

A Flourishing Church

Acts 2:42-47

INTRODUCTION

I remember back to the first time I visited my wife's family. This was obviously before we were married. Emma and I were living and attending college in Columbia, South Carolina at the time, and her family lived in a small German town called Hermann in Missouri. Before this her parents served overseas as missionaries in Lyon, France for the EFCA. This is where Emma also grew up for the first 13 years of her life. As a family living in a foreign country, there's no doubt this strengthened their bond to one another, which I'm sure helped influence what I witnessed when I first walked into their home in Missouri.

Now's it very important for you to know that Emma is one of eight siblings. I'm not sure if you're aware, but that's a number most American families stay away from in regards to the number of kids they have in their families - it tends to cause a lot of chaos and pulling of hair! Perhaps you've walked into the house of a large family before. Typically you see a mass scrambling, erratic noise, half the kids undressed, toys strewn all over the floor, a noticeable odor, and two parents who are more occupied with chasing down a kid running with a knife than inviting you to feel at home.

This was *not* what I witnessed as I opened that door. I was met at the door by a perfectly well-dressed family of ten! They were all lined up and no one was opening their mouth or shoving an elbow into the one next to them. They all politely greeted me and shared their names and ages. The house was clean and tidy, and the smell of breakfast was coming from the kitchen! After our greeting, Emma's dad said, "Okay, let's continue breakfast preparation!" All eight kids proceeded to their assigned roles. Some set the table, others prepared the food, and still others sat with me in the living room and asked me prepared questions to get to know me. We very soon sat down for a wonderful meal and enjoyed great conversation. When it was over, they all yet again hopped up in unison to begin cleaning up - clearing the table, washing the dishes, vacuuming the floor, and cleaning countertops.

As I witnessed this, I whispered to Emma, ***“I have never seen anything like this! This is what it’s supposed to look like!”*** Now if I’ve made you feel guilty about your family life, I’m sorry! That was not my intention! I think deep down we all wish to see and experience greater relational life, whether it be within our families, friends, or our church.

TRANSITION: What we find in our Bible passage today is just that. It will make us say, ***“This is what it’s supposed to look like!”*** I invite you to open your Bibles with me to Acts 2:42-47. Here we have the first of several summary texts in the book of Acts that define the community life of the early Church. Now if you remember, Acts 2 began with the ***Day of Pentecost***. On this significant day, the Holy Spirit fell upon the believers who were gathered together in prayer. He filled them with His power and manifested Himself in the outward act of their prophecy. The disciples all began speaking forth the mighty works of God in all the languages represented by the people gathered in Jerusalem! People clarified with them what was happening, the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh in the last days. He proceeded to preach the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. He called the masses to repentance and faith in Jesus. And they, cut to heart, came to Christ and were saved! Finally, we learn in v.41 that the number added that day to Christ were about 3,000 souls! ***This was the birth of the church!***

FOCUS: What follows in the last six verses of the chapter are characteristics of this beginning, yet flourishing Christian community. Here there are characteristics we as the church today are to be continually reforming ourselves to. It functions as a mirror for us. We don’t always like what we see, but it shows us the areas to change and tweak. ***When we study this passage, we want to compare our own local version of Christian community to this.*** We want to do this, not to guilt us, but to encourage us and challenge us to pursue a more Gospel-centered, Spirit-saturated community. So let’s pick a few of these characteristics from this passage to dive deeper into for our own benefit. ***Today we will identify three characteristics of a flourishing Christian community.***

Our first point will dominate the majority of our time. Points 2 & 3 will function more as outcomes of us fulfilling point 1. So let's dive in!

BODY

The first characteristic we see is that their community is a devoted community. V.42 says, *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”* The greek word here for “devoted” is προσκατερέω. It is the same word used in Acts 1:14 to describe the believer’s act of waiting for the Spirit’s arrival: *“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”* It most accurately means they were faithfully and perseveringly committed. It can also define the attitude with which they met. They were not distracted, but rather gave the full amount of their energy and undivided attention to their time together. If those in the first century had cell phones, they would have silenced them or even left them at home. Getting a text in the middle of the church service that there was a giant fish sale at Lake Galilee may have tempted some of them to exit early!

