

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Simple Church

(Acts 2:42-47)

Study #3

Introduction: The beauty of simplicity...

Some years ago, a man who was visiting our church came up to me at the conclusion of a worship service to compliment me on my sermon. I thanked him, humbly, of course.

He went on to say that he saw real brilliance in my message, even genius. (I believe I began to blush.) He continued, telling me that after hearing that particular sermon, he thought I might be the smartest man in the world.

I politely asked him to continue.

He explained, *“Well, it was said that only three people in the world could understand Albert Einstein when he got on a roll. I don’t think anybody could have understood that sermon you just gave.”*

Some people have the gift of making complex things simple. Others of us have the other gift. Oh well...

There is something delicious and beautiful about simplicity. Leonardo da Vinci wrote, *“Simplicity is the ultimate elegance”* and if da Vinci was correct, many of the world’s organizations today are profoundly inelegant.

From major corporations to arms of the US government, the org charts detailing how these things run are shockingly complex. It makes me marvel that anything ever gets done, especially in large institutions.

But, I dare not throw stones. Churches - even a church the size of ours - may not do much better.

Churches can be highly complex organizations. Staff and non-staff juggle activities. Individuals have assignments and then take initiative. Committees and sub-committees seek to accomplish their missions. Life in the church can get downright confusing!

Well, this morning we get to see the first church ever. The church that was formed on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem was amazingly healthy and effective - and there are very few hints of complexity.

Luke is able to describe a church of three thousand for us in six verses. He gives us the priorities, distinctives, and values of the church in about one hundred and twenty five words. Simple. Beautiful.

So, here it is, the day *after* the Day of Pentecost. There are three thousand believers in Jesus. The question on everybody’s mind is, reasonably, *“Now what?”*

Now that there is a church, what does it do? Luke tells us.

Right off the bat he says that the first church ever continually gave itself to, devoted itself to, immersed itself in the teaching of the apostles.

The Apostles Are Used by God

Teaching (v. 42a)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching...

The three thousand want to know more, more about Jesus

The three thousand people who had placed their trust in Jesus on the Day of Pentecost would have had a pretty decent knowledge base when it came to Scripture.

They were serious Jews, serious enough to have taken a pilgrimage from far distant lands to Israel to worship at Passover and Pentecost.

They would have known what we call the Old Testament. But these Jews likely knew precious little about Jesus.

I suspect that many of them became acquainted with Jesus only during the last week of His life. They knew that He had been hailed Messiah and King on Palm Sunday, had been opposed by the religious rulers of the nation, and had been crucified.

But it is doubtful if they knew much at all about His remarkable conception, His teachings, the miracles He performed, or what kind of a Person He was.

But now, having just placed their trust in Him for salvation, they would have been hungry for any information they could gain about Him. And the apostles of Jesus were only too happy to fill in the gaps and tell them all about Jesus.

The apostles were eager to tell the stories for the first time

When the apostles taught, they would have spoken with the assurance and certainty of eyewitnesses.

“I heard Jesus tell the parable of the sower. Here’s how it goes...” and *“I watched Jesus calm the storm on the Sea of Galilee. This is how He did it...”* and *“I listened as He prayed”* and *“I watched Him heal”* and *“I heard Him outwit the Pharisees.”*

Can you imagine being present when Thomas recounted the time when He met Jesus? Can you imagine hearing Peter tell about finding the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning? What would it have been like to listen as John described what it was like to watch as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?

The apostles would have highlighted Jesus’ commands, reiterated His warnings about coming persecution, and emphasized how important it is that His followers love each other.

They would have told the church everything they could recall about Jesus’ life. And they wouldn’t have just told it in a cold, academic way. They had been there. They didn’t just know the stories. They knew Jesus!

So when they spoke it was animated, enthusiastic - the way you tell about a life-changing experience you have had.

The apostles were eager to tell those first believers about Jesus. They are still eager to tell stories about Jesus. They want to tell you!

The apostles are STILL eager to tell the stories

The first believers in Jesus needed content and believers in Jesus today need content, too. Growing Christians in 2010 need to know about Jesus. And the best teachers around today are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Every healthy church that has ever existed has been built on the foundation of the teaching of the apostles - that is, the Bible. And Christians grow healthy by learning about Jesus from the Word of God.

If you want to get to know Jesus, I can offer you no better counsel than this: own your Bible. The Bible will protect you from erroneous ideas about Jesus and will expose you to the real thing.

