

The Gospel Creates Community

Acts 2:42-47

As long as I can remember people have debated what the church should be and what the church should do. Sometimes the question is posed, “Should the church focus primarily on becoming internally strong and mature or primarily on reaching people outside the church who need to enter into a relationship with Jesus?” I think if we could ask that question to Jesus’ original followers, they’d say, “That’s a bad question. . . a false dichotomy. The two go hand in hand.”

Today’s passage, Acts 2:42-47 describes the first church that ever existed, the church in Jerusalem. What we’re going to see is that the gospel creates a community that is strong and vibrant and maturing. And that is exactly the type of community that puts the gospel on display and that God uses to lead other people to Christ. I hope that you leave here today with a vision for this church being that type of community.

Let me set the stage from last week. We saw last week in Acts 2 that on the day of Pentecost Peter stood before a crowd of people in Jerusalem and said (verse 36):

36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The people in the crowd were “cut to the heart” because seven weeks earlier they had cried out “Crucify him!” and now they realize that he is “both Lord and Christ.” He is in the position of power and authority at God’s right hand. Did this mean that Jesus would condemn them forever? The crowd asked the right question - a question that every single one of us should ask at some point - “What shall we do?” Here’s Peter’s answer:

38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Honestly, this was by far the best news they had ever heard. If they repented and were baptized, Jesus was not only not going to condemn them; he was going to give them “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In verse 41 Luke writes:

41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Today’s passage, Acts 2:42-47, makes clear that ***the gospel created a community***. People repented and believed and were baptized individually; but together they comprised a community. Luke explains two things about a community created by the Gospel: its ***devotion*** and its ***fruit***. Their devotion and their fruit are an example and a model for us. As we go through this passage, ask yourself, “Do I have the same devotion they had?” And “Do I trust and expect God to give me/us the same type of fruit that he produced through them?”

The Devotion of a Community Created by the Gospel (Acts 2:42, 44-45, 46)

The gospel produces a community devoted to four things (there's some overlap in the items mentioned). Verse 42 gives a summary of these four devotions; the following verses expand and explain that summary.

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

If you are devoted to something it's a priority; you will make time for it no matter what. For example, if you are devoted to the Kansas City Chiefs, watching the Big Game tonight is not optional. If I ask you, "Are you watching the Super Bowl," you won't say, "I don't know . . . maybe, if I feel like it. . ." No, you're all in. You might even wear a Chiefs jersey to church! [I am not judging you; I'm a little jealous, actually.]

In the same way, the gospel created a community of people in Jerusalem that "devoted themselves" to four things. They weren't devoted to these things because it was convenient or easy. Their devotion came from a very deep place. Because they had all repented and believed the same gospel, because they had been baptized and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, they spontaneously devoted themselves to these four things.

The Apostles' Teaching.

Remember that the apostles were the official spokespersons for Jesus. They had been with Jesus since John had baptized him in the Jordan River all the way until he returned to his Father in heaven. They could give a first-hand account of his miracles, teaching, death, AND resurrection. And during the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension Jesus had opened their minds to understand the Hebrew Scriptures and how he had fulfilled everything written therein. And now they had been clothed with power from on high to bear witness to all these things. Furthermore, Jesus had promised them (John 14:26) that the Holy Spirit would remind them of what Jesus had taught and would teach them additional things that they hadn't yet been taught.

Consequently, the apostles taught with power and authority. The teaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost was life changing for the 3,000 who believed. They were hungry for more. Therefore, ***they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.*** They made it a top priority to listen to the apostles teach. There were many old things they needed to ***stop*** thinking and doing; there were many new things that that they needed to ***begin*** thinking and doing. They were committed to hearing, internalizing, and living out what the apostles taught.

Another way to say it is, "They became true disciples of Jesus." I say that because of what Jesus said in John 8:31-32.

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They were disciples because they were devoted to letting the words of Jesus remain in them and form them.

This devotion to the apostles' teaching has characterized true disciples of Jesus ever since. We devote ourselves to the apostles teaching by soaking in the 27 books of the New Testament. One reason these 27 books are considered authoritative is because they were written by one of the apostles or by someone close to the apostles, like Luke who wrote Luke/Acts.

