

Examples of Spiritual Fitness In The Life of This Church
Hebrews 11:4

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

INTRODUCTION:

Communication can break down very easily. I recently read about a woman who owned ferrets and was walking two of them on leashes. She passed an elderly gentleman who asked, "What are those?" and she said "Ferrets." He acted surprised and exclaimed, "No way! Those are parrots!?" She said, "No, not parrots. Ferrets! You know, like weasels!" And he said, "Those are BEAGLES???"

I don't want any misunderstanding this morning. I want to try to make sure that you and I are starting from the same place. Our theme for 2010 is "Fit For Life" and since the first of the year, I've been addressing the subject of motivation to be spiritually fit. I've talked about the importance of motivation and then I have tried to help us become motivated by looking at some historical examples of spiritual fitness. We've looked at Old Testament examples and at New Testament examples. During the period from Palm Sunday through Easter, we will look to Jesus as the ultimate example of spiritual fitness. But for this week, I want to bring the subject closer to home: much closer to home. I want to look at examples of spiritual fitness from the life of Clay City Christian Church.

In the life of every congregation, there are some people who helped to shape it into the church it has become. This morning, I want to take some time to tell the story of Clay City Christian Church. Because the church is people, not a building, a budget or a board, the history of Clay City Christian Church is the story of people whose lives made a difference. Many have already passed from this life into their eternal reward. But like Abel, by faith, they still speak even though they have died.

I. The Start of the Church Was Planned

An Elder George P. Slade of Centralia, IL, had been appointed to be a Christian Church evangelist for Southern Illinois. Slade was looking for locations to plant new churches so they could reach lost people for Christ.

A man by the name of Greenbury Owens (sometimes also spelled "Greenberry" and sometimes "Greenburg") had moved to Clay City in 1869 or 1870. Owens had a Christian Church background and was disappointed that there was no independent Christian church in Clay City so in 1871 he contacted Elder Slade and invited him to come to Clay City to establish an independent Christian Church.

On March 10, Slade began an evangelistic meeting for the purpose of starting a church. The next day, March 11, 1871, the Clay City Christian Church was officially organized with ten founding members: Edward William Schooley, Greenbury Owens, J.T. Evans, O.D. Schooley, George W. Bailey, Martha Owens, Philadelphia Schooley, Josephine Driskell, Catherine Livings and Sarah A. Basset. Some of these original ten members, like Greenbury Owens, had been members of independent Christian Churches in other places before moving to Clay City so they were quite happy to have a new but familiar church of which to become a member.

Elder Slade continued his evangelistic meeting for about three weeks. During that time, another 27 members were added to the newly formed Clay City Christian Church.

At the end of that three-week meeting, the young church decided to call a mature evangelist, John A. Williams, to come the fourth Sunday of every month to work with them.

Now, don't lose the chronology here:

- Clay City Christian Church began to meet on March 10, 1871 on the first day of a three-week evangelistic crusade.
- At the end of those three weeks, around April 1 of 1871, they called their first paid minister, who began his service with them on the fourth Sunday of April.
- And the first thing their new preacher, John A. Williams did, was to host a two-week evangelistic crusade! These evangelistic meetings extended into the middle of May. During that time, another 17 members were added to the church – for a total of 44 members in about two months.
- On the fifth Sunday of May, Elder Slade came back to Clay City and conducted yet another protracted meeting of several days' length and an additional 18 members were added to the church.
- The fourth Sunday of July, John A. Williams decided it was time to have another revival so he conducted the fourth evangelistic crusade in five months and 24 more were added to the church.
- By the end of the first year of its existence, Clay City Christian Church had 105 members!

During that first year, on October 3, 1871, the church had a groundbreaking for a building of their own. They had been meeting in a local Methodist Episcopal church up to that time. Now catch this: the church had a groundbreaking on October 3 and within six weeks, they had the brick walls erected, a roof on the building, windows in the walls, stoves were in place and they were meeting in their new facility. In six weeks!!

You may know that the church continued to meet in that building until August of 1920 when lightning struck the building and it was destroyed by fire. Attempts were made to organize the members to build another building but these were unsuccessful and the Clay City Christian Church, after less than fifty years of existence, disbanded.

For 29 years, there was no independent Christian Church in Clay City.

In 1928, Pearl Willis was the preacher at the First Christian Church in Flora. He saw a need and an opportunity in Clay City and he wanted to see a church planted here again. So he assigned Gerald Durre, a student assistant minister at Flora, to take a census of Clay City to determine the prospects for reorganizing an independent Christian Church in the community. The results of the census looked favorable and Howard Yonaka, who was preaching at Sailor Springs at the time, was asked to rally those who had expressed a desire to reorganize the church.

For ten months, Howard Yonaka taught in private homes and held Bible classes every Wednesday evening. On August 21, 1949, 29 years and 10 days after fire destroyed the building of the Clay City Christian Church, the church was reorganized in a meeting in the former Masonic Lodge above Sunday's Ice Cream Shop in downtown Clay City. This reorganization of the church was not only news in Clay County, it was the featured story on the front page of the November 12, 1949 CHRISTIAN STANDARD, the national magazine of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ in America.

The dedication service for the new building was held on September 18, 1949 and at that service, it was decided to conduct a three-week evangelistic meeting starting the very next week! Notes from the time record that the building was filled almost every night and many nights the only space for latecomers to hear was standing room space in the vestibule. There were 22 charter members and 24 more were added during that protracted revival.

