

May 19, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

A New Community

Acts 2:41 – 47

Last week we looked mainly at the end of Peter's sermon on Pentecost where verse 40 says, *And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."* And we understood that Peter was not just calling them into an individual relationship to believe in Jesus as their personal Savior – although that is where it all starts. He's not just calling them to repent of a sinful life – although that is absolutely necessary. He's not even saying that this is a particularly bad generation, as generations go.

When Peter says, '**Save yourselves from this crooked generation**' and the people respond and begin to get baptized, we should understand that Peter was not asking for private and individual conversion. He was calling for something far more profound. He was calling for identification with a whole new community, a new society, a new generation. These people were transferring from the crooked world society to which they currently belonged, into a new and what was a being saved society. In other words, when Jesus Christ calls you through the gospel, you must understand that He doesn't **just** call you into an individual relationship with Him. He is not calling you into an individual relationship of meeting your needs. He calls you into a whole new society, a new generation. He calls you into the church. The **ekklesia** – the called out ones. Called out from a crooked, disintegrating, falling apart generation – into one that is being saved.

And here in this passage we see what that looks like. These people have been called out of this crooked generation into a new one that is being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into a radically different society. One in which truth is recognized and valued and cherished. One in which the community of the redeemed becomes the focal point of their activities. A community that is characterized by a glad and joyful worship of Jesus. A community where radical generosity is practiced; and a community that leaves a visible mark on the culture around them. What this passage shows us is what happens when the Spirit of God comes in power and transforms a generation. And what we see is what the church looks like. This is not a prescription for the church – this is what the church really is. If the Spirit of God has truly called people out of the crooked generation and the gospel has impacted their hearts and minds, this is what it looks like.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. Acts 2:41 Three thousand people were added to this new generation, this new community, and it says they were continually doing some things. *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Acts 2:42 When it says they were devoted to the teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, that word devoted means **that this was their manner of life**. The word means to be constant, continual, steadfast in something. Now these guys didn't suddenly become Christians and say, '*Now what can we do to show that we are really saved. Oh yeah, we should go to church and listen to sermons and have potlucks and communion and pray a lot!*'

What happened was their story had been changed by the cross and they **found** themselves doing these things. Luke was not writing a prescription for the perfect church. He was not trying to tell future Christians, '*Now you've got to have these four things: teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer – then you're the church.*' In fact many good theologians who know the Greek, think Luke was saying that they were devoted to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship – **which included** prayer and what we call communion. Some think they were four distinctives of the church, but most of them agree this is **not** a four point program for being the church. Luke was a historian who was simply writing down the visible results of changed lives. And what we see in this passage is a new generation of believers whose lives were now marked by several distinctives. They were devoted to the truth and to the fellowship – and that devotion was seen in their passionate worship, radical generosity, and phenomenal growth.

First of all they found themselves **devoted to the truth – the apostle's teaching**. You can tell the real Christians by the way **they cherish the truth**. The mark of people whose lives have been impacted by the gospel is a devotion to the word of God. Teaching, the word is **didache** – doctrine, dogma, teaching. It really should be translated doctrine here, and if you look at the KJV it is. But most modern translations use teaching because for today's readers, doctrine seems dull and distasteful. I've heard Christians say things like, '*Doctrine divides, Jesus unites, we just want Jesus*'. And that sounds somehow more spiritual and generous. Yes Jesus unites, but who is He? If we can't agree on that, how will we ever be in unity? That's doctrine. Others will say, '*O I just love the simple stuff – John 3:16 – I'm not into doctrine*'. But what does John 3:16 say? *for God so loved the world* – that's the doctrine that God is love, that God is a personal God; *that He gave His only begotten Son* – that's the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – *that whosoever believes in Him should not perish* – that's the doctrine of the justice of God and the depravity of man, it's the doctrine of the love of God for rebellious sinners – *but have eternal life* – the doctrine of glorification. John 3:16 is packed with doctrine – it means nothing if it weren't for doctrine.