One of the bigger issues facing the church today is that we can be defined as a distracted and divided community. According to Thom Rainer, *“About 20 years ago, a church member was considered active in the church if he or she attended three times a week. Today, a church member is considered active in the church if he or she attends three times a month.”* In many places, it’s even lower than that. We all know that if 200 people show up to church on a Sunday morning, that number is not a good indicator of the true size of your church. This is because on any given Sunday at least 50 people are missing for various reasons!

I asked my father-in-law one time what he thought was the biggest cultural change that most negatively affected the church in his lifetime. He immediately said, ***“the doing away with the Blue Laws.”*** I had never heard of those! He said the Blue Laws were also known as the “Sunday Laws.” They were designed to ban or restrict some or all Sunday activities for religious reasons for the purpose of promoting a time for worship and rest. He said that when he was young most restaurants and stores were

closed on Sundays. As a result, there wasn't much to do except go to church, be home with your family, and then go back to church that night! But with the doing away of these laws, what you find today are many things competing with the church. Kids now have little league practices on Sunday mornings or afternoons; sporting events consume our time on Sunday afternoons, and weekend getaways tempt us away. On the flip side, our weekdays and Saturdays will be so jam-packed with activity, that we must sleep-in and recover on Sundays. ***Rather than church feeling like a life-giver, it can feel like a life-taker - a detractor from all the other things we love to do.***

Yet what we find in this passage is a group of believers who were devoted. They had a single-minded, undistracted and undivided priority set on being together! Why was this the case? Obviously the greatest reason is because Jesus Christ had just radically altered their world. They were just days past the time-space event of Christ's resurrection! They had just experienced the outpouring of the Spirit! ***This should remind us that the level of our devotion is directly tied to our level of belief in the resurrection of Jesus.*** The more we believe in the resurrection of our Lord, the greater our passion and commitment will be to experience His life together!

Well what specifically did they devote themselves to? ***First we see they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.*** We must remember that with the origination of the church and Christianity as we know it today, there was not yet a written New Testament. Therefore, the word of the apostles represented that testament. They carried on the verbal Word spoken to them by "The Word," Jesus Himself. Their special role was unique only to this particular season of the church. As first-hand eye-witnesses to Christ's life and ministry, Jesus charged them with propagating His Good News to all people.

This new movement known as Christianity would live or die based on the correct teaching and *hearing* of God's Word. ***We know that the preaching on Sunday is important, but just as important is our reception of it.***

We all remember playing the **“Phone Game”** as kids. The first person starts with a phrase they must repeat in someone’s ear. It then goes from one person’s mouth to the other person’s ear all the way around the circle. Almost always the ending phrase was different than the first! The fault found in this game is not with the speaking but with the hearing! If you don’t hear the phrase correctly, it easily gets changed!

For this reason the church must be devoted to hearing God’s Word.

We must be active listeners. Why? Because the Apostle Paul says our faith grows by hearing. Romans 10:17 says **“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”** What we hear is what shapes our minds, perceptions of the world, our attitudes, and our actions. ***Whatever you hear the most of will also be what you have the most faith in.*** What are you allowing your ears (and heart!) to most listen to?

More than just what we allow ourselves to hear, the scarier question is what do we devote ourselves to hearing? If you are most devoted to hearing the latest election poll numbers, your faith will be in the salvation brought by a human leader. If you are most devoted to hearing the praise of others, your faith will most be in yourself. But if you are most devoted to hearing the Word of God, Psalm 1 says **“you will be like a tree, planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”**

Secondly, we are to devote ourselves to the fellowship. I’m sure you’ve heard the greek word κοινωμία. It can most accurately be translated as “a shared partnership.” I worked for Starbucks all through undergrad and seminary. What’s unique about their culture is that I was never referred to as an employee. That word doesn’t exist in the Starbucks dictionary! Instead I was referred to as a “partner.” Their mission was to make it clear I wasn’t a mere hireling brought on to accomplish their goals, but a valued and necessary companion in accomplishing our shared goals.

In the Old Testament, God would speak to and work through only select men. But with the tearing down of the veil separating the Most Holy of

Holies and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, God would now speak to and work through anyone and everyone! Before there were select priests but now we hold to a doctrine known as the “*priesthood of all believers.*” ***We are partners together with a shared salvation, a shared Gospel, a shared Spirit, a shared purpose for living, and a shared eternity!*** We share more together than you share with your family! It is for this reason that Christ said we are brothers and sisters together in Him. We are a body being built up together under the headship of Christ! We are a building built upon Christ as the cornerstone!

