

We Must Multiply Small Groups
Series: Acts of a Healthy Growing Church
Acts 2:42-47
January 22, 2017

A few weeks ago, we began our series “Acts of a Healthy Growing Church.” We are looking back at the Early Church through the book of Acts and see how they were healthy and growing.

Two weeks ago, we learned that in order to be a healthy growing church, we must minister in the Holy Spirit’s power. We must depend upon the Holy Spirit for everything we do, especially in the places where we think we know how to do it.

Last week, we learned that in order to be a healthy growing church, we must maintain a warm fellowship so that we can be a family, the Body of Christ, and do God’s work.

We’ve given you a page to record some notes, so turn to page 5 in your bulletin.

Today’s act is this: We must multiply small groups.

I want us to look at Acts 2:42-47. Follow along with me in your bulletin:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.¹

Explosive, dramatic events occur throughout Acts 2: tongues of fire, wafts of wind, dazzling displays of language and discernment, Peter’s vivid testimony, the conversion of thousands. These stunning occurrences leave us breathless, for where there had been only a handful of halting believers before, there is suddenly a whole new community of enthusiastic, faithful Christians.

If we had never before read Acts, if we knew nothing of the history of the early church, we might expect one of two endings to follow these events. We might expect the new believers, fired up with enthusiasm, to go on some out-of-control rampage through the streets, destroying pagan images, tearing down the shops that sold them, and revolting against the evil government. Or, after experiencing the miracle of Pentecost and celebrating the conversion of new believers, this flare-up of faith would quickly die down and burn out. Like pouring lighter fluid on the barbecue, it’s hard to get the coals to “catch” before all the fuel is gone.

Luke takes care to end his description of the miracles of the day of Pentecost by detailing the greatest yet quietest miracle of all. Instead of blazing up then dying out, those who experienced the touch of the Holy Spirit were able to come together and quickly form a community of faith. Verses 42-47 demonstrate that this was no flash-in-the-pan, momentary outburst. This experience produced a warming, sustaining flame that served as a glowing center for a growing community of faith. The Holy Spirit may

¹ Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

have descended in the shape of wind and fire, but the Holy Spirit immediately takes on a new form, that of the Christ community.

In many ways, verse 42 encapsulates everything that illustrates the strength, unity and commitment of this infant church. The rest of the passage simply lists specific examples of what a Christ community, built on four tenets, may expect. Four tell-tale marks that together create this body of believers, and which find their best fulfillment in the community of a small group.

First, the Early Church was devoted to Teaching.

Luke says that the Christians “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching.” While the uninitiated multitudes heard much preaching from the apostles, a slightly different message is presented to those who have already experienced and confessed the power of Christ’s Spirit. Before the faithful community, the apostles engage in teaching. With such a large group of new disciples, these teaching sessions were very important in maintaining a unified body. While this teaching undoubtedly relies heavily on the continued proclamation of the gospel, it also gives something more. The apostle’s task is to take a community that had witnessed the power of Pentecost and help it understand what that experience demands of the church.

Every single Sunday, you hear biblical teaching. I say that unashamedly. We don’t review a magazine article or current events or a book; we teach THE book, the Bible, as the authoritative Word of God. It is THE most important book in all of human history, and every week, we open it up and allow God’s Holy Spirit to make it alive and real to us.

So let me ask you: what did I preach on last week? If it is so important, what did we study?

Of course, I already told you just a few minutes ago, didn’t I? Or were you already asleep?

You see, preaching the Word of God is important, and hearing it opened up for us is vital. Sermons transform lives. It is the spreading of the seed, as in the Parable of the Sower.

But that seed, that Word of God, needs soil, needs water, needs nurturing, in order to grow, and one of the key ways that happens is in community, in a small group.

Susanna Wesley spent one hour each day praying for her 17 children. In addition, she took each child aside for a full hour every week to discuss spiritual matters with him or her. No wonder two of her sons, Charles and John Wesley, were used of God to bring blessing to all of England and help found the Methodist Church.

In a small group, we can study Scripture, hear insights in its meaning and how it has become real in others’ lives, and find ways it can transform our lives in our discipleship journey.

My Sunday School class is studying the Book of Revelation. When we started, there were about 5 people. Now we are nearly busting out of the room, and there are 21 people who are regular attenders of the class. And while we are studying that book, I think most of us would agree that while we are learning what’s in the book, that’s not what we are retaining. You could ask any of the members, and they would be hard pressed to tell you that they understand Revelation. But what they do understand is that God’s patience on a sinful world will not last forever. His judgment will come upon sinners, and it will be horrible to go through. Yet, God’s promise to His people will come

to pass: victory over evil and eternal presence with God. Beyond the minutia and details of the book, we have learned that God wins, and so do His people. And during this study, we have all grown deeper in the Word, deeper in our trust of God, and deeper in our fellowship with each other.

And that is our second point this morning.

The Early Church was devoted to fellowship.

We talked about this last week. Luke highlights in Acts 2 what is arguably the most special gift the Holy Spirit bestowed on these new believers: the ability to become a true fellowship, koinonia community. We know from early in Acts 2 just how diverse this group actually was; they were from all over the Mediterranean. They spoke different languages and had different customs. Yet they now find themselves able to form an enduring, cohesive community. It is the ongoing acceptance and celebration of this koinonia fellowship that makes it possible for them to continue to experience the “wonders and signs” of verse 43 instead of dissolving into a bickering band of complainers and critics.

