



Love the Church for What She Does—Marks & Mission

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O God, You've heard our heart's cry. We long to see Your churches filled with people who sing Your redeeming grace and thank You for adding to Your church through the redemption that is in Christ. We pray that we would be instruments in Your redeeming hand, because without You we are not able to please You. We ask that You would mercifully grant Your Holy Spirit to direct us, rule our hearts, illuminate our minds and reveal Christ to us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit—one God—now and forevermore. Amen.

Please open your Bibles to Acts 2. I'm sure none of you has ever had a thought like this cross your mind, but just imagine that another Christian says to you, "You know, I could download thousands of sermons from preachers like John Piper, Matt Chandler and even Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Compared to them, my pastor sounds so-so at best. I can listen to Shane and Shane sing worship songs on Spotify—a little more polished and professional than my church on Sunday mornings. I can connect with other Christians on social media and have spiritual conversations, then when they start to annoy me, all it takes is one click to unfriend them. What's so special about the church? If there's better preaching on podcasts, better music on Spotify and better friends on social media, why do I really need to come? Why do I need to be part of the local church?"

A couple weeks ago Brett McCracken wrote an article for The Gospel Coalition entitled, "Nothing on Your Phone (Including TGC) Can Replace the Local Church." He asked this question:

Why is the rise in access to theological material coinciding with a decline in Christian church attendance? Could it be that our easy access to theological content is, in a twisted way, making us see church as unnecessary? Listening to a Christian podcast or devotional app, after all, is much easier than getting out of bed on Sunday morning and going to a church building. But is it the same?

Acts 2 helps us answer that question this morning. I'm not here to scold all of you church-going Christians about the Christians who are not coming to church. Instead, what I want to do is have you be compelled by a beautiful vision of what the church can be and what we see here in the

early church on the day of Pentecost. The number of Christian believers in Jerusalem skyrocketed from 120 to 3,120 in one day and it all happened through the Apostle Peter's preaching.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter preached on Pentecost and showed that all of us are sinners. We've all played a part in the crucifixion of the Son of God. But Jesus, God's Son, stood in our place. He took God's judgment for our guilt on the cross, dying so that we could be forgiven. He rose from the dead, He's reigning at the right hand of the Father and He will come again to judge the living and the dead, vindicating all who have trusted in Him. That's what Peter preached that day.

As he preached, the people who heard were "cut to the heart" and they said, "What shall we do to be saved?" They wanted to turn their life in a completely new direction, so they repented. They embraced Jesus as Lord and surrendered their lives to Him. They got baptized that day as a sign of their allegiance to Christ and devoted themselves to the community of believers whose lives were being transformed by Jesus. All that happened on the day of Pentecost, then they became part of the community. Let's read about that community, beginning in Acts 2:41.

Join me in worshiping the living Lord as He speaks to us through His written Word:

⁴¹ So those who received [Peter's] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Thanks be to God for His living Word.

This morning we're going to focus on the marks and mission of the church—what the church looks like and what the church does. I'm praying that you will be convinced of this main claim this morning: **God intends to do a work in the world and in our lives that can only be accomplished through the church.** Not on your iPhone, not through individual Christians living solitary lives, but through the community called the church, the body of Christ. God intends to do a work in the world and in our lives that can only be accomplished through the church.

In this passage we see a church filled with the Holy Spirit, and it's irresistible and irreplaceable. When the Spirit of God fills the people of God, He creates a compelling community, the kind of community that everyone in the world longs for, but no one in the world can create. We have a snapshot here of the early church—maybe we could call it the First Pentecostal Church—and we find here a great description of the marks and the mission of the church that the Spirit of Jesus is creating in the world.

Mark #1 – The church is a community devoted to learning Christ.

We see the first mark in verse 42: *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...”* They had a passion for learning. They weren't anti-intellectual. The word “devoted” means they stuck to it like glue. They were stubbornly, obstinately committed to the teaching of the apostles. They continued in it, persevered in it, chewed on it and savored it. They digested it and lived it out in their lives. No one in this church was bored or disinterested in the Word of God. People weren't shifting in their seats, wondering, “When will this be over?” These people were hungry. They couldn't get enough teaching.