The Bible will help you discover the inexhaustible resources that are yours in Christ. Learn your Bible and you will learn of Jesus’ promises, direct from the men who actually walked with Him.

Wherever there is long-term, sustainable spiritual growth, there is a devotion to the apostles’ teaching. So, the first church of Jerusalem was a learning church.

The apostles were busy teaching and preaching and mentoring the newly minted believers. But Luke tells us that they were also engaged in other things.

Signs and Wonders (v. 43b)

[43]...and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

The miracles of the Day of Pentecost

As we saw last week, miracles occurred on the Day of Pentecost. These wonders and signs didn't happen off in a closet somewhere. The sound of the violent, rushing wind and the tongues like fire and the speaking in unlearned foreign languages was visible and audible to everyone in Jerusalem.

And Luke wants us to know that the wonders and the signs continued *after* the Day of Pentecost.

The miracles in the days that followed

A pattern was set in the events of the Day of Pentecost. God worked first; people spoke second. Miracles of Pentecost were followed by Peter's sermon. That pattern repeats itself over and over again in the book of Acts.

Supernatural works of God occur to get people's attention. And with the people's attention "got", followers of Jesus follow up with a word about Jesus.

Take some time some time soon to trace through the book of Acts and you'll see that these miraculous works primarily (although not exclusively) took place through the apostles (as Luke says here). God had been at work in the life of Jesus. He is equally at work through the apostles.

Credibility for the Gospel increased as the people of Jerusalem saw the accompanying signs. The signs "greased the skids" for the church to bring Jesus into conversations.

That was then. This is now. What about wonders and signs and miracles today?

What about today?

We will see in our study of Acts that the miraculous events tended to occur at strategic places in the historical expansion of the church.

In other words, miracles were more prevalent when the Gospel was making inroads into new populations or when missionaries were taking the Gospel to lands that had never heard about Jesus.

It was at these times that God seemed to especially move in overtly miraculous ways.

Now, in hearing me say this, you might hear me saying that God is not in the business of working in overtly miraculous ways today. I am NOT saying that.

I believe that the pattern that we see in Acts still holds. First, God acts. Second, we speak.

And our God is still a wonder-working, miracle-performing God!

- Surely we believe that God heals today - or else why would be constantly be placing the names of people who are suffering from illness in the weekly program for prayer?
- Surely we believe that God performs the miracle of repairing hopelessly fractured families. If not, let's stop praying.
- Surely we believe that God can take a damaged life and perform the miracle of restoration and break addictions, bad habits, and character flaws. If not, let's close down the recovery ministry.
- Surely we believe that God can perform the wonder of taking a dead soul and breathing life into it as a man or a woman or a teen or a child does nothing but place faith in Jesus for eternal salvation. If not, let's stop evangelizing.

We believe that God can and does intervene today in wonder-working power.

And when God works - in whatever way He chooses to work! - we have the same privilege the early church had of stepping up to the microphone and declaring, “*You’ve seen God at work. Let me tell you what this tells us about God. Now, let me tell you about Jesus.*”

Luke tells us something else about the first church in addition to pointing out the role that the apostles played. The church in Jerusalem was continually devoted to “*fellowship.*”

Fellowship Was Deep and Nurtured

Shared Life (v. 42b)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to [the]...fellowship¹...

The meaning of fellowship/koinonia

The word we translate “fellowship” here is the Greek word, *koinonia*. At its most basic, *koinonia* means “*shared life.*”

In the culture of the first century, *koinonia* was a word used to describe the closest of all of human relationships. A husband and a wife enjoy *koinonia*. Parents and children experience *koinonia*. Close friends have *koinonia*.²

Koinonia was flowing among the three thousand believers in Jesus there in Jerusalem.

The basis of church fellowship/koinonia

And that is remarkable.

It is remarkable because prior to the Day of Pentecost most of these people didn’t even know each other at all. They spoke different languages, observed different customs, and hailed from very different cultures. Yet now, after the Day of Pentecost, they are enjoying a shared life. How so?

¹ Somewhat surprisingly, this is the only occurrence of the word *koinonia* in the book of Acts.

² The word can also refer to a legal partnership (Luke 5:10)

Well, all Christians are intimately related to God through faith in Christ.³ Each of us is united with Him and we have fellowship with Him. He is our hub, our core. Our lives revolve around Him. And because of our union with Him, we are united with each other.

