

INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, my family used to travel to Myrtle Beach, S.C. because my aunt and uncle had an old beach house right in the middle of the area. There was an amusement park just down the road. In this amusement park was a huge machine about the size of an 18-wheeler with trailer. There were hundreds of dials, wheels, whistles and lights in this machine. When it was turned on it was a precision of activity. The wheels turned, the gears rotated, piston rods moved steadily, the lights flashed, and the bells and whistles activated right on schedule. While all the kids ran to the roller coaster and the Tilt-A-Whirl, parents and grandparents sat around this machine and just watched it operate. As a kid, I was even fascinated by it. I stood there by my uncle on one summer afternoon with an ice cream cone melting over my fist. I was mesmerized. I finally asked my uncle, “What does this machine do?” He laughed out loud and showed me a little sign attached to the machine that read, “This machine doesn’t do anything—but doesn’t it do it well?” He laughed again—but I didn’t get the joke. I think I understand it better now that I have worked in churches for the past 30 years. Sometimes we are just like that machine. We are busy, active, and bustling about—but when it comes to the heart of New Testament ministry, we strike out. I believe many busy churches could post a sign on their door that read, “This church really isn’t doing anything—but aren’t we doing it well?”

A Christian magazine recently interviewed me about our church and I was asked what I thought the greatest danger facing our church in 2001 would be. I could have given a spiritual answer like, “We are battling against the forces of darkness: the world, the flesh, and the devil.” Or, “We face the danger of the increasing moral breakdown of our culture.” Both of those statements are true, but I told the interviewer I believe the greatest danger GABC faces is becoming so busy doing a lot a good things we neglect to do the very best things. I really think the Devil delights in keeping churches so busy doing “fluff,” they never get down to the real purpose of the church. When that happens, we confuse busy-ness for faithfulness.

The most successful people and organizations excel at the basics. One of my sports heroes was John Wooden, UCLA’s legendary basketball coach. He was the most successful college coach because every year he made his players concentrate on the basics. While some college coaches started practice each year with new offensive or defensive schemes, the very first thing John Wooden taught his players was how to put on their socks properly, so they wouldn’t get blisters. Then he taught them how to lace their shoes so the laces wouldn’t come undone. Every year when Vince Lombardi began his practices with the Green Bay Packers, he held up a football and said, “Men, this is a football.” Then he went over the basic rules and skills of the game. Every great coach would agree; teams that excel simply focus on the fundamentals. The key to winning is not having trick plays; it is in executing the fundamentals with excellence.

I have challenged our staff to simplify our church calendar in 2001 and focus on doing the basics with excellence. That’s why I’m preaching to you on Back to the Basics this month. We are going to look at six core values of our church.

We can find these basics by studying how the early church in Acts 2 functioned. Acts 2 contains the DNA of a healthy growing church. They weren’t perfect, but they reflected these six basic core values I’ll be talking about this month.

Acts 2:42-47. “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. 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. Everyday 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.”

Over the next few weeks I want to take each letter in the word B.A.S.I.C.S. and let it be the first letter of these six basic values.

I. BIBLE STUDY: THE CHURCH IN SMALL GROUPS

In verse 46, we are told the early church gathered in two different settings. They gathered in the “temple courts.” That would have been somewhere in the huge courtyards surrounding the Temple. After the Day of Pentecost there were 3,000 believers, so they needed a place large enough for the crowd to gather. We could call that what our kids call “big church.” That’s corporate worship and we’ll talk about it in a moment. But notice they also gathered in small groups, too. It says they “broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” The New Testament model is every Christian needs a large group experience of worship and a small group experience of fellowship. In our church, this small group experience is what we call Sunday School. The term “Sunday School” actually originated in London about 230 years ago when educator Robert Raikes offered literacy classes for children who worked six days a week. These children met at church and were taught how to read and write. It was truly a Sunday school.

