

The Church Forms

July 27, 2018

Acts 2:42-47

The book of Acts, what a wealth of helpful truth! And yet, the book of Acts, what a challenge! It never lets up! It keeps pushing and pushing. It pushes us way, way out of our comfort zone! Good morning! Welcome to another message in our walk through the book of Acts. And to think, we are not even done with the 2nd chapter!

Last week, we were pushed in the area of evangelism. Before that, it was the role of the Holy Spirit. This week, we are pushed in a very different direction. And yet, I believe in our context, the passage before us is as challenging as any in the entire book. The problem is that I can read it to you and you might not even see it. Let me try.
READ Acts 2:42-47.

Did you see it? Perhaps you did not. This is simply a passage that describes the way the earliest believers lived. And that is entirely my point. This is a description of important aspects of the early church. As we have been saying since the beginning of our study, these words are not just history (this is what happened), but this sets a direction for the Church. This ought to be instructive to us to see how we measure up. This is what it looks like when the whole church is on fire for God.

Main point: The Church is designed to be lived out in community.

As I said, this sounds pretty common, pretty mundane, pretty ho-hum. But the truth is that too often, we do not live this way. We say we do, we might even think we do, but when we measure it, we actually do not. The truth is we are probably more likely to open up our homes to watch a football game together than pray together or study the word of God together, or just enjoy each other's fellowship around a meal.

Just like last week, I'm sure I've already offended some of you, but I'm saying it anyway. The truth is that our lives are so full that we don't have room for the gathering together with believers. Our daily, weekly, monthly, yearly calendars are such that there is little room for the specific purpose of gathering with believers. And

the truth is that we lack as a result. And dare I say it, but communicating by text or social media cannot suffice.

So, here we go. Expect to be challenged. Expect the Word of God to make you uncomfortable. I hope it will prompt you to take action. I'm confident that's why the Holy Spirit prompted Luke to write it down. (2 parts)

I. The early church focused on certain priorities. v.42

I want to be clear here. This verse is not intended to exclude anything not listed. In other words, worship is not mentioned. Evangelism is not mentioned. But that is not to say that such things were not their priority. Instead, the things listed are meant to paint a picture for us, guide us. There were some distinctives in the early church, distinctives that stood out, were different that you might expect, which characterized them. And from the way they are presented, these are good things. Such priorities helped them, sustained them, invigorated them. In other words, we ought to measure ourselves against them to see how we are doing, as the Church, as Hillcrest, as families, as individuals.

v.42-They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The first thing we notice is that they were committed, devoted, focused in certain ways. This is what made them tick. Then we have four nouns, all in parallel, all in a form that makes them specific. In other words, it was not devoted to fellowship, but to THE fellowship, not simply to prayer, but to THE prayers. They were specific. The original readers would have known what these things were.

The first one is they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. Such teaching would have been all that they heard from Jesus, watched Jesus do, understood about the Scriptures from Jesus' perspective. As men who followed Jesus everywhere, leading a movement where Jesus was at the center, I imagine many, long conversations recalling, digesting, coming to a common understanding, listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. As those who see only the final fruit of their teaching, I for one would love to be privy to such teaching and conversation. Coming to grips with all that Jesus did and taught would have been a huge task. They were students of the Word.

The second item on the list is the fellowship. Now, we often use the term fellowship simply to conversation with each other. We even have a "fellowship hall." But the term here is not just fellowship as a concept or practice, but the fellowship as in the group of people who share with each other, who go through life together. It is not fulfilled by shaking hands or greeting each other. It comes as we sit down at a table and talk, or pull up a chair around a fire pit and talk. It comes when we get to the point where we know each other's struggles and help when there is a need.

Again, they were devoted to this. The sense of community characterized them. Remember, these people had little in common before this. If what we read earlier in the chapter carried through, many of them did not even speak the same native language. Some were from Jerusalem, some from far away places. Some were leaders in the community, some were outcasts healed by Jesus. The thing they had in common was their devotion to Jesus and now His people. And yet, they devoted themselves to going through life together with THAT group, the fellowship. They saw themselves as one tight-knit group.

