neither was there any among them that knew, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made unto every man according as he had mean. And Joseph, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, which is being interpreted the son of Constellation, a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet, thus.

Now what do we have of that, don't we, my friends? These are things of God, thus. [00:04:01] A certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold the possession and kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and was a certain man and laid it at the apostles' feet. And Peter said, Ananias, why hast thou taken till thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own?

And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou thus conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias, hearing these words, fell down, and gave up the ghost.

And great fear came on all them that heard. These things, and the young man arose, wound him up, and padded him up, and buried him.

[00:05:03] Now I skip the rest of that sad story, just to read the verse which we have in verse 11, 12, 13, and 14, where again it says, And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as herded the sheep, and by the hand of the apostles, where many signs and wonders wrought among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch, and of the rest doth no man join himself to them.

But the people maddened by them, and believers were the more added to the Lord.

Not a few, those are men and women.

Pray to the Lord for guidance what to read and speak about tonight.

[00:06:02] This scripture came rather forcibly before me, and I had to say to myself, well, it may be good for all of us, myself included, to have another look at what we may call the primitive church, as it was at the outskirts.

Most of us, young or old, are all too familiar with the state of things that marks the professional church today.

And indeed, I think I've got to go further than that. I think I've got to go further than that. Things have not even given you insight who are indeed of the true church today.

Although history, we find, and what God has instituted, is in its time and way more or less corrupted in the hands of men, it has marked, you know, my friends, [00:07:01] all the gracious revival that God has brought.

In the history of things, even more recent history, shall we say from the Reformation, as we call it, onward, why, dearly, dearly, again and again, I will read a mighty work of the Spirit of God, that always, in the course of the years, failure has come in.

Now, here, then, is a picture of the church in Jerusalem as it was at the outset.

And I remember when I read this years and years ago, I pondered over it, and I said to myself, well, now there are some very interesting and striking features marking these early saints.

Good for us to look at, because it shows us, I think, what was God's mind when, for the moment, [00:08:03] the power of the indwelling Spirit of God was very powerful.

Now, the first point I would like you to notice is this. I began reading at the point, that being let go, they had been having a rough time, they had been hauled up before the authorities, they had been beaten, all kinds of things had happened. But they were let go. As we're told in the earlier verses of that chapter, they found nothing how they might punish them. They found that what had happened was really beyond their criticism, and reluctantly, wishing, of course, to have done very much more evil things, having given them a beating, they had to let them go. And being let go, they went to their own country.

The Church of God is a company distinct from the world.

[00:09:04] That hits me in the eye, wouldn't it be?

Indeed, you see, I read that only there were to be found in Jerusalem at that time a number of people who formed a company, so that the apostles, released by the antagonistic authorities, they knew where to go. They said, yes, there's our own company.

I pray that has been forgotten, you know. Through the years, the art of the adversary has been to mingle the Church of the world, to, if possible, swap what is of God in worldly circumstances, and all too often and largely, he has succeeded in that kind of thing.

[00:10:01] But let us, looking at what God did at the beginning, and what was found before failure, very manifestly came in, although indeed a failure, after that gut that I call attention to at the beginning of the next chapter, before there was any very widespread failure, we see there was a distinct line drawn between the Church and the world. It depends upon if that line still exists. You and I have got to recognize the Church is not a part of the religious system or the world system.

No, there was their own system, and of that they went.

So that I say to myself as I read this simple passage here, very well, it is obviously that the Church is a called-out company.

[00:11:04] That is what the word, you know, which is again and again translated, Church, we sometimes, in the Derby Version, you get the word assembly.

The Greek word, as we know, has been brought into our language at all events in an adjective form.

You might go to London and find the office of the ecclesiastical commission, people who have to do with church affairs. Yes, ecclesia, that is the Greek word. And it means, I did just have a little snack in the Greek when I was a youngster, I've forgotten it, but I do remember that. Ec means out of, and ecclesia comes from the word kalio, to call.

It simply means the called-out people.

That's always been God's way.

He called out his own. [00:12:02] And we go to this right at the beginning of the Bible. If you read in those early chapters of Genesis, where you get your chapter 10, isn't it, where you get the account after the flood, when the men of that age, I dare say, a century ago perhaps, they were beginning to multiply once more on the face of the earth, and they knew what had happened in the previous, what we call the anti-Danubian age, an age of awful individuality, and lawlessness, and violence, and corruption within the earth. They said, look, Ansel, we can't achieve what we want as individuals, we must achieve it together. We must have something collective, and not merely individual.

And so the word is go-to.

Go-to, in our version, you can turn to it and read for yourself. [00:13:02] In the Derby version, rather more homely and striking, you find it rather come-on.

It's exactly what people say. Oh, come-on.

Let's all get together and do something.

So in chapter 10 it's come-on, come-on.

The very next verse I'm not sure I'm going to have to know unless you have to, my memory isn't too good for these things. In the next chapter, which I hardly expect to claim, the Lord said to Abraham, get out.

Oh, that's the irony, isn't it? The world was saying, come-on.

Let's all come together. Come-on.

You Christians, join in. Don't you know you can accomplish a lot more good things if you come and join our show. Give your kind of Christian push to what we're doing. Come-on.

Well, that's what they were saying when they started to build the Tower of Babel and one man couldn't do it, but a whole lot could, [00:14:01] and they started to do it. Come-on.

But the Lord said to Abraham, it had been a bit later, of course, but he brought in next, and we may have stopped by it in the Scripture, the Lord said, get out.

Get out.

Well, that's all.

Out. Calling out. Has not God worked?

He called Israel out to make them a distinct nation amongst the nations. It was again, I hear, that's why the term assembly, or ecclesia, is once. You remember the ecclesia, the called-out, in our version, church, in the wilderness. Yes, they were the called-out people, our believers.

We belong to the ecclesia, the church, the called-out country.

And immediately after Pentecost, well, it was visible in Jerusalem, they went to their own country. Now, what marked that country?

[00:15:01] The first thing I notice is, it was familiar with the Word of God, and their thoughts were governed by the Word of God. In this emergency, brought face-to-face with the opposition of the powerful religious leaders, they found light and direction in the Word of God. All they said, you see, they hadn't got, of course, our New Testament scripture, not a line-off, but they had the Old Testament scripture, and they went back to what David had written. And they reminded themselves how David, in the second psalm, of course, had spoken of the heathen raging, and the people gathering together to accomplish their own design. And they said, and they said, yes, Lord. Now, here's a remarkable case of how scripture often has a double fulfillment. That is, a preliminary fulfillment, not the complete thing, before the complete thing comes. When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, [00:16:03] you may remember, he said, this is that which is spoken of by the prophet Joel.

If you read the prophet Joel, you'll see he's clearly predicting what will happen on a great scale at the opening of the Millennial Age. What Peter said, yes, this is a kind of sample, this is the thing of which Joel is speaking, the outpouring of the Spirit and the speaking with tongues on the day of Pentecost. So here, yes, when the climax of this poor age is reached, and the heathen rage, and people imagining things, and the anti-Christian powers, all apparently at the top of their form, God will intervene.

And he will set his anointing on this holy day of Zion.

They only quote this, [00:17:01] they were gathered together to praise God.

They say, yes, exactly what I predicted then has happened now.

And you Gentiles have, what have they done? Well, they've crucified the Messiah, yes, but they've only done what thy hand and thy purpose, thy counsel determined before to be done.

They've only succeeded, they didn't know it, in accomplishing what had been predicted concerning the sufferings of the world.

But what caught their eye, the early Church, was the knowledge, and counsel, and direction of the Word of God.

And that's equally true for us who belong to the Church of God today. [00:18:02] The Word of God is the governing factor.

But, also, of course, there was prayer. The Word of God and prayer, they were in touch with God. They didn't say, sent for the police, if there were police, you know what they were in those days, I know.

They didn't appeal to the ruling powers, they didn't try and cultivate things with men of the world.

No, they simply cast themselves on God.

There's no doubt. But when saints do that, there is sure to be a gracious answer.

They turned to God.

It's remarkable, isn't it, when they heard that and it really comes back before the world. They lifted up their voice to God and cried out.

And what did they ask?

Now, they didn't say, oh Lord, we're having such a very rough time, [00:19:02] and the rulers are so terribly antagonistic, will you please, well, you might have asked God to judge them or asked God to stop them.

No, that was not their request. They knew things from the, what I may call, the divine strength.

They said, now Lord, we're all over their place. And what?

Stop it?

No. No, grant to thy servants that with all boldness they may speak unto you. They asked God to stretch forth his hand and make his power felt, so that they might be able to do what they know, they knew they were commissioned to do.

They were to speak forth the word of God with boldness. You remember the Lord's instructions to them where they were to go forth outermostly to all the nations [00:20:01] but beginning at Jerusalem.

That, I think, is the record, if my memory is right, in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel. Repentance or remission of sins to be preached among all nations, but beginning at Jerusalem.

But yet the Lord said, now you're going to begin at the most difficult spot of all, the very worst spot, the spot where sin has with it climaxed.

For there never was a sin before and never could be one again like the rejection and death of the greatest Messiah, the supreme sin of humanity.

And it was at Jerusalem.

Jerusalem that had slain the prophet. Do you remember how the Lord went over the city? And we are told that when he went over, or rather at the graveside of Lazarus [00:21:03] with the sisters, the word that's used, they had two words in the Greek, means silence.

But when he went over Jerusalem, the word that's used means loud madness.

Saw what lay before the city.

And yet, at the worst spot, the gospel was first to be preached. It was to prove its mighty power and efficacy in the worst city on the face of the earth.

And so they said, knowing how they're being commissioned, and here they are in Jerusalem at the beginning, they said, for the moment, not thinking of our distant nations, but thinking of where they were, run to thy servants with all openness.

They may speak thy word, which, of course, is exactly what they did. As we are told, [00:22:02] with great power, they were probably witnesses of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

That is to say, consequent upon prayer, there was the action and working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Now, that's one of the great marks of the primitive church.

The Holy Ghost had come.

He is the power.

Now, let us never forget that.

Whatever we may do, the real power, the power, of course, that formed the church, though that isn't the point here. It is the same power that operates in the church. And if, through service of God, the word is to go forth, [00:23:01] it is the power of the Spirit that accomplishes really the work of God.

Now, we are living in an age when man is very great. And man's thoughts and man's doings are matters on all sides. And it's very often here Christian people may forget that power does not lie in human abilities.

It lies in the Holy Spirit of God.

The Church of God, and we see it here in this primitive condition, is the sphere of the operation of the Spirit of God.

Of course, that may very well stay in a doctrinal way in Paul's letter in the first Corinthians. It's the Spirit of God, the power, the operations in the assembly of God.

[00:24:03] It's the Spirit of God. You know, sometimes people in fact say of such a mass, say, oh, I think you brethren, me too, it seems to be a kind of democratic institution. You think at the end of all we get up and talk? I pray we should say no more than that, except under the power and direction of the Spirit of God.

You say it's very difficult, it can't be difficult. Now, let's make no mistake about it. I feel it often when I sit in an audience, should I be writing that writing that I give to you?

It's the answer to people, to brethren. We have to be exercised. I know it myself.

Others may make mistakes, but it's better to do the right thing even imperfectly than the wrong thing in the first class way. Think of that.

It's better to do the right thing [00:25:02] even imperfectly than the wrong thing in the first class.

And after last, Christendom has largely drifted away from the simplicity of the privileged church,

which is marked by the power of the Spirit and consequently by great wonders of God.

Do we see that today? Alas, we don't.

We were of one heart and one soul.

One, because at that moment the power of the Spirit was very much in our dailies.

And the hearts of the saints were controlled. And the result was this great wonders of heart.

Well, where is that now?

[00:26:01] Differences of thought.

Unaware.

Diversity.

Yes, well, alas, it tells us how little we have known of the controlling power of the Spirit of God. It's just as well we have read it as it is. Look at the things of privileged church.

And I do, of course, I begin to feel ashamed of myself or at least of the church as it is today in its present condition. It's well to be reminded of what marked the church in its earliest days, just after the Holy Ghost had been given and the power of the Spirit was very prominently felt. There was great wonders of heart amongst the saints and there was great and powerful testimony to the world which are not recorded again. It's so often lacking in our days.

[00:27:02] The wonders inside and the testimony flowing to the outside.

Those two things are more intimately connected, I venture to think, than sometimes we can imagine.

And in a way, it meant, of course, care for the saints.

Now, of course, people have often spoken about this remarkable outburst of generosity.

When here was Barnabas, he was of Elijah, well, he was of the country of Cyprus, of the old land, and so on. He was one of many.

Brought the running to the apostles' feet and there was a wave of this remarkable generosity and care for the saints of God exhibited amongst the saints.

We must remember, of course, they were in a rather rejected, they were rather an outcast people. [00:28:02] They were outsiders in the gospel. In the time of our Lord, the blind man of John 9, they cast him out.

It was the way they had in those days. Cast them out as a symbol. There they are, outside all the ordinary things of Judaism that surrounded them.

But there was a great outflow of divine love and compassion seen amongst the saints.

Care was exercised.

Some people said, oh well, but of course, isn't that kind of something imperative we all ought to have done? No, it wasn't something that was laid upon them as an imperative demand.

Somebody said, how do you know that? I know it from when I read you the lecture. Peter said to Ananias, while that land or thing remains, you'll search for what is not thine own.

[00:29:04] Here, here you are.

And after it was sold, what is not thine own power? Oh yes, he was under no compulsion. He might have sold it, kept the money. Not pretended anything. He came to see it active on earth. For Sapphira told one. Ananias, active.

When everybody would bring it, he brought it under the assumption he was bringing all that he had received for the sale of the land when all the time he was putting on his own body.

He might have received, but there was this mighty action of the Holy Ghost and you know, it's often the way, the way of the seeker, that kind of thing. You see, Larry, comes into the circle of the saints. At the outset, you see a pretty drastic exhibition of holy history.

[00:30:04] Now, my brethren, the church is a place of visiting. It was shown right at the primitive moment when the first outbreak came of self-wishness which led to this pretension, this unreality, this, as Peter put it, lying to the Holy Ghost that the spirit of God didn't know. The spirit of God was so powerfully active in the church. He manifested his power. He illumined the mind of Peter that Peter could speak through this way. And Peter has to say, Ananias, you've done this thing and you're going to receive that where you might have received all of them. It hadn't been that the Holy Ghost was there. He said, Peter, you've been well in line with the Holy Ghost. You've been doing this thing as though you could receive [00:31:01] the spirit of God, thank you, God. And the spirit of God acted in very drastic discipline. And he does.

Some of you will at once remember, of course, the case of the ape when they entered into the lab.

Often it appears at the beginning of an epoch. God does give a very drastic exhibition of power and of disciplinary judgment.

But I do think we've got to know this, that the church of God in its primitive state is not only accompanied, you see, from the words of Mark my prayer and the word of God and the power of the Spirit and great wonders of the heart and bold testaments of the Word and cloud of faith and bold testaments of the Word [00:32:02] and cloud of faith that it's a place of holy discipline.

It is the house of God. God was dwelling there by His Spirit. But some of us were relieved in knowledge yesterday that the church is the house of God.

God dwells therein by His Spirit.

And we, each one of us, are thus brought into the house. We are part of the house.

And at the beginning, God was pleased, as He did with apes when they were entering the lab, to give a very drastic proof of His holy judgment.

Because many a person did the kind of things that apes did afterwards, and as the world would say, they got away with it. They weren't. They didn't. They were not all thrown to death and had this terrible business. Many a person may have done things this evening or attempted to deceive the Spirit of God, [00:33:01] and they still live.

But at the opening of the dispensation, a striking exhibition was given to show the holiness of God's house.

It was something that no ordinary person could have detected about the Holy Ghost in you. And the Spirit of God proved the reality of His indwelling of the church, the house of God, by acting in this way.

Peter merely uttered a word, the Spirit of God made Him scream, and took a beating on the beating heart of Ananias, and they both died with all in awe.

You say, what about their souls? Well, if you ask me, my friend, they're in heaven, because God does not deal with the world in this way. He does deal with His saints. The fact that He dealt with them shows they were His saints. That's the great thing in Psalm 33. Psalm 73.

[00:34:01] The poor psalmist said, why my feet almost slipped out of the world like that. What's the matter with you psalmists? Why I'm in trouble, there's these people in the world doing all these things and they're getting away with it, and they're having a jolly good time, here tonight, played every morning, and disciplined, and, oh, yes.

Well, the psalm goes, the psalm is going to the sanctuary of God, and have a look at things in God's name.

It's the end of the story. The man of the world gets away with it in this life, and plunges into a lost eternity. The child of God doesn't get away with it. I think, I do.

Well, I've seen that. Again and again, the child of God has done something that isn't right, and God permits it to be found out. Why, you see, that didn't need to be done by a lot of the fellows in that place. Again and again, and they got away with it. This fellow who's a cripple doesn't lose court.

Why? Because God deals with you. [00:35:01] The man of the world slips off, he knows it. He doesn't get into trouble. No, but if the saint is not of the Lord, he is poor.

Now, that's what happens here. And people would say, well, you know, if discipline like that comes in, you know, it would have a very restrictive effect upon things, don't you think?

The answer is, of course, this. We are told quite plainly that it has.

Now, I've been dwelling upon, I've been dwelling against seven things in this. I've come to be distant

from the world in the light of the word of God, in touch with heaven by prayer, great oneness of spirit, great power of the spirit, and great oneness of heart in the sense, great testimony to the world, [00:36:02] great power of the saints, and very solemn discipline upon what was sinful enough according to God.

And the effect of that was this.

Great fear came upon all the time.

In the first place, the church, they all said, oh, I see.

We are committed to a life of holiness.

It isn't for us to do the kind of thing that the world does. I hope we've all had a little of that fear in our hearts. Needless to say, any real earnest Christian's will, you know, I so easily might slip into the ways of the world and do this happy hour. No, as a saint of God, I'm committed to a life of another straight order that isn't ruled by the ways of the world.

[00:37:03] Let us remember, the eye of our Lord is upon us, and we are committed to another order of life, and that which marks the men and women of the world. But then there was something else. It came upon as many as her, it seems.

There was still the power of the apostle, verse 12 of chapter 5, and one thought, but of the rest.

Does no man join himself to them?

You see, look at that.

I suppose they lost a lot of new life.

My friends, they lost a number of folk who would have come in who were no true members of Christ.

Again and again, you know, it's again when there is such a sense of things [00:38:04] that the inrush of what would prove only sources of trouble and weakness is stopped. Now the contrast is, it's often come to my own heart, I hope it will come to yours, the vagueness of the rest, of all the messes of the people. Oh my, I thought I'd join this new movement. You know, it's wonderful. They do all kinds of things. Look at the money they've got. Look how they fork it out, and it all goes round, and everybody's got what they want. Oh, I'll join this.

It's a lovely idea.

Yes, but the folk who were like that, they said, I don't think I will.

If that kind of thing happens, no, I'm not going to poke my nose in that.

Yes, it hindered the inrush of people who would have been mere outward professors [00:39:02] who saw how nice it was to have people selling houses and lands and all that kind of thing, and supplying money that you never earned yourself.

But did it stop the real work of God? No, it didn't.

No man dared join himself of the rest of the masses of the people. But, on the other hand, first of all, he believed where the law added to the law.

Now, the contrast clearly lies there between added to the church and added to the law.

My dear friends, how many have been added to the church? What masses of people there are in what we have to, they claim to be, church services?

Added to the church.

But the fact of the thing is, added to the law.

You see, it did not stop.

For a moment, [00:40:01] it really furthered the genuine work of God in spite of this drastic action, in spite of the fact that it was demonstrated that the church of God is a house of holiness.

It put its hand upon the false thing.

And people said, oh no, no, no, I'm not going, I thought I'd go in there, it's such an advantageous thing, I don't think I will.

There were not added to the church these people who would have been owed an encumbrance if they hadn't added. But it didn't stop the mighty work of God. Believers, yes, now you've got the genuine thing, they were the law.

The law increased, believers were the law, added to the law, multitudes of men and women.

That indeed is what I'm sure we ought to perceive.

[00:41:06] Believers added to the law.

Brought under the lordship of Christ. Oh yes, many things will happen if, by the mercy of God, we saw more folk believing.

And they are, as he puts it, added to the law. That is, I understand it, brought under his lordship and dominion so that they confess with their mouth Jesus as Lord.

And of course, believing in their hearts that God would raise them from the dead, they are saved.

And they become, such become, a source of real health and joy if presently you find them adding to the church.

Well, if that's the picture [00:42:02] of the principle church that we do well to look at, because we know the sad spectacle of the outward professing church as it is today.

Now I think we might just join in singing a hymn of hope and expectation, which is number 305.

Hope of our heart, O Lord, art thou the glorious star of day.

Thou wilt arise, thou wilt shine forth and chase the night with all our fears away. 305.