Of course we should be devoted to the Word throughout the week. Coming to worship and hearing the Word taught once a week is vital. I think of the Sunday sermon as "the weekly family dinner"; we are all feasting on the same Scripture together. But if you don't take in Scripture till next Sunday morning (or the next time you come), you will be spiritually malnourished. You need to feast on the Word throughout the week - read it, think about it, talk about it, live it out.

Whether or not you are devoted to the apostles' teaching affects your spiritual health and the health of this community. If we **aren't all committed** to being formed by the Word, our unity will suffer because we're not on the same page (literally and figuratively); if we **are all committed** to being formed by the Word, the sky is the limit.

This Easter season we are going to be reading/studying the Gospel of Luke together in our daily devotions. We're providing a devotional guide; it will be available next Sunday morning. Each day you'll find a Scripture reading as well as a reflection on seven core spiritual disciplines.

The Fellowship.

They devoted themselves to "the fellowship." The term fellowship (Greek: *koinonia*) emphasizes commonality, what you share in common. The three thousand people who formed the church in Jerusalem instinctively understood that what they had in common was a supernatural relationship with God himself. They had all been cut to the heart by their prior hatred of Jesus; they had all repented and been baptized; they had all received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Their lives were all being formed by the apostles' teaching. What they had in common far outstripped their differences. And so they devoted themselves to one another.

Down in verses 44 and 45 we see a tangible expression of their devotion to the fellowship:

44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

The term fellowship is *koinonia* and the term common is *koinos*. Because they had deep substantive commonality in Christ, they "had all things in common." This was an obvious, spontaneous thing to do since many of these new believers had come from other nations; they were "living out of their suitcases," so to speak. But their fellowship

was so deep that the believers in Jerusalem had the attitude, “My home is your home. My food is your food. My clothes are your clothes.”

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

If you keep reading Acts you’ll see that they didn’t sell **all** their possession, but they sold some of them because there were needs in the community. This is the mindset in a healthy family: “If I have more than I need, I will gladly let go of it to meet a need.”

Devotion to the fellowship (to other believers) makes people ***generous toward one another***. We’ll see this throughout the book of Acts.

I have seen the gospel produce this same devotion and generosity here at Faith. Sometimes this generosity flows from individuals in the church in spontaneous ways. Someone notices a need and meet it on the spot. Or they bring it to their life group which responds with meals, gift cards, childcare, notes of encouragement or whatever meets the need.

Other times this generosity flows from organized efforts here at Faith. Many of you have contributed to our “compassion fund” that is used to meet financial needs both inside and outside of the church; because of your generosity we’ve been able to give away tens of thousands of dollars each year.

There’s a sense in which every time you give to the church or a missionary or a ministry you are demonstrating your commitment to the fellowship; your giving helps other people come to Christ and grow as disciples.

There’s a sense in which every time you volunteer your time, you are demonstrating your commitment to the fellowship. Many of you are lavishly generous with your time, both on Sunday mornings and throughout the week. I could illustrate the point a dozen different ways, but I’ll mention a ministry that God used in my life.

Several years ago I was going through a tough situation and I was stuck. Mentally and emotionally I was sort of a wreck. So I signed up for a Stephen Minister. Those who volunteer with this ministry initially get 50+ hours of training plus ongoing training in how to come alongside hurting people. I met with another man once a week for several months. We talked and prayed together; and he prayed for me in between those meetings. It was exactly what I needed; God used him in my life in a huge way. Because he was devoted to the fellowship, he was generous with his time. And I found healing.

I would commend this ministry to you. If you’re hurting, going through a difficult life transition, or dealing with loss of a job or friendship or some other type of loss, you might think about asking for a Stephen Minister (through calling the church office) Please know that we place a high value on confidentiality.

The Breaking of Bread.

In first century Jewish culture, “breaking bread” meant to eat together. Before eating, someone would break a loaf of bread with their hands and give thanks to God (see Luke 9:16, Luke 22:19, Luke 24:30, Acts 27:35). In the second century, to break bread became the common way that Christians referred to the Lord’s Table because at that Passover meal (the last supper) Jesus had broken a loaf of bread and given it to his disciples saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). We also know that the early church integrated the Lord’s Table into a full meal (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-24). So it may be that here in Acts 2:42 Luke is saying that they were devoted to celebrating the Lord’s Table along with their meals.

