

Patterns

Acts 2:42-47

Sunday, October 11, 2020

If you've ever been a fan of comic books and superheroes, you may be familiar with the concept of an origin story. How did the character become the hero? How did they acquire their special ability or super-power? Fans want to know about Peter Parker's transformation to become Spider-Man, or how Diana became the hero we know as Wonder Woman. Even in the real world, there is an interest in knowing our heroes' origin stories. Did George Washington *really* chop down that cherry tree? How did growing up in a log cabin on the frontier shape the life of Abraham Lincoln?

I want to turn our attention to another kind of origin story, a story not about the origins of a person, but the origins of a people. I invite you to turn with me to chapter 2 of the Book of Acts as we resume our sermon series. This morning we are looking at the tail end of chapter 2. We are very early in the storyline of the first-century church. We are looking at the church's origin story.

About a month ago we started this journey together through the Book of Acts. In chapter 1, we saw how Jesus commissioned his closest followers to carry the message of the gospel to people everywhere, beginning right there in the city of Jerusalem. Then in chapter 2, we read about a world-changing event, the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. With the Spirit's arrival, these followers of Jesus now had everything they needed to begin their world-wide disciple-making mission.

There's so much that takes place in just these first two chapters, but for our purposes this morning let me draw your attention back to verse 41 of chapter 2 where we left off two Sundays ago. Luke, the narrator of this early-church origin story, reports that,

“Those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:41, NIV).

The early church was a growing church. In just one day, after hearing the Apostle Peter preach the gospel to a multi-ethnic crowd of Jerusalem festival attendees, three thousand people responded in faith to the message about Jesus. Inwardly, their hearts turned away from their rebellion against God and they repented. They heard the announcement of grace and forgiveness through Christ and they were made spiritually alive. Outwardly, they proclaimed their new identity in Christ through baptism. More powerful than a radioactive spider bite or an exposure to gamma rays, these newborn believers experience

radical transformation. They announced to their new brothers and sisters in Christ and to the watching world that they had been made new in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul would later describe this transforming work of God like this,

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:3-6, NIV).

The early church was a growing church. But it wasn't just numerical growth that they were experiencing. These baby Christians were starting to take their first steps of faith as they were learning together how to walk with Jesus.

Maybe you can relate to what it's like to open your eyes to spiritual things for the first time. In any church, there are some who exhibit spiritual maturity. I am so thankful to God for those in our church family who demonstrate a lifetime of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But perhaps some here today or watching online feel a bit young in the faith. Maybe some of you feel like you've got a long way to go before you see yourself as a fully devoted follower of Jesus. But whether you are new in the faith, or you've been a follower for many years, every one of us is still a growing disciple. And together we are a growing church.

Now, as a pastor, I'm far less concerned about our church's numerical growth than I am about our church family's discipleship growth. So, as we unpack the final verses from Acts 2 together, I want us to consider how the practices and priorities of the early church might inform the practices and priorities of the church today. To do that, we need to identify some patterns. These patterns ought to be true of any church, at any time, in any culture.

But we need to proceed with caution. As we work through the Book of Acts in the coming weeks, and as we observe more of the early church's practices, we will need to ask ourselves whether what we read is *prescriptive* or *descriptive*. As Luke narrates these early church accounts, how do we discern what is *prescriptive*—what should be true of all believers everywhere for all time—and what is *descriptive*—what was unique to what God was doing in the developmental stage of the early church.

Let's get into our passage this morning and start to identify some of these patterns of a growing church that we can apply to our situation today. Follow

along with me as I read starting in verse 42 of Acts 2 through the end of the chapter.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who 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” (2:42-47, NIV).

Notice that these verses list some practices that were commonplace in the early days of the first-century church. Unlike what we’ve looked at so far from Acts 1-2, in this passage, Luke doesn’t narrate an event, rather he gives us a day-in-the-life snapshot of the newly-formed Jerusalem church.

We’ll focus most of our attention on verses 42, 46, and 47, but first, let me say something about those verses 43-45. Luke reports that,

“Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (2:43-45, NIV).

Wonders and signs? Selling possessions and holding everything in common? What exactly is being described here, and more importantly, to what degree should we expect that these things are to be true of our church today? In the coming weeks, as we get into chapters 3-5 of Acts, we’ll see these things play out in greater detail, and we’ll be able to discern what is *descriptive* and unique to the early church, and what is *prescriptive* and ought to be true of us today. So we’re going to hold off on considering those practices for the time being.

