

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
HOLY PENTECOST SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 2023**

**“4 SIGNS OF A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH---ACTS 2:42—SIGN 1:
THE APOSTLES’ DOCTRINE”**

Today is one of the 2 or 3 greatest of all Holy Days----Pentecost. Today we celebrate when 50 days after Christ’s Resurrection the 3rd Person of the All-Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, came down upon the Apostles in Jerusalem. It was the birthday of the Orthodox Christian Church.

And the start of our first parish...How special that first congregation in Jerusalem must have been! Yet we right here in our congregation have the same essential they had---the Holy Spirit. He came down on us, too---when we were baptized, when we were chrismated. What happened to us is what happened to them—except we didn’t get the visible tongues of fire!

Acts 2 tells the story and we just heard it read a few minutes ago. Later in chapter 2, at verse 42, St. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us the 4 most essential things about that first parish. By focusing on these 4 things (I like to call them the Big 4), we can do so much for the Lord! Luke’s list is still totally relevant and important.

Before I read verse 42, let’s do a little guessing about what these 4 things are---what does St. Luke consider the 4 most important things for a congregation?

Guess #1---Something that comes up a lot when a new church is going to start up: “Location, location, location” (usually said like that in three’s!). A new parish needs a nice piece of land, to be on an important street, not far from a big highway..... Yes, location, location, location---that’s the thing. Let’s see how Luke says it..... Hmmm! He doesn’t mention location! Strange, some kind of mistake, I guess.

Well, I’ll try again---Guess #2---this is maybe the most obvious of all. A parish needs money....and lots of it. What could be better for a congregation than to have a big and healthy treasury! Let me see how St. Luke words this one....Hmmm! Strange that he left it out!

Well, one more try---Guess #3---can’t miss on this one. It’s just so essential---a nice and big church building. So, so important, and I’m glad we have one! Let me check here---Hmmm! No mention of the building! Wow, maybe it got lost in the manuscripts somehow. How could the church building

not be on the list? Oh, that's right—they didn't have church buildings back then. They met in homes!

I give up; I'm not even going to try a fourth guess. So let's just go ahead and read Luke's list in Acts 2: 42---what St. Luke says are the 4 most essential things for a congregation: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers." There are the Big 4: 1. Apostles' doctrine; 2. Fellowship; 3. The breaking of the bread; 4. The prayers.

None of my pitiful guesses are on the list! God blessed them greatly for focusing on the 4. As we read in verse 47—"And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." We have been growing and we get excited when we get a couple of new members in a month. But the Jerusalem church was really growing----new members daily! God really worked through those 4 essentials. They grew. They remained faithful. And they sent out missionaries to start new parishes leading to the growth of God's Church. And if we focus like they did on those 4, we can be blessed like they were.

So I'm going to do something I haven't done in quite a long time---a sermon series for a few weeks running. I'm going to use 4 Sundays to look at that list in Acts 2:42 one by one each week. 4 sermons on one verse may seem rather odd, but there is a lot in that one verse!

So today---#1 of the Big 4. To read from verse 42---"they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine". (Some translations give "teaching" for "doctrine"—no difference in the meaning.)

The Christians in Jerusalem were steadfast about the apostles' doctrine, about what the apostles taught them.

Some Christians say that "doctrine is not important". And some think it's a negative thing and say "doctrine divides". But true doctrine, the apostles' doctrine doesn't divide---it unifies. Having true doctrine is essential—Jesus Christ Himself taught it to the Apostles; and they taught it to the Church---and that includes us! We can trust the Apostles to have passed on accurately what the Lord taught them. They were trustworthy and steadfast to do that. They knew the truth from the Lord, they taught that truth to the Church. The Apostles lived for that true doctrine, and they died for it.

We can trust them. We can be secure in believing what they believed and handed down to the Church as a whole. Our beliefs are the same as those of Peter, Matthew, John, etc. We don't have to, and should not, make up our beliefs. And we should not believe what those outside the Apostles' Church,

our Orthodox Church, believe when it differs from the Apostles' doctrine.

Those outside our Faith may be very sincere and well-meaning. And to our shame, they may be holier in their personal lives than we are! But false beliefs in the long run always have bad results.

When you think about non-Orthodox groups, ask yourself the question----when did that denomination start up? A couple of years ago? 50 years ago? In the 1800s? In the 1500's? In the 1000's? Our church goes back a little further---to the Jerusalem parish in about 30 A.D.! Who are the founders of those other churches? How do they compare to the founders of our Faith----men like Thomas, Bartholomew, and James? That is why we are called the Apostolic church----because our founders are not later historical figures, but the Apostles themselves. And we today are still steadfastly holding to what verse 42 called "the Apostles' doctrine".

Don't waver, don't wander when some new religious teaching pops up. They always do. Perhaps they are big and exciting, something new and original. Something that seems to fit well with today's world, But where will that new church be a hundred years from now? If we stick to our Apostolic doctrine, and if Christ tarries in returning to the world, we will still be the same 500 years from now. The others won't be. There are denominations that started in a wave of excitement and enthusiasm over the last century or two that are now so different than they once were—they started with exuberant commitment and revivals and growth. And some of them now hardly believe in anything at all. A new and exciting type of church? Give it a hundred years and see what it is like then----most likely, not much what it's like now.

But in closing, we should not make personal judgements about individuals in other churches, even if some of their teachings are not true and apostolic.

They may truly love God and be very devoted to Him even if some of their doctrines are faulty because of what particular denomination or church they have been taught in. They, with partly untrue beliefs, may be more dedicated to Christ than we who have all correct beliefs. That is shameful for us, but it is sometimes true.

Judgment Day will come. As St. John says in his vision of that day in Revelation 21:13, on that day "the books" will be opened and each of us will be judged according to our works. I believe we Orthodox that day may face a

harsher judgment than other people. After all, God has blessed us with the total truth, the full Apostolic faith handed down to us from the Apostles. And yet---- how do we live? How our “our works”?--- to use St. John’s words. Someone who loved Christ and lived for Him even if some of their beliefs are wrong because of what they have been taught....think they will be saved. So instead of judging them (that’s God’s job!) we should be more concerned at looking at ourselves. We have it all----the True Faith, the Apostles’ doctrine. What do we do with it? What will the Lord say to *us* on that Day?

The solution to this frightening scenario is this---let us cling totally to the Apostles’ doctrine, #1 in Luke’s Big 4. And also live totally in full obedience and dedication to the Lord of the Apostles--- our own Lord Jesus Christ. And pray for God’s mercy!

May our Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on all of us on that day when we stand before what our prayers call the Dread Judgment Seat of Christ. Lord, have mercy!