And these people were devoted to doctrine – to the apostles teaching. And what they were teaching was truth – the transcendent truth of the Bible. **The truth that is true whether you believe it or not**. Today, people are comfortable with their own little truths. 'Truth is whatever I believe to be true. It may not be true for you but it is for me – so that's my truth'. And they're right – as measured by themselves – that is true. But it is not **the truth**. **The truth** is the truth because the standard of measure is entirely outside ourselves. That requires a truth-teller who is transcendent, above it all. Someone who can see it all. I remember several years ago heading south on I-5 just crossing the bridge before you get into Seattle. I wanted to get to Bellevue so I was going to take the 520. And I was listening to the traffic report from the chopper in the air and he was saying there was a real slowdown just as you got onto the 520 bridge but the traffic through Seattle was great and it would be quicker to take the I-90 to Bellevue.

Now from where I was the traffic into Seattle seemed to be slowing down but the traffic exiting for 520 seemed to be zipping along nicely. And I had a dilemma. What should I do? Should I go with the transcendent truth from the chopper, or do I make my own? Do I make my personal perception the final judge of the truth of the traffic? Do I make my truth the one thing that everything else yields to? What I see, what I feel, what I think? Or do I put my trust in the guy above it all, and acknowledge a truth to which I must yield? Wisely I chose the transcendent chopper truth and as soon as I got down to where I could see the exiting traffic, I saw a zillion red lights, and in front of me, going through Seattle, it was wide open. But I couldn't have seen that until I committed myself to the man in the chopper. You see, either you sit in judgment over the transcendent truth of who Jesus is, of who God is, of what truth is – or it sits in judgment over you. You decide that either it will yield to you, that you are made of harder stuff than it – or you will yield to it – that it is made of stronger stuff than you. It is higher – it is transcendent – it is made of stronger stuff than you.

I don't think anyone comes to faith believing in a transcendent truth. They come first of all with their own idea of the truth, their own truth claims – their own perceptions of reality – everything must yield to them – they have to find out what's right for them. But when the truth comes to us, it cuts us like a knife. Now it's obvious that no one does surgery with styrofoam knives – they won't cut – they're not hard enough – we're harder than styrofoam. But when the truth comes, we discover we're not steel, we're styrofoam. We think that everything must yield to our truth, but we find that this transcendent truth cuts us open like a surgeon's scalpel. You see, in verse 36 Peter tells this crowd of people, "*Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.*" And this truth verse 37 tells us, cut them to the heart.

And when it cuts you, you know, without a shadow of a doubt that it is true. You know that you've met something that's harder material than you. It shows you who you are, it shows you your heart, it lays you open. And it tells you with absolute authority the good news, the gospel – that you crucified the one who lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died, so that God could be both just, punishing sin on the cross, and merciful and loving, not counting our sin against Him but laying it on Jesus and clothing us with His robes of righteousness. That's what cuts, that's what goes right down to the bottom of your soul. That's what compelled these guys to cry out, 'Brother's what shall we do?'. That is why they were devoted to the truth, that is why they hungery for it, that's why they were steadfastly, continually, constantly in the doctrine. They wanted to find out more about this person who gave His life for them – they were cut to the heart.

If devotion to this transcendent truth, the truth revealed in the Bible, is not something that characterizes you, there are two possible explanations. The first is that you're not a Christian – you've never been cut to the heart. Let it cut you this morning. The second is that maybe you are a Christian, and this hunger for the truth of God's word, the doctrines of the Bible, was once true but the power of its desire has weakened over the years. You rarely read the Bible, you don't really like the sermons, you hardly ever find yourself in a mid-week Bible study – you just really don't have the appetite anymore. You need to be cut again. You need to let the scalpel of God's divine word pierce your hardened heart and cut away the callous that has grown over it. Because the danger is, in the final analysis, you really haven't embraced this transcendent truth, you've never yielded to its power, and you are living in deception. Clearly, these guys lives were radically changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and the first mark of that change was a passion for the truth.