Instead, let’s focus on the patterns that begin to emerge starting with what it says in verse 42:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (2:42, NIV).

One of the cultural casualties of COVID-19 has been the disruption this pandemic has had on professional sports. If you remember back to when things began to shut down this spring, the first to fall was the NCAA March Madness

basketball tournament and the abrupt end of the college hockey season. Then we learned that the NBA, the NHL, the NFL, and Major League Baseball would all have shortened or altered seasons. Worst of all, we had to go through the emotional toll of the announcement of the off and then on again Big Ten football season. So sports fans, how has all this disruption affected your team loyalty? Did you give up on the 2020 season, or have you stuck by your team? Are you devoted?

You'll notice that word *devoted* there in verse 42 followed by a list of four practices that the early church committed themselves to. That word *devoted* carries with it the sense of associating closely and continuously with someone or something. These were not occasional practices, these were defining attributes of these fully devoted followers of Jesus.

What did they devote themselves to? First, this growing church of disciples with newly-formed faith devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching. We don't use the term *apostle* much today unless we are referring to the New Testament apostles. Our church has pastors, elders, trustees, and other leaders, but no apostles. That shouldn't surprise us since back in Acts 1 we saw that the two necessary qualifications to be an apostle were (1) that they were chosen by the Lord Jesus himself, and (2) that they were eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. To designate someone as an apostle meant that one had been commissioned by Christ himself as a special messenger of the gospel.

Now, you and I are free to share the message of the gospel and to teach it to one another; we're commanded in Scripture to do just that. So, in one sense, all Christians are called to be messengers of the gospel. And yet, the *office* of apostle in the New Testament is a unique role. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the prophets, the apostles were authorized to speak on God's behalf. One author puts it this way,

*“Those who have the office of apostle in the early church are seen to claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets, an authority to speak and write words that are God's very words.”*¹

We need to understand that these apostles, along with the soon to be converted Apostle Paul and others, had not yet composed the books of the New Testament. Over the next few decades, these men, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would put pen to parchment and would give the church the 27 books of the New Testament. And yet, in the meantime, the apostles were

¹ *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Wayne Grudem, p. 60.

instructing these new Christians in the word of God; they were preaching and expounding the message of the gospel.

So we start to see a pattern emerge. **Growing disciples need gospel instruction.** Even though there are no apostles alive today to teach us, we too can devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching. As growing disciples, we too need gospel instruction.

Isn't it interesting that the text doesn't say that these early disciples devoted themselves to the teaching of *Jesus*? Instead, Luke says that they devoted themselves to the *apostles'* teaching. We might ask, why not cut out the middleman and go to the source? Would not the very words of Jesus be a more pure form of the gospel message? No. The gospel is not just about what Jesus said, it's also about what Jesus did.

If we are to grow as Jesus's disciples, we need gospel instruction. We need to open our Bibles together and be shown that, as Jesus himself said, all of the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms—is fulfilled in him.² We need gospel instruction so that we are better able to grasp the message about Jesus as taught by the apostles and the other New Testament authors.

I think that pastor and author Mark Dever gets it right in his book *What Is a Healthy Church?* On this topic, Dever writes,

“It is particularly important for our churches to have sound biblical theology in one special area—in our understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel. The gospel is the heart of Christianity, and so it should be at the heart of our churches. A healthy church is a church in which every member, young and old, mature and immature, unites around the wonderful good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Every text in the Bible points to it or some aspect of it. So the church gathers week after week to hear the gospel rehearsed once again. A biblical understanding of the good news should inform every sermon, every act of baptism and communion, every song, every prayer, every conversation. More than anything else in the church's life, the members of a healthy church pray and long to know the gospel more deeply.”³

So let's make a deal. We pastors, elders, teachers, and worship leaders will commit to keeping the message of the gospel central in all that we say and do. Would you then, as growing disciples of Jesus Christ commit to keeping the

² Luke 24:45-45; cf. Matthew 5:17

³ *What Is a Healthy Church?*, Mark Dever, p. 75.

message of the gospel central in your own life? Let's devote ourselves as growing disciples to gospel instruction.

There is another pattern that begins to emerge in this passage, but we need to consider the other practices listed in verse 42 before we can jump to application. In addition to devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching, Luke tells us that these growing disciples devoted themselves to "fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42, NIV). If we are too quick to jump to application here, we might prematurely conclude that since the early church devoted themselves to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, then Christians today need to devote themselves to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. While this is the direction this text is pointing us toward application, I want us to look before we leap.