For many years, Sunday School was only for children—and some adults think it is still only for children. What we call often call Sunday School is actually small group Bible study and it is for every person, regardless of his age. Many contemporary churches do not use the term “Sunday School” because unchurched folks do not know what it means. A friend of mine started a church outside St. Louis 12 years ago. They began calling their small groups “life groups.” Each letter stands for Love, Interaction, Friendship and Encouragement. Another church simply calls their Bible study groups “Small Church” to distinguish it from “Big Church.” What you call it is not as important as what happens in these small groups. From this passage, we can see:

Sunday School provides the ideal setting for:

1. PREPARING—We Teach the Word of God

Notice it said the early church was devoted to the “apostles’ teaching.” Because the New Testament hadn’t been written yet, it means the early church studied the Jewish scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament. In addition they listened to what Peter, James, and John and the other apostles taught about Jesus. These men told the new believers what Jesus had done and said. For us, it would be like reading the four gospels. The Bible is a special book.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” We believe the Bible is God’s Word to us—it is absolutely true. When the Bible speaks, God speaks. When you come to our church, whether it is the worship service or a Sunday School class, the Bible is taught. Our classes don’t teach current events. And we don’t teach the “quarterly,” we teach the Bible. The “quarterly” is simply a commentary or guide for the scripture. We believe studying the Bible *prepares* us to live our daily lives.

Sadly, there is an epidemic of Biblical illiteracy among Christians today. After interviewing thousands of Americans, George Barna has reported 74 percent of Americans believe, “There is only one true God who is holy and perfect, who created the world and rules it today.” But when asked “if there is any such thing as absolute truth,” 65 percent answered “no.” We’re in trouble, because we live in a culture where people want to believe in God but they don’t believe or they don’t know what the Bible says.

I’ve been told there are churches where people don’t even carry their Bibles to church. People tell me they come from churches where the Bible was read in the worship service, but it was never really preached or taught. That’s hard for me to imagine. To me, one of the most beautiful sounds is to hear the thousands of Bible pages rustling when I ask you to turn to a certain passage. By the way, I’m still a little suspicious of someone who claims to be a Christian but seldom, if ever, brings his Bible to church or Sunday School. I’m not saying you aren’t saved but there’s a good chance you are not a growing Christian. Coming to church without a Bible in your hand is like going to the golf course without clubs, or to the tennis court without a racket, or going fishing without any equipment. Bring your Bible, open it and mark it up. I love to see someone carrying a Bible that is falling apart from use. It is true that when you see someone who has a Bible that is falling apart, they usually have a life that isn’t falling apart!

Good Bible study will make you a better husband, a better wife, a better employee, a better boss, a better citizen, a better friend ... and oh yeah, it will tell you how to get from East Texas to heaven as well. As I’ve said before, whenever you hear the word “Bible,” you should think of the acrosstic Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. But Sunday School can’t merely be Bible study. Each class is like a small church where a sense of community and caring exists. You see

2. SHARING—We fellowship with the People of God

Sunday School is so much more than simply a Bible Study. If the only thing that ever happens in your small group Bible Study is teaching the Word, your class is really deficient. Every class must function like a small church. This is where a sense of community and caring is created. Those who aren’t involved in a small group Bible Study are missing out one of the greatest blessings of God. Because our church is so large, it is impossible to have real fellowship in this setting. During our greeting time, we may ask you to “fellowship” with each other, but that’s just a momentary greeting, not full fellowship.

Studies show on average you will know a maximum of 60 people in your church, whether the church has 60 members, 600, 6,000 or 60,000 members; you will probably only know about 60

of them by name. Obviously, in small churches, where there are only 60 to 70 people attending, you may know the names and the family background of every person in the worship service and true fellowship can exist on the congregational level. There’s certainly nothing wrong with small churches, unless they are determined to *stay* small. But the model in Acts 2 fits what is often called a mega-church profile today. When Acts 2:41 was written, the church in Jerusalem had over 3,000 members and they added another 5,000 by chapter 10. When you are a part of a large congregation, like here at Green Acres, or in Acts 2, there is no way you can experience true fellowship by simply attending big church.

What is fellowship? You could say it is “two fellows in the same ship.” The Greek word for “fellowship” is *koinonea*, which literally means “sharing.” A small group Bible study is the perfect setting to share your name. Nobody knows everyone by name in this room right now, but in a Sunday School group, there is somebody who knows your name. It’s where you can develop lasting friendships.

