



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 20: 7-12

June 2021

"God's Grandest Work"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. This morning we are going to have a little lesson on the church, and why we do what we do. So I'm going to look at a few texts, but the one text that I will read this morning is Acts chapter 20, beginning with verse 7,

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, *(and that's an important expression. I'll come back to it in the lesson, but that's really a reference to the LORD's Supper)*, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. ⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." ¹¹ When he had gone *back* up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. ¹² They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

Acts 20: 7-12

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time in it together.
Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

Father, what a blessing it is to be with Your people this Sunday morning. And we talked a little bit this morning about why we do meet on Sunday and how the church met in the early centuries of its history. And so we pray, LORD, as we look at this lesson and consider these things that You would bless us and build us up on the faith and give us a clear understanding of Your will for us and how the church had functioned and what we should look forward to doing. So we pray Your blessing upon us. May the Spirit of God open our hearts to receive the truth. May we understand things clearly and may we desire to live obediently.

Well, we do thank You for this opportunity again to open Your Word. It is so essential for us to grow in grace and knowledge. We cannot do so apart from Your Word. And so this is a great privilege. This is part of what it means to have fellowship with one another. And so LORD, we pray You'd bless our time together of study and worship.

But bless us LORD, materially as well. We pray for those that are not feeling well, those who are going through procedures, serious procedures. Bless them. LORD, we are fragile and frail people, even in our healthiest moments. We live moment to moment by Your grace and by Your power. We live and move and exist in You. You give us every breath of life that we take. And we need to understand that. We are temporal and we can be gone in a moment. We're like the grass of the field. It withers. It goes quickly, but Your Word remains. Your promises are sure and we have the great promise of eternal life for every believer. We pray that You would bless us with that understanding, encourage us with it.

So LORD, we look now to You to bless us and prepare our hearts for a time of study together. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

In one of his sermons, Charles Spurgeon said that, "God looks on the Gospel and the work of the Gospel as the grandest of His works." Which means He considers the church His grandest work. Spurgeon said that, "It has been the chief subject of God's thoughts and acts from all eternity." 'Church', if it's His grandest of works, it is not our work—it's God's work. Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18, "I will build My

church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Paul called it the pillar and support of the truth. Christ died for the church. The apostles labored for it. Paul crossed continents to establish churches. And in doing so he suffered all kinds of hardships: hunger, exposure to heat, exposure to cold, beatings, shipwrecks, and daily, he said, 'he was concerned for all the churches'.

It follows then that we should be concerned about the church, God's grandest work. But to have a wise concern we need to know about it. We need to understand how the church is to function and what our responsibilities in the church are. So that's what we'll be looking at this morning. And we're doing this, as I noted at the beginning of the reading of the Scriptures, that we're doing that because of a change in schedule. We mentioned that two weeks ago.

The evening meeting, when we have historically celebrated the LORD's Supper for almost 60 years, is being moved to the morning. Some of you have not attended that evening meeting, and I know, (at least I think you would like some explanation for our practice), which, I have to say, is one of the main reasons that the men who established this church back in, I think, March of 1962, did so for that meeting. And tells us historically for us it's important. But I think, from Scripture, as we study, we'll see that it's very important. And very simply, why we do this is we attempt to follow the practice of the early church, and the principles of the New Testament. Well, I say that. You would like that demonstrated, I think, from Scripture. And so this morning we're going to look at a couple of passages from the Book of Acts—Acts chapter 2; and then Acts chapter 20, and then one from 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 14, verse 26.

But the best place to begin is at the beginning, when the church was established, which was on the day of Pentecost, one of the great feast days of Israel. That day is the birthday of the church. It was supernatural. It was a work of the Holy Spirit. It's recorded in Acts chapter 2. I'll just summarize the event and draw your attention to some specific points of importance for our study.

Before ascending to heaven, the resurrected LORD told the apostles that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they would be His witnesses, and His witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but to the remotest parts of the Earth. Chapter 2 begins with the apostles and others gathered in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came:

Verse 2, "And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance."

That word *tongues* is always used in the New Testament of a known language. And so it would be used of Aramaic, and Greek, and Latin. The city was filled with pilgrims from all over the world, east and west, from Persia to Rome. And they heard these people speaking in their language, various languages, but they're all hearing the message. It was a miracle. And verse 11 says they were speaking of miracles; they were speaking "of the mighty deeds of God."

And so these people, this audience, is thousands of people that were gathered there in the temple in Jerusalem, heard of God's great miracles, and they were witnessing one. When these uneducated people spoke foreign languages. Well then Peter spoke and explained things. And he gave a sermon. This is the first sermon of the church.

