

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

4: The Early Church

Somewhere along the line, it became popular to pursue Jesus while shunning organized religion. We even hear from people who “love Jesus but hate the church.” While no one can deny that the church has its share of problems, Jesus never gave us the option of giving up on His church. And He certainly would not approve of us “hating” her. The church was His idea, so it is impossible to follow Him while shunning the church He died to save.

The reality is that God is using His church around the world to transform lives and accomplish His will on earth. In many ways and in many places the church today is healthy and focused on fulfilling God’s mission. But it is also true that much of the church is in a state of disarray. Churches define themselves by virtually every issue under the sun. Christians are known more by their bumper stickers and T-shirts than by the love of Christ. Gossip and hypocrisy run rampant. Many churches are more concerned with preserving the status quo than reaching out to the people around them.

With such a wide array of sentiments about the church, we have to ask some important questions: What is the church? What should the church look like? What should the church be doing? If we can't answer these questions biblically, then we will only be adding to the confusion. If the church doesn't understand its identity and its role in this world, then it is bound to be confused, paralyzed, and ineffective.

When Jesus ascended to the Father, He left one group in His place to carry on His mission: the church. If we don't do everything we can to understand who we are and what we should be doing as the church, then we are not taking Jesus's mission seriously. By God's own choice, the continuation of His plan of redemption now rests on the church.

The Early Church

There is so much that could be said about the church. Peter said that the church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). Paul called the church a "pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), a temple of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), and the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22–33). Each of these descriptions should be explored and discussed at length. But in this session, we will assess the church's identity by examining the founding of the church in Acts 2.

At the beginning of the book of Acts, there were about 120 people who followed Christ. The twelve apostles¹ formed the core of this group. Then came the day of Pentecost. Peter stood up and proclaimed that God had raised Jesus from the dead, the same Jesus whom the crowds had demanded to see crucified. Peter's Spirit-empowered proclamation brought great conviction, and about three thousand people repented of their sins and put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. With this unbelievable demonstration of the Spirit's power, the church was born.

There was something so attractive and intriguing about this first group of believers. Not only was the birth of this group miraculous, the way they began to live together and interact was something the world had never seen. Acts 2:42–47 describes life in the early church. Take a minute to think through the way this group is described.

1. *Read Acts 2:42–47 slowly. After you read it, spend a few minutes meditating on what characterized this group of people. What stands out to you?*

1 The twelve “apostles” were Jesus’s original twelve disciples who followed Him throughout His ministry. After Judas betrayed Jesus, he committed suicide and the other eleven disciples replaced him with Matthias in Acts 1. The word *apostle* means “one who is sent,” “delegate,” or “messenger.”

Several things made the early church blatantly stand out. For one, Luke told us that the early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). They had a deep commitment to what the apostles taught. The apostles’ teaching emphasized everything that happened in Christ and the significance of these events. In other words, the apostles were dedicated to the gospel. Their teaching was the fulfillment of what was prophesied in the Old Testament, and this teaching would later be recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to form the New Testament. So the New Testament we hold in our hands is “the apostles’ teaching”—the same truths that the early church was devoted to. God’s Word has always been essential to the life of the church.

2. *Why do you think the early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching? What implications does that have for the church today?*

Luke (the author of Acts) also said that the early church was devoted to fellowship. The word *fellowship* sometimes has strange connotations in the church today. If it sounds cheesy, lighthearted, or old-fashioned to you, then you have the wrong idea about fellowship. The first Christians shared their lives with one another. It wasn’t about church picnics, potlucks, or small talking in the “fellowship hall.” They were real people meeting real needs and joining together

to fulfill a real mission. They weren't meeting together because they kind of felt like they should. They shared their lives because in Christ they had everything in common. They truly loved each other. They cared deeply about God and His mission on earth, so they joined with the other Christians around them and worked together toward the goal.