At a core level, those Christians were united to each other. And at a core level, we are united with each other, today, too, in Christ.

We may talk about having a “fellowship” event when we meet in the Hospitality Center or in Community Blend or in a home. But we have a “fellowship” because we have “fellowship.”

“Fellowship,” biblically speaking, is not about cookies and punch at a pot-luck or coffee between services. It is something far more powerful.

Our “fellowship” may end up resulting in a rich time over cookies and punch or over a cup of coffee, but it is the organic *fellowship/koinonia*, the *shared life*, that makes rich interaction possible.

And in the church at Jerusalem this shared life played itself out in extremely practical ways in the first church ever.

Shared Possessions (vv. 44-45)

Their attitude

[2:44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common

Here is the way they looked at things. “*We are one in Jesus. Therefore, what’s mine is mine AND what’s mine is yours.*”

Those who came to faith in Jesus are hanging together and holding their material possessions as common property.

This attitude translated into some pretty amazing action, as Luke goes on to describe.

³ 2 Peter 1:4 says that we participate in God’s divine nature.

Their actions

[45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.⁴

Again, the Jews who were in Jerusalem, who had heard the sermon preached on Pentecost and who had placed their faith in Jesus, had come from all over the known world. Among other things, that meant that they didn't have homes, material possessions, or, in many cases, a lot of cash.

Some of those who were now a part of the church were running low on funds and had to be supported, either by the residents of Jerusalem or by those who had come to Jerusalem with more cash.

The wealthy among them simply decided that, from time to time, they would free up whatever of their wealth was necessary to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ.⁵

This is outrageous generosity!

There is nothing coerced about it.⁶ The practice was a completely voluntary response to need.

The people didn't all sell their property at the same time and put it into a big pot.⁷

No. As people had needs, donations were made. Needs of Christ-followers were met by other Christ-followers. There was tangible fellowship because of the reality of a truly shared life in Jesus. It is love and care in action.

⁴ When Jesus and His disciples traveled throughout Galilee and Judea, they shared a common store of money. They had all things in common. It shouldn't be a huge surprise that the first church bought into the same idea.

⁵ Some (not me) believe that this sharing indicates their understanding that Jesus was coming back soon. I think it just shows genuine compassion. The rationale is not eschatological, but social.

⁶ At Qumran, the pooling of material resources was required for entrance into the group called the Essenes.

⁷ Strictly speaking, this is neither incipient socialism nor communism.

This sharing of material possessions was voluntary, spontaneous, loving, occasional - and, interestingly enough, short-lived.

In the years to come the church did not keep up this practice. But wherever the church is healthy, generosity has always been in place.

As it was in the ancient church, so it is - or should be - in 2010.

Today

It is my hope that you are increasing in your valuation of the grace of generosity.

Actually, I'm convinced that many of you are. I see evidence that generosity is increasing here at Northwest, and that is a sign of congregational maturity. There is consistent generosity toward the General Fund - and that is a good thing. It speaks of your ownership of the ministry and of your heart for what the Lord is doing here.

But there are also weekly contributions to the Benevolence Fund, a fund that helps people in desperate situations. And there are contributions to Bread and Water that meet needs in Jesus' Name. And there are gifts of food to the Food Pantry that are helping people who otherwise wouldn't know where their next meal is coming from.

It is exciting to see needs being met here! And as encouraged as I am by the generosity I see sprouting out here, I want to encourage you with the thought that we can do more.

I can pretty assure you that if you keep your ears open to listen and your eyes open to see, you'll tune in to situations of need where you might well be able to offer assistance, just like they did in the church at Jerusalem.

With ears and eyes wide open you'll find ample opportunities for true, Christian fellowship.⁸

⁸ The Apostle John, who was there in Jerusalem to witness this incredible outpouring of generosity when the church was launched, wrote near the end of his life, ***[17] But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? [18] Little***

So, the picture that is developing of life in the church in Jerusalem is of a community of believers who are learning from the apostles, watching God at work, and enjoying deep fellowship.

But there is more. And the next ingredient tossed into the mix in the first church was - are you ready for this? - FOOD.

Food Was a Staple of Community

The Lord's Supper (v. 42c)

*[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread...*⁹

The speedy adoption of "communion"

I checked out several Bible commentaries concerning this particular reference to "**breaking bread**" in preparation for this morning's message.

