

*Words and Deeds: The Early Church Part II*

*By Jason Huff*

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*Psalm 149:1-5; Matthew 16:13-18; Acts 2:41-47*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 2:41-47. May we hear, understand, and believe God's holy and sovereign Word. "Those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. 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."

Can you think of your ideal day? Where would it be? What would you be doing? Some of us would be someplace hot, on a beach, with a book in hand, enjoying the surf. Others of us prefer the mountains. Your best day might be riding rollercoasters, watching a movie with your family, or hanging around a campfire with your friends. It might be trying new things or enjoying something familiar. Everyone's different.

Yet when we think of our perfect day, we know if we get it, it won't last for long. We also know that the ideal day is better in our heads rather than in reality. In our perfect day, nobody has problems after too many trips on the tilt-a-whirl; nobody disagrees with the movie choice; nobody fights over beach toys. But our ideal day coming true would be pretty awesome.

Today's passage summarizes the ideal time in the early church. For a season – we don't know if it was a few months or perhaps even a couple years – the early church experienced huge blessings, amazing miracles, and phenomenal growth. Not only that, but the early church "enjoyed the favor of all the people." It was a stunning time.

It is such an amazing description that the modern church movement is a bit obsessed with Acts 2. There's an Acts 2 network of churches, like a denomination unto itself like the Catholics or Lutherans or Presbyterians. A lot of church planting networks are called Acts 2. Even before I went to seminary, I heard a lot of people say, "We want our church to be an Acts 2 church."

Well, who wouldn't? The summary is all gain and no hardship, no persecution, and also, at this point, almost no Gentiles, just Jewish converts. The church doesn't stay in Acts 2; there are 26 more chapters to go. We can never stay in the ideal forever. And yet key components from Acts 2 stick with the church; when the church is at her best, when she's growing, when she's experiencing the Lord's favor, it starts looking a bit like Acts 2. We need to embrace this passage to be able to ask ourselves, "Are we doing what God blessed in the early church?" For CrossWay to grow, I believe we must be rooted in Acts 2 – not expecting the ideal or perfection forever, but the patterns the church established early on.

In last week's passage, Peter gave his first sermon to the crowds gathered on the Day of Pentecost and told how Jesus, the man they had killed on the cross, was in fact the Lord and Savior, the promised Messiah of Israel. The crowds asked how they could be saved, and Peter told them, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ, and you will receive the Holy Spirit." On that day, 3000 people became part of the first church.

So what did this church look like? We'll take things out of order so they make more sense. We need to make sense of it because it will break some patterns of thinking about what it is to be a Christian and what it is to be a part of the church. This is truly life-changing. If we take it seriously, we aren't going to be the same, and CrossWay isn't going to be the same.

First thing I'm going to point out is that *the early church isn't a big steeple church, and it's not a house church – it's a movement of people*. Everyone has an opinion about what a Christian congregation should be and where it should meet and how big it should be. A lot of people expect a church building of some sort. In the past thirty years, churches have popped up in schools and shopping malls like ours, but the expectation is that you grow, then you build a building, and that's when you really have "church."

But other people think that big churches are bad. Some people think the early church didn't meet in buildings at all, and the only way to have an "Acts 2" church is to meet in someone's home. It's a lot less expensive, and there are real benefits, though there tons of problems with it too – because there's usually no trained leader, theology can go south quickly.

In Acts 2, though, the people *are* the church. They *are* the gathering of the faithful. They are Jewish people with Jewish beliefs that now include the Jewish messiah, so where do they meet together every day? The temple courts. That's where they were baptized. Ritual cleansing pools were all around the temple – the ruins are still there; you can still see them. That's where the early believers would have been baptized.

The earliest believers worshiped at the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem. Many new converts don't live in Jerusalem, so when they go home, where do they worship? In the local synagogue. This was the pattern for a long time. Later in Acts, whenever the disciples go anywhere to spread word of Jesus, they always went to the synagogue first, and they taught there unless or until they got kicked out by the synagogue leaders. The early Christians didn't own a big building, but they met in the largest place around meant for the worship of God.