And it was bold. I think that is significant because only a month or so earlier, weeks earlier, Peter had cowered. He had denied the LORD three times—even wilted in his vaunted courage that he had spoken of earlier that evening, before a little slave girl. But now he's a different man. The Holy Spirit has come upon him, and he spoke of Christ, and he spoke of His crucifixion boldly before all of these people, and spoke of His resurrection. We find in verse 23 and 24, the heart of this great sermon. He charged the

audience with complicity in the LORD's death. "...this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God you nailed to a cross..."

And through the sermon, verse 37 states, "...they were pierced to the heart..." and asked Peter and the apostles, "...what shall we do?" And Peter told them what to do, "Repent". And they did. About three thousand, according to verse 41. And they were baptized that day. That's how the church began, through the preaching of the Gospel. And verse 42 states, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Now that's very important. First of all, stress is laid on the preaching of the Word of God. We will never grow unless we are hearing the Word of God preached, taught, explained. And we will never grow unless we are dedicated to reading the Scriptures ourselves—weekly...daily!

Well this first church was devoted to that, as Luke writes, devoted to the Apostles' teaching. Now that's the first thing that characterized the early church: Devotion to the Word of God. I suppose I should emphasize that word, *devotion*, "devoting themselves". But that speaks quite clearly, I think. These people were devoted to the teaching of the apostles. But also, to fellowship. They shared a common life together and formed a community.

But Luke meant something more specific than that when he speaks of fellowship. The last two statements of the verse actually define what he meant by it. It is the breaking of bread and prayer. The word 'and' is not there. It's not found between fellowship and the breaking of bread. It is simply "fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer." And those two words, those two statements, "fellowship and prayer", define what Luke meant by fellowship. Breaking of bread is a reference to taking the LORD's Supper. And we know that from Luke chapter 22, verse 19, where the same expression is used of the LORD instituting the LORD's Supper. He broke bread: It says He took bread, He broke it, and He gave it to the disciples.

Observing the LORD's Supper was a regular part of the meeting of the church. The early church was as devoted to it as it was to the teaching of the apostles and to prayer.

And in those very early days they took the LORD's Supper often—because they met often. The chapter ends on verses 46 and 47, (Acts 2), 'They met day by day in the temple.' They were truly committed to the faith. The LORD was their first love. But they also met in smaller groups, we read, "breaking bread from house to house", (vs46), observing the LORD's Supper together in smaller groups, and also sharing a meal together. Now that was the first church, the church of Jerusalem.

But the Gospel spread from Jerusalem out to Samaria, and then across the west throughout the Gentile world. And as it spread increasingly to the Gentiles and became an increasingly Gentile church, some things did change. At the end of Paul's third missionary journey in Acts chapter 20, we notice some of these changes. But we can also see that some things stayed the same. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem when he passed through Macedonia.

From Philippi, he sailed across the Aegean to Troas on the northwest coast of Turkey, where he stayed for a week. Luke wrote in verse 7, "On the first day of the week, when we gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight." Now that was a change from meeting every day in the temple to one day a week in a house. That was the location of the meetings of the early church. In Romans 16, for example, Paul sent greetings to Prisca and Aquila, or to Priscilla and Aquila, and the church that met in their house.

There are other statements like that in the letters of the apostle Paul. And they were meeting, you'll notice, on the first day of the week, Sunday; not Saturday. So the church was no longer observing the Sabbath, which was a major change from the synagogue. From an early date, the church met regularly on Sunday, which was the day, as you know, Christ was resurrected from the dead. So Sunday became the LORD's day.

The fact that early Christians, many of whom were Jewish, would make such a change, (and it was a drastic change), has been seen as added proof of the resurrection. It would take something as significant as the resurrection to cause such a change, that of moving the day of worship from the last day of the week as the Law prescribed, to the

first day. That's the significance of Sunday worship. Every Sunday we meet as a celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. And in doing so, we proclaim our faith in a living Savior.

They met at night. That is likely due to the social makeup of the church. Many early Christians were slaves. Their time was not their own. They had to work in the day, and were not able to meet until night. What is important about verse 7 is, it gives us a glimpse into the meeting of the early church. And in so doing, it gives us a model of how the church is to function; what the basic aspects of the church are for it to function well.

I don't think meeting in houses is necessary, or meeting at night is necessary. What is necessary is teaching and observing the LORD's Supper, as well as baptism when that is necessary, (we see that back in Acts chapter 2.) There are two ordinances of the church, two (if I can put it this way, I don't like to use this word necessarily but), ceremonies that the church observes. And that is the LORD's Supper and baptism.