Secondly, they found themselves **devoted to the fellowship** – they were continually engaged in community, The word here is *koinonia* - and it means fellowship, community, communion, joint participation, the share which one has in anything. Henry Blackaby said: *"In the mind and teaching of Jesus, a church was a vital, living, dynamic fellowship of believers. The Greek word koinonia...is the best way to describe what a church ought to be."* And Luke says they found themselves constantly in the fellowship - constantly participating in community. Look at the passage – they always wanted to be together. Together in the temple, together in their homes. To put it plainly, people who say they are Christians but don't gather in community, don't regularly attend church, have no passion to be together – those people most definitely are not Christian. They're something, just not Christians. Because when the gospel impacts your life, your story is changed, your life is changed. The life of this new generation is a fellowship life, a community life. **You are devoted to community.**

We have such a limited concept of what the Bible calls fellowship. Fellowship is not a potluck or church social or casual conversation with other Christians. Fellowship is a mutual participation in the life of God among believers. Fellowship is the participation in the same communion of mutual love and respect and honor and glory that the Father and Son and Holy Spirit share among themselves. The essence, the heart of this fellowship, is the relationship the Triune God has. Jesus' prayer back in John 17 was *'Father, make them one just as We are one – as You are in Me and I in You, that they may be in Us.'* And this relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is one of continual and eternal joy in each other. They want to be around each other, talk to each other, fellowship with each other. They can't imagine not being with each other. That is why it was so incredibly horrific when Jesus on the cross saw His Father's face turned away – even for that brief moment – it was hell. That is the nature of the relationship they share. Paul writes of this in 1 Corinthians: *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* 1 Corinthians 1:9 So you can't call yourself a Christian if you don't have this.

There wasn't a Chreester among them. You know that's the term for those who only attend church on Christmas or Easter. They're doing their duty, putting in their time, putting on their glad rags and hoping to make a good impression on God. But this isn't a duty – it's not a chore – this is a delight. Christians, real Christians find their real joy in being in the fellowship. Look at what they were doing: *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.* Acts 2:46-47 This is church – this is community. They were deeply involved in each other's lives. Day by day. In the temple. In their homes. Eating together – praying together – worshipping God together – doing life together – you couldn't keep them away from each other. And those outside this community noticed. The Christians had favor with the larger community. It was attractive. Their whole world view about what is good and right and necessary in life was changed by the gospel. No one had to legislate this – this was spontaneous – this was the Holy Spirit being poured out into their lives.

This fellowship overflowed in the expression of **passionate worship**. They were devoted to two things – the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship – and the fellowship spontaneously broke out in worship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. The construction of the sentence here argues that their devotion to the fellowship centered around the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection and prayer. One of the reasons they always found themselves coming together, fellowshiping together, was to worship the One who had by His death and resurrection, brought them into this new community.

There is a definite article there in the Greek which is translated **the breaking of bread**, and it indicates this was not just a coming together to have a potluck. Most Biblical scholars agree that this was an indication that their fellowship always included remembering the Lord's death and resurrection, and we have come to call that communion. Which is great because that's fellowship.

And what that is, is a continual, regular **rehearsing the gospel**. The single most defining thing about a Christian is the love and the joy and gratitude he has for the One who came down from His glory to suffer and die for him. When these people were cut to the heart by the gospel, the center of their world changed forever. Before they were self-centered and consumed with what concerned them. Now the center of their world was Jesus, and everything, even their common meals, were saturated with joy and generosity and praise toward God. They saw everything had to do with Him. They couldn't get enough in the temple and it spilled over into their homes. They were **passionate about remembering the Lord**, the truth of who He was, what He did, His awesome mercy and grace, the gospel. This is perhaps one of the strongest arguments for celebrating the Lord's Table every time we gather.

And they were **persistent in the prayers**. Passionate persistent prayer is the mark of a changed life. The wording here seems to indicate the Jewish custom of regular times of prayer. Religious Jews prayed formally at least three times a day – morning prayers, afternoon prayers and evening prayers. And it was the custom for those in Jerusalem to go to the temple at these times to pray. In fact in the next chapter we see Peter and John headed to the temple around three for their regular afternoon prayers. But unlike a majority of Jews, this was not a duty for these Christians – it was a spontaneous outflow of the joy and gratitude they felt as they were drawn into this new community. For the first time perhaps, prayer made sense. For hundreds of years the Jews prayed to a God who was far off and unreachable – now He had come in the flesh and died for their sins and they were in fellowship with a God who was near. They had a sense of His real and immanent presence among them. A sense of awe was so thick you could almost cut it. And they couldn't help but pray.

