

“Formula for a Church Aflame”

Acts 2:42–48

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Let's start by looking at Acts 2:42–48 which says [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, 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.*

We are asking the Lord to revive this church and His church throughout the world and to revive this nation through our churches. Here we have a pattern of the early church in Acts 2 right after Pentecost. It is a real formula for a church aflame and we want to understand and apply that in our church. First there are the constants of the church starting in Acts 2:42, [42] *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* These are things they did constantly as new priorities which they devoted themselves to.

There are five constants and the first was the apostles' teaching or doctrine. John Calvin said 'It began here because that's the soul of our life' the teaching of the Word of God. It is also the soul of the church. They put themselves under this instruction. We might think, 'if only we could hear it?' This was the early church so they couldn't be taught the book of Romans or Hebrews, Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, etc. and yet we are in such a better opportunity for getting grounded in the solid Scriptures to help us. We also have so many excellent study guides that have developed since then. We have great teachers of the Scriptures like Calvin and Luther and so many others.

Here at Briarwood we have a Christian bookstore with so many wonderful missionary biographies. We have a church library. There are so many wonderful opportunities for us to get grounded in the Word. Are we applying this? Are we studying the Word? Are we taking advantage of these opportunities at home, in Sunday school, small groups etc.? We have Briarwood Christian School and Birmingham Theological Seminary. You might think you're not going to be a pastor but you can get grounded as a lay person and improve your abilities to teach the Word of God through the seminary. There have been many who have gone into full time service because of their training as well. We have great tools here to help us in this.

Secondly, the early church had fellowship also noted in Acts 2:42. This fellowship was based upon common belief about Christ. These Christians basically believed the same things and this promotes fellowship. They had come to Christ by surrendering their will in true repentance unto life. What is repentance unto life? According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism question 87, repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience. We remember our will and purpose to obey. We don't always obey but we are to surrender our will so that we can grow in our relationship with Him.

The other side of that is faith – repentance and faith. Faith is believing in Christ where Christ died for our sins. He was fully Man and fully God. He arose from the grave and one day He is coming back. I believed that for years but I didn't believe in Jesus Christ. There is a difference in believing about Jesus and in Jesus. Believing in Jesus means I will put my trust in Him as my approach to God. As the hymn says, *Upon a Life I have not lived, Upon a Death I did not die, Another's Life; Another's Death, I stake my whole eternity.* That's faith in Jesus Christ. For years I believed all about Him but I had not put my trust in Him. I was trusting that I hadn't been too bad. Then I thought I had been pretty bad so I better be a preacher if I was going to get to heaven. No, we don't earn our salvation. I had totally missed that salvation was by grace.

At that point I was in seminary in Atlanta and I was pastoring a church in Oxford, Alabama and I knew something wasn't right in that church. I didn't feel like asking the congregation how you could be sure that you believe in Jesus. I didn't feel like asking my professors in seminary but there was an Airforce Chaplain at the seminary who would go flying with me and I felt free to ask him. He gave me a little book titled 'What it means to believe' and he said you have to put your trust in Christ. That it was a gift to trust in Christ but I thought God wouldn't give this away and that you had to earn it. While I was reading my Bible I came to Romans 6:23 that says [23] *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* He was right, for it is a gift and that's when I became a Christian where I put my trust in Christ as my approach to God. I was going to improve my record. When that happened the church I was pastoring took off. It helps when the preacher becomes a Christian! Once you become a Christian it really promotes your fellowship.

In Acts 2:42 it said they fellowshiped to the breaking of bread. They would meet in homes there – house to house. They would study together in small groups. Acts 2:46 says [46] *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.* They would go to the temple like we would go to church but they would also meet in home in small groups and fellowship together.

In Malachi 3:16–17 it says [16] *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.* [17] *“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.* It is so crucial that we have this fellowship with one another and growing spiritually.

I was lost for years in the church. It was there in the early church but then as time went on it got to be a very public thing but not the fellowship aspect of it. John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church rediscovered that. Others also realized that they had been weaving a rope of sand where there wasn't a strong connection to each other and they weren't growing like they should be growing. When Wesley rediscovered this fellowship and praying together that's when it really took off. This is called aftercare. It is needed because when someone comes to Christ and are not followed up with or disciplined they don't grow and they begin to fall back away. It is vital to grow spiritually through fellowship with others and develop those kinds of small groups in the church.