And we see that here in chapter 20. The church is gathered on the first day of the week to break bread to take the LORD's Supper. It was part of the regular, weekly meeting of the church. And it was an essential part. It was done in obedience to the instruction that the LORD gave in Luke chapter 22, verse 19. He said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." That is the reason that we observe the LORD's Supper every Sunday—usually on Sunday evening, at least historically it's been that way until recently. The time is not so important as the frequency—every Sunday. Now that was clearly the practice as seen in the meetings of the church in both Acts chapter 2, and Acts 20. That has stayed the same over the years because the LORD commanded it. But also for very practical reasons. In fact he commanded it for very practical reasons. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me."

The word *remember* is a very important word in the Old Testament, as is the word *forget*. Forgetting led to disobedience and ruin. In Deuteronomy chapter 4, verse 23, Moses warned, "Watch yourself that you do not forget the covenant of the LORD your God, and make for yourself a graven image." Deuteronomy 8, verse 19, "It shall come

about if you ever forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you today that you will surely perish."

Now I can give numerous examples of that throughout Deuteronomy and throughout the Old Testament, of the danger of forgetting. It is a dangerous thing. And so repeatedly, throughout the Old Testament, Israel was told to *remember*. It is the antidote to forgetting and to spiritual drift and ruin—and it's the means for being strengthened and of being built up in one's faith.

In Deuteronomy 15, verse 15, Moses said, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you..." That was the purpose of Passover: That they remember, that they keep this great redemption they had experienced ever in their mind, what the LORD God had done for them lest they forget and fall.

So it's no coincidence that on the night of Passover, the LORD instituted the LORD's Supper, with the command, "Do this in remembrance of Me." 'Remember that I redeemed you from slavery, and the very worst kind of slavery, slavery to sin and death.' So in obedience to the LORD, the early church practiced that every week, lest they forget. That's our practice.

And we're not alone in our understanding of this. John Calvin advocated it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He wrote that the LORD's Supper should be administered at least once a week. The great Baptist, Charles Spurgeon said, "Shame on the Christian church that she should put off to once a month the LORD's Supper." Most churches probably put it off to four times a year. He spoke of the "sweetness" of doing it every week.

It is of great practical value. As we meditate on Christ, we remember His sacrifice for us. That cultivates gratitude in us, love for Him, which is really the impetus or incentive for action and obedience. Now we're commanded to do certain things. —And we really have no option but to do what we're commanded to do. But the right way to do what the LORD would have us to do is out of gratitude and love. —And this is what instills that.

It also gives us an opportunity to express our faith in Him, and to show our devotion to Him. So to that end, we observe the LORD's Supper every Sunday, and preach the Word. That's, again, equally important, as we have seen, but it's mentioned next. Luke wrote that, "Paul began talking to them...and he prolonged his message until midnight. (vs7).

One of the last statements that Paul made was his command in 2 Timothy chapter 4, verse 2. This is a man who's facing death; he's in chains and he knows the end is very close. And so he's saying what's really on his heart and what Timothy needs to hear, and what the church needs to hear, and he said, "Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction."

As God said in Hosea chapter 4, verse 6, "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge..." And so Paul preached—and he preached until midnight. It was evening; assuming the meeting began around 7 at night and it went on until 12 o'clock, that was a message of four to five hours. Well that had to be unusual, but this was Paul, this was the apostle; it was a rare opportunity, and so they wanted to hear him. At least most did. One man fell asleep. Like I said, some things have changed and some things have stayed the same, *[Laughter]* and that's always an encouragement for a preacher to come to this because when one looks out and sees that happening, he says, "Well, this is apostolic." *[Laughter]*

He was a young man named Eutychus; and I will confess that in my young life I was a Eutychus. But Luke said he was a "boy". That's how he describes him in verse 12, which normally covered the years of 8 to 14. Well, he's a young child, he's a boy, maybe he wasn't all that interested in the lesson that Paul gave—at least not as interested as he ought to have been. But the circumstances are unusual here. Maybe he had worked hard that week and was tired. It was late, probably past his bedtime. They rose early in those days. But also, since it was night, Luke wrote in verse 8, "There were many lamps in the upper room." The flickering light may have had a kind of hypnotic effect on this young boy, Eutychus. Anyway, he fell out of the third story window and they picked him up dead.

