

Community: Truth in Love

Acts 2:42-47

August 2, 2020
Steve DeWitt

We are wrapping up our summer series *re:Discover: Following Jesus at Bethel Church*. We started with God's Word as the truth on which our church is built on. We looked at worship, mission, and service—all key components. Before I tell you our subject today, I want to give you a heads-up. In two weeks, we get back into Romans. Did we have any idea two and a half years ago when we started Romans that the schedule would land us in Romans 13 in the middle of a pandemic and riots? No. Nor did we know how controversial these words from Romans 13 would be, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*" (Romans 13:1 ESV). Could anything be more relevant right now? Romans 13 is the clearest teaching in the Bible on the role of government and a Christian's responsibility to authorities over us. Sound like anything people are arguing about these days? So that's in two weeks and we will sit on that text for a while.

Our subject today is Christian community and our church's vision for what that should look like. In a strange irony, there has likely never been a season in our lifetimes where we have longed for this more than now. These past four months have been a massive disruption in the regular rhythms of life and gatherings and ministries and fellowship with other Christians.

As you know, we have been doing the best we can given the shifting landscape of government mandates and medical direction. The tension we feel only highlights the importance of Christian relationships and Christian fellowship. Some people say it this way, *I just want to hug somebody!* What is that revealing? Our hearts are made for interpersonal relationships. We want to be viscerally close to others. The absence of it shows its importance in the body of Christ.

It's like our bodies. There are certain nutrients and vitamins our body needs. The absence of them creates disease. Scurvy is the lack of vitamin C. Rickets is the lack of vitamin D. Strange diseases happen in our spiritual lives when we are not nourishing our lives with life-on-life Christian community.

Our text today is Acts 2. As you get there, here is the backstory. *Acts 1*. Jesus goes to the Mt. of Olives with his disciples and charges them to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes and from there to be his witnesses throughout the earth. Jesus ascended to heaven.

Acts 2 – Key moment in redemptive history as the Holy Spirit comes upon those gathered in the Upper Room. It sounded like a tornado such that people from all over came running to see what had happened. Because it was the feast of Pentecost, there were Jews from all over the world. Miraculously, the Apostles begin speaking in the languages of the world. People are astonished. How do Galileans know all these languages? Peter explains it as the fulfilment of prophecy and a sign that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world. He urges them to believe and be baptized in Jesus' name. 3,000 people respond and are baptized in Jesus' name. So, think of this, on day one there is a megachurch in Jerusalem. Everyone in the church are brand new baby Christians. Twelve Apostles and 3,000 baby Christians. They are still dripping from their baptisms, but 3,000 new Christians are asking, *now what do we do?*

What's this supposed to look like? Acts 2 tells us what the church looked like in its pristine condition. Apostolic leadership. Holy Spirit empowerment. Boom. The church.

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 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. 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. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

What an exciting time to be part of the church! Apostles are preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. God is verifying their message with miracles. There was a powerful unity and commonality felt across the church. Such that people were incredibly generous to meet the material needs of others. That all sounds great to you, except perhaps you noticed that they gathered as a church *every day*. Really.

As much as you may like the generosity, would you put your field or savings account in the coffers to meet these needs? Or if you keep reading, there was a couple named Ananias and Saphira who tried to appear generous in giving the proceeds from the sale of some land, but they secretly held some back. God struck them dead for it. Now we can understand v. 43, *"And awe came upon every soul."* That word for awe is *phobos*. "Phobia; fear." There was a power, a supernatural power that came at Pentecost and its display shook Jerusalem into a wonder and awe among everyone and a uniting of the Christians in gospel community. As much as we may wish these days back, if people started dropping dead after the offering in our worship services, following Jesus would be a joy, but a sober and serious joy, don't you think?

