

## Living the Dream

A Sermon on Acts 2:42-47

Knox @ Faith PCA in Tacoma WA

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This evening we return to our sermon series on the book of Acts. As we do so, I want to briefly remind us of where we are in the book.

This evening we come to the conclusion of chapter 2, one of the longest and most significant chapters in this book. By verse count, only chapters 7, 10, and 13 rival or exceed chapter 2. A quick glance at these chapters reveals that each one contains a speech rich in theological significance: Peter's Pentecost sermon to the Jews of Jerusalem, proving that Jesus is both Christ and Lord, here in chapter 2, Steven's condemnation of the leadership of Israel in chapter 7, Peter's proclamation of the gospel to Gentiles and his vision of unclean foods being made clean in chapter 10, and Paul's demonstration that Jesus is the Messiah to the Jews and God-fearers of Antioch in chapter 13.

The length and significance of chapter 2 explains why we've already had 4 sermons on this chapter. Each of those sermons has highlighted a different aspect of Pentecost: the **significance of the Spirit's being poured out** like fire, wind, and tongues; the fulfillment of prophecy and the **eschatological significance of Pentecost**; the significance of the titles "Christ" and "Lord" and the proof that they belong to Jesus; and Peter's rationale for baptizing covenant children.

Here at the end of chapter 2, Luke zooms out from the day of Pentecost to show us its **effect** upon the apostolic church: blessing, vitality, spiritual-fruitfulness, and growth. This text is a **snapshot** of the **church** at her **best**. As we read it together, consider its **beauty**.

Acts 2:42-47. For context I'll pick up the reading at verse 41.

This is the inerrant and infallible word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Acts 2:42-47 gives us a **vision of what the church should be**. That vision can be summarized by **three ideals**.

The first of those ideals is a **commitment to worship**. Look again at this passage and notice how it begins with a summary of the church's commitments: "and they **devoted** themselves to the apostles' **teaching** and the **fellowship**, to the breaking of **the bread** and the **prayers**." The Greek word translated here as devoted can also be translated, "to occupy oneself with" "to pay persistent attention to" "to hold fast." Skip down to verse 46 and compare this idea with the phrase, "day by day" or "daily" in some translations. These were life-altering commitments. This was a way of life, not just one-hour a week that left the rest of their time untouched.

Commentators are divided on how exactly these 4 commitments mentioned in verse 42 are related to each other. Some think of them as 4 related, but separate, activities, while others think 2 or 3 or even all four of them are all elements of an early Christian liturgy. For reasons that I will get into under my second point, I think that debate is overwrought and not entirely helpful. However, if I had to choose, I would side with those who see this list here in verse 42 as mostly consisting of elements of an early Christian liturgy. Let's go through each item and I'll briefly explain why.

Notice how this list ends with a mention of "the prayers." Using the definite article and the plural when describing prayer was the typical, idiomatic way of describing the set prayers of the temple, as opposed to personal prayer or prayer in general. This reading is confirmed by verse 46, which describes the early Christians as "daily attending the **temple** together." Remember that when Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, he described it as a "house of prayer." Another point in favor of seeing these prayers as part of a set liturgy is that the Greek word translated in the ESV as "**attending**" in verse **46** is the **same** Greek word used here in verse **42**, where it is translated as "**devoted**." In other words,

verse 46 is, at least in part, expanding on verse 42. In other words, the early Christians did much of their praying, though certainly not all of it, at the temple, where it was part of a more formal liturgy.

Jump back to the beginning of this list and notice with me that it begins with the preaching of God's word. As we have already seen in Acts 2 and will continue to see throughout the speeches of Acts, the apostles' teaching can be summarized by the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. To make this case, the apostles turned to what we call the Old Testament (what they would have simply called **Scripture**).

Keep in mind as well that what **Luke** called the apostle's teaching, we call the New Testament. The last 27 books of the Bible are the written record of their teaching, which was uniquely authoritative, since they were personally commissioned by the risen Christ to be His ambassadors.

So, this list begins with **preaching** and ends with the **liturgical prayers** of the temple.