And, while consensus among commentaries is no guarantee of anything, the agreement of these Bible scholars does carry *some* weight. With the exception of one, each of these commentators believes that the reference here in verse 42 was to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.¹⁰

"Breaking bread" seems to have taken on almost instant religious overtones, due to the impact that Jesus made on the apostles when He broke bread in the Upper Room with them at their last Passover together.

children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. I've often wondered if, as he penned those lines he was thinking of Acts 2.

⁹ "Breaking bread" - as a reference to the feeding of the 5,000/4,000 - Matthew 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6, 19-20; Luke 9:16; in reference to the meal after the walk to Emmaus - Luke 24:30; 35; in reference to the Last Supper/Lord's Supper - Matthew 26:26; Acts 2:42; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24; Other - Acts 2:46.

¹⁰ Among those I'm using as resources for this series are commentaries by F.F. Bruce, Everett Harrison, and Darrell Bock. Bock is an exception to the others. He takes these words as a broad statement that the early Christians ate meals together rather than as a reference to a sacramental meal.

That meal changed their lives. The emphasis of that time with Jesus established the New Covenant as critical to what life in Jesus was all about.

The purpose of the Lord's Supper

And so they made sure that from the very beginning they would come together to remember Jesus by eating the bread and drinking the cup (and as we will do next Sunday).

They would recall together how Jesus broke bread and distributed a cup and said, "**This is My body**" and "**This is My blood**".

Now, when we take the Lord's Supper here at Northwest, we do so with a small piece of broken bread and a small cup of juice.

Not so in the early church! The Lord's Supper was celebrated with a full meal and was referred to as the Agape (the Love Feast).

The church members would all bring food and drink to the Love Feast, enjoy fellowship around the table and finish up by remembering Jesus' death with a final morsel of bread and His resurrection with a final drink of wine.

They re-enacted the Last Supper Jesus had with His disciples on the night of His betrayal, which was a full-blown Passover meal.

Luke does not tell us how frequently they observed Communion, only that they were "continually" breaking bread.

As I think about this special time of worship, I picture an incredibly powerful bonding experience - both man-ward and God-ward. Their observance of the Lord's Supper deepened their *koinonia*.

As Luke goes on to say, though, their *koinonia* was further solidified by the simple act of taking regular meals together.

Taking Meals Together (v. 46b)

[46] Day by day continuing with one mind...they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart

Then...

There was nothing “churchy” about this practice. They simply joined each other at mealtime and ate together.

We shouldn’t necessarily assume that at each meal there was an inductive Bible study. It was just friends sharing food around a table whose central passion in life was Jesus.

It happened in the first century. It can happen in the twenty first century.

...and now

I’ve seen it over and over again and so have you. Good things, God-honoring things, intensely personal things happen when we share meals with each other.

Intimate associations and mutual acceptance comes into play when people eat together. It’s friendly. Relationships get established. Talk turns to important topics.

So if you are looking for one hugely practical, intensely spiritual application from Acts 2 to take home with you, here it is:

EAT MEALS TOGETHER

Take the initiative and invite someone over for dinner. Meet at a favorite restaurant. Invite a group of folks over for supper. Have a dessert fellowship. Throw a pot-luck (pot-faith?) supper. Form a dinner group. Make sure your Care Group has food - at least from time to time.

Food - it’s what’s for fellowship!

And, to round out the distinctives highlighted in the church in Jerusalem, Luke lists prayer. Not surprisingly, the first church ever prayed and worshiped God together.

The Church Was All about Prayer

Prayer at Home (v. 42d)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to [the] prayer.

God’s people have always recognized that prayer is essential for spiritual growth and spiritual health. Old Testament Jews knew this, and Christians have always known this, too.

Since the Christians who made up the first church were all Jewish, they were all immediately on the same page of seeing the importance of prayer to God.

- They were filled with gratitude to God for their salvation. What better way to tell God, “*Thanks!*” than through prayer?
- They were filled with joy over the blessings God had heaped on them. How better to express their joy than through prayer?
- They recognized their need for God’s strength to be able to live for Jesus. What better way to access His strength and grace than through prayer.

We don’t know anything about the form their corporate prayers took. Did they divide into twos, threes and fours during a worship service and pray together? Did they listen as one of the apostles led in prayer? Did they all pray out loud at the same time? Did they all pray silently at the same time? Did they pray scripted prayers? Did they mainly pray the Psalms?