Like in the story of the sea captain and his chief engineer who were arguing over who was most important to the ship. To prove their point to each other, they decided to swap places. The chief engineer ascended to the bridge, and the captain went to the engine room. Several hours later, the captain suddenly appeared on deck covered with oil and dirt, waving aloft a monkey wrench. “Chief! You have to get down there: I can’t make her go!” “Of course you can’t,” replied the chief. “The ship’s aground!” In the fellowship of the church, we don’t become a bickering band of complainers and critics; we depend on each other in fellowship.²

In the book “Witnesses of a Third Way: A Fresh Look at Evangelism”, Robert Neff’s tells a story about visiting a church service: “It was one of those mornings when the tenor didn’t get out of bed on the right side. As Dr. Neff listened to his faltering voice, he looked around; people were pulling out hymnals to locate the hymn being sung by the soloist. By the second verse, the congregation had joined the soloist in the hymn. And by the third verse, the tenor was beginning to find the range. And by the fourth verse, it was beautiful. And on the fifth verse, the congregation was absolutely silent, and the tenor sang the most beautiful solo of his life.”

That is life in the koinonia fellowship of the body of Christ, enabling one another to sing the tune Christ has given us.”³

It is the fellowship of a small group that helps us open up to others and allow the Holy Spirit through them to encourage us, counsel us, support us, welcome us, love us. We are stronger together than apart.

In order to be a healthy growing church, we need to be in small groups, in fellowship.

Third, the Early Church was devoted to the breaking of bread.

In a small-town church, the pastor suggested one of the 10-year-old boys be host of the visiting evangelist at the church potluck. The youngster took his task seriously. He introduced the evangelist to everyone, and then took him to the food table. He commented on each casserole. “You’ll want some of that and that,” he said, pointing. Then looking at another dish, “Trust me. Skip that one.” They got near the end of the

² Leadership, Vol. 12, no. 4.

³ John H. Unger, Brandon, Manitoba. Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 4.

table when he said, “My mom brought that.” When the evangelist asked him if it was good, he said, “The recipe has been in the family for years, passed down from one bad cook to another.”⁴

One of the primary ways new believers continue to practice community is at table, breaking bread together. Since humanity’s earliest tribal days, eating together has functioned as far more than simply a collective effort to get rid of hunger pangs. Throughout history, the pangs of solitude, insecurity, and loneliness have also found their ease at the common table.

Jesus himself provided a clear model of witnessing through eating and drinking. Many of Jesus’ most poignant moments were at meal time. He was heavily criticized for the sorts of people He sat at table with: either they were too rich or too poor, too sanctimonious or too sinful. Many touching messages and sharp denunciations came while He was at table with one group or another. Jesus not only broke bread with any and all types of people, He usually broke through the protective shells of His table companions at the same time. Meal times with Jesus meant soul food as well as body food.

His example perfectly reflected the kind of community that now found itself gathered together for everyday sustenance, solace and support. Drawn from diverse lands, with different foods and formats, different dining traditions and customs, meal times could have been one of the most difficult, fracturing events in this new community’s life. Instead, we find in verse 46 this:

*... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with **glad and sincere hearts.***⁵

Finally, the Early Church was devoted to Prayer.

The new Christ-body community prays together.

Maybe you’ve heard these Children’s Prayers:

- Neil prayed, “Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that okay? “
- Joyce petitioned, “Dear God, Thank you for my baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.”
- “Dear God, It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway. Your friend (but I am not going to tell you who I am)”
- Bruce prayed, “Dear God, Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.”

The new church was a praying Church: these early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to.

Now, we are going to talk about this in more detail in a couple of weeks. But for now, the important thing is that devotion to prayer is vital to a healthy growing church. It is the first and most important thing for the healing of our nation right now. Trump can’t do it. Better economical possibilities will not do it. Education will not do it. A national disaster will not do it. 911 proved that. Sure, we were united in grief, but not really united as a country.

Prayer is the key. 2 Chronicles 7:14 reads:

⁴ Rev. D. Dean Benton, Burlington, IA, Christian Reader, “Lite Fare.”

⁵ Acts 2:46 (NIV)

*Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.*⁶

Prayer is the key. The Early Church was devoted to prayer. **(Point)** It always went **in** to God before they went **out** to the world; they were able to meet the problems of life because they had **first** met **Him**.

Look at verse 47. This group was:

*praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*⁷

This verse is the culmination of the glorious events on the Day of Pentecost, and the most profound. The church was winning people continually. It was a Church whose people others could not help liking.

Real Christianity is a lovely thing. A healthy Christian community attracts people to Christ. William Treadwell wrote in Leadership Magazine, "If we can convince people that we are onto something that's full of joy, they'll stampede one another to follow us."⁸ The Early Church's zeal for worship and brotherly love was contagious, because they knew a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms. A healthy, loving church will grow in numbers.

EATING AND RETREATS

That happens best in small groups.

In Acts 2:41, one sees the pattern which became normative for Christianity. They were devoted to the apostles teachings, devoted to fellowship, devoted to the breaking of bread, and devoted to prayer. And as a result, "...the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."⁹

⁶ 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NLT)

⁷ Acts 2:47 (NIV)

⁸ Leadership, Vol. 1, no. 3

⁹ Acts 2:47 (NIV)