



Week 2: Birth of the Church

Week 2, Day 1 – The Early Christian Community

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Understanding the Passage:

Here it is, the *earliest* image of the early church. There is no description of the post-Pentecost church that predates this one. Who wouldn't want to be in a church like this one? It's almost too ideal to be true. While we can't return to this church, we can replicate its practices and habits, for these are the actions that the Spirit chose to embody to live out God's mission in the world. We see yet again this theme in Acts that the Spirit is alive in the *doing* of the church.

- **Learning:** The earliest church was devoted to the "apostles' teaching," meaning the original disciples' interpretation and preaching of Scripture and their instruction in the Way of Christ. We follow this habit today when we receive the sermon, study the Bible, and learn the beliefs and practices of Christianity from and with trusted leaders. The early church didn't study the faith alone; faith was something that had to be *received* from people who were set apart for the responsibility of teaching.
- **Fellowship:** The earliest Christians loved to hang out. They "spent much time together." Another way of saying fellowship is making friends. The earliest church was a people who made a habit out of making friends. Church wasn't a social club, but it was a place where you could find friends, make friends, and invest in long-term, hopefully lifelong, friendships.
- **Signs and wonders:** These aren't "miracles" in the sense of a suspension of the natural order. These are the in-breaking, the arrival, of how things ought to be done in the Kingdom of God, when God's rule is complete and uncontested. "Signs and wonders," then, aren't magic or works of the supernatural; they're leadership in the ways of the Kingdom, such as feeding the hungry, lifting up the poor, and healing the sick.
- **Sharing:** The early church "had all things in common," meaning the *personal* property of each believer was also the *communal* property of the church. The clothes in my closet would have been the clothes of any needy person in the church. The cash in my wallet would have been the saving grace of anyone in the church who couldn't afford groceries. There was also

a common church savings account, and the apostles would withdraw from the account to meet the material needs of the needy.

- **Eating together:** The earliest Christians broke bread together. They “ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” Every table became a sort of altar where Jesus was made present in the breaking of the bread.
- **Prayer:** The earliest church was a praying church. You simply can’t take the prayer out of church and call it church.
- **Worship:** The earliest church was a worshipping church. They praised God and spent much time in the Temple. Their attendance at worship mattered, and when you didn’t show up, you were missed.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How is our church like the early church in Acts? How is it not like this church?
2. Which of these seven habits are you practicing? Which are areas of growth?
3. Acts says that “day by day the Lord added to their number” when the church practiced these habits. The *doing* of these habits translated to church growth. Why would the church grow when these habits are practiced?

Week 2, Day 2 – Peter’s Healing and Preaching

Acts 3:1-10

¹ One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.² And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴ Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and astonishment at what had happened to him.

Understanding the Passage:

Jesus didn’t “play favorites” but he was certainly closer to some of the original Twelve than others. Jesus was closer to Peter and John, and John’s brother, James, than to the others. Peter is the “rock” of the church, and John is the “beloved disciple,” or the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” Therefore, the fact that Peter and John are the actors here is a signal that to be close to Jesus like a best friend means doing what they’re about to do.

It’s 3:00 in the afternoon. What time of day did Jesus die on the cross? You guessed it – 3:00 in the afternoon. Whatever’s about to happen is super important.

You’ve seen men like the one at the Beautiful Gate before. You see him at intersections asking for spare change. You’ve given him a quarter. Or you’ve seen women like this man, asking for anything to help her feed her children. What do they need? What does the man at the Beautiful Gate need? They need what we *all* need: salvation. They need to be saved holistically. They need salvation to

come in the form of money, yes, and also through restoration into community so they're no longer lonely, and physical healing so they can work again, and spiritual healing so they can rejoice and be at peace. Salvation never happens just to a person's soul, or just to a person's mind, or just to a person's wallet. Salvation happens to the whole person.

Look at what happens to the man. He receives salvation in body (he can walk again), in mind (he's joyful again), in soul (he knows Jesus personally because Peter stands up and preaches the Gospel), and in community (people no longer see him as a beggar but as a friend).