At the same time, they regularly met in homes. They held the Lord's Supper, which was meant for believers, in their home gatherings. They fellowshiped together, ate together, and prayed together in their homes. The homes of more wealthy individuals in the fellowship became the regular gathering places for the faithful.

They weren't worried about where they were. That's because the church was a movement of people. The word church comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which means gathering of the called – often, it meant the village called out into the city square for news. But in Christianity, it goes far deeper – the *ekklesia* is the gathering of those called by God to be His people, who hear the good news and are changed. There's nothing to do with a building.

Wherever we gather, we are the church. At our fellowship lunch next week, we'll be the church there. When the youth and I gather at the Lyjaks or the Bible study meets next, we're the church. When you are at work and you meet with a fellow Christian for a few minutes for study or prayer or fellowship, you are the church. When you go to someone's home for a graduation party or a celebration or just a nice dinner, if you and your spouse are believers, you are the representation of the church; if your hosts are believers, then you all are the church.

Thinking of church as a constant thing changes our way of being. Because we act differently when we are together in the modern church. We slow down; we're more quiet; we sing. We're reverent. We listen. And the other 167 hours of the week, we're often totally different. Being the church wherever we are doesn't mean we have to become who we're not or that we have to recreate a modern church service.

No, it means that wherever we go, wherever we are, we act as people of God's Kingdom. There has never been a point in history where going to a worship service was separate from being God's people all the time. Worship simply set the stage for the rest of life during the week. If we can go from thinking about church as a place to worship to thinking about church as a movement we live out daily that includes regular worship, that could change our lives.

Here's the next thing I want us to look at...the early church was continually devoted to four things: *the teaching of God, the community of believers, the fellowship of meals together, and prayer.* The Greek means to persevere at something, giving it constant attention. These things were what the first believers were all about.

The first is the teaching of the apostles. The disciples are teaching about the life of Jesus – their experiences with Him, the things that He taught them, all that He went through – and how Jesus is the promised messiah of Scripture. They are studying every part of the Word of God carefully...and keep in mind this is the Old Testament. They are looking deeply to find all the material about Jesus. At the same time, they are starting to learn what it is to be free from the impossible demands of the Jewish law, still following its morality but also knowing about the forgiveness God has given through Jesus.

When they meet on the temple grounds, this is what they are learning. When they are walking in the streets, when they are meeting in homes, when they are dining with one another, this is their discussion. They are learning about Jesus with the devotion of people who realize their utter failure at saving themselves and are diving in deep to know the One who has saved them from themselves. It's not as if they didn't have lives and families and discussions about what was for dinner and who was fixing the cattle fence, but their dedication, what mattered to them, was conversations that led them closer to Jesus.

They are dedicated to the community of believers. This is actually the bigger change, probably. The response to Jesus' ministry showed there were plenty of people interested in learning about God. But caring for one another? Jesus called out the Pharisees for creating rules that made it easy not to care for one another. People believed the rich were blessed by God because of their righteousness, so if they didn't share what they had, well, it was the lot of the poor to suffer.

But now there's an about face. The early believers genuinely care about one another, and they are willing to back up their faith with what they own. They care for their own by spending what they have on others. Now some people have read this passage as encouraging some form of community living, a form of socialism or communism. But it's not that at all.

In communism, the state owns everything and gives you what it wants you to have. In socialism, the community owns everything and determines what you should have. But here, individuals choose freely and willingly to sell their own personal possessions to help those who are in need. All the believers had everything in common not because the apostles demanded it or Jesus said we must do it a certain way, but because they were convinced that God had given them all that they owned as a gift – a gift given not only to bless them but those around them. Their attachment to Jesus and to their brothers and sisters in Jesus had finally outweighed their attachment to their stuff.

Moving on to the breaking of bread. The “breaking of bread” referred both to eating together and to the practice of ending their meals with the Lord's Supper. This too showed the level of commitment they had to each other, because eating was not just a personal activity but one that showed your social position. Rich people didn't eat with poor people. “Good” people didn't eat with known tax collectors and sinners. And never, ever did Jews eat with Samaritans or Romans. Who you ate with signaled your virtue, your place in society, so many things.