The third one is "the breaking of bread." As you might expect by reading the term, it could be taken in different ways. It could be used as simply sharing meals together. Or, it could mean something quite specific as what we would call taking communion together, or sharing a meal together highlighted by communion, as if they were re-enacting the Last Supper. There is no way to know for certain, but I believe the term is purposefully vague to encompass a range. Certainly it involved eating meals together, but that would also be covered under fellowship, so it likely involved sharing meals with a purpose. Remember, there was no church building, no organized structure. They simply know what Jesus told them to do and they gathered in groups to do it.

The last one could be even more cryptic. We understand what it means to be devoted to prayer, but what does it mean that they were devoted to THE prayers. Can

you see the difference? It could mean the times of prayer, or the certain prayers that they jointly expressed. It seems to me that it includes not only praying for each other and their movement, but probably included using the Psalms under their new understanding. As we learned back when we studied the Psalms, many of them are dedicated to the Messiah, or “the victorious One who comes at the end.” I imagine them studying them and then using them as they had for generations, but with a totally new meaning. Psalm 22 would have new meaning! Psalm 23 would have new meaning! Indeed, Peter has already quoted Psalm 16 and will soon quote Psalm 2 in this new way. Their understanding of the Psalms would have taken on a new richness that we cannot fathom. Their sacred prayer book has come alive! They were a praying group.

So, let’s put all these together. All four express their communal life, all living in one area. They did these things together. They lived out this new faith together. They ate together, studied together, prayed together, shared life together. This is what characterized this brand new movement called the church.

But then we remember that there were about 3,000 of them at this point. So, together must not mean as one collective group. They might have been able to spend time listening and learning from the apostles as one large group, but they certainly could not have enjoyed a meal together. I’m certain this means they met in smaller groups, more intimate settings. I trust you can see where I am going with this. As a church, we have grown past the point where we can all meet in one place at one time with everyone knowing each other. We simply cannot do that but perhaps one meal a year. We have to think smaller. If this description in Acts 2 is going to characterize us, we are going to have to embrace small groups.

My kids go to churches where small groups are almost mandatory, they certainly are strongly emphasized. I don’t think Hillcrest would respond well if I announced that small groups were now mandatory. But I do think it is right and proper that I challenge you to get in one. I know there are some that we organized under a specific model by Pastor Brad. I know there are some that the women have begun implementing called, “the gathering table.” I know there are some that have been meeting for years. I know our students have been meeting in small groups for years. But as a congregation, we have far to go to be able to say that we as Hillcrest are DEVOTED to these things. And as your pastor, I urge you to do something about it.

After giving the four things the people were devoted to, Luke relates what it looked like. As we consider the description, notice the words, “all”, “everyone,” “every day,” “daily.” It seems to me what stuck out to Luke was that this description characterized everyone, and them as a whole on a daily basis.

43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

By “awe” here, I envision a humility that comes when you see God at work. When you see Him clearly, you shrink as He increases. When you recognize that He is willing to use someone like you, it fills you with awe. In other words, at this point in the life of the church, the Spirit had just come on all of them, so they would have all had this new sense of the movement of God both in them and among them. That can turn into pride, but at this point it was awe. God was choosing to show Himself to this people and it was awe inspiring.

Then we have the mention of signs and wonders. Here we go again, another controversial topic in the book of Acts! By signs and wonders, we mean they did things that authenticated their message (signs), and they did things that clearly demonstrated God was doing it. In other words, it was not that they put on magic shows or circus sideshows. Rather, they spoke with authority and God put His authenticating mark on their teaching by having them do things that only God could do. They healed the sick, set the demonically oppressed free, they even raised the dead. When combined with the teaching and preaching, that would be signs and wonders.