This radical new category for relational living is worth devoting ourselves to for so many reasons! We learn in Hebrews 10:24 that *our fellowship stirs one another up to love and good deeds.* It goes on in v.25 to say that *we must not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.* This admonition couldn’t come at a better time than right now with everything going on in our world. This pandemic has provided a unique obstacle to the necessary fellowship of the church. For months we were not allowed to meet together. Some churches are still not meeting even now! Brothers and sisters, this is not healthy! I know some of us claim legitimate reasons for abstaining from close contact, but even they must admit their souls are languishing. Proverbs 18:1 says, ***“A man who isolates himself seeks his own desires; he breaks out against all sound judgment.”***

We must, now more than ever, devote ourselves again to fellowship. This fellowship is a gift from the Spirit. It does not naturally occur according to the order of this world. It is brought about by the Spirit within us and He overflows into the lives of one another. It cannot be manufactured by programs and it sure can’t happen by staying home and watching the livestream!

We must be a persevering people in this endeavor. Committing yourself to the fellowship doesn’t promise immediate “bosom buddies.” Some of us confess that our best friends are not in this church or may not even be Christians. You may even feel like you’ve tried to make friends in the

church for a long time and it just isn't happening. But I want to remind you that this is something we are to devote ourselves to. It doesn't promise immediate fruit, but the sowing of the seed comes with God's blessing of a later harvest. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "*Quality time happens in the midst of quantity time.*" ***The more we commit to being together, the more Christ will knit us together.*** The more you say, I am going to faithfully commit to Sunday attendance and my small group, the more God will delight to show you faithfulness in endearing your heart to other believers. They will hold you up in the faith in your moments of weakness and strengthen you in Christ to obey where you have not the strength yourself.

I wonder how God might be prodding your heart to again get involved, even if it means stepping out of your comfort zone? Are not God's greatest blessings like hidden treasures that require our seeking? To this we must devote ourselves.

Thirdly, we are to devote ourselves to the breaking of bread. Is Luke referring here to an ordinary meal or the celebration of the Lord's Supper? We can't be 100% certain. Luke records six occasions in his Gospel account and in Acts where Jesus or the disciples "*broke bread.*" Two of these refer to the Lord's Supper directly and the other four refer to common meals. Even further down in v.46 it seems to refer to just a common meal. It says that "*day by day, they attended the temple together, broke bread in their homes, and received their food with glad and generous hearts.*" However, the use of the definite article in v.42, "*the bread*" seems to point to a special meal.

The early Church called this special meal "the Eucharist," or "giving thanks" and received it during a common meal known as the Love Feast. It commemorated the death of Christ. Jesus said, "*Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*" Jesus made it clear that this was to be a normal practice within the church, just like baptism. It is a badge of the Christian confession. It is a ***means of grace***, not an act by which we receive grace but an act by which we

experience grace! It represented the mutual communion of believers with each other. Isn't it amazing that here 2,000 years later we are still doing the same thing!

It is only right for us to make this a normal occurrence built into the habits of our fellowship. When we break the bread, we remember Christ's body broken for us. When we take the cup, we remember Christ's blood poured out for us. When we ingest the bread and the cup, it is symbolic of us saying that Jesus Christ alone is our sufficiency. ***"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word (Jesus Himself!) that comes from the mouth of God."*** Also, ingesting the bread and the cup is a reminder of our intimate connection to Christ and one another. Jesus said in John 6:56, ***"Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks by blood abides in me, and I in him."*** ***When we celebrate this expression of grace together, we are reminded of what makes us a special and separate people from all those in the world: We are covered by the blood of Jesus and set free from our sin!*** We must be a people who devote ourselves to this habit of grace.