When believers ate together, they came together across all those different lines. Even people from different races and religious backgrounds eventually were given a place at Jesus' table. The rich shared their meals with the poor. The notorious sinner sat next to the pious person because they both knew they were saved by grace and not by their own righteousness. They came together because they wanted to commune with Jesus.

And the Lord's Supper was not a once a month ritual. It was a part of their regular fellowship. No one argued whether Jesus' literal body and blood were consumed or if salvation came through taking it. No, the Lord's Supper was a real way of communing with Jesus, participating in His life, remembering His death and resurrection, and being a part of the community of faith. It was celebrated when they came together to eat, often daily.

Last but not least, they are devoted to prayer. They aren't just praying personal prayers alone. They are dedicated to prayer together – to talking to God, to seeking His will, to asking for His power, bringing their needs to Him. Constant prayer together defined the early church. They wanted God to be a part of all they did, and they sought Him out. They wanted to follow in Jesus' ways and so they talked to Him. The Spirit was inside them now, guiding them, so they were in constant conversation with Him.

And they did it “with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” Nobody forced them into any of this. They are happy, joyful, even, about all that's going on. No one seems to mind getting rid of their things, changing their lifestyles, embracing people they once wouldn't sit at a table with. And it's such an amazing change that it has Jerusalem talking. No one is mad at them because who could be? They're genuinely loving, kind, giving, caring. They're a blessing to others.

Do you want to know how a band of maybe a hundred Jesus followers becomes a huge phenomenon? Do you want to know how the church grows daily? God is at the center: “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” It’s not the disciples or the new believers who are saving people; it’s God. But how is God bringing the new people? Through the actions of these folks who are genuinely changed by the Holy Spirit inside and out. The church grows because something extraordinary has happened – people not only care about their family and friends, they care about the least, the last, and the lost, and they prove it with actions.

What would it be if, when you became a believer and joined the church, it meant that you would not go hungry or go without shelter or clothing? What would it be if my work was short and I couldn’t pay my water bill, someone in the church would give something up in order to pay it? What would it be if the guys in the church who had handyman skills helped out those without those skills when the toilet leaked or the furnace went kablooeey? What would it be if we were close enough to one another that it wouldn’t be embarrassing to have to ask for that kind of help? That kind of community would make waves. People might start believing because they saw someone whose faith changed their behavior. I’d like to be the pastor of that church.

What would it be if we were so excited about what we might learn next from the Scriptures that we would meet far more often to talk about it? What might happen if there was a women’s breakfast and a men’s breakfast regularly, not as a church program but something we all wanted to have? What if there were small groups meeting regularly, to talk and to share life together, to pray together regularly for all sorts of things? You couldn’t help but talk about it with others because it would become such an important part of your life.

I ask these questions not to put us on a guilt trip. We may be guilty, but Jesus forgives. Anything we’ve done wrong, He can set right. I ask these questions because I want to be a better pastor, a better husband, a better Christian. I want to be faithful. And I want CrossWay to be a greater gathering of the faithful in our part of the world. I pray that we want to move to the next level, disciples who aren’t satisfied with an hour a week of Jesus.

I don’t have the details of how this will look. It can’t start with me. I can lead, but I can’t tell you how it has to look. If we are to grow, it’s got to be a grassroots movement that starts with you. How is God working in you towards making this happen – becoming a church that resembles the movement that changed the world? I can organize and preach and facilitate things, but it starts with each of us having a vision of becoming a church like the one in Acts 2.

It won’t be perfect; nothing ever is. This incredibly blessed time didn’t last forever. We’re not going to be naïve and think that we can suddenly decide to be this way. It will take us making a conscientious effort to love, to reach out, to give, to grow. I don’t want to leave you today with answers. I ask you to wrestle with the questions. The one question I can answer is this: it’s not impossible. We have the Holy Spirit of God living and working within us. We know the love that God has for us in Jesus, who gave His everything for us. It may seem impractical, unfeasible to live and love like the early church. But I want that blessing of God that was upon them for us. I want us each to hear on our last day, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I want us to hear it together as a fellowship of believers when someday we all meet again in the Kingdom of God. Are we willing to be that church?