What constitutes fellowship? What types of activities were these early church believers involved in that could be properly classified as fellowship? Can any activity, as long as it's shared with another Christian be considered fellowship?

And what did it mean that these first-century disciples were devoted to breaking bread together? Where did they break bread? Did this activity *only* include bread? In verse 46, the text seems to indicate that this took place in one another's homes and that eating together might have included other food options.

And what did it mean that they devoted themselves to prayer? Some of our English Bibles translate this as *the prayers*? Did they pray specific prayers like the Lord's Prayer? Did they take prayer requests? How often did they meet for prayer? Was prayer a formal act of worship or an informal practice among fellow believers?

I hope in raising these questions that we sense the need to rightly apply this text to our own situation. If we conclude that devoting ourselves to certain practices will help us to grow as Jesus's disciples, don't we want to be sure that our practices actually *will* lead us to discipleship growth?

One strategy could be to try and mimic these early church practices as closely as possible. But then, we again run into the issue of discerning what Luke intends for us to see as prescriptive and what is descriptive. For example, what do we do with verse 46 where it says that these disciples were "[meeting] together in the temple courts"? Are we safe to assume that meeting together in the temple courts is analogous to worshiping together here at church or via livestream on Sunday morning?

I think I have a good solution. Rather than try to mimic these early church practices, again, let's look for a pattern. I believe that the pattern that emerges here is that **growing disciples need gospel community**. Nowhere in this passage do we get the sense that these newborn disciples were navigating their growing faith independently of each other. Yes, each individual believer had to devote himself or herself to growing in Christ. But the overall sense of the passage is that discipleship growth primarily takes place in the context of a gospel community.

I think every one of us understands the value of community. Even we introverts can sense that God made us for one another and that people need people. This fact has become painfully obvious over the last number of months of increased isolation and social distance. We are created to crave community.

But what does *gospel* community look like? For these first-century Christians, it looked a lot like what is described in verses 46-47,

“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” (2:46-47a, NIV).

But it also looked like what Luke described in verses 43-45, which as I mentioned earlier, we will look at in greater detail in the weeks to come. What we all want to know is, what does gospel community look like *for us*? How do I apply this text to *my* discipleship growth? How can *we* become a church of growing disciples devoted to gospel community?

When the text tells us that these growing disciples devoted themselves to fellowship, we are to understand that this was *gospel* fellowship. These believers were discovering that they didn't just share the same religious preferences and attend the same church, they had been united in Christ into one body, one family of brothers and sisters in the Lord. The gospel was forming the bonds and the boundaries of their relationship to one another.

When the text tells us that the early church broke bread together, we are to understand that this was a *gospel* meal. That doesn't mean that the bread they ate was somehow infused with some special gospel ingredient. Like the bread and the juice that we will eat and drink as we share communion together today, the food they enjoyed together was just food. And yet, like our celebration of the Lord's Supper today, the message of the gospel permeated their tangible expression of love for one another and for Christ their Savior.

And when text tells us that the early church prayed together, we are to understand that these were *gospel* prayers. Gospel prayers may include prayer for the well-being of fellow disciples—for our physical, mental, and emotional health. But gospel prayers would also include prayers for discipleship growth and for the empowerment to continue the mission of making disciples of all nations.

Let's consider these two emerging patterns together. **Gospel instruction plus gospel community produces growing disciples.** That's the kind of church we want to be here at E-Free Bemidji—a church of growing disciples.

So here's my challenge: First, **let's devote ourselves to gospel instruction.** If you're listening to this message either online via livestream or in-person here in the building, then you're already doing this. This is a great first step. Do whatever it takes to make Sunday morning, whether on-site or online, your highest priority of the week.

But second, **let's devote ourselves to gospel community.** Make sure that each and every week that you are staying connected to a community of believers that is helping to see the gospel formed in you. Join with others who are devoted to growing in discipleship.

That's why our church is so committed to Life Groups. I'm not suggesting that Life Groups are the *only* way to experience gospel community, or that discipleship growth is *impossible* apart from a Life Group. But I am saying that our Life Groups are intentionally designed to bring gospel instruction and gospel community together so that you and I can grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. There's still plenty of room for you to join a Life Group, and if we run out of room, we'll start more groups.