Why was that? It was because these apostles were not making up their lessons. They weren't getting up and shooting the breeze. They weren't entertainers. They weren't preaching a man-made message, their own ideas, concepts or religious experiences. These men had been instructed by the Master Himself. These men had been with Jesus and they were preaching about the One they loved—the Lord Jesus Christ. These apostles had become living letters of their Lord. Jesus was being reflected in their lives by His grace through the fullness of the Spirit. They'd been taught by Him how all the Old Testament Scriptures were looking forward to Him and how they all found their fulfillment in Him.

If you read Luke 24, you'll see that Jesus met some of His disciples while they were walking to a place called Emmaus. Jesus had risen from the dead, but the disciples did not yet recognize Who this was walking beside them. Jesus began talking with them and opened all the Scriptures, showing them how Moses and the prophets and the Psalms—every part of the Old Testament—were pointing to Him.

Jesus entrusted this teaching to the apostles and gave them the authority to show God's people how the eternal plan of God, unfolding throughout the Old Testament, was all fulfilled in Him. The authority of the apostles' was accredited, as we read in verse 43, my many wonders and signs that were being done through them. Just as Jesus' miracles confirmed His identity as the Son of God, the miracles of the apostles confirmed their preaching of Jesus Christ. The signs and

wonders they were doing demonstrated that their teaching came with the authority of Christ Himself.

So the people were listening to all this, seeing all this, and becoming devoted to it. “Give me more of Jesus and His Word,” was what they were crying. Because this Word points to a living Savior Who came to us as a man—as we sang this morning, “Come, behold the wondrous mystery...” Jesus lived a pure and righteous life of love. He was crucified for our sins, then He died and was buried. But He rose victorious from the grave. They couldn’t get enough of this teaching.

Friends, I want you to understand that we’re not missing out on what the early church had. In fact, we have more. The apostles’ teaching has been preserved for us in the New Testament. We now have the whole counsel of God in our hands and we have the same Holy Spirit in our hearts, teaching us as we read. We can now read the Old Testament through the lens of its fulfillment in Christ, studying the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation as Christian Scripture, as a message about Christ and as the sufficient rule for our faith and conduct.

What a gift! What a treasure we have in God’s Word. If the teaching of this church is not the apostles’ teaching, then you should ask me to repent. If that doesn’t work, you should ask me to resign. If that doesn’t work, you should ask the elders to fire me. I’m pretty sure that would work.

But friends, if the teaching of this church is the apostles’ teaching, if the Word of God is being presented and Jesus is being lifted up, and you’re not hungry and you’re not eager to devote yourself to the teaching, then you should repent. You should plead with God, “Renew a right spirit within me, a spirit that hungers and thirsts for the living Christ and His Word” (Psalm 51:10; Mathew 5:6). Ask God to give you a passion for learning His Word.

Here’s what I really want to sink in this morning. The word “disciple” means “learner.” When you come to Jesus, you’re beginning a lifelong journey of learning from and about Jesus. This week, the women here are beginning a Bible study on Philippians and they’re excited about being learners. It’s a great opportunity to join with them.

I heard someone named John Percival say this, and it really resonated with me as a vital word for our church: “Great preaching is not the mark of a great church. Great learning is. The ultimate test of a church is not whether you have a great preacher in the pulpit. It’s whether you have great learners.”

Friends, we believe God does wonderful things through preaching. But many churches have had great preachers, yet they’ve lost their first love. They’ve declined in spiritual power and gospel influence, because the people were more enamored with hearing great preaching than they

were devoted to being great learners. Great preaching is not what makes a great church. Great learning is.

