

Acts 2:37-47 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved.

Every once and a while the oldest person in the world dies leaving the honor to another person. And inevitably when they are interviewed by someone on TV about their feat, this question is asked, "What's your secret?" Charlotte Benkner was 113 when she became the oldest women in America. When asked what her secret was, she responded that it was a matter of her genes and rarely eating candy or sugar. Kamato Hongo, the world's oldest person during last year, was 116 when she answered the question. She said her secret to longevity was not moping around. The oldest man currently alive is 113 years old. Fred Hale Sr. says that his secret is a tablespoon of honey and a tablespoon of bee pollen washed down with a swig of whiskey every day.

Today is Pentecost day. Pentecost day is the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Apostles. And through the gift of the Spirit given to these men, many people were called to repentance and Baptism. And through those Baptisms, God began to gather His people into His Church. For this reason we often talk about Pentecost day as the birthday of the Christian Church. The Church has existed ever since Adam and Eve first believed in our God, but the specific period of the New Testament Christian Church certainly began on Pentecost. Once the Spirit came, the Church began to grow.

It can be said that Pentecost Sunday is the day when we throw the Church a birthday party. And since Pentecost happened likely in the year 30 and we sit in 2004, we can say that the Church has lived to the good

ripe age of 1974 years old. And it is appropriate today that we ask of the Church today, “What’s your secret?” What is it that has kept a faith started by a crucified man and twelve rather ordinary men going strong for so many years?

In our three year series of readings, the Pentecost story is broken accordingly up into three parts. In the first year, we hear the actual account of the Holy Spirit falling on the Apostles and the beginning of Peter’s sermon to all those gathered for Pentecost. In the second year, we hear the rest of that sermon. And in this the third year, we hear the effect of that sermon which was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our text tells us that the people were cut to the heart when they heard about the Lord Jesus and their generation’s rejection of Him. They asked Peter what they should do. He told them to repent and be baptized. They did, and in so doing they received the Holy Spirit. Our text tells us that around 3000 people repented and were baptized that day alone.

But our text does not stop there. Not only does it tell us how these first Christians were brought into the faith, it also tells us how they were kept there. The rest of our text tells us what the secret to the longevity of the Christian Church has been from the very beginning. Having been baptized into the Lord, there were three things that kept them going. These three things could be referred as the three secrets to the longevity of the Christian Church.

The first thing we are told that they did was devote themselves to the doctrine or teaching of the Apostles. In others words, we are told that they gathered to hear the word of God given to the Apostles. The Apostles opened the Old Testament Scriptures to the people who gathered. They showed them how the whole Old Testament had pointed forward to Jesus and His work on the cross. The early Church gathered around the Old Testament and the Apostles’ teaching which they knew had been received from the Lord. They read the Word, they listened to the Word proclaimed, and they studied the Scriptures. The first secret to the longevity of the Christian Church is its utter dependence upon and belief in the Word of God which reveals to that Church its savior Jesus.

The second thing we are told that they did was break bread together. Before your mouths start watering for a good old fashioned Lutheran potluck, we must stop and really understand what this phrase mean. The phrase “to break bread” in the New Testament is not a reference simply to eating together, but to eating the

Lord's Supper together. Just as Jesus on Maundy Thursday had given thanks and broken bread to institute this very special meal, the early Christian Church gave thanks and broke bread often as they continued to celebrate this faith-sustaining meal. The second secret to the longevity of the Christian Church is a desire to receive the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of their sins.

Their last thing we are told that the first Christians placed as a priority was prayer. God spoke to them through His Word. He came to them through His Supper. And they responded by talking to God in prayer. They let God know the desires of their heart and prayed that God would keep His desires ever before them. As God spoke to them in His Word and they spoke to God in prayer, their relationship with the Father grew ever stronger through the Son. The third secret to the longevity of the Christian Church is fervent prayer to God.

For 1974 years the Church has survived and yes thrived based on three things: dependence upon and belief in the word of God, a desire to receive the Lord's Supper, and fervent prayer.

No one would even think of suggesting to Charlotte at 113 years old that perhaps she should start hitting the sweets if she wants to live longer. No one would suggest to Kamato after 116 years that she should sit around and mope a little if she wants to live longer. And no one would suggest to Frank that he has had enough honey, pollen and whiskey in his 113 years. For the longevity of their lives give some credibility to their secrets.

Likewise the longevity of the Christian faith gives credibility to its secrets. For in these secrets we see God's own chosen means to sustain His people.

People will always come along outside and inside the Church and assert that if the Church wants to survive it must change its ways. And it is certainly no different in our day. Churches and their pastors tell us that our blind dependence upon what the Bible says is irrational and naive. They tell us that we need to keep up with the times and embrace things like living together before marriage, homosexuality, and women pastors. They will tell us not to take the Bible so literally.

Our fellow Christians in other Church bodies tell us that believing in the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is just some Catholic idea us Lutherans held on to. And they tell us that trusting in the real

forgiveness offered in the Lord's Supper is foolishness. They will tell us to not really worry about celebrating it all that often because it really is no more important than any hymn or song we could sing.

And most people outside of the Christian Church tell us that praying is just a way of talking to yourself that our society allows without any fear of judgment. They tell us that mumbling in a room at night won't accomplish anything. They tell us that prayer is only as powerful as you think it is.

But we as Christians scoff at these ideas. Many new fads in the Church have come and gone. But these three remain: God's Word, His Supper, and prayer. We know that throwing away these three means would be ridiculous and deadly. But with all the encouragement to do so, we must be careful in our own lives. For if we rely not on God, we too can be coaxed into thinking that something must change. But it is not the case. So long as we continue in these three secrets of longevity, the Church will not only continue to survive but also to thrive. It will continue because these are the very means which God has chosen to sustain His Church.

Our lives indeed should show that these three things are at the center of each of our lives. This means that church should be full of people wanting to hear the Word. The people in Bible study should fill more than just the back few pews. People should look forward to receiving the Lord's Supper with great anticipation. And they should spend much time on their knees before God in prayer.

Today we must look for evidence of the importance of these three items in our lives. We must truly ponder whether anyone by our actions could tell their importance to us. How often is your Bible open? How often do you desire to receive the Lord's Supper? How often do you put aside all distractions to pray to Jesus?

Any deficiencies we find in our lives on this Pentecost day, we lay them as the foot of the cross. We confess that the Spirit given on Pentecost has brought us to recognize our sins and to desire forgiveness for them. And as we confess these things to our God, He graciously forgives us again. And as He forgives, He renews in us through that same Spirit the conviction that the secrets of longevity which He has used to sustain the faith for some 1900 years are the same means by which He does so today. His Word, His Supper, and prayer shall strengthen us unto the end. Amen.