Now, notice the third element in this list: "the breaking of bread." Many commentators have suggested that this is a reference to the Lord's Supper, though some disagree. In favor of that reading, the Greek here includes the definite article before "bread." Even though the ESV doesn't show it, a literal translation is "the breaking of **the** bread." If that seems like an insignificant difference to you, then consider the fact that just a few verses later in verse 46, when the context more clearly indicates that Luke is describing ordinary meals in people's homes, he leaves the definite article out. There it is simply "breaking bread."

Now, I realize that it can sound a bit **arcane** to read significance into the presence or absence of the definite article, so I think a brief illustration may be helpful. Think about the following conversation I had with a friend in my late middle school years. We were hanging out at his house. We took a break from whatever silliness it was we were doing (probably playing video games) so that he could use the restroom. While I waited for him, I did exactly what you would expect **any** future Reformed pastor to do...pulled a book off of his bookshelf and started reading. When he came out of the bathroom, he saw me reading and

asked, “Which book are you reading?” I responded “**The** book.” He **immediately** knew which book I was referring to, and I bet you do too...the Bible.

Perhaps we can't say it with absolute certainty, but I think it's very likely that the same kind of thing is going on here. This isn't just bread, it's **the** bread...the bread of the Lord's Supper.

If, indeed, this is the correct understanding of verse 42, then here, in our first snapshot of the church post-Pentecost, we have a reference to both of the sacraments, given the reference to baptism in verse 41 which Pastor Steven exegeted last time.

And, finally, consider the second item in this list in verse 42, “the fellowship.” Although the term fellowship (Greek *koinonia*) is certainly used in the New Testament to refer to **more** than the gathering of God's people for worship, it cannot mean **less** than that. While Christian fellowship is expressed in **many** ways, the **primary** expression of it is found in our gathered worship. Paul uses this very same word in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 to describe the meaning of the Lord's Supper, “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a fellowship (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a fellowship (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ?”

The fact that our gathered worship is itself an expression of Christian fellowship is the very reason that many churches incorporate specific rituals of fellowship into their liturgies. I'm sure that some of you have attended churches whose liturgy includes a greeting time, the passing of the peace, a formal exchange such as “The Lord be with you,” or maybe even a holy kiss. (Perhaps the Presbyterian version of the holy kiss would be the “holy head nod”)

In any case, even in liturgies where fellowship is not **explicitly** expressed in these kinds of **rituals**, the expression of our fellowship is **implicit** at almost every point in **any** Christian liturgy. According to Paul's instructions in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, when we sing, we are not only addressing the **Lord** in worship, but also addressing **one another** with edifying words (by the way, that would be a good reason to **look one another in the eye** while we are singing). According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, when we give thanks to God in prayer, we are not only glorifying

**Him**, but we are also **edifying** our brother. When we partake of communion, we are not only expressing **thanks** and **praise** to God as we remember the gift of His son, but we are also supposed to “discern the body of Christ,” that is, recognize our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

These connections between the various elements of **worship** and **fellowship** demonstrate why this commitment to worship is so **foundational** for the church and for the Christian life. In corporate worship the three core purposes of the church all come together. First and foremost, in worship we glorify God. This is our highest purpose, the one which we will continue to do in eternity, when there is no more evangelism to be done, and when our discipleship is complete as we are fully sanctified and free of sin.

But even as we gather on the Lord’s Day to worship our Lord, it’s also true that disciples of Christ are also being edified and instructed. While that is not our **primary** aim in worship, Paul does teach us that edification is an important criteria for measuring what is done in our worship services.

And, at the same time, it’s **also** true that the very act of worship **is itself** a **witness** to the unbelieving world. Now, please don’t hear what I’m not saying. Evangelism is certainly **not** the primary purpose of our worship services. We do not design our worship services to please unbelievers, but rather to please God.

That is the mistake made by so many of the broadly evangelical, seeker-friendly churches that wind up with a man-centered approach, a watered-down message, and an impoverished liturgy.