During the time of the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord exposed the sin of His people like this. He said in Ezekiel 33:30-32 (NIV):

- *“As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.’”* They’re all saying, “We’ve got a great preacher in Ezekiel. You should hear his sermons. Come, listen to our preacher preach.”
- God says, *“My people come to you, as they usually do.”* It’s their habit.
- They *“sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice.”* They’ve got great preaching, but they’re not learning.
- *“Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.”* They come distracted by all the desires they have for this world and what they can acquire here.
- God says, *“Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.”* They’ve become connoisseurs of great preaching. They love to hear. They love to be entertained. It’s like love songs—but they’re not going to obey it. They’re not going to practice it.

Friends, great preaching and great teaching will not alone transform the world. It’s when a community of great learners devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching that the church becomes an irresistible, life-giving force in the world. I hope you’re not coming to New Covenant just because you’re attracted to or devoted to a preacher. I hope you’re coming because you’re devoted to learning the teaching of the apostles. And I hope that those who preach here are not preaching themselves but preaching Christ and Him crucified, risen, reigning and returning. I hope we are devoted to teaching the apostles’ teaching.

Know that you have not learned the Word until you’ve lived it, and you haven’t lived it until it’s taught you to love. That’s the goal of all God’s teaching. It’s love that issues from a pure heart, a clear conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5). You haven’t learned it until you’ve lived it and you haven’t lived it until it’s taught you to love. Some churches are known for great learning, but not for great loving. Other churches are known for great loving, but not for great learning. This church in Acts 2—the First Pentecostal Church—is filled with the Spirit and is known for great learning and great loving.

Mark #2 – The church is a community devoted to costly fellowship.

Look again at Acts 2:42: *“They devoted themselves to...the fellowship...”* Now, I know it’s hard for us to think about fellowship without thinking about coffee and donuts, but the word fellowship here is not just some casual time when you mingle for a little bit before you go home to a great meal. It’s the word *koinonia* which means partnership. It’s the same word that is used when two colleagues go into business together. They both have skin in the game. They both share a common goal. They have a stake in one another.

Friends, this fellowship is something God creates. We don’t make it happen. He calls us to Himself, then He joins us to one another. He calls us, like Peter did in verse 40, *“Save yourselves from this crooked generation,”* then He unites us to His chosen generation, the church. This fellowship is something God creates; it’s a gift God gives. What a privilege to be united to the body of Christ, to be made part of the fellowship.

It’s a gift God gives, but it’s also a commitment God calls us to pursue which will show up in how you spend your time. Look at how much this church loved being together in verse 44: *“And all who believed were together...”* You saw them together a lot. Verse 46: *“Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”*

Devotion to the fellowship means you don’t just love people who are similar to you. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that just because you’ve got three or four friends in the church, you’re devoted to the fellowship. No. You might just be devoted to your own little comfortable clique. God wants to draw us out of our natural comfort zones into costly relationships. The fellowship God creates is not defined by our race. It’s not defined by our social or economic status. It’s not defined by choices on how we educate our children. It’s not defined by our political preferences or our personality types.

The fellowship God creates unites you to people who are really different from you. It unites you to people who are a lot older than you and a lot younger. It unites you to people from Africa, Asia, South America and Europe. It unites you to people from the Midwest and the deep South. Being devoted to the fellowship means you go out of your way to meet and get to know people you don’t know as well.

It means you learn to enjoy all types of people who are learning to love Jesus, asking God to show you evidences of His grace in their lives and to help you learn from their experiences. You invite them into your home; you listen to their stories; you give sacrificially to meet the needs of the body. That’s costly fellowship. Look at verses 44-45. What do they say? They *“...had all things in*

common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

Friends, no one was forcing them to do this. Communism says, “What’s yours is mine.” Christianity says, “What’s mine is yours.” This is a big focus for Luke, who wrote the book of Acts and also the Gospel of Luke. He knows that following King Jesus means you become a generous person. You become the kind of person who is not owned by what you own, whose possessions do not possess you.