One of the best synonyms for “fellowship” is “friendship.” You may have friendship without Christian fellowship, but it is impossible to have true Christian fellowship without heartfelt friendship. In other words, you may have some friends who aren’t believers, but “*koinonea*” (Christian fellowship) will be absent from your relationship. But some of the best and dearest friends you’ll ever have in this life (and you’ll know ‘em forever) are those with whom you have true fellowship.

As parents, we always want our kids to “associate” with the right kind of people. That’s important for adults as well. You can have some friends who may lead you into doing the wrong things—but Christian friends, where there is true fellowship will always make you a better person. If you are new to Tyler, or a new Christian, it is important for you to develop some Christian friends. Where do you find them? You won’t find them by just attending worship services. But you’ll find some of the best friends you’ll ever have in your life in our small group Bible Studies—Sunday School classes.

Fellowship begins when you stand around before class starts, drinking your coffee and just visiting. My wife has always had a trick to force her class members to fellowship: She never sets up the folding chairs until she is ready for the class to start, that way class members are forced to stand around and talk; nobody can just walk in and sit down alone. (Our maintenance folks would be thrilled if every class did that so they wouldn’t have to set up hundreds of chairs each week!)

But fellowship continues beyond the class and you go into the homes of these folks to share food and fellowship. That’s why Sunday School socials or parties are so important. Sometimes, super-pious folks think a Sunday School class should only dig into the Bible—and any kind of party or social event is frivolous or unspiritual. Take a moment and look again at verse 46, it says they “broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” Thank you Lord, but eating together is simply a part of New Testament fellowship.

Now we often laugh because if there is anything Baptists are known for is our covered dish suppers—we love to eat! I heard about a group of first graders who were asked to bring a symbol

of their faith to school for show-and-tell. The Muslim boy brought a prayer rug, the Jewish youngster brought a Star of David; the Catholic girl brought a rosary and the little Baptist boy brought a casserole dish! We can laugh about that, but when we meet together and eat together, especially in each other’s homes, we are practicing the same kind of sweet fellowship the early church practiced.

The only place you develop that kind of fellowship is within small groups, which we call Sunday School classes. John Fawcett wrote the beautiful chorus: “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.” The third verse says, “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows, the sympathizing tear.” That leads into the third function of Sunday School classes:

3. CARING—We show the Love of God

Notice another characteristic of this church in Acts. The scripture says, “They gave to everyone who had needs.” That means that they *knew* the needs of their members and they *met* the needs of their members. Everyone has needs, but if you aren’t involved in a small group Bible study, chances are our church won’t even know about your need unless you tell one of us. How do we know when people are in the hospital, have a death in their family, or have a new baby? Ninety percent of the time we learn about it from their Sunday School class. Once again, like the church in Acts 2, there are too many people in our entire church family for us to know about every need. But if you are in a small group where people know you and know about your needs, they can minister to you and show you the love of Jesus. As a pastor, nothing thrills me more than to go into the surgery waiting room of one our local hospitals and see six or eight Green Acres folks sitting with a fellow member of their Sunday School class while a loved one has surgery. Whenever I see that, I think, “Here is a Sunday School class that is really working according to Acts 2.” I am so impressed when I visit in a home where there has been a death and members of the Sunday School class are there fixing food, answering the door, and basically just showing the love of Jesus. A couple of times a year, we hear from someone who says, “I was in the hospital, or I had a death in my family and there was nobody there for me.” In almost every case, that person wasn’t active in a Sunday School class—that’s why nobody knew about it.

Let me say it again. Every Sunday School class in our church is a small church and the teacher and workers serve as pastors and servants in that particular small church. That’s the *best* place for fellowship and ministry to happen.

II. ADORATION - THE CHURCH GATHERED TO WORSHIP

The “A” in the word BASICS stands for “Adoration.” You need both a small group experience of fellowship and a large group worship experience if you really want to grow as a Christian. Let’s look at these verses and learn about three elements always present in corporate worship:

New Testament corporate worship involves a sense of:

1. TOGETHERNESS—We are here!

I love the word “together.” It appears three times in these five verses. Verse 46 says they “met together” (large group) before they “ate together” (small group). There is private worship that takes place when you are all alone with God but then you come together with others who have the same feelings about God to worship together in what we call corporate or public worship. Private worship alone is not enough and public worship alone is not enough. We see the progression of both kinds of worship in Psalm 34:1-2 “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.”