Instead, what I mean is that the very act of God-centered, reverent, Bible-saturated, liturgically robust, doctrinally deep, no-punches pulled, high-octane, black-coffee worship is itself an act of witness. There is no need to accommodate, water-down, or truncate. Think of what Paul says about the Lord’s Supper, “as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again.” The Lord’s Supper itself is a proclamation of the gospel. It’s the word made visible.

I think we see that principle illustrated in our passage here. Look again at verse 46 and consider the fact that the early Christians were worshipping at the temple. Surely their Christ-centered worship and preaching would have attracted the attention of Jews who hadn't yet believed in Christ. When verse 43 says that, "awe came upon every soul," this seems to be a description of the general population of Jerusalem, not simply of the church.

Worship is not only the church's destination- what we will do in eternity- but also the church's engine- the core commitment that moves us forward in our core purposes.

If the centrality of God-centered worship for the church seems mind-numbingly obvious to some of you, then remember that it is not obvious to many of our sincere brothers and sisters in the Lord. It's common to hear things like, "We don't want to do church...we want to be the church." You can probably find sermons on this very passage that suggest that the early church was essentially a commune or a collection of small groups, not a formal assembly of worshippers with a liturgy.

While it is certainly true that the early Christians often met in each other's homes, shared many of their possessions, and were deeply committed to one another beyond formal times of worship, it is a serious mistake to pit corporate worship against community, liturgy against love, or institutional organization against sincerity and generosity. In fact, what I want to suggest to you this evening is that our text does the very opposite. Rather than suggest that a church can either be good at worship, or good at community, liturgical or joyful...our passage suggests that what we do in worship influences **everything else** about us.

And that brings us to our second ideal: the culture of the apostolic church.

Look again at this passage and notice that there is a close connection between the **worship** of the apostolic church and the **culture** of the apostolic church. Notice the parallels between the commitments of verse 42 and the informal activities of the rest of this passage. Verse **42**, this church was devoted to the **sacred** meal of the **Lord's Supper** "the breaking of **the** bread;" Verse 46, this church also regularly ate common meals together, "breaking bread in their homes."

Verse 42, the people were regularly worshipping together in the Lord's house; Verse 46, the people were often in each other's homes where they lifted spontaneous expressions of praise to God. Verse 42, this church was committed to the fellowship expressed in their corporate worship; verses 44-45, they spontaneously met each other's needs with voluntary generosity and charity. Verse 42, they were committed to learning from the apostles; Verse 47, they had daily opportunities to speak of Christ to their unbelieving neighbors.

This morning Pastor Steven reminded us that we need to distinguish between the sacred and the common, between what we do in corporate worship and what we do in everyday, all-of-life worship. This evening our text shows us the other half of that two-sided coin: namely that what we do in worship influences everything else. What we do in worship overflows into the rest of our lives.

As many thinkers have said in various ways, Culture is downstream from Worship. The shared attitudes, habits, language, customs, beliefs, and history of a people are shaped by many factors, but none is so influential as the worship of that people. It's no accident that the words "culture," "cultus" and "cult" all come from the same Latin word.

To put it another way, worship is the heart of any given culture. Whatever else we may be and do, we are worshippers first. Whatever is at the center of our worship will influence everything else we think, say, and do.

Look again at this passage and consider the **culture** of this church. On the one hand, they were characterized by a sense of **awe**, or **reverence**, or literally in the Greek, **fear** (vrs 42). They had the great sense that God was among them, working in and through them. On the other hand, verse 46, they were equally characterized by **glad** and **sincere** hearts, knowing that in Christ the Lord had poured out the **blessings** of His **grace** and **mercy**. Their **generosity** and **charity**, verses **44-45**, were **legendary**, to the point that no one in their midst went without. This was no ancient form of communism, no government-imposed program of wealth redistribution: no, this was the spontaneous overflow of love, the Christian's grateful response to the generosity of God, giving to others as God has given to us. This church was characterized by **hospitality**, verse 46. Just as the Father had

welcomed them into his household in the name of Jesus Christ, so they welcomed one another into their homes as brothers and sisters in Christ. Verse 47, this church was characterized by **graciousness** towards all people. Although the ESV has it, “having favor **with** all the people,” the better translation, as many commentators have pointed out, is probably “having favor (or grace- same word in Greek) **toward** all the people.” (That’s the way Vulgate has it.) Just as the Lord had shown grace towards them in the gospel, so they reflected grace towards all men.