And where does this take place? *In the Temple*. Luke is providing commentary on what the true purpose of the Temple is: it's not ritual sacrifice, or buying or selling animals for sacrifice, or observing high holy days. It's salvation. We have a Temple, Luke is saying, because there are people who need to be saved and this house is where salvation should start.

It's 3:00 in the afternoon. What happened at 3:00 in the afternoon? Healing and proclaiming. At 3:00 in the afternoon, God healed the world through the sacrifice of his Son, and God proclaimed that Jesus is the Lord of all. Now, what is the church to do? We must heal and proclaim. We must heal the nations and proclaim Jesus. Healing and proclaiming are our very reason for being. These are the "signs and wonders" the world needs.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When have you seen God heal the whole person?
2. When was the last time you healed somebody? When was the last time you proclaimed Jesus to somebody?
3. What kind of salvation do you or someone you love need right now?

Week 2, Day 3 – Sharing Possessions

Acts 4:32-5:11

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ There was a Levite from Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

¹ But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said,

“Yes, that was the price.”⁹ Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Understanding the Passage:

Imagine how different the annual pledge campaign at the church would be if everyone was afraid that if you kept even a dollar to yourself, you’d fall down dead.

Just kidding... kind of. Because Luke wants us to feel the urgency of this matter. No pastor (note, no *good* pastor) would threaten sudden death if you’re not generous with your money, but the tone of this story is nonetheless accurate and timeless.

Being generous with our money is a matter of life and death. It’s a matter of the giver’s life and the recipient’s death. We are *happier* when we give. We are more joyful people when we’re generous. You can either be stingy and sad, or generous and glad. Pick one. Giving is one of the paths to the eternal life *now*, not after death but today. And generosity is a matter of the recipient’s death because there are people on earth this very moment who depend on the generosity of others to put food on the table, make ends meet, and provide for their families. When generosity is withheld, there are people who suffer real-life consequences. They die spiritually (they do not know joy) or sometimes physically (they die from hunger or disease).

So, will the pastor strike you dead if you don’t sell all your property and give it to the church? There’s a 99.9999% chance that won’t happen. But giving is no less a matter of life and death. Your salvation *in this life* is at stake, and the livelihood of other people is at stake. Does that mean you should sell all your possessions and drain your pension and give to the church? In most cases, no. But that does mean we should take generosity as seriously as Peter took it – as if people’s lives were on the line.

Look at Acts 4:33. Luke inserts a strange sentence. He was talking about having all things in common in verse 32, then he picks up the same message in verse 34, but in the middle in verse 33, he talks about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The insertion of resurrection in a story about generosity is not a mistake. How is the power of Jesus’ resurrection made known today? One of the ways is through your sacrificial giving to Kingdom causes. Jesus breaks out of a tomb when you give like someone’s life depended on it.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Unpack that last sentence in your class or small group. What does this mean: “Jesus breaks out of a tomb when you give like someone’s life depended on it.”?
2. What are your favorite Kingdom causes to give to?
3. Why aren’t people more generous with their money? What’s a barrier to you being more generous?

Week 2, Day 4 – Prayer for Boldness and Healings of the Apostles

Acts 4:23-31 and 5:12-16

²³ After they were released, they went to their own people and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, ²⁵ it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

*‘Why did the gentiles rage
and the peoples imagine vain things?
²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.’*

²⁷ “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

¹² Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. ¹⁶ A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Understanding the Passage:

Peter and John are thrown in jail because they healed the man at the Beautiful Gate and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah openly in the Temple. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, released Peter and John because they were afraid of a riot if they kept Peter and John any longer. Peter and John return to the church, tell the whole story, and the church rejoices.

Note that in the church’s prayer in 4:25-30, it is assumed and expected that the powers and authorities of the world will resist the church. It is zero surprise to the church that Peter and John are thrown in jail. It is a given that the kings of the earth will stand against the Messiah and his people. What does this mean for us? It means we should expect resistance whenever we live according to the Messiah’s ways. Hopefully, resistance won’t take the form of open persecution, though that’s certainly the case for millions of Christians around the world. Usually, resistance means we incur other forms of sacrifice. We may earn less money, receive less praise on social media, or lose the approval and respect of our peers because we chose to live like the Messiah.