The issue for us is whether that is normative, meaning to be expected in every church, only for the apostles, or somewhere in between. I’m certainly not going to settle that issue here and now, and I know there are sincere and strong beliefs among us in opposite directions. But I would remind all of us that by definition, such signs and wonders are from God, by God, as controlled by God. We cannot manufacture them, control them. They just happened. So, in one sense, if God wants such things to happen, then He can make them happen. And I actually believe He is big enough to work through a variety of belief systems. Indeed, those who have experienced Christianity in settings other than the West, in Africa, South America, Asia, third world countries would testify that their experiences with signs and wonders would be very different than most of ours. In other words, God is still in this business, even if

He doesn't choose to do so here. What I would reject is any suggestion that because Pastor Curt hasn't healed someone lately or raised the dead, the Holy Spirit is not moving among us. Such a position goes too far.

44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Another sentence, another controversy. Was the early church communal, socialist as some today claim? I do not believe so at all. Indeed, we will see in ch.4-5 that they still owned land, and "from time to time" sold it. This is not so much an indicator of communal living as it is how they regarded their possessions. They were willing to part with what they had to meet the needs of others. They didn't view "their stuff" as "their stuff." Their stuff was resources for the kingdom. They were characterized as generous and willing to give as needed by the least among them. Notice they weren't willing to just give out of their income, but they were also willing to convert their assets. That is generous giving! Again, in a few weeks, we will see this practice put to the test by Barnabas, compared to Ananias and Sapphira. But this type of generous living was characteristic of the early church. And it went directly against their culture, otherwise it would not have been noteworthy.

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

They gathered in a natural place, the temple courts. Remember, they did not see themselves as leaving their Jewish home, but being privileged by God to witness the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. The temple would have been the natural place for them to gather. This was their spiritual home, with space to accommodate. I don't picture all believers gathering every day. Rather, there were always some of them there. The apostles hung out there. People came there to get help, get answers, hear more about all of this Jesus talk.

But that was not all. They also gathered in homes, they ate meals together, they celebrated the Lord's Supper together as we noted before. They worshipped together, laughed together, enjoyed their newfound status together. Things were going well! People liked them! (How long do you think that will last?)

And then we have this report of the spread of their influence:

47b- And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Everything was going well, and God was working, and people were putting their trust in Christ, and Jesus was saving them! This happened every day. It characterized the church in those days. The gospel was spreading, the church was growing, the people were happy. Everyone had his needs met and the people were glad to do it. They were in awe that God had chosen to show Himself among them. Life was good!

Now, I want you to know that this same type of assessment marks the end of the various stages of the church's development in the book of Acts. Here, nothing negative has happened yet. Soon it will. In other words, such an assessment is going to be followed by a trial, a threat, a disaster. And yet, that episode will then be followed by this same description. So, in some senses, this is given as the calm before the storm. But then, it will also be the calm AFTER the storm. In other words, the storm did not throw the movement off course. And this is key. The book of Acts is about how God grows His Church. It happens every day. It happens in spite of and indeed through times of trials. But make no mistake about it, this is what His Church was designed to look like.

So, how are we doing? Rob Mitchell has been teaching a class on this very topic, "10 leading indicators of a healthy church." And in many ways, I believe we are quite healthy. Indeed, this is the healthiest church I have ever been a part of. And yet, I also believe we could be doing better at living life together. This is true of the American church, it is true of our type of church, it is true of Hillcrest. We could be doing better. We should be doing better. And as the church continues to grow, we must do better. We must think smaller if we have a vision for getting larger. We are too large to know everyone, but we must make sure everyone is known. We must set up systems where we can really know people. We must be willing to drop what we are doing and help someone who needs help. We must see our homes, not as places where we escape

from the world, but as places where we invite people to join us. This aspect of fellowship cannot be farmed out to a few, or to leaders, or to paid staff. By definition that will not work. It has to involve us all. If we are going to be a church that reflects Acts 2:42-47, we have to see the value of living life together. We have to be devoted to it. It is as simple as that.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will see the value of living life together.
- 2) We will get rid of the notion that Christianity is just God and me.
- 3) We will reorient our lives to make room for the Church.
- 4) We will make the gathering together with believers a high priority.
- 5) We will be in awe as God continues His work among us.