We have a lot of that here at Briarwood and we praise the Lord for that. I want to give you a feel for how helpful that can be. There was a lady who lost her only son and said in 1983, 'Losing a child is the most difficult thing a person can ever attempt to deal with but when it's by the child's own hand it multiplies the devastation. I won't attempt to address this but I would

like to share what part our small group precepts Bible study played in the healing process because it was to me a miracle. For five years after David died I merely functioned for the life I lived was just struggling to get through each day. My husband and I had four wonderful children and I tended to them on a very minimal level. If I had been asked to describe my day to day life I would have said that I lived at the bottom of a deep, black hole. I now know that I was in a depressive state and I really did not expect to ever return to normal.'

She goes on to say, 'One day we received our Briarwood newsletter and I sat down and read it as I had always done. My eyes quickly settled on a new Bible study that would begin in a couple of weeks. The title of the study was 'Lord heal my hurts.' For the first time I had to deal with the fact that I was unwilling and unable to reach out for the healing I so desperately needed. It took me several days to get up the courage to reach out to call the teacher to sign up. The moment I did the healing began and continues. One of the most important lessons I learned was that I simply did not know God as I needed to when the storms of life come. I committed myself to that very purpose. I believe precepts which gives an opportunity for what my husband calls 'pick and shovel' for it's a great way to learn more and more of Him. Nine years later I'm still at it and looking forward to beginning a new study. There is still so much to learn about God and His faithfulness.' It is so crucial for us to have this kind of fellowship that helps us grow and reach out to others.

The next constant we see in the early church is worship. They did this through the breaking of bread which had a two-fold basis. One was the Lord's Supper and the other aspect of worship was the private, small group time. They were having public worship combined with the Lord's Supper.

Then we see the constant of prayer. Acts 2:42 says [42] *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and **the prayers**.* Prayer is so crucial. Over and over in the book of Acts we see the early church praying and God answering by doing amazing things. I think of Briarwood when we started in a store front in 1960 in Cahaba Heights. I led a man in the neighborhood named Bob Barnes to Christ and he wanted to learn to pray. I told him the way to learn is to pray so I suggested we get together to pray and we began to set some goals.

About this time a man named Hilton Piper visited our church and he came to see me because he had a lot of questions and problems he was wrestling with yet not so much spiritually. By this time Bob and I had led some more to Christ and had about eight men praying with us so I invited Hilton to come pray with us. Hilton said to me 'I don't much believe there is a God and I know He doesn't answer prayer.' I insisted he come to our prayer group so he did and he told them he didn't much believe in prayer. We told him to set some specific goals for us to pray for to see if God would answer them. He told us he wanted us to pray that the church would be filled. This was in the middle of the summer when we met in this store front and there was no prospect for it to be filled until the fall because many were on vacation. They asked him what he meant by filled and he said 'they have to bring in the green chairs.'

The church had grown so that other stores in the store front let us use their space for Sunday school and we had those green chairs in those places. They told him that the only time we used the green chairs were for Easter and Christmas. He said 'well that's my goal.' Then he said 'you have to promise not to invite anybody or anything like that.' We agreed. We prayed and asked God to fill the church so that we could bring in the green chairs. That was Wednesday night. Sunday came and we went to church and initially it wasn't even two thirds filled. I stood up to give the opening prayer and as I looked out the store front I began to see cars pull in so I

prayed a long prayer. And then they started bringing in the green chairs and I even said 'hey, they're bringing in the green chairs!' Hilton became a Christian, joined our prayer group and had a dramatic change in his life, through his life and through the lives of others. It is seeing God answer prayers.

We were having an officers' retreat around that time and we had been praying for people to go from our congregation to be missionaries. On the retreat one of the officers said 'why don't we set a goal so that we can exercise our faith?' So they decided to ask God to call one person a month from our congregation into full time mission work. That was a big goal so every Sunday I would pray from the pulpit 'God, we are asking You to call an average of one person a month into full time mission work either here in the states or overseas and we pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.' We had other prayer groups praying for this goal also and by the end of the year 13 had been called and were gone. The next year we set a goal of 15 and at the end of the year 17 had gone. The next year we set a goal of 21 and 22 went.