Their attitudes about money and possessions underwent a radical change. They became **radically generous**. Look at verse 44 and 45: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* Acts 2:44-45 This was not, as some believe, a primitive form of communism or even communal living. In communism everything belongs to the State and the State doles out everything. And it wasn't communal living because they were still going house to house, which meant they still had houses to go to, and they still had property and possessions to sell. In fact there is a story coming up in chapter five of a guy named Ananias and his wife, Saphira, who pretended to be Christians and that didn't turn out so well.

But here it is clear that individuals, whose lives had been impacted by the gospel, viewed their possessions primarily as assets to help other people, and **they** saw the need and **they** sold their possessions, not the State. This was radical. The whole culture of that day was just as materialistic, just as bent on individual success as ours is today, and yet here you have people who were one moment just like the surrounding culture, much like ours today with its emphasis on Me first, and the next moment, selling their stuff to help those in need. You want to know what a Christian is? **He's someone whose wallet has been saved. That's a Christian.** It is someone whose heart has been so impacted by the gospel, so changed by being brought into a new community with a brand new story, that there is a dynamic and fundamental change in the way they handle money and possessions.

And there was **a sense of awe** in the city. *And awe came upon every soul,* Acts 2:43 This is an interesting word. The word is actually **phobos** – where we get our word phobia or fear. And it actually describes two things. One is a trembling fear and one is a reverent fear. When believers talk about the fear of God, they are talking about a reverential fear that recognizes the majesty and mercy of a transcendent yet imminent God. A God who is a consuming fire and yet whose heart is big to save sinners. A God who created all things but loves me personally. But to an unbeliever it is a terrible fear of judgment and eternal punishment – a trembling fear.

I remember a missionary coming to our church when I was much younger and sharing with us about a time when the Spirit of God was poured out over a city in Argentina back in the 1950's. I don't remember the name of the place but I'll always remember his description of what happened. He said there was within that city a palpable, almost physical sense of the presence of God. And among those who were believers it filled them with incredible joy and thanksgiving – and they couldn't get enough of being together. But when unbelievers came into the city, it was almost as if there were an invisible fence, that when they stepped into the city, they were overcome by fear and trembling – cut to the heart over their sin. It was not unusual he said, to see people literally step over the line of the city limits and fall to their knees with loud groaning and weeping. That's awe.

Look at what happens when that happens, **signs and wonders: *and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles...*** Acts 2:43 When the Spirit of God is poured out on His people – there is awe – there are miracles – wonders, there are signs. Signs that point to Jesus, signs that tell everyone that the kingdom is here, that the King has come. We see that in the next chapter with Peter and John at the temple, laying healing hands on the lame man who jumps up and starts running and leaping and praising God. It reminds me of The Return of the King, where Aragorn, the rightful ruler of Gondor, comes into the city in disguise where Faramir lays dying and he heals him. And this was a sign to the people of Gondor that Aragorn was the rightful king because the old prophecy declared that ***The hands of the King are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.*** And the King was here, the kingdom had come, in part, not in whole – and the signs and wonders attested to the fact.

And, when the Holy Spirit is poured out, and the gospel is proclaimed in power, believers are devoted to the truth and the fellowship, and passionate worship and radical generosity is happening and there is a sense of awe – ***church growth is not a problem, it's phenomenal. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*** Acts 2:47 Nobody attended a church growth conference – nobody read 9 Marks of a healthy church – there isn't any evidence that they felt they needed more seeker-sensitive services. The Lord added to their number daily.

I am convinced that this is what we need to pray for. This is what we need. This is what transforms people, communities, cities, whole countries.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

We confess our great need of You this morning. We ask for a mighty outpouring of Your Holy Spirit on us that we would be the people of God that You have called us to be. Our hearts echo the prayer of Isaiah – Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make Your name known to Your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at Your presence! When You did awesome things that we did not look for, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides You, who acts for those who wait for Him. Act for us O God and come Holy Spirit to fill us, renew us, revive us to be a people who delight in the truth of Your word; who are hungry for the fellowship of the saints; who worship You with a white-hot passion; whose money and possessions are at Your disposal; and whose lives are marked with the indelible stamp of Your image so that the world would see and come to know the God who saves, we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.