So Paul rushed down, embraced him, and he was revived. He was restored. It was a miracle. And that miracle allowed them to go back upstairs for more teaching. They valued the Word of God. And I think, in line with that, there may be more to the mention of the many lamps in the upper room than simply describing the setting of the evening—that there is symbolism in it, that representing what the church was and what the church is to be.

Troas was named after Troy. It was located on the site of that most famous battle of the ancient world; where Achilles and Hector fought. But something of far greater importance occurred there in that small room that evening. It was full of lamps, lights shining in the night. That's the church. Those Christians listening to Paul were being equipped to shine out in the darkness of this world with the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But what will make us able to do that is fellowship in the things that we see here as Luke describes it. Fellowship, which involves taking the LORD's Supper, which involves baptism at times, which involves the ministry, the instruction of the Word of God—doing all of this in obedience to what the LORD has been teaching, what He teaches here, what the apostles instruct us to do.

Now we know other things occurred in the meeting of the early church. For example, in Ephesians chapter 5, in verse 19, Paul wrote of "...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..." And I think in that passage, the context that Paul was addressing is the meeting of the church. So the meeting would usually, it seems, end with a hymn. I say that because that's how the Passover celebration ended, when the LORD established the LORD's Supper. We're told that, 'when it ended they sang a hymn.' So the early church was a singing church. As were the churches of the Reformation. In fact, when there is revival, as with the great awakening in the 18th century, hymns were written. Think of the hymns written by Charles and John Wesley. And singing occurs. It's natural.

1 Corinthian 14, verse 26 gives us another glimpse into the meeting of the church, and how it was conducted. It was clearly a very active service. Paul wrote, "What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification."

The Princeton theologian and Presbyterian, Charles Hodge, wrote in his commentary, "This passage, and indeed the whole chapter presents a lively image of an early Christian assembly." It was lively. More recent commentator, Don Carson, wrote, "It is clear that the Corinthian service was not boring." (And that is clearly intended as an understatement.)

And not just the Corinthian service, but church services all around the Mediterranean and throughout the ancient world; this was a typical meeting of the church. It was made up of all kinds of people, men and women, slaves and freemen, rich and poor. All kinds of people. They gathered in someone's home on a Sunday evening where they would take the LORD's Supper, baptize new converts, and minister to one another using their spiritual gifts.

It was patterned after the synagogue service in the first century. And in the synagogue there was no single, as it were, 'pastor'. Those meetings were overseen by a leader of the synagogue, but he would often choose someone to speak. And you see this in the Gospels when Jesus returned to Nazareth. He was asked to speak in this synagogue that He'd grown up in. And He speaks, opens up Isaiah, and does exposition from it. You see it all through the Book of Acts, Paul would enter the synagogues in whatever city he went, and he would give the Gospel. In fact, that situation of the synagogue, where various people were able to speak was very instrumental in facilitating the spread of the Gospel throughout the ancient world, as the apostles moved from city to city.

Well, in the church, there were elders to oversee the meeting. But it was open to various men, to teach and use their gifts. And so we've often referred to the evening meeting as the 'open meeting'. Everyone came prepared. Each one, Paul says, has a

psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation. And that means that someone composed a New Testament psalm to be sung in the meeting. Someone else prepared a lesson to teach, a passage from the Bible, and so on. It operated on the principle of the priesthood of all believers. That's one of the great doctrines of the New Testament. The priesthood of all believers. We all have a responsibility to one another, and before the LORD. And we go directly to Him. In 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 9, he calls this "a royal priesthood".

So when Paul wrote, 'each one has a psalm, has a teaching', he means every person is a priest and has a ministry, a ministry to one another. And we are to minister to one another according to our gift under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And that's what we attempt to do when we follow this same format, or plan, on what was Sunday evening and will be now on Sunday morning beginning next week.

This is not what people are used to when they go to church. They're used to a passive service where they sit, they listen, and they leave. That's different from what Paul describes here. Somehow the church got away from this form of worship. Charles Hodge suggested that the freedom and spontaneity of the early church ended when the miraculous gifts of prophecy and tongues ceased. And I'm sure it did change the meeting significantly when those gifts ceased.

But the gift of teaching didn't stop. The need for prayer didn't end. And that format allowed for different gifted teachers to speak and for people to pray and to request hymns. And I imagine different men stood and spoke, as Paul did in Troas—not for as long as he spoke, but long enough, certainly, to give a good exposition from a book of the Bible. And I assume that they studied through books as we do—but not just one individual. Others contributed. And perhaps others would stand after the instruction was given and would add something to the instruction that the teacher had just given.

The difficulty with this kind of meeting is that it requires maturity to work. It requires that people are devoted to doing these very things. So it requires preparation from everyone. Preparation, if one's going to speak, but certainly preparation of prayer for a spiritual preparation, and vigilance in that.

It doesn't rely on just a few trained men to carry it. And that can seem a little dangerous to people. This kind of freedom seems to invite anarchy—and it can. Hodge called the meeting 'lively'. It could become disorderly. Evidently it became a little too lively in Corinth because Paul corrected the church in this passage. In fact he's giving correction throughout this portion of 1 Corinthians on the meeting of the church. (Chapter 14).

He said, in verse 33, "God is not *a God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." So things are to be conducted in an orderly manner. In order to do that, as I said, it requires that people come prepared, spiritually prepared, prepared in every way. Generally, it is people who are gifted to speak who should stand and speak and teach.

But sometimes people who don't have that gift have a burden, as it were, have something that they feel they ought to say, a word of praise for something that God has done in their life, or a word of thanksgiving to offer to the LORD. Or simply, as I said, to stand and request a hymn, or to give a prayer. The standard for those who speak is, very simply, orthodoxy, doctrinal purity. Paul ended the chapter in verse 40 by stating, "All things must be done properly, and in an orderly manner." And he wrote at the end of verse 26, "Let all things be done for edification," to build up the body. That's the goal of what's done.

When things are not orderly or edifying (and occasionally they aren't), an elder must give correction. That's why elders watch over the meeting. Well, we won't be going to midnight, meaning we won't be going at great length of time in that service. We have to consider children in the nursery, and it will have been a long morning. So the meeting will last about 45 minutes and conclude with the observance of the LORD's Supper. Now that means that those who do speak need to be disciplined in speaking. They need to discipline their self to be concise. How long is concise? I can't really say, but I would suggest five to ten minutes. That's a fair length of time to speak.

What much of the instruction given is designed to do at that point in the service is prepare us for taking the LORD's Supper. So much of what is said should have that as its

objective: Speaking of Christ and His sacrifice for us. It's for believer priests. So it's a meeting open to a variety of men. And, as I say men, because is clear in verse 34, only men are to teach in the meeting of the church. And instruction is to be given in English, not in the tongues of angels, if you understand my meaning in that.

Some of you may find the meeting different, I think you will, with various people speaking, and periods of silence before and after people speak. Sometimes long periods of silence. People often find that uncomfortable, but those are really opportunities to reflect, opportunities to meditate on what has been said, on what we are about to do in taking the LORD's Supper, which is remember Christ.

One of our elders, Jim Frazier, often reminds us that the LORD has asked us to do this, to remember Him by taking the LORD's Supper. As we see from the Book of Galatians, we're no longer under the Law. Paul makes that point in Romans chapter 8, verse 2. We no longer have the 613 commandments as the yoke upon us. We're free from the Law. But that doesn't mean we're free to do whatever we like. The LORD has given us instruction, and He's expressed His mind and His desire for us. And He desires that we take the LORD's Supper, regularly. It's very important, and it pleases Him that we do it. And that being true, it is certain to be a blessing to us, spiritually, and for our growth, when we're obedient to Him.

At the end of Acts chapter 2, Luke wrote, "And the LORD was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." (vs49). Building the church is God's business. But we're to be faithful to the principles that He's set forth. When we are, the local church, this church, will grow and will develop according to the way the LORD has desired us to grow, according to the pattern that He intends for us. We will be a vital assembly, a living, active assembly, with the Spirit of God within us. And it will transform us. We'll be a loving assembly and a light in the neighborhood; what Charles Spurgeon called the Gospel, "The work of the Gospel, the grandest of God's works." It brings people into the church, which He's presently building. And that, too, that is His grandest work.

In order to be a part of that great work, one must believe in His Son, the LORD Jesus Christ, who died for sinners. All who trust in Him for salvation are saved and made useful for His service which has eternal reward.

So if you've not believed in Christ, come to Him. Trust in Him and be saved, and then join us this next week around the LORD's table. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank You for this time together to take a break from our studies in Galatians to study this specific subject of the church—which is so important to You. Your Son gave Himself up for the church and we thank You for that. Thank You for the salvation we have in Him.

And now, as we move to this last aspect of our service this morning, and we remember Him through the LORD's Supper, we pray that You'd bless us; prepare our hearts and may we reflect deeply upon all that this signifies. We thank You for Your grace because that is what it is about—Your love for those who were enemies of Yours and Your redemption of us.

We thank You for all that Christ has done for us. We thank You for the Triune God's love and care for us. And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

(End of Audio)