Each of these aspects of the culture of the apostolic church is worthy of our admiration, reflection, imitation, and prayer. If we were to measure ourselves in each of these areas, I am sure that we could not only come up with dozens of ways in which we fall short of this ideal, but also be freshly inspired about how we might continue to push the gospel into the corners of our shared life together.

But this evening I want to hone in on just one of those. As most of you know, one of the reasons that your Session decided to hire another pastor was to implement a new small group ministry. Next week I’ll be giving a detailed description of what that process will look like in the ministry report of the evening service. But for now, let me briefly point out the theological rationale for such a ministry. Christ-centered hospitality was a foundational part of the culture of the apostolic church. As we will see later in Acts, and as we saw a few months ago in Romans 16, Christians met in each other’s homes to pray, to discuss the Word, to encourage and build each other up, to bear one another’s burdens. They shared their meals, their burdens, their joys, and their lives with each other.

That is our vision for a small group ministry: to bear one another’s burdens and to build each other up. Or to put it another way, to connect with God’s word and with His people. For our homes to be spiritual greenhouses, places where we discuss and apply God’s word in fresh ways, where we are supported and encouraged in prayer and fellowship, where lives are shared over meals, conversation, and prayer.

Our text this evening is a reminder that while it is a good thing to strategize and plan, nothing will shape the culture of our church more than our worship.

At my former church, one of our elders was fond of reminding us at Session meetings of a well-worn adage in the business world: culture eats strategy for breakfast. If we want to have a church characterized by warm relationships and growing disciples...if we want to have a church characterized by extraordinary generosity, charity, and graciousness...if we want to have a church that is hospitable and joyful, then we must not only **plan** and **strategize**, but we must **pray** that the Lord would make His **means of grace effective** in our lives, that He would pour out His Spirit upon us as we worship Him, that our hearts would be warmed and moved by His mercy and grace in the gospel.

This kind of kind of church culture is not something that we can conjure up. It is the work of His Spirit, and so we must pray.

Commitment, Culture, and, our third ideal, Impact.

Look again at our passage and compare verses 41 and 47. Although there are different ways of dividing up this last portion of Acts 2, one way to do so is to note that verses 41 and 47 form an inclusio. That's a literary term for the idea that a passage begins and ends with the same idea or phrase, thus pointing to its theme.

Both verses 41 and 47 refer to the fruitfulness, or the impact, of the apostolic church on the rest of the city. On the day of Pentecost alone, 3,000 people were baptized. And as the church carried out the commitments and culture that we have been considering, it continued to grow "day by day" or "daily."

As Dr. Rayburn reminded us in Sunday school this morning, and as verse 47 reminds us here so clearly, this kind of fruitfulness is **not** something we can produce or control. The Lord Jesus, sovereignly working by His word and Spirit, is the one who adds to His church. He must draw sinners to Himself.

But that is no reason to be indifferent, apathetic, or passive about the salvation of unbelievers. On the contrary, His sovereign grace is very reason why we should earnestly pray for the light of the gospel to shine in minds darkened by sin. If the Lord cannot or will not influence the hearts of sinners, then what hope do we have for their conversion? But if He is both willing and able to replace a

heart of stone with a heart of flesh, then we can have hope as long as there is breath.

Surely the culture of this early church must have been, at least in some sense, attractive to many of the unbelievers around them. Even those hardened and deceived by sin can often, thanks to God's common grace, recognize something of the beauty and goodness of Christ-like virtue.

But even as we recognize the beauty and attractiveness of their church culture, we ought to go back to their commitment to prayer as we consider the impact of this church. Though God is absolutely sovereign, in His wisdom and kindness, He has ordained our prayers, though foreordained they may be, as one of the means by which He works.

From speaking with many of you, I know that you long to have an impact on the unbelieving world around us. So let us pray that the Lord would once again pour out His blessings upon His church, and move in mighty ways for the glory of His name. Amen?