But resistance is also a measure of success. It’s a *win* for the church when we face resistance from the world. It means we’re doing something right. It’s a bad thing when the church and the world look exactly the same, when there’s no friction, when there’s no heat one way or the other.

But at the same time, that doesn’t mean the world should hate the church. Look at 5:13: “None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem.” This is the church’s sweet

spot. The church should look so much like Jesus and there should be enough friction between the church and the world that folks outside the church pause before jumping into the church. Folks outside the church should have to ask themselves, “Do I really want to sign myself up for this? Do I really want to turn my entire life around and be like these Jesus people?” It’s also true that the church should look so much like Jesus that we have the world’s esteem. We don’t want the world’s hatred; we want the world’s respect. We want the world to respect us because we’ve chosen the narrow of way Christ even if it’s too hard for them.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why should resistance from the world be a measure of success for the church?
2. Why should respect from the world be a measure of success for the church?
3. What’s going on in your life today that gives you reason to praise God who made heaven and earth?

Week 2, Day 5 – Seven Chosen for Outreach

Acts 6:1-7

¹ Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ² And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Understanding the Passage:

This is the story of the ordination of the first deacons. Until now, the only official office in the church was the apostle. An apostle is someone “sent out” to lead the church in mission. Here we see the creation of a second office, the deacon. A deacon is someone who leads the church in direct service. The word deacon comes from the Greek word for “servant,” someone who literally “waited on tables.” Deacons in the ancient Roman world would be the waiters in the restaurants of our world. But in the church, being a deacon, or a “waiter,” is an office for ordained clergy. It’s a big job. It means you lead the church in being the hands and feet of Christ showing up and serving others.

The creation of the deacons is a response to heated church conflict. Remember that until this point in Acts, the only Christians on earth are Jewish Christians. Among Jewish Christians, there were the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews from the rural countryside, those who hadn’t fully assimilated to the Roman culture of city life; and there were the Greek-speaking Jews of the cities who had assimilated Roman culture. It’s the difference between small-town and big-city folk today. The problem was, the Hellenists, or the Greek-speaking big city Jewish Christians, were newer to the church than the rural Jewish Christians (Jesus was from Galilee, a rural, small-town area), and the widows of the Hellenists weren’t receiving the same level of care from the church as the widows of the rural Jewish Christians. The result was a feeling of prejudice by the Hellenists. Were they being intentionally left out of the church’s benevolence? Were their widows being deliberately ignored?

The apostles simply don't have time for this. They don't have time for ordering the life of the church, preaching and teaching, planting new churches, *and* for making sure poor widows receive food. But clearly, it's extremely important to the church that the widows receive food. The church members didn't care if worship or Bible study was neglected; they cared when feeding the hungry was neglected. So, the apostles called for seven leaders to solve this problem. The Seven became the first deacons. Their names are all Greek names, meaning the first deacons are Hellenist Jewish Christians themselves. They go to serve their own people.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you know a deacon? What's their ministry?
2. What would be the equivalent of the "widows" in our church? As in, if this person or this group of people were neglected, it would cause a rift in the church.
3. To be ordained means to be "set-apart" for leadership. But all Christians are "set-apart" for ministry. What is your ministry? What are you "set-apart" to do?

Video Questions:

1. Acts says that "day by day the Lord added to their number" when the church practiced the habits described in Acts 2:42-47. Why would the church grow when these habits are practiced?
2. Dr. Pace recounted a story about being asked what happened in the church building. How might you have answered that question based on your own experience?
3. Re-read the healing of the blind man in Acts 3. What kind of salvation does the church have to offer?
4. What does the word "salvation" mean to you? Have you thought of it related to the idea of healing before?
5. Thinking about the account of Ananias and Sapphira, why is generosity presented as a matter of life and death?
6. Have you ever felt the reaction that Dr. Pace described some folks as having when the church talks about money: that the church is meddling in your business? Do you think it's God's business how you spend your money? Do you think it's the church's business?
7. Look at Acts 4 and 5. Resistance from the world is presented as a *good* thing. How can resistance from the world be a measure of success for the church?
8. Dr. Pace closed by asking what it means to be fully committed to the church. Share your thoughts with your group.

Prayer requests and other notes.