There is something to be said for just “showing up” for worship. Just to attend is a big first step. If you claim to be a Christian, and you are lax in your participation in public worship, you are violating God’s word. Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” We ought to be more faithful to gather than ever before, because we see the day of Jesus Christ approaching closer than ever before. I don’t know when Jesus is going to return, but I promise you we are one week closer to it today than we were last week (which also happened to be last century and last Millennium as well!). That means in 2001 you should commit yourself to be more diligent to gather for worship.

Sadly, about 50 percent of the people on our church roll (and many other church rolls) seldom or never even attend worship. What are they saying by their absence? They are saying that to them, “worshiping God with my fellow believers is *not* a high priority for me.” They are saying there is something more important in their life than worshiping God. For many, they are saying “sleeping in” is more important. Others are saying, “playing golf, or tennis, or being on the lake, or shopping for antiques, or traveling to see grandmother” is more important than worshiping God.

Have you ever heard a back-slidden Christian make the following statement: “Well, going to church doesn’t make you a Christian.” If I had a nickel for every time that statement has been made and I could easily pay off the remaining cost of our new building! On the surface, that statement is true; going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a rodeo makes you a cowboy. You don’t have to go to church to become a Christian, but according to the scriptures you do have to gather regularly in church to be the kind of Christian God wants you to be.

Is attending worship every week a real priority in your life or is it something you do if you don’t have anything else to do that weekend? For these early Christians, church was their main priority. Did you notice they didn’t just gather every week, it says in verse 46 they gathered every day. The first step in worship is just showing up, to gather together with other believers to worship our Savior.

2. AWE AND WONDER—God is here!

Notice it says in verse 43 “everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.” Before you can truly worship, you must acknowledge the presence of God in this place and stand in awe at His majesty and greatness. When you see God

in all His glory, it will cause your jaw to drop. It will cause you to want to fall on your face before a Holy God.

The reason we gather together is *not* to sing songs and to hear a sermon. We gather to meet God and to worship Him. Jesus promised where two or three, (or two or three thousand) are gathered in His name He would be in the midst of that group. Jesus is here today. Do you sense His presence? If you don't, it's not God's fault; maybe you just haven't humbled yourself yet.

In the 19th century, people traveled for many miles to Plymouth Church in Brooklyn to hear Henry Ward Beecher, a famous preacher known for his simple but powerful messages. On one particular Sunday, Henry Ward Beecher was gone and he had invited his brother, Thomas, to speak in his absence. When Thomas walked into the pulpit, many folks were disappointed that they wouldn't get to hear Henry that day. Some people stood up and began to leave; others joined them. Henry raised his hand for silence and said, “Everyone who has come here today to hear Henry Ward Beecher may leave. But those who have come here today to worship God may remain.” Many returned with a new understanding of worship. How would you feel some Sunday if I just said, “Today, I'm not going to preach, we are just going to pray and sing more songs to Jesus.” What would your attitude be? Would you complain and grumble? You see, God is in this place and we are to worship Him.

A.W. Tozer wrote about this holy awe that should be in our worship services:

“I am not talking about the solemn attitude that pervades many churches today. In some churches they have the idea that if you create an atmosphere more like a funeral service you are reverencing God. That is not what being filled with awe in God's presence is about. As a matter of fact there have been times when people were so overcome by God's holiness and their lack of holiness that they fell to the floor under the burden of their sin, weeping and wailing. Being filled with awe can be loud sometimes. You are filled with awe when you have transcended your earthly view and caught a glimpse of the eternal glory of the living God. Like Isaiah in the Temple, when we see the Lord high and lifted up, we fall at His feet in humble repentance and surrender.”

The main reason we gather is because God is here—and we are to worship and adore Him!