About that time I was called to speak at a conference over at First Presbyterian in Jackson, Mississippi and I asked the pastor what he wanted me to emphasize while I was there. He wanted me to emphasize people going to the mission field. He had told me that the church was 137 years old and that no one had ever gone into the mission field in that 137 years. Four men had gone into the pastorate but no one into missions. I shared with him what we had done and what we had seen God do so he met with his officers and told them that. They also set a goal of one person a month being called in the first year and at the end of their year 14 had gone into mission work. He came to preach for us nine years later and 54 of his members were on the mission field. Setting goals, exercising faith, and praying was a big thing in the early church and it's a big thing today.

The next constant is witnessing where we are reaching out to others. They would start off witnessing of Christ's resurrection and salvation through Him. As we started Briarwood we needed to train people to share their faith. We started off using the Four Spiritual Laws of Campus Crusade. Then as time went on we shifted to Evangelism Explosion within our denomination. Now we have a similar type thing of sharing our faith called Bridge to Life. We do this every Wednesday night. We also call on people who have visited the church in our neighborhood and we have really seen a lot of people learn to share their faith to lead others to Christ and follow up with them.

When you think of witnessing you think of 'where can I reach out?' Our family is one place and our neighborhood is another. We had those in Med School at UAB who wanted to reach out to med students. This young man in Med School asked me to come to UAB at noon on Wednesdays to teach the Bible to med students and he had about 30 to 40 students there the first time I showed up. Those students starting coming to Christ. Some of them had apartments downtown there and so I started a Bible study in one of their apartments. I did that for about 10 years. A man at our church named Earl Carpenter who was on staff with Campus Crusade started our ministry known as CMMA (Christian Medical Ministry of Alabama). It has been very effective in reaching out to medical students. We were asked to bring that ministry over to Georgia as well so we're doing it there as well. We have also started it at other medical schools also.

Here are other ways we have been reaching out. Tom Carradine grew up in our church. When he was a student at Samford University he wanted to reach out to his fellow students. He did by starting the ministry of Campus Outreach. There were other colleges that wanted us to do this ministry on their campuses so we did and today we have nine campuses on our old site and

have spread it to other churches and states with the headquarters being here at Briarwood. We are currently on 110 campuses with 95 of them here in the United States and 15 overseas with over 700 staff. This year is the 40th anniversary of that ministry. What a blessing that has been! Business men started reaching out as well to their business friends. We started a small group of these men and called the ministry Young Business Leaders (YBL). It is wonderful to see how that ministry has grown.

When Briarwood moved out of the store front location we moved to our first building off Highway 280 which is now Mountain Brook Community Church. When we got into those first buildings an officer of the church came to me and said 'I think we need to start a Christian school here because that would be a good way to reach out.' At that time we had about 300 members and only had a few on staff. I thought 'I need a school like I need a hole in my head.' But we prayed about it and decided to do it.

We started the school with just first and second grade and then moved it up to sixth grade and had one teacher teaching two grades at the time. We eventually went on up to high school and today we have 1900 students with about 150 staff. Boy what a blessing Briarwood Christian School has been. Paul Keinel, president emeritus and founder of Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) said 'It's been my privilege to visit hundreds of Christian schools around the world. It is my personal opinion that Briarwood Christian School is not only an exceptional school but it is the foremost Christian school in the world today.' Wow, that's quite a statement.

When I went to Mississippi to speak I was staying in the home of member who was teaching at a junior college. We were looking for someone to head up our school over here because the current leader had to leave to go someone where else. I asked him if he would consider taking over the leadership of our school and he did. That was Beryl Kynard and when he and his wife came our school really took off under his leadership. It has been doing really fine since. God has been blessing us in so many different ways.

My wife, Barbara came in wanting to teach ballet here at the church. She started the ballet school here at Briarwood and we were reaching out to many young ladies. Then they would take a ballet team that they had trained overseas to perform. They would take me with them so that they would go to perform at places and then I would preach as part of the whole program. We went to Japan on one occasion and it was a wonderful spiritual outreach. They didn't quite initially understand how we were using ballet evangelistically but they had us and it was a wonderful outreach in a tough area there in Japan.