We are called to do the same. In fact, God tells us that fellowship is even more important for us *now* since His return is coming soon: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, *and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*" (Heb. 10:24–25). Our fellowship has never mattered more than it does right now.

3. *Why was fellowship so important for the early church? Why is it important for the church today?*

The reference to the "breaking of bread" is either a reference to taking the Lord's Supper (communion) together as a body of believers, or to the sharing of meals together. It probably refers to both. The early Christians often took the Lord's Supper as part of a larger shared meal. Both the Lord's Supper and the early church's practice of eating together served as expressions of their common faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul pointed back to the night when Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples and transformed that ritual into what we know as the Lord's Supper. The bread became a reminder of His broken body and the wine of His shed blood. This celebration is a reminder of the new covenant that Jesus made with His people, the church. Paul highlighted the significance of this ritual: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). In taking communion, we are proclaiming that Jesus's sacrifice is central to our mission and our life together as the church.

4. *In your own words, describe why the Lord's Supper is significant. Does communion carry this significance in your church? Why or why not?*

Luke also told us that the early church was devoted to prayer. To say that prayer was important to these early Christians would be a gross understatement. Immediately after Peter and John were released from prison in Acts 4, they gathered with the church to pray for more boldness, and for the Lord to work signs and wonders. Prayer was the church's means of receiving strength and guidance from the Lord. They depended on intimate communion with the One in whom they had put their trust.

Sadly, our churches aren't typically characterized by devotion to prayer. Could it be that we have lost sight of our absolute dependence on God? Have we lost the urgency of our mission and the sense that if God does not work through us, we will not be able to do what we have been called to do? Prayer is exactly this type of declaration. A church that is devoted to prayer is a church that knows God's mission is the most important pursuit on earth. It is a church that knows it cannot succeed without God. May this type of devotion to prayer define the attitude of our churches.

5. *Explain why prayer is essential to the life and mission of the church. What would a devotion to prayer look like in the life of your church?*

More Than Individuals

The early church was made up of those who embraced the gospel. God's Spirit had been poured out on them and their sins had been forgiven. These people had been saved from a "crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). This is exactly what the church has been in all ages. The church consists of those who have been called out of their spiritual darkness and have responded to the good news that Jesus Christ died to remove the separation of sin and rose from the grave to demonstrate that He is the true King of the world. In every generation, God takes those He is redeeming and joins them together in the church.

Individualism is widely celebrated in our culture. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and independent, able to “make it on our own.” Sadly, many Christians have adopted this individualistic mindset. Nobody is going to tell us how to spend our time or our money or tell us what to think. Sound familiar? If so, then we need to look long and hard at the early church’s life together.

Notice what the first Christian converts in Acts 2 did not do. They did not simply make a profession of faith and then seek to live the Christian life on their own. No, these early converts were baptized as a sign of their identification with Jesus Christ and His church. Actually, to identify with Jesus Christ is to identify with the church, His beloved bride. Jesus Himself said: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another” (John 13:35). One crucial aspect of submitting to Jesus is committing to the ministry of His church. We are no longer isolated individuals, but members of Christ’s body.

6. *Read 1 Corinthians 12. How should Paul’s analogy of the church as a body affect the way we think about the church?*

7. *Does the life of your church look anything like the body that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12? How so? If not, why do you think this is?*

What Are We Missing?

Reading the book of Acts can almost be depressing because we are forced to recognize deficiencies in our churches. On the one hand, this is healthy. We should be challenged by the vitality of the early church. But on the other hand, we need to be careful not to simply imitate what we see in Acts. God gave a mission to the church, and it worked out in a specific way in the life of the early church. We have the same mission, but God may want to do something unique in our churches. Rather than trying to reproduce the tongues of fire, the powerful sermon, and the mass conversion we find in Acts 2, we should be looking for God to fulfill His purposes through our churches in whatever ways He sees fit. Read through the following description of life in the early church, then take some time to consider how some of the characteristics of the early church might play out in your unique setting.