But it seems to me that Luke is primarily saying that they were devoted to eating together. I say that because of what we read down in verse 46:

46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

What’s the big deal about eating together? The big deal is that in that culture and in ours, table fellowship signifies ***relationship*** and ***acceptance***. If you have somebody in your home to sit at your table and to eat your food, you are saying, “I accept you and I value our relationship.” When you share meals with other believers your relationship and your unity deepen. This has great benefits for the entire community. [See Note 1]

I understand that some of you invite others into your home very naturally; it looks effortless (even though it’s not). Some of you have the spiritual gift of hospitality; your home is the hub of your ministry. For others of you, inviting people into your home is very hard/difficult. But we all need to find simple ways to spend unhurried time like meals with other believers.

The Prayers.

We’ve already seen in this series in Acts that the early church was devoted to prayer (see 1:14, 6:4, 10:9, 12:5, 13:2-3, 14:23, 16:25, etc.). We’ll come back to that theme throughout this series. The fact that Luke writes that they were “devoted to . . . ***the*** prayers,” probably suggests that they were devoted to “participation in the set times of prayer at the temple” (Peterson, PNTC Acts). In the very next chapter, we read that Peter and John went “up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (3:1 - at 3 pm). Even though Jesus made clear that the temple would one day be obsolete (John 2:19, 4:21-24, Matthew 12:6), the believers in Jerusalem were still devout Jews and therefore were still devoted to the set times of prayer at the temple.

In addition to individual/private times of prayer, they made it a priority to gather with others to pray to God. They understood that prayer moves the hand of God.

This devotion to regular times of prayer with others can be challenging. Over the years we have tried several different formats for church-wide times of prayer. Currently this

devotion to prayer is expressed when smaller groups gather: Wednesday morning prayer group that has faithfully met for many years (you're welcome to join that group); life groups that pray when they meet; Rooted includes a prayer experience for each Rooted group; our elders meet to pray. Some of you are involved in a campus ministry; that may be the primary place where you pray with other believers. I'm part of a pastors' prayer group that meets twice a month. It can be challenging, but I'd encourage you to find or pull together a prayer group that works for you. If we're not devoted to prayer we won't be like the church in Acts.

We've seen that the gospel creates a community that is devoted to the Word, to the fellowship, to eating together, and to prayer. The gospel creates a community that is internally strong and united. Next let's notice the fruit externally that God produces in a community with that type of devotion.

The Fruit of a Community Created by the Gospel (Acts 2:43, 47)

In verse 43 we see one type of fruit: ***people experienced God himself!***

43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

The word translate "awe" is the term normally translated "fear" in Acts (and in 5:5, 5:11, 9:31, 19:17). Both inside and outside the church experienced God in such powerful and tangible ways that the fear of the Lord came upon them. And "many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." Next week we'll see in chapter 3 that they performed a miracle that was reminiscent of a miracle Jesus had done (Luke 5:17ff). Take some time to read Acts 3 before you come next Sunday. Because they were a gospel-centered community, they experienced and demonstrated the power of God.

Down in verse 47 we see that they were the type of community that reached others.

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.

We will see throughout Acts that people made accusations against Christians: that Christians are troublemakers, bad for local businesses, a threat to a stable society, etc. Luke takes numerous opportunities to mention that these accusations were unfair and untrue. Here he mentions that the church in Jerusalem had "favor with all the people." When people saw their devotion and the way they lived their lives, they held them in high esteem; people respected them. Their community was tangible evidence that ***the gospel produces good people***. Because people respected them, they were receptive to their gospel.

Consequently, "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The Lord didn't do this independent of this community; he did this through the community created by the gospel.

This is what we want to see happen here at Faith. If we are a community devoted to the things we've discussed this morning, and if we live transparent lives (as opposed to hiding our light under a basket), some will see that the gospel produces good people. Some will see that our devotion to God and to one another is actually an asset to this community. And some will therefore be receptive to our gospel.

It's not a formula, but it is a general pattern: If we are a community devoted to God and to each other. . . and if we share the gospel freely. . . we can expect that God will add to our number those who are being saved. Honestly, I don't see any reason why that can't be the case here at Faith.

In response to this Scripture, Evaluate your heart to see if you have the same devotions of the early church. I'd encourage you to talk with at least one other person about your answers to these two questions:

1. Which of these four devotions (if any) is a strength for you? Why?
2. Which of these four devotions (if any) is a weakness for you? Why?

Note 1: We'll see when we study Acts 10 and 11, that Peter had to convince some within the church that it was okay to eat with Gentiles because everyone who believes in Jesus is part of the same family of God.