So here we see a formula for a church aflame here as they followed the Apostles teaching through doctrine, through fellowship, the breaking of bread (worship), prayers and reaching out through witnessing. So are you engaged in any of those constants? Are you equipped to share your faith? Are you helping others do that? Are you practicing it? Are you studying? Are you a part of small groups? Are you using your gifts spiritually? We really need to be focusing on reaching out to our families, friends, our neighborhoods, people we work with, etc.

Then we see the commitment of all they believed here. Acts 2:44-45 says [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.* Here is their commitment of their resources, voluntarily and sacrificially. They loved and cared for one another. They were willing to surrender whatever they had to help. They were giving to spread the Gospel.

There is also the commitment of their lives. They were threatened not to preach anymore. They were being threatened by Romans, Greeks, and other Jews but they were committed to do that. They didn't back down at all when you think of that commitment aspect and the threats they faced.

Helen Roseveare who was a missionary to Africa told about being raped time and time again by African people in the area she was in. She was beaten and was finally released. She went back to England and when the rebellion finally calmed down she went back over. She was also a doctor and when she arrived there she told them she was back and if anyone had needs to come to be treated for healing. One night she heard all this racket and looked out the window to see this huge crowd that had come to be treated by her. There were 2600 that first day. On the second day there were 5176. The third day there were 6868 and on and on. Things like this are where our resources go to support our missionaries. Praise the Lord for opportunities to reach out in situations like that.

Now notice the consequences here in Acts 2:43 which says *[43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.* Fear came upon their enemies. Awe came upon every soul. Miracles took place in their midst. God was crediting what they were doing, like He did us with those green chairs.

Their unity and charity grew and we see this in Acts 2:44–45, *[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.*

They were joyous people. Acts 2:46–47a says *[46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47a] praising God and having favor with all the people.*

They also had favor with non-Christians there. Acts 2:47b says *[47b] And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.* God was blessing the spread of all this for they were having an evangelistic impact there. We want to ask God for that, for revivals. So here is the formula for the church aflame.

We need to take those opportunities to share our faith and reach out to others. We need to join hands in small groups and study the Bible together. In the fall our Birmingham Theological Seminary starts. We need to take advantage of the training offered here and at the church to share our faith. This is a great opportunity to get grounded in the Scriptures. The Bridge to Life program here at Briarwood is also a great training program to learn how to share your faith and get grounded in the Word. It is a great opportunity as each one reaches out to different aspects of their world to spread the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world.

We hope to have at least 200 students enrolled this fall at Birmingham Theological Seminary here. Now we have several extensions all over in places like Dothan, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Huntsville, Anniston and it has spread overseas. We have about 4500 overseas in about 150 different countries of our Birmingham Theological Seminary. God has blessed that so wonderfully. This is an excellent opportunity to learn and get grounded in the Word.

As we do these things we have a church aflame. So we need to take advantage of these opportunities and practice these things. I want to challenge you. What does God want you to do? What part does He want you to play? How will you reach out? Who can you reach out to? Are you equipped to lead small groups, work in small groups and/or teach?

Think through what God wants you to do. Take steps and start small but step out and tackle it! If you have never surrendered your will to Christ that's the starting point. Put your trust in Him alone as your Savior. That is where you start. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You so much for this formula here in the Scripture from the early church and how You blessed it for this is what we need to do today and always. We thank You Father for Your blessing on our church past, present and we pray for more. We want to bear fruit to You. We want to glorify You. Father, our nation needs churches that are really making an impact. We pray that You would guide each of us to know and do Your will. And if you have never committed your life to Christ do it right now. Surrender your will and put your trust in Him right now, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

- I. THE CONSTANTS (42, 46–47)
 - A. Doctrine
 - B. Fellowship
 - C. Worship
 - D. Prayer
 - E. Witness (46, 47)

- II. THE COMMITMENT
 - A. Of Their Resources (44, 45)
 - B. Of Their Lives

- III. THE CONSEQUENCES (43–47)
 - A. Fear Came upon Their Enemies (43a)
 - B. Miracles Took Place in Their Midst (43a)
 - C. Their Unity and Charity Grew (44, 45)
 - D. They Were a Joyous People (46, 47a)
 - E. They Had Favor with Non-Christians (47b)
 - F. They Had an Evangelistic Impact (47c)

- IV. THE COST?
 - A. Have to Engage in the Constants
 - B. Have to Have the Commitment
 - C. The Time to Start