Lastly, we must devote ourselves to prayer. You will notice the text says ***"the prayers."*** Again the definite article suggests there may have been set prayers used in public. At this early time in the church, it was still a normal daily habit to attend the temple, and the temple had many public prayers set for use. I'm sure the Lord's Prayer was another prayer referred to here. But we don't want to miss the forest amidst the individual trees here. ***The main point is that we are to be devoting ourselves to corporate prayer.***

Prayer has become a very individualized expression of communion with God. Everyone has their own personal and specific requests - you have your prayers and I have my prayers. There's nothing wrong with this type of prayer - it's essential! ***But does God not get more glory and express greater delight when His people in faith are gathered together before Him?*** John Piper has said, ***"Corporate prayer is a greater miracle than individual prayer because it forces each Christian to pray for things beyond***

themselves, which is sadly often all we really care about praying for.”

Prayer becomes beautiful and powerful when we (in a spiritual sense) lock arms with another to pray for one another, yet also to pray for those bigger things we share together as a church.

My favorite prayer gathering I've ever been a part of wasn't supposed to happen. Back when I was a sophomore at Columbia International University in Columbia, SC, about 5 friends and I were gathered in our room finishing up a Bible study. We were all gripped by what we studied. It led to some extended prayer. While we were praying, there was a different group walking by who had just finished praying in a different room on our hall. They joined us and we continued in prayer. About 20 minutes later, someone came and interrupted our prayer with news that a different group of about 20 students was gathered out in front of our dorm on the grass. We went down to join them. We concluded that the convergence of all our prayer gatherings was a sign that God wanted us to continue in prayer. It was just guys. Sins were confessed, deep visionary prayers were prayed. Our time led to prayer walks on the campus and continued till around 4 in the morning! The challenge was that we all had class the next morning! We went back to get some sleep. As we awoke in the morning, something quite unexpected was the lingering taste in several of our mouths of something sweet. This was a time when we devoted ourselves to prayer together that resulted in deepened fellowship, more victorious and holy spiritual lives, and a greater witness to the lost. We never forgot that day. ***Relationships are forged through shared experiences.*** This experience knit us together and led to more prayer than we ever would have expected together. Oh, the power and greater miracle experienced when we pray together!

Jesus said in Matthew 18:19-20, *“If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*

Notice some of the powerful acts of God He performed because His people gathered to pray. We learn in Acts 12 that Peter was kept in prison, but v.5 says that *“earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”* That very night, when Herod was about to bring him out, an angel woke Peter,

loosened his chains, and allowed him to sneak past all the guards set around him. When they approached the iron gate, Luke said *“it opened of its own accord.”* **When the church devoted itself to prayer, God answered!**

In the book of Joel, a locust plague had overtaken the land. It had eaten all their crops! It got to a point that they didn't know where their next meal would be coming from, so in desperation they called out to the Lord. In Joel 1:14 their leaders said, *“Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”* As soon as they united themselves in this devoted prayer effort, it says in Joel 2:18, *“Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, ‘Behold, I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.’”* God again brought his blessing and restored to them the years the locusts had eaten from their land. **When God's people devoted themselves to prayer, He answered!**

God maintains the same promise to the church who together devotes themselves to prayer today. We may not have a locust plague in America, but we have our own versions of it! More than ever our nation is morally decaying. What once was known as simple “right” and “wrong” is now a skewed gray area of confusion among our people. Light is now considered darkness and darkness is now considered light. ***It's not that people are suddenly more sinful but their wickedness is now widely accepted and even endorsed on a grand, public scale.***

This is just as much true among our leaders in Washington. With such an important election just a week away, I could use this platform to tell you to vote. I could even encourage you to vote a certain way! But that's not my mission or my highest priority. ***Much more than exercising your civil right to vote (which you should), I challenge you to pray!*** Individual votes contribute to an election, but God steers the course of the nation! Proverbs 21:1 says, *“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of*

the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.” He says in 2 Chronicles 7:14, *“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”* Let’s be a people who devote ourselves to pray together for the revival of our nation unto God, for the revival of our friends and family unto God, and for even the revival of our souls unto Him!

We see that the early church was a devoted community: to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. V.43 shows the result: *“And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.”* What is “awe” as it’s known in our culture? “Awe” means to be captivated by what is both beautiful and unexpected.” ***But according to the Bible, it is often also associated with a feeling of fear because of how it might affect YOU.*** The literal translation of “awe” here is “fear.”