Don’t know. All we know is that they prayed and that they prayed “*continually*.” They were devoted to nurturing their fellowship/koinonia through prayer.

They prayed in their homes. And they prayed in the Temple. And as they prayed, they were of one mind.

Prayer in the Temple (vv. 46a, 47a)

[46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple¹¹...they were...[47] praising God

I don't know what image that phrase "*one mind*" brings to your mind. It's possible that would see it as an unattractive sameness. You might be tempted to think that the early Christians were cookie cutter look-alikes who had the same opinions about everything.

Well, based on everything we read in the rest of the New Testament, I can assure you that this was NOT the case!

The "*one thing*" about which the early church was of "*one mind*" was Jesus.

- They may have had differences of opinion regarding politics, the economy, the state of Israel and the role of Rome.
- They might have had differences of opinion about child-rearing.
- They might have been rivals in the business world.
- They came from different countries and different cultures, so they probably had very different opinions about music, dress, food and leisure activities.

BUT, these early Christians were caught up in Jesus. He was their core commitment, and they related to each other from that core.

So, when Christian A was ready to go to the Temple to worship, he didn't allow the politics or the economics or the demographics of Christian B to be a show-stopper.

He just grabbed Christian B by the arm, and said, "*Those issues can be worked out, brother. Let's go worship Jesus.*"

And so they did, day by day.

¹¹ Every day, they are at the Temple, worshiping. Highlights the Jewishness of early Christian faith.

You know, when the people of God are learning and loving, when they are all wrapped up in Jesus and the life they share in Him, when there is demonstrable love flowing back and forth and the power of God is being unleashed through them, there will be effects. Count on it.

And there were remarkable effects emanating from the highly effective church in Jerusalem.

Effects

From the Congregation - AWE! (v. 43a)

[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe

The *everyone* mentioned here is, I believe, a reference to the believers in the church.¹²

This awe (literally "fear") speaks of the careful, respectful, (even nervous) notice of what is happening at the hands of the apostles. The awe/fear speaks of genuine worship and recognizes that God is doing something.

And there was a wonderful effect on the outside community as well.

From the Outside Community - FAVOR! (v. 47b)

[47]...having favor with all the people.

The residents of Jerusalem were impressed by what they saw of the Church. At this stage in its development, the church had a sterling reputation. That will soon change - and we'll see it soon. But at the beginning, there was a winsome attractiveness about the church.

¹² After having just told us that the church was continually devoting itself to "*the apostles' teaching*" and to "*fellowship*" (v. 42), it makes sense that the next verse's primary reference is to the awe felt by the Christians because of the wonders God was performing.

And our passage ends by affirming the work of God in drawing more and more people to Jesus through the dynamic witness of the church.

From the Lord - PEOPLE SAVED! (v. 47c)

[47]...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

And what was the means that the Lord was pleased to use to bring about these “*day by day*” conversions? What method? Well, the Bible doesn’t tell us directly, but we can make a hunch using a little “sanctified imagination.”

These believers in Jesus had, only weeks earlier, not been believers in Jesus. The church members had social networks in place with people who did not know Jesus.

And in the weeks following Pentecost, the members of the church naturally used those social networks to tell their friends that Jesus saves.

The reason there was such great evangelistic impact is that the Christians shared their faith with their unbelieving friends.

Here is what one of my commentaries said about the evangelistic methodology of the first church of Jerusalem following Pentecost.

“There is nothing to suggest that the increase in the numbers of Christians was due to more public preaching. While the possibility of such preaching must be granted, the more likely explanation for the growth of the church at this stage was the transformation observable in the three thousand. The impact of the few at Pentecost had broadened and become the impact of the many.”¹³

The life of Jesus had infected the church and had spread with soul-winning power through the city of Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

In Acts 2, we see a highly effective church. Its distinctives can be spelled out in a little over a hundred words.

- The believers learned from the apostles and marveled at the wonder-working power of God.
- They enjoyed a shared life - and shared their possessions as any had need.
- They remembered Jesus in the bread and the cup, and got to know each other over common meals.
- They prayed together.

Period. Simple church.

The result was a growing reverence for God, favor with all the people of Jerusalem, and daily additions to their number as more and more people placed their faith in Jesus.

Maybe *simple* should be our goal. Back to basics. Following the Manufacturers instructions will get us to church - plain, simple, life-changing and God-honoring!

¹³ Everett F. Harrison, Acts: The Expanding Church, Moody Press, 1975, p. 67.