All of the preceding is background information to make this point: In 1871 when this church began it was not by accident. The independent Christian Churches in Southern Illinois had decided they wanted to reach the lost and that planting new churches was the way to do it. Elder George P. Slade was hired to do that job. Greenbury Owens invited him to come to Clay City to start a church and within a year, a congregation with 105 members had been firmly established.

Almost 30 years later, when the Clay City Christian Church was reorganized, it was not by accident. Pearl Willis and the folk of First

Christian Church in Flora saw a need and an opportunity and they did what needed to be done to get this church started again.

Gardens are not planted by accident. Orchards are not planted by accident. Crops are not planted by accident. And neither are churches. The start of this church was planned and it was executed by people of vision who were spiritually fit enough to see the opportunity and seize the opportunity. Their decisions affect us to this day. And their example should be having an impact on us to this day.

II. **The Study of the Word Was Primary**

In your bulletin, you should have an insert listing most of the previous ministers of Clay City Christian Church. Those names from 1871 through 1904 were taken from a copy of the Clay County Advocate newspaper from August 4, 1904. I am indebted to Harvey Cash for allowing me to use that treasured resource.

I want to read for you what the Flora newspaper wrote about those early preachers.

"The young church was very fortunate in securing that grand old veteran of the cross, Elder J.A. Williams as its first minister. He had long been a preacher and had much experience in teaching the churches young and old how to keep house for the Lord.

"Elder Williams was succeeded by that deep thinker and close reasoner, J.W. Sprigg and he by the earnest and faithful Erustus Lathrop, and he by the fine word painter, Charles B. Black, whose term of four years was greatly enjoyed by all. He was followed by the generous big hearted Kentuckian, Marshall Reid, and by Dr. J.T. Baker, and he by the honest John A. Mavity. Then came W.D. Ingram the noted church builder, and he was followed by the plain gospel preacher, Daniel Logan, and by the boy preacher, Philo Ingram. Then came the logical and unceasing worker, R.H. Bateman, who was followed by the kind and gentle Wilford Field. Then came the enigmatic P.M. Phillips, then the earnest S.G. Battenfield. Then four years of J.A. Battenfield came and he suited the church so well that they gave him a call to stay another year. He was followed by the gifted and eloquent Walter Kline. The last two named did the church harm as they captured and carried away with them two of our best working young sisters, but we know that our loss was their gain. Brother Kline was followed by E.S. Thompson and he by the present minister, Arthur A. Brown.

That is a lengthy quote to read but I hope you caught the descriptors of the earliest preachers of this church: they were men who knew the word and taught it well.

It was in that same vein that the church was reorganized under the teaching of Howard Yonaka. Yonaka came to Clay City with a wealth of experience as a Bible scholar and teacher. Two years later, he left the church well-grounded in the Word because of his systematic instruction in the Bible.

Over the years, Clay City Christian Church was blessed to have some noted Bible scholars who came to preach for the church and also some outstanding Bible teachers who volunteered from their own ranks. In addition, Clay City Christian should take some satisfaction in the number of preachers they hired for whom this was their first ministry and who learned their craft here then went on to outstanding service as preachers, professors and parachurch professionals in this country and abroad.

All of this is because, historically, priority was given to the study and the teaching of God's Word. The people of Clay City Christian Church have always been a people of The Book. As a congregation, we still benefit from the firm foundation of spiritual fitness that has long been a part of who we are.

III. The Structure of the Ministry Was Partnership

Another distinctive in the DNA of Clay City Christian Church is that ministry here was always a partnership. The earliest preachers of this church came one Sunday a month to help the church get established. The other three or four weeks out of the month, local men preached and taught. The ministry of the Word was a partnership.

The administration of the church was a partnership. The hired evangelist or preacher was never considered a mere employee of the church: he was a partner in ministry. It is significant that in the earliest days of the church, the salaried ministers were called "Elder". Like Elder George P. Slade and Elder John T. Williams. In those days, the preacher was considered a member of the team of elders who led the church. He was not above the elders nor was he beneath them – he was among them. This was a direct application of what Paul wrote in I Timothy 5:18 where he taught,

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

These men had the honor of serving the church and had the double honor of doing so fulltime. They directed the affairs of the church well and their work was preaching and teaching. So they were considered elders in the church, serving alongside those who did so as unpaid volunteers.

As I have already indicated, the teaching ministry of the church was also a partnership between the trained and salaried preachers and teacher and also those willing volunteers within the church.

Leadership, administration, education, ministry, stewardship – in all ways, the work of the church ought to be a partnership of the people under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That is the heritage that was passed along to us and that is the heritage we must pass along to those who will come after us.

CONCLUSION:

The old adage is that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. It is also true that a chain is only as long as its last link. There is a chain of faith that extends to us. It is not unbroken because there was that 30-year period when Clay City Christian Church had disbanded. But there is a chain of faith that extended for almost fifty years, that was re-established and that has extended for over 60 more years. And it extends to us. We dare not be the last link. We must pass along the faith of our forefathers to generations yet unborn. We do that as we live out Paul's admonition to Timothy in II Timothy 2:1-2 – ² *You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*

I am asking you today to respond to the invitation to be one of those reliable Christians who will take the message that was entrusted to us and pass it along to others who will then be qualified to pass it along to still others.

INVITATION: #404 – *“Faith of Our Fathers”*