Acts 2 provides us with a paradigm for life in Christian community. This is what it's supposed to look like. Verse 42 provides the outline, *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."*

Our focus is "fellowship" but first note the energy behind this. They *devoted* themselves. The word means "intense effort over time." This was no casual gathering for chit chat. They were very devoted and gave to church life their very best effort. Should we stop right there and ask, *how would Luke describe the culture of our church and the degree of effort our people put into church life? The church of Northwest Indiana involved themselves when it was convenient. They gave effort occasionally. They worked it in around other priorities.* Would Luke describe Bethel Church with, *"they devoted themselves?"* How would you describe your own effort? Let's hold "devoted" out as our aim.

What did they devote themselves to? Teaching. Fellowship. Breaking of bread and prayer. These should sound familiar as they align very closely with our discipleship strategy here. Prayer is self-defining. Breaking of bread is either the bread of the Lord's Supper or Christians eating meals together or possibly both as the practice of the early church was the Agape Feast which was a meal highlighted at the end with the taking of communion.

Then we have this word, *fellowship*. The root Greek word is "common." It says here, they *"had all things in common."* God's amazing grace through his gospel and its transforming work in our lives creates a powerful unity and solidarity among believers. This unity transcends social barriers and preferences, race, and background. All that is secondary to the primary unity we have in Jesus. We might say our relationships are all about Him.

Fellowship

So, let's define Christian fellowship. Here are some good definitions:

*"Christ-centered mutual affection and action [which] includes everything from joining in worship to conversations, meals, working together in all the activities of the Christian community."*¹

*"New Testament fellowship involves the sharing of the Christian life with other followers of Christ. Talking about the things of God with each other, telling and hearing testimonies of the work of the Spirit of God in our lives, serving the Lord and His people together, worshiping God and praying as one people, extending to and receiving from one another the love of Christ—these are the fibers of the fabric of fellowship."*²

"Sharing in word or action what we share in Christ." (Steve DeWitt)

True Christian fellowship is spiritual. We have so muddled fellowship to include chitchatting after a service about the Bears game. Was that fellowship? With some people, any gathering of Christians and doughnuts is instantly called fellowship. Is there anything wrong with those things? Maybe the doughnuts, but no. But don't think it's fellowship. If it's something you can do with an unbeliever, then it's not fellowship. Why?

"Indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ... But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:3, 7)

Our fellowship with one another is created by our mutual fellowship with God. When I become a Christian, I enter into a spiritual fellowship with God and because I am in fellowship with God, I am also in fellowship with everyone else who is in fellowship with God.

As many of you know, my father-in-law was a Major League Baseball player. He played from 1973-1977 for the Minnesota Twins. Before the 1978 season, he signed a contract with the Kansas City Royals. He entered into a relationship with that organization. The moment he signed, not only was he in relationship with the owners, by virtue of that relationship, he instantly was also in relationship with everyone else who had signed on with the Royals. Their mutual fellowship with the owners meant they were in mutual relationship with one another. It's called a team.

People in a church are a team. Not first because we are committed to one another, but because we are mutually committed to God. That's true Christian fellowship. It begins vertically with God. Churches that try to unite their membership around politics or a social cause or even a ministry won't last long. But when we see these relationships as vital because of the shared eternal relationship with God through Jesus, it creates a durability because *issues* come and go, *viruses* come and go, *politicians* come and go, *pastors* come and go, but God isn't going anywhere and our commitment to each other must be based on our common commitment to God and his gospel.

¹ Gordon Keddie, *Acts: You are My Witnesses, Welwyn Commentary Series*, (Wyoming, Michigan: JPL Books, 1993), page unknown.

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1996), page unknown.

"Fellowship is a sharing with our fellow-believers the things that God has made known to us about himself, in hope that we may thus help them to know him better and so enrich their fellowship with him. ... Fellowship is, secondly, a seeking to share what God has made known of himself to others, as a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one's own soul."³

So, let's talk about fellowship and community at Bethel Church. How do we reflect first-century Christianity in our 21st-century society?