Luke alone tells us the story about the rich fool who built barns and had plenty, then God came to him and said, “You fool. Don’t you know that this very night your soul is going to be demanded of you? You’re not going to live to enjoy all this. What are you living for?” (Luke 12:13-21). Luke alone tells us about God’s great banquet that people would not attend because they had fields and cattle they had to tend to (Luke 14:12-24). He also tells us the story of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-13) and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

God is saying through Luke, “Don’t let your heart be ruled by your things.” The needs of the body are meant to be supplied by the rest of the body. We are to care for one another and make sure everyone’s needs are met.

So here’s a test. How much has it cost you to be devoted to the fellowship this year? What’s it costing you? If it hasn’t cost you anything, you may need to ask the Holy Spirit, “What needs to change in my life today to realign with Your priorities?”

True fellowship is costly. It’s not about getting my needs met. These early Christians weren’t looking for a feel-good sermon. They weren’t trying to find a safe-friend group. They weren’t coming to church thinking, “What’s in it for me?” They were giving, giving. I like how Brett McCracken puts it: “Christians are not meant to be consumers; we’re meant to be servants. And Christianity is not merely content; it’s an embodied, lived community.” We need to hold on to that. We need a vision of that in the 21st century.

I love it when I see this in the church. I’ve seen people drop off envelopes full of cash at this church office, saying, “Give this to a person who’s in need and I don’t want them to know who it came from.” I love that. I’ve seen church members take a family on vacation who probably would not have been able to afford doing it themselves. I love seeing the depth of relationships and joy that come from that.

I’ve seen cars given away and houses rented for next to nothing. I’ve seen a single mom go out in the middle of the night to help an older person in our church who urgently needed to get to the hospital. I’ve also received that again and again—costly fellowship from the body. If you

withdraw into iChurch on your iPhone, you're going to miss out on the blessing of giving sacrificially. You're also going to miss out on the humbling experience of receiving the costly generosity of your brothers and sisters when you're in need.

Mark #3 – The church is a community devoted to joyful and reverent worship.

There's another thing you're going to miss. You're going to miss corporate worship which is the third mark of the church we see in this passage. The church is a community devoted to joyful and reverent worship. They found delight in making much of God. Look at Acts 2:42: "*They devoted themselves to...the breaking of bread...*" which almost certainly refers to a fellowship meal that then flowed into the Lord's Supper—communion—"*...and the prayers*" which refers to prayer services or prayer meetings.

Prayer was the lifeblood of the early church. This is what the disciples were doing in the upper room while they were waiting for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on the day of Pentecost. They were praying in one accord. As you turn through the book of Acts, you're going to see them praying again and again. When they were persecuted, they prayed. When they faced a dispute among the widows about the distribution of food and they needed guidance to know how to deal with that practical problem, what did they do? They prayed.

When Peter was arrested and thrown into prison, they prayed throughout the night. They prayed together in formal settings and informally. Look at verse 46. It took place day by day as they attended the temple, as they were in the temple courts. They participated together in the formal liturgies and prayers of the temple worship. They could see, "This is all pointing to You, Jesus." They stayed connected to the institutional religion the prayers and liturgies that took place there.

But that wasn't enough for them. The Holy Spirit was making Jesus so real to them and pouring the Father's love into their hearts so richly, that temple worship wasn't enough. After they were in the temple, they said to one another, "Let's go over to someone's house and let's keep praying together." So they'd go over to the person's house, they'd eat together with glad and generous hearts. As they broke bread together, someone would stand up and say, "Remember our Lord Jesus, how on the night He was betrayed, He took bread. And after He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you.'" They'd have the Lord's Supper together.

So there was formality and informality. But there was another balance as well. There was joy in their worship and there was reverence. Look at verses 46 and 47. They were eating with what kind of hearts? Glad and sincere hearts, generous hearts. They were praising God and

enjoying the favor of all the people. As they ate, they kept saying, “Oh, our God is so great.” They’d talk about Him and praise Him. They did so gladly—the word is exuberant—and with sincerity, with wholehearted hearts.

This is what it was like to be a part of that church. You’d go to a meal and everyone would be praising God together. Now, how long can you praise God without singing? You’ve just got to break into song, because that’s what the Psalms say. “Rejoice with singing.” So they’d sing. Christians are a singing people and the fruit of the Spirit is joy. They were glad about this. It wasn’t stiff. It wasn’t solemn. It was joyful.

I love how John Stott says it: “It is right in public worship to be dignified, but it is unforgiveable to be dull. At the same time, their joy was never irreverent. If joy in God is an authentic work of the Spirit, so is the fear of God.”

That’s what was happening too. Look at verse 43. The word awe there is fear. “*Awe came upon every soul...*” That’s everyone—Christians and non-Christians alike. They were all filled with awe when they heard the teaching of the apostles and when they saw what the Holy Spirit was doing through them in miraculous signs and wonders. God was a stunning, awesome, present reality—and He was with them. God was not some tame, distant, silent deity. They were filled with awe in His presence.

When you look at their worship, you see this combination of qualities:

- formal and informal
- prayers and praises
- fellowship meals and the Lord’s Supper
- joy and reverence

Do you find a lack of balance in your own worship? Do you tend to tilt one way or the other? Are you a “joy, joy, joy” person, but haven’t thought about the fear of God much? Or are you really in awe, but it’s heavy with very little joy?

God wants us to have both. The Holy Spirit creates both in the community He is forming. Friends, you can’t get that on your iPhone. You can’t get that through Livestream. You can only experience that by actually gathering with the church.

Now, if verse 42 is the only thing we learn about the marks of the church—that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and to prayers—it would be lopsided and unbalanced. There’s something missing if all you’re looking at is verse 42.

If the church was all about teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer, that would be a wonderful church for believers, but an essential piece is missing.

As much as the First Pentecostal Church enjoyed all these things they were doing together , they did not for a moment forget that there was a world of lost sinners who needed to hear the gospel. They worshiped daily, but they also witnessed daily. They “gossiped the gospel” wherever they went which we know is true because of what we read in verse 47. Look at the last sentence of this paragraph. It’s an amazing sentence: *“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”* People cannot hear the gospel without a messenger.

Mark #4 - The church is a community God grows as He empowers His people to be Christ’s witnesses.

Notice, it was the Lord Who was adding to their number—not they themselves. We can’t add to the church. Only God can do that. And notice the Lord was adding those who were being saved, not just those who were becoming a little more religious. God never adds people to His church without saving them, and God never saves people without adding them to His church.

God doesn’t want big churches full of unsaved people, nor does God want a bunch of Christians who are disinterested and distant from His church. When the church looks like the church we see in Acts, then it will be the kind of church people want to be part of. It will be unignorable by the world. It will be irresistible to the people God is drawing to Himself. How did the church get this power to witness like they did?

Look back at Acts 1:8. These are the very last words Jesus spoke before He ascended to the Father. He said to His disciples, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* That’s what’s happening here in Acts 2. There are 3,000 newborn Christians and they’re already empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem. The Lord is adding to their number day by day.

Friends, years ago, one of our elders and his wife started praying for their neighbors in Geneva every day. They’ve been doing that for a long time. A few weeks ago I heard this elder say, “I am powerless to connect with my neighbors. I can’t make it happen.” And he prayed, “Lord, I cannot reach my neighbors. I am totally dependent on You. I need You to make the connection. I need You to fill me with Your Spirit.” Then last weekend one of their neighbors just said, “I want to invite the whole neighborhood over for dinner” and he did. They had a wonderful meal. At the table, a wonderful opportunity opened up for our elder and his wife to witness about Christ for

about 45 minutes with one of their neighbors—and it happened in the most natural and winsome way. That’s the Holy Spirit working through His people.

When we realize how much we need the Holy Spirit, it’s amazing how He comes to our aid. We don’t live in a time in redemptive history when we’re still praying like the disciples in the upper room for the Holy Spirit to show up. No, He has come. He is with us. He indwells His church. We live in the age of the Holy Spirit. This is the redemptive period we are in—the age of the Spirit.

I believe the Holy Spirit doesn’t want to be taken for granted. The Holy Spirit doesn’t want to be forgotten or ignored. The Holy Spirit doesn’t want to be treated as if His presence or His power are optional. The Holy Spirit works in response to prayer. How much of a difference would it make to us if the Holy Spirit removed His presence from our fellowship? I don’t believe He’s going to do that, but I pray that we would be the kind of church that is so earnestly dependent on the Holy Spirit that we would notice His absence immediately—and we would cry out, “Holy Spirit, we need You.” I pray that we would not want to gather on a single Lord’s Day, have a single meeting, Bible study, Sunday School class, youth group gathering or preach a single sermon without consciously and eagerly looking to God the Holy Spirit for the power which He alone can supply. I pray we would be consciously, explicitly dependent on Him. “Lord, we are powerless. We don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on You. Fill us, Holy Spirit” (2 Chronicles 20:12).

That’s the kind of church God is pleased to grow. Sometimes it happens in a great downpour of blessing, like He did on the day of Pentecost, adding 3,000 in one day. Often it happens in a steady shower of rain, daily adding to their number those who are being saved. But right now, any honest Christian has to admit we’re living in a dry season. We’re living with a trickle of new life here and a trickle there, in a time when much of the growth in churches consists of Christians who are going shopping for a church that will better meet their needs. We certainly aren’t seeing the Lord adding to our number daily those who are being saved.

Let’s be honest. I love our church and I love what God is doing here. I believe the Holy Spirit is working wonderfully in this church. But I believe a passage like this should grab us. It should compel us. It should move us to pray, “God, make us the kind of people who are ready to have added to our number daily those who are being saved.”

Charles Spurgeon poked a little fun at the mentality of churches who don’t really long to see growth. He said, “Some churches, if they have an addition once in every 12 months, make as much noise over that one as a hen does when she has laid an egg. Now, the early church would not have been content with so small an increase.”

So what should we do, Spurgeon? Well, if all the members of the church were daily teaching about Jesus Christ from house to house, a daily sowing would bring a daily reaping. If we were daily praying with earnestness and daily using every effort we could by the power of the Holy Spirit, and if daily the church lived in fellowship with their Master, we would soon see added to it daily those who are being saved. So Charles, why don't we see it in many churches? Why? Because many churches do not believe in it. Here's the paragraph by Spurgeon that caught me:

God will not cause His children to be born where there is no one to nurse them; He will be sure not to send converts to churches which do not want them... He loves to see His people watchful for new converts and watchful over them.

The Good Shepherd would have us feed His lambs, gather them in from the cold field of the world, carry them to some warm sheltered place and nurture them for Him. When He sees a church ready to do that, then He will send them His lambs, but not 'til then.

Let's pray. Lord, make us a church ready to do that. Make us a people very aware of our need for the power of the Holy Spirit. Create in us, Lord, a devotion to the fellowship that's costly, where every member is loved and every need is provided for. Create in us worship that rejoices with trembling in Your presence. Renew in us a right spirit that is devoted to the apostles' teaching we find in Your Word.

Make us a compelling community here in the Fox Valley, because there are lots of people who, if they are not added to Your church, will spend eternity apart from You. We pray this would burden us. We pray this would move us. We pray that we would not be content with just a trickle here and a trickle there. We ask, Lord, for showers of blessing. We ask, Lord, not for ourselves, but for Your name. We ask not for our church alone, but for Your church in America. In Your mercy, would You bring a downpour of gospel awakening upon Your church in our nation?

Lord, as we gather now at Your Communion Table and experience the breaking of the bread together, may be who love You know that we have met with Jesus. May You knit our hearts more closely to You and to one another. May You strengthen us by Your grace so that we can be sent into this world empowered by Your love and presence to be Your witnesses. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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