This difference can be illustrated in witnessing the beauty of a tsunami from atop a high-rise hotel compared to feeling its effects from the shoreline. Amid the happenings of the early church, there was no mere observation of God’s manifested work without also feeling its effects on you. For those in Christ, this was a ***healthy fear*** that led them to a greater sense of holiness. But for those outside of Christ, it was a ***foreboding fear*** of lacking protection for their own kingdoms they’d built. The one thing that both parties understood was that Christ in the power of the Spirit came to change everything!

As we already stated, the Spirit greatly blessed the early believers' fellowship. ***We know the Spirit made them a devoted community, but it also made them a unified community.*** V.44-45 says, *“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.”* For clarity's sake, at no time was there a planned communistic community among the early believers. None of them were forced by church leadership to give up their belongings. Instead what we

see here is a voluntary sense of brotherhood initiated by the Spirit, in which believers gave freely out of love, not under compulsion. ***What made them unified was not a perfect sharing of the same material things, but a willing desire to give as any had need!***

This unhindered form of generosity was administered by the Spirit of Jesus himself. His extreme example of generosity in giving up His own life set the tone for the church's generosity. The Scriptures say in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*

As we increasingly devote ourselves to Christ and to one another, giving to cover each other's needs is a joy and blessing! Jesus did say it is more blessed to give than receive! One of the great blessings of being a Christian in America is that most of us already have everything we need in this life. In fact, we often have far more than that! Yet what we learn from studying the early church is that they graciously gave up their belongings to meet needs outside of their church as well.

The first great orphan care movement developed out of the early church. Infanticide was universal in ancient Greece and Rome. Babies would often be rejected if they were illegitimate, unhealthy or deformed, the wrong sex, or too great a burden on the family. Female infants were particularly vulnerable. Often these dejected babies were left alone in public places to die. But the Christians of the time felt compelled to fight against this practice by taking in as many babies as they could find. They also provided funds to support poor, single mothers. They even built hospitals specifically for orphans! These projects required them to all give in profound ways. This is just one example of the church uniting together to meet a tangible need in the community.

I wonder how God is uniting your church to meet the needs of those both within and beyond your doors? While there is blessing in what one person can give, there is strength in numbers in what the church together

can give. The early believer loved both in word and deed. They put their money where their mouth was. I am sure many of you give in tremendous ways as well. ***Yet there may be others who need a reminder that we all share a kingdom that's not of this world. Therefore we can freely let go of unnecessary things!*** How will unbelievers know Jesus is real? When they notice we don't love the world or the things in the world. Unity in this endeavor will make our community flourish!

We see that a flourishing church is characterized as a devoted community, a unified community, and lastly a growing community. It is no surprise the early church grew the way it did. V.47 ends by saying the ***Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*** Acts 4:4 says, ***“But many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”*** Acts 5:14 says, ***“And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”***

It is a scientific fact that everything that is alive must grow. Trees, animals, flowers, bugs, fungus, and individual cells all grow! It only makes sense that a church brought into life through the Spirit's second birth would grow as well. We see from this passage the lovingly contagious way in which they lived. They willingly laid down their possessions to bless someone. They were committed to living life together. They ate meals together. They witnessed the mighty works of God. Their hearts were full of gladness and praise. This led them in v.47 to have favor with all the people. People wanted what they had! Acts 17:6 says that when the outside world saw the faith of these new believers, they declared ***“They turned the world upside down.”***

We have all been in a dark room before. We lose bearings and quickly grow uncomfortable. But if someone on the other side of the room turned a flashlight on, we would immediately notice it and be drawn to it! This is the same with a contagious church today. When outsiders who are darkened in their understanding SEE a demonstration of the love of Christ, the

generosity of Christ, the mercy of Christ, the joy of Christ, the satisfaction of Christ, they too will be in awe and will be drawn to us!

CONCLUSION

So the closing question is for you: *How is God calling you to take part in making your church a flourishing Christian community?* What is God calling you to devote yourself more fully to? What ministry will you join? Which person will you call this week to connect with over coffee? Many individual acts of devotion result in an entire church flourishing through the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning I shared how after seeing my wife's family, I exclaimed, ***"I have never seen anything like this! This is what it's supposed to look like!"*** My prayer is that both you and outsiders will look at your church and say the same thing, ***"I have never seen anything like this! This is what it's supposed to look like!"***

CLOSING PRAYER