A Generous Community

Members of the early church had such a concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ that they were willing to sell their own possessions to meet a physical need. The Scriptures say that they had “all things in common” (Acts 2:44; see also 4:32). In other words, these Christians voluntarily gave of what they had for the welfare of fellow believers. Likewise, Paul described a time when the churches in Macedonia joyfully gave even in the midst of “extreme poverty” (2 Cor. 8:2). He even said, “they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (vv. 3–4). Such generosity is the fruit of transformed hearts.

A Holy Community

The early church was a community set apart for God's purposes. Even the outside world took notice of what was happening. Luke says that "awe came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). This group of believers was noticeably different from the outside world. Their obedience and God's presence among them caused them to stand out, so that they had favor with the unbelievers around them (2:47).

A Fearless Community

Not everyone was happy about the Holy Spirit's work in the early church. Suffering was a very real part of following Jesus in the first century, and the same holds true today. Christians around the world are often under physical threat for confessing Jesus Christ, while our own culture continues to grow increasingly intolerant of the gospel message. Paul promised: "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). The early church boldly proclaimed the truth of the gospel and fearlessly reached out to the hurting world around them. Because of this, they often encountered persecution and even martyrdom.

A Multiplying Community

There's no denying that the growth of the early church was remarkable. What began as a small band of fledgling disciples multiplied supernaturally into a large movement consisting of believers in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Churches were planted as the apostles and other believers

took the gospel all over the known world. All of this was clearly the Lord's work: "*the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*" (Acts 2:47).

In a providential twist, it was often the persecution of the church that resulted in its growth. As believers were scattered, they took the gospel with them (Acts 8:1). Instead of retreating into silence, they prayed for boldness when they came under scrutiny from the authorities (Acts 4:23–31). We are reminded that the Lord's plan for growing His church turns the world's wisdom on its head.

8. *What do you find most compelling about the way the book of Acts describes the life of the early church?*

9. *Does your church possess these compelling characteristics? If so, briefly describe them and thank God for them. If not, why do you think these characteristics are lacking?*

The Church in the Modern World

Read through almost any letter in the New Testament, and you'll quickly see that the early Christian churches were anything but perfect. In fact, many of these letters were written to address specific sins or false teachings. For example, the Galatian Christians were in danger of distorting the gospel (Gal. 1:6), while the church at Corinth was tolerating gross sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1). Or take an example from the early Christian congregation in Acts: one part of the church felt that their widows were being neglected in comparison with another part of the church (Acts 6:1). Similar complaints threaten to divide many of our own churches today. Our experience may be closer to the early Christians than we think.

In this session we have highlighted many of the positive characteristics about life in the early church, and Acts certainly gives us much to imitate in the example they set. God's Spirit worked in extraordinary ways in order to empower the church for its mission. However, we have misunderstood the early church if we feel that we cannot relate to the early church's experience. This group of believers did not live in some spiritual fantasyland untouched by sin and weakness. In fact, the point of their example is not primarily to make us dwell on their strengths, but rather to make us marvel at God's strength. His Spirit caused the message of Christ to bear fruit as it was taken to city after city.

The church must continue to exalt Jesus Christ in our own day by the power of the Spirit. We shouldn't expect to experience another Day of Pentecost, or to see precisely the same signs and wonders that the apostles performed, but we should continue to pray that the Holy Spirit will transform the way we live and give us boldness to

proclaim the good news to the people around us. The same God who multiplied the early church works through the church today. And the same Spirit who lived in the midst of the Christians in the first century lives within the church of the twenty-first century. It is our responsibility to bring that same message of healing and salvation to our modern world through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

10. What do you think the Holy Spirit would want your church to do in an effort to fulfill the church's mission in your unique setting? If you don't have an answer for this, make it a priority to pray and seek the Spirit's guidance on this issue.

11. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to guide and empower your church for the mission He has given you. Pray that the church today would be everything that God designed it to be.