Community at Bethel Church

We get together

"And all who believed were together... And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes." (Acts 2:44, 46)

The word *church* itself means "gathering." We aren't a church because we gather. We gather because we are a church. There is a spiritual magnetic pull we feel. That is what made April and May so hard as we were completely online with our services. It's gotten slightly better since June. Our outdoor services are a huge step forward and we all can't wait until it's all clear.

Why do we care? Why do we miss it? Because in the DNA of Christian fellowship is a magnetic pull toward being together.

Here is how the writer of Hebrews says it,

"And 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." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Not gathering is spiritually dangerous. But see how gathering is supposed to be spiritually encouraging as we seek to stir one another up. That's why talking about sports or grandkids doesn't get at this. We need to intentionally talk about spiritual matters. I have found asking the right questions takes conversations into this realm. *How did you become a Christian? How is God working in your life? What have you read lately that's been profitable? Any advice for us?* On and on. Doughnuts and coffee and talk about the Bears isn't fellowship. Any local bar can provide that. The church is uniquely a place where we can share our joys and sorrows, laugh and love, and do all this in the safety of a shared eternal union with Jesus and other Christians. Let's cultivate that culture here!

So, as we are right now, we have online services every Sunday. We have in-the-building services and we have outdoor services. If you can, I urge you to attend a service every Sunday. We offer options for you. At the very least, if health concerns require it, attend every Sunday online. That certainly is better than nothing and we are thankful for the technology. But don't view it as New Testament Christianity. Being with one another is New Testament Christianity.

³ J.I. Packer as quoted by C.J. Mahaney, *Why Small Groups? Together Toward Maturity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996) 20.

We devote ourselves to one another

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship." (Acts 2:42)

What does that look like—devoting ourselves to each other?

"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 leads to the expression of that devotion.

Street level love

There are some people who romanticize these days of the early church. Everything was great and everyone was happy. Yes, there were people materially giving but that's because there were people in material need. You get to Acts 6 and there are widows. What's that mean? Death of a husband. They are in need. There's division in the church over their care. The Apostles are struggling to understand God's plan because the Samaritans receive Christ in chapter 8, and the Ethiopian Eunuch and Cornelius the Gentile. So much was changing and morphing. Wonderful, but crazy times.

Yet the church loved each other with devotion right down to meeting practical material needs. How did they know who was in need? Here is a key underlying principle of great churches: people in them are authentic and vulnerable. I've heard it this way, *a church is a place where it's OK to not be OK as long as you don't want to stay that way.*

The church truly is a place for messed up people to be loved, not in their strengths, but in the hurts and struggles of life. We aspire to the same here at Bethel. I wish I could inject a huge dose of anti-pretending into our hearts. We have to be real with each other! Truth be told, we're all struggling, particularly right now. So, let's be done with the *I'm good. Life's good. Everything's good.* The less of that and the more real we are, the better our fellowship will be.

Circles not lines

Quickly, we believe fellowship is not sitting in the same auditorium with other Christians in lined seating but sitting in a small circle of believers and doing that regularly. We provide contexts for this. We call them small groups. We invest in our small group leaders who are called to offer frontline shepherding. We organize these somewhat by affinities, stage of life or gender or age. But the goal is circles. Are you in a circle? It doesn't have to be an official small group of our church, but we all need circles. There we can focus our devotion to each other. Do the one anothers of the New Testament. Be especially vulnerable in the safety of relationship. We have a link for you to take a step: **www.bethelweb.org/connect**.

The big picture here is cultivating a culture in our church of fellowship and Christian community. Like what? How about Acts 2? Look at the result of their dedication to one another, *"praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47)*

True Christian fellowship is incredibly attractational even to unbelievers. The early church's devotion to community with one another was itself a witness and led many to believe in Jesus. Have you been added to "the number"? Repent of your sin, turn to faith in Jesus as

Your Savior. Begin a lifelong journey of following Him. May God cultivate that culture more and more here and may the result be praising God, favor with the people, and the Lord adding to our number those who are being saved.

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