

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Let's take a moment and brainstorm. What would the ideal church look like? If everything in our church and its membership were exactly as it should be... everything was perfect... no more work left to do... what would it look like? How would we describe that ideal church? It was described in the reading we heard first this morning in Acts chapter two. Let's hear again that description:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Drawing from these verses, could we put together a list. Well, let's see...

- Word of God (devoted to apostles' teaching):
 - The ideal church studies the word and knows God's will and promises. Every member devoted to reading and meditating on God's Word daily and regular prayer.
 - It teaches it without error and with proper love.
 - Believed by every single member identically... no difference... perfect unity.
- Right living:
 - Loving each other always. Thoughtful, considerate and serving each other.
 - Loving those outside our church and serving them as well.
 - The motive behind this loving service to others is glorifying God.
- Growth:
 - If all were ideal, every member of Good Shepherd would be actively sharing the Good News of Jesus with friends, family, co-workers and neighbors every week.
 - With such active sharing of faith, I expect Good Shepherd would experience and incredible growth in membership. Bible 101 classes would be packed.
- Fellowship: In our perfect church, we would be getting together more often than just the weekends. We'd be visiting in each other's homes, enjoying meals together, and encouraging one another with God's promises. We would
- Reputation: Our ideal church would also have a good reputation in our community. Even people who have no interest in joining our church would have to say, "I know that church. They are great people and do a lot of good in our community."

Does that pretty much cover it? There may be a few other things we could mention, but I think we have a pretty good picture of what the ideal church would look like.

Now the honest question. Is that what our church looks like? Is our church ideal? Where do we fall short? We can be honest enough today, can't we, to say that Good Shepherd is not the perfect

church. We fall short of the ideal in every category, I would imagine. And what's the reason that we are not an ideal church? Wouldn't it be that our church is made up of less than ideal members? As you take a hard look into your how heart and life, don't you find that in that **Word of God** category, you personally have sinned? Perhaps you're not in church as often as you could be... not active in Bible study and prayer. In the "**right living**" category, your love falls short. "**Outreach:**" Failing to share Christ with your neighbor. **Fellowship:** Not spending much time with your church family. **Reputation:** perhaps you have a part to play in that too.

Friends, there is only one way our church can be transformed... it's when every single member is transformed. There is only way that can happen. And what is that way? Well, it's the same way that first Christian church was transformed... the one we heard about in Acts chapter two.

It can be easy for us to idolize the believers in the Bible and to think that they were somehow in a different category than us. We sometimes disassociate these stories from real life... as if they're nice tales and have good morals, but they don't really pertain so much to real life today. Nothing could be further from the truth. These were real people... people who struggled exactly like you and I do... who were transformed by the power of the Gospel.

Who were these people that made up that "ideal" church we read about? Let's remember the context and setting. The place is Jerusalem... the capital of Israel and the heart of Jewish worship. Time: It's just shy of two months after Jesus was crucified and rose again. It's a week and a half after Jesus ascended into heaven. So this was the very place and the very people who 2 months earlier had shouted "crucify him!" They had rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah and as their Savior.

So the entirely holy Christian church in all the world at this time numbered roughly 120 people. That's it! But on this special day 50 days after Jesus rose and 10 days after he ascended, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on his disciples in a special and powerful way. As they were gathered together, there was the sound of a strong wind. Tongues of fire came to rest on the disciples head, and they began to speak fluently in foreign languages they had never learned. And what were they speaking? The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pentecost was also a Jewish festival... it was like their Thanksgiving. So there were many pilgrims and travelers from all around the ancient world in Jerusalem to celebrate this special festival. These were Jewish people who knew the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew the promise of the Messiah, but they didn't know Jesus was the fulfillment.

Peter stood up and addressed a crowd that had gathered to see what that rushing wind sound was all about. Peter was very blunt in his sermon that day.

"Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

Peter made no attempts to pander to the crowd. He didn't tell them what they wanted them to hear. Instead he told the truth. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah! He truly was God's Son! And you killed him. You nailed him to the cross and put to death God's own Son. His message hit home. His words pierced their hearts. They felt the full weight of their sins.

Friends, if God will transform our church, he must transform each of us. For him to do that, we must acknowledge our sin and guilt. We made a list earlier: Word of God; right living; failure to reach out with the gospel. Each one of these sins necessitated the death of the Son of God. Peter says to us today: **"You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."** Let the sorrow over your sins cut you to the heart. Shout out in anguish with that crowd:

“Brothers, what shall we do?” And listen to the simple answer: **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”** Renewal and transformation happen at the cross of Christ. Repentance means to have a change of mind. It means to do a 180 in the way you think. They come to a real, honest acknowledgement that our sins are damnable. It means that we turn to Jesus at the cross for his full and free forgiveness.

Have you repented? Have you been baptized? Then know this for a fact. Your sins are forgiven by the Lord Jesus. You have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, that is faith. And this promise is not just for you, but for everyone you know.

With the slate wiped clean, with our hearts transformed, with the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts... there is real change. This change that has been made in you by the Holy Spirit is complete. You are not partially forgiven, but fully forgiven. Your adoption papers into God’s family are not in process. They are filed and complete.

But understand this: the enemies of God are trying to undermine the work God has done in us. The devil, the world and our sinful flesh are trying to create doubt instead of certainty. Anxiety instead of peace. Sorrow instead of joy. There’s only one thing that can keep us firm in the faith: the **Gospel in Word and sacrament**. Just like you need three square meals a day to stay strong and healthy, so also you need a regular diet of Word and sacrament. Bible study, worship, home devotions, prayers... this the food that sustains you. Eat often!

Fellowship: That Word of God also comes to us when our fellow believers encourage us, help us, support us and give us advice. They keep us in the Word as they share God’s principles and promises with us. If they are going to do that, we have to be with them frequently, don’t we? That means fellowship. Get together! We need to be in each other’s homes. We need to be talking to each other and sharing. Call each other. E-mail each other. Send texts. As our members communicate with each other, we are better able to encourage each other and that builds up our faith. Think of ways you can work together. Work together on service projects in the church, in our homes, in our communities. Work together to advance the Gospel ministry entrusted to us by our God. As we work together, we grow together.

Can you see the vision of how we can grow personally and also grow as a church? With the renewal and transformation that come from a close connection to Christ, all things are possible. Totally dedicated to Christ our Good Shepherd, our church, Good Shepherd, will thrive to the glory of God.

You know, some have wondered if we’re biting off more than we can chew with our proposed building project. I don’t think I’ve heard anyone yet outright opposed to it. But I have heard a few express that it may be beyond our reach. I completely disagree. With the Good News of Jesus motivating us... with our eyes focused heavenward on eternal rewards... with the selflessness and energy that come from faith in Christ... with total dedication to Jesus Christ... and with a willingness to devote all we are and all we have to him... it will happen.

May God bless our little church with a unity and strength and an outreach mindedness as we are renewed and transformed in our hearts... as we grow together in the Gospel.
Amen.