3. CELEBRATION—So let's praise Him!

It says in verse 47 they were constantly praising God. When you sense the presence of Jesus, your first impression is to fall before Him in awe. But the next step is to rise up and praise Him. We are told to praise the Lord over 300 times in the Old Testament alone. It means to celebrate His presence and to brag on His greatness. When I was in the fourth grade, in public school, we recited Psalm 100 every morning in our classroom. I believe this chapter gives us God's design for corporate worship. “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all you lands. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing...” Wow, that's what I believe we should be doing every time we meet to worship. We aren't here to mourn a dead teacher; we are here to celebrate a risen Savior! That's enough reason to celebrate.

Vance Havner used to say, “Too many churches start at 11:00 o’clock sharp and end at 12:00 o’clock dull!” Have you ever heard of bars and places advertising a happy hour? Some of you will have to tell me what that means—but I like the term. Sunday morning worship ought to be the happy hour for every born again Christian! Worship is our opportunity to express our love and Adoration to God. As I’ve said many times before, thousands of people come to a worship service, but they never worship. They never express their praise and joy to God.

Did you see any of the bowl games? Bobby Bowden is an old friend of mine, but I was thrilled to see OU win the Orange Bowl. Could you imagine attending a football game of your favorite team and as you walk in the stadium we are handed a card reading, “Please enjoy the game, but we request that you remain seated and refrain from making any noise during the course of the game.” Could you imagine that? The team runs of the field—no cheers. Your team runs the opening kickoff 98 yards back for a touchdown. How long do you think you could sit still and be silent? I’m not saying we should behave like we do at a ball game, but worship should give us the chance to express our praise. I’ve never understood how some good folks holler like wild Indians on Saturday at the stadium and then sit like wooden Indians on Sunday morning. Worship is not a spectator sport. I pray all of us can fall so deeply in love with each other and with Jesus we can feel free to express our heartfelt worship. Now, I’m committed to make sure everything done in our services is done decently and in order, but I’d love for somebody to just jump up some Sunday and holler, “Glory Hallelujah, Praise the Lord! God is good!!!!” That would wake some of you up! We ought to feel the liberty to express our adoration of God in worship.

CONCLUSION

God wants our church to concentrate on the BASICS like small group Bible study where true fellowship occurs. On this first Sunday of a new century, and a new millennium, I want to issue a personal challenge to each of you to be an active part of a small group Bible study and to gather every Sunday with thousands of others to lift up Jesus’ name. My heart is on fire for Green Acres to become more of a caring community like the folks in Acts 2. He wants our church to be a caring community. The word community comes from the word “communion,” meaning “to share together.”

In the 1988 Winter Olympics, American speed skater Dan Jansen was favored to win a gold medal. The day before his first race, Dan received word his sister had died from a long bout with leukemia. Bearing the weight of his sorrow, he laced on his skates to win for his sister. On the first turn, he lost his balance and fell, causing him to lose the race. Four days later, in the 1,000-meter race he fell again. The whole country mourned over Dan Jansen’s failures.

According to *Sports Illustrated*, Dan received many letters of consolation. One letter among them was remarkable. It was from Mark Arrowood, a 30-year-old mentally disabled man from Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Mark wrote:

Dear Dan,

I watched you on TV. I am sorry you fell two times. I am in the Special Olympics. Seven years ago, right after my dad died, I won a gold medal in the Pennsylvania State Special

Olympics. Before we start each race, our teachers tell us to say, “Let me win, but if I can’t, let me brave in the attempt.” I want to share my gold medal with you because I don’t like to see you not get one. Try again next time.”

Inside the envelope, Dan found the gold medal Mark won in a track and field event.

When I read that story, I thought, “Now that’s what a caring community is all about. We love each other, we fellowship together, we worship together. If somebody needs something, we give them one of ours!” That’s real koinonia.

OUTLINE

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Timothy 3:16-17
2. SHARING–We fellowship with the People of God
3. CARING–We show the Love of God

ADORATION–THE CHURCH GATHERED TO WORSHIP

New Testament corporate worship involves a sense of:

1. TOGETHERNESS–We are here!
I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.–*Psalm 34:1-3*
2. AWE AND WONDER–God is here!
3. CELEBRATION–So let’s praise him!



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If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes