

November 8, 2020 by Steve Brandon



Community in the Early Church

Acts 2:42-47

1. Devotion (verse 42)
2. Awe (verse 43)
3. Generosity (verses 44-45)
4. Joy (verses 46-47)

Last week, I talked about the amazing revival that took place in the fall of 1949 when Billy Graham came to hold evangelistic meetings in Los Angeles. The meetings were scheduled to last for three weeks. However, because of the overwhelming response of the crowds who kept coming night after night, the campaign was extended another week. Then it was extended for another week and another week. In all, it lasted for eight weeks in all. There were some 3,000 people who made decisions for Christ during the event.

We know what happened to Billy Graham as a result of the campaign in Los Angeles. As I mentioned last week, it was the watershed moment for his ministry. It was the event that launched him into international fame. But one of the things that we don't know much about is what happened to the 3,000 people who made decision for Jesus. We know a little bit about a few of them. Some of the famous people who were converted during the campaign. One of them was named Louis Zamperini. I mention him, only because his story is told in the book and movie entitled, "Unbroken." It's a great story of redemption.

Louis Zamperini was a famous athlete, who ran in 1936 Olympics games in Berlin. He finished 8th in the 5,000 meters and wanted to return for the 1940 Olympics. But due to World War II, there were no Olympics in 1940. Instead, Zamperini joined the Army Air Corps, and trained as a bombardier. While on a search and rescue mission for a missing plane, his own plane experienced mechanical difficulties. It crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Eight men on his plane died upon impact, but three survived the crash. They managed to get on board a life-boat. Where they drifted for weeks, surrounded by sharks, and even being shot at by Japanese pilots. After 30 days, one of the men died and was thrown overboard. After 46 days they were "picked up" by some Japanese soldiers, taken into a Prisoner of War camp, and were brutally tortured for two years. He was eventually freed at the end of the war and came home a hero.

Yet, Zamperini's life was far from settled. Though saved from the terrors of the war, he faced his own terrors within. He was disillusioned and broken in spirit. His marriage was on the rocks. He had heard that there were some evangelistic meetings in town. He had no interest in going, but his wife did. She went one evening and gave her life to Christ. As a result, she told him, "I have become a Christian. I am not going to divorce you." She begged him to join him. He refused. She begged him again. They argued. Finally, he caved in and went during the last week of the campaign. He went the first night and stormed out. But on the second night that we went, and gave his life to Christ. Here's what his biographer says about his response.

Cynthia [his wife] kept her eyes on Louis all the way home. When they entered the apartment, Louie went straight to his cache of liquor. It was the time of night when the need usually took hold of him, but for the first time in years, Louis had no desire to drink. He carried the bottles to the kitchen sink, opened them, and poured their contents into the drain. Then he hurried through the apartment, gathering packs of cigarettes, a secret stash of girlie magazines, everything that was part of his ruined years. He heaved it all down the trash chute.

In the morning, he woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, Bird [the leader of the Japanese torturers] hadn't come into his dreams. Bird would never come again.

Louie dug out the Bible that had been issued to him by the air corps and mailed home to his mother when he was believed dead. He walked to Barnsdall Park, where he had Cynthia had gone in better days, and where Cynthia had gone, alone, when he'd been on his benders. He found a spot under a tree, sat down, and began reading.

Resting in the shade and the stillness, Louie felt profound peace. When he thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that he believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that [his torturers] had striven to make of him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation.^[1]

Zamperini's story went on beyond that night. The next year (1950), he visited the Sugamo Prison in Tokyo, where those who tortured him were imprisoned. He spoke to them about Christ with no bitterness in his heart. Some of them became Christians. With the help of Billy Graham, he became an evangelist himself. He went on to serve "at-risk" youth for the rest of his life.

This is just one of the lives that were impacted by the 1949 evangelistic campaign in Los Angeles. Perhaps many other stories could be told of how those weeks of meetings impacted people. And really, that's how you measure all revivals, by the impact that they make. You don't measure revivals so much in numbers of decisions, because these numbers are often inflated, and many who make a decision are no Christian at all. They simply were caught up in the emotion of the moment to make some commitment that they never would keep. But you measure revival in the fruit that comes forth in the lives of those who repent and believe.

Well, this morning, we have an opportunity to look at the changed lives of those who were converted under Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. Their change comes in Acts 2:42-47. Rather than spreading their own ways as did the people who were impacted by the campaign in Los Angeles in 1949, here we see them coming together. They come together in community. That's what these verses describe. That's why my message is entitled, "Community in the Early Church."

Acts 2:42-47

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.

For my message this morning, I simply want to pick out some characteristics of community in the early church. The application will be evident: what was true of this Spirit-filled community then, ought to be true of our Spirit-filled community today. First of all, we see ...

1. Devotion (verse 42)

I trust that you see that in verse 42.

Acts 2:42-47

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

The early Christians were a committed people. Or, to use the language of verse 42, they were a "devoted" people. They were "all in." They were fully engaged in their new life. When they experienced forgiveness of sins, all else of importance in life faded away.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.

They had a passion to pursue the Lord. All they wanted to do is learn about what they experienced in Jesus. All they wanted to do is be with God's people and worship the Lord. This is typical of those who are first saved from their sins. They were struggling in their lives before. But now, they have come to find freedom in Jesus. And all they want to do is give themselves to their new life. They want to learn. They want to grow. They want to worship the Lord who saved them!

Note the four things that the early church devoted themselves to: (1) The apostles' teaching; (2) Fellowship; (3) Breaking of Bread; and (4) Prayer

Now, these things ought to sound familiar to many of you. They are the four commitments that many of you made in filling out your membership forms this past spring. Commitments that you are have made to serve in this body: to submit yourself to the teaching of the church; to share your lives with those in the church; to eat with one another, to remember Jesus; and to pray with and for one another. For many of you, these are things that you are already doing. Our membership process is a formal expression of your commitment to these things. Do you remember that? We (as elders) haven't forgotten. And there will be a day when we all can come together and celebrate our community together. It simply seems to us that during these days of COVID-19, with the disruption that it has brought upon our normal lives in community, with the many who aren't even gathering with us on Sunday mornings, and with the disruption of our small groups at church, that we are delaying the full expression of our formal membership when we bring everyone together in a united church family to formalize what has been going on here informally for years.

I look forward to the day when we can do this all together. When we all can be together in this place, hearing God's word together and growing together. (I'm thankful for the online capabilities that we have as a church, and that many of you are tuning in right now). But it's different being together, learning together and growing together. I'm looking forward to the day when we all can share our lives together, being with each other, in one another homes, meeting together in small groups, sharing what's going on in our lives. I'm looking forward to the day, when we all can eat together, downstairs for our monthly potlucks, packed into our dining room. I'm looking forward to the day when we can all be together praying in tight circles. I'm looking forward to the day when we can do these things freely. On that day, we will have a wonderful celebration of all of us in community committing ourselves to these four things as the early church was. On that day, we will finally install our first formal members at Rock Valley Bible Church.

In the early church, they committed themselves to the **apostles' teaching**. They had learned about Jesus. They had learned about the Messiah. But they wanted to know more. They didn't have a New Testament to read, which explains Jesus for us. All they had was the Old Testament. But they had their guides, the apostles. So, they gathered and listened and learned. Today, we the Scriptures to learn from. They guide us in the truth. That's why our Sunday mornings are focused upon the word of God. That's why we encourage you in your Bible reading. That's why we encourage you to know and understand and love your Bibles. Because that was a commitment of the early church and this is the commitment that we all must share.

The early church was also devoted to fellowship. The Christian church often gets this wrong by simply believing that fellowship means standing around talking with each other while drinking red punch and eating cookies. Now, it's not that eating snacks and speaking with others isn't fellowship. It's simply that genuine fellowship is so much more than this. At its core, "Fellowship" means "sharing." And so, genuine "fellowship" happens when you truly share your lives with others around you. This is what the early church did, "Those who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:42). That is, they had all things in "fellowship" with one another. They shared their lives with one another, even to the point of sharing their possessions with one another, "as any had need" (Acts 2:45). That's a picture of

community. And that's a picture of community in the early church.

Thirdly, they were also devoted to **"the breaking of bread."** Now, it is difficult to know exactly what this phrase is referring to. There are many who believe that this is referring to the Lord Supper, when the church gathers all together and eats of "the bread," that is "one loaf" in remembrance of Jesus. There are others who believe that this simply means that they shared their meals together, as verse 46 seems to indicate, "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).

With the confusion of exactly what this refers to, it is best to apply it in both ways, lest we be wrong and miss it all together. We ought to be eating together. We ought to be celebrating the Lord's Supper together. We ought to be "devoted" to these things, just as they were.

Finally, they were devoted to **prayer**. Literally, it was "the prayers." It's probably a reference to the prayers in the temple. Next week, we will see Peter and John "going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). They were certainly going up to pray in the temple.

The early Christians were committed to prayer. In fact, you read the book of Acts, and you see their commitment to prayer. We already saw this in chapter 1:14, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer." We will see the early church gathering regularly to pray together. We see prayer meetings in chapter 4 and in chapter 12. Their prayer meeting in chapter 4 was so powerful that when they finished, the place in which they had prayed "was shaken" (Acts 4:31).

They prayed together when seeking guidance (Acts 1:24). They prayed together when establishing leaders (Acts 6:6; 14:23). They prayed together when sending off missionaries (Acts 13:3). They prayed together when saying goodbye (Acts 20:36; 21:5). They prayed together in times of trouble (Acts 27:29). And to encourage us all as a church in our devotion to prayer, we are holding a prayer workshop on Saturday. We would encourage you to attend.

The early church community had (1) Devotion (verse 42). Secondly, the early church community experienced ...

2. Awe (verse 43)

This comes in verse 43, ...

Acts 2:43

And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

This word translated, "awe" here is literally "fear." Yet, it doesn't mean that they were shaking and terrified as if they had seen a ghost. No, it means that they were experiencing the power of God first-hand, and were feeling what it was like to see the Lord work. They weren't in awe at the buildings or programs. They were in awe at what the Lord was doing among the people of the church.

A small illustration of this might be what took place this past week at Rock Valley Bible Church. On Tuesday, we hosted the elections in our building. Now, our building isn't so wonderful, but we have made some improvements since we have been here. The building is also nice and clean. The election officials were quite impressed, especially in this time of social distancing, that they were able to use the auditorium to vote. All of the election officials went out of their way to express their thankfulness to use the building. They were also encouraged by our generosity in giving them whatever they needed to use in the building. But this isn't what filled people with awe in the early church. It was God's working in the people. Even if we had a grand cathedral with high ceilings and ornaments all around, still this isn't the awe the early church felt. This is because there were no buildings or great programs in the early church. There was only God and what he was doing.

They were witnessing the "wonders and signs" that the apostles were doing. We don't know all of these wonders that the apostles were doing. Luke doesn't record many of them for us. He simply says that "wonders and signs" were being done. Next week, we will see but one example in chapter 3, which, I believe is typical of the power of God upon the lives of the apostles. They healed a man who had been lame from birth (Acts 3:2). He had never walked before. Like Jesus healed these sorts of people, so did Peter. He simply commanded the man to walk (Acts 3:6). He took him by the hand to help him up. And we see the man instantly "walking and leaping and praising God" (Acts 3:9). And seeing that, the people rightly had a sense of fear, a sense of awe at the power of God, that could make a lame man walk again.

While I have never witnessed this sort of power, and while I don't think that such is normative today, I still have felt this sort of power of God in my life. It is often the case when I have an opportunity to clearly share the gospel of Christ with someone, that I feel a sense of awe in the power of God. I know that God is working in the heart of this person to have an interest in spiritual things and that a life hangs in the balance between heaven and hell. It draws me to pray that the Lord would work to grant faith and repentance, and that he would bring a soul to himself. At those times, I feel the sense of awe, like those in the early church did.

I have also felt a sense of awe, when something is stirring at Rock Valley Bible Church. It has been when the Lord brings a bunch of new people to church at the same time. I get a sense of awe as I watch Jesus build his church. Or when the Lord is working in the lives of people in a special way. When I see people turn from their sins and follow Jesus, I get a sense of awe, knowing with fresh confidence that the Lord is with us and working among us. Do you know what I'm talking about? The early church community felt the awe of God. And so should we.

Let's move on to my third point.

3. Generosity (verses 44-45)

Acts 2:44-45

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.

The picture here is one of perfect fellowship. They had all things in common. Literally, they had all things "in fellowship." Such was the excitement and enthusiasm of the early church, that everyone was doing whatever they could to help each other with their needs, even to the point of selling possessions and belongings.

Some have argued here for communism from this text. But I don't think that's the mandate at all for Christians. Communism would seek to pool all of our resources, across our country, so that each of us would give to the common pot, "according to our ability." And each of us would receive "each according to our needs." While this may sound wonderful to some, it's simply not the reality of the early church, nor is it the exhortation of the apostles to pool everything together.

We will see in chapter 5, when Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of property and give it to the apostles to distribute, that Peter tells them that the property was theirs to do with as they wanted. Even after they sold it, Peter told them that the proceeds were theirs to keep if they so pleased. If any time there was a mandate to hold all of our possessions in a common pot, it was here. But Peter didn't. Instead, he made it clear that private property is a good and proper thing.

Yet, the non-negotiable and applicable here is generosity. You cannot be generous if you don't have freedom to keep what you have. It's not generosity to pay taxes. You must pay your taxes. It's not generosity to live under a communist regime when you give much of your wealth away. Further, it may not even be generosity to pay a church-mandated "tithe." This is the case when people feel obligated to give a certain percentage of their income. It's generosity to give what you do freely, and under no constraint. That's exactly what we see here. We see the early church community being generous, seeking to provide the needs of their neighbors.

Now, there is reason to believe that their abundance of generosity here was short-lived, because the need may have been short-lived. If you remember the context of these words, you remember that they came during a time of Pentecost, when many who were out of town came to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem. The feast lasted a single day. There is reason to believe that most of those who came were prepared to be in Jerusalem for a single day. But revival broke out. And just as the Billy Graham crusade was extended for another five weeks, I believe that there were many from out of town who remained for some days (or even weeks). But they weren't prepared. They had made their arrangements to stay for the weekend, bringing enough food and clothes and money for a day of travel to Jerusalem, a day at the feast, and a day of travel home. Maybe some of them planned to stay a few extra days to visit with family or friends. But they weren't planning to stay for weeks on end. It may just be that those who had need were those who were not planning to spend a few weeks in Jerusalem, but seeing the power of God, they just couldn't leave. As a result, they found themselves in need. Those who lived in Jerusalem were being generous to meet their need, especially as it meant the revival would carry on.

This short-term need doesn't set us free from the generosity demonstrated by the early church. Generosity is foundational for any church to exist. I know for a fact that this church would never exist apart from the generosity of God's people. I'm thankful for your generosity in giving to our church. But generosity in a community isn't only expressed in giving to the church. It's also expressed in giving straight to others. And so, I exhort you, church family to be generous with what you have. Support the church. Support some missionaries. Give to those in this body who have need. Give money. Give things. And we will experience community as the early church did.

Let's move on to my last point this morning. First of all, we have seen the church filled with "Devotion" (verse 42). Second, we have seen the church experiencing a sense of "Awe" (verse 43). Thirdly, we see the church displaying their "Generosity" (verses 44-45). Finally, the church experienced ...

4. Joy (verses 46-47)

Acts 2:46-47

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.

By way of outline here, I picked out "joy." I could have picked out "togetherness" as they were in the temple together and breaking bread together in their homes (verse 46). I could have carried over the third point in generosity, as we see this mentioned in verse 46. I could have entitled this point, "worship" as they were "praising God" (verse 47). I could have zeroed in on "blessing," as they were "having favor with all the people" (verse 47). Yet, I chose to single out the "joy," because I think that this helps to share the atmosphere around the early church community.

Nothing was a drudgery in those days. They were together with gladness. They were generous with joy. They were joyful in their worship. They were happy in the favor that God gave them with all the people. And I so long that Rock Valley Bible Church would have a culture of joy in our midst. I long that we would be a happy people. I'm not seeking to be a fake people, but a genuinely contented and satisfied people. I'm aiming our church as being our "happy place." It was their joy to stay in Jerusalem.

It is not without accident that the vision statement of our church is "Enjoying His Grace and Extending His Glory." Right there in the first word, "enjoying" is the word, "joy." We exist to find our joy in God. I so want that this is the culture of our church. They were happy. I long that we are a happy people. I pray that people want to come to church and be among us, not because they feel any sense of obligation, but that they desire to be here.

This is why the difficult times of COVID-19 has hit me particularly hard. As a pastor, I'm seeking to aim us to cultivate such a community among us. Yet, during these days, the government is mandating that we stay apart. It's like everything we are aiming for is being opposed by this health crisis. It has been difficult, but the Lord will strengthen us through it.

I love how verse 47 ends, "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." As the church was growing, who was responsible for the church growth? It's the Lord. He is the one who was adding to their numbers day by day. He was saving people. "Those who were being saved" is a passive verb. God was acting upon people, saving them from their sins. Peter exhorted the people to "save

yourselves" (verse 40), yet ultimately, it was God who was saving them.

This verse is the first of six "progress reports" in the book of Acts. It reports on how the church is growing and expanding. Consider the others:

Acts 6:7, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

Acts 9:31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Acts 16:5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Acts 19:20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Acts 28:30-31 He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

These progress reports all help to show why Acts is such an encouraging book, because it shows how the church continued to grow and boom. We have much to be encouraged by all that we will see in Acts in months and years to come.

Now, as I end my message, I want for us to step back and think about my message. Overall, my message has been simple, "This is what the early church was. So should we be." One of the big challenges of the book of Acts is that you always have to keep in mind the difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive. In other words, just because the early church did something, it doesn't mean that we are required to do it also. We saw this in chapter 1, with the replacement of Judas with Matthias. Just because they cast lots doesn't mean that we should cast lots to determine who the leaders of our church should be.

So, the question of our text here in simple: does this descriptive also have a prescriptive element? In other words, should we follow in the example of the early church as seen in these verses? I think so. In chapter 4, we see much the same thing as here in chapter 2.

Acts 4:32-35

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

So you see the closeness and togetherness of the early church. And so, I would argue that the things we saw in Acts, chapter 2, we see continued on in Acts, chapter 4. But did the mandate for us stop there? I say, "No." You see the same commands in the "One Another" passages throughout all the New Testament. Further, you see it in history. And if you see it in history, then, we know that it continued on and is applicable to us today.

I want to close with a testimony of a man named, Aristides. He lived in the second century A. D. He was not a believer, but was writing to the king about the behavior of these "Christians." His testimony of the early church community is challenging for us today.

They do not worship idols (made) in the image of man; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others; and of the food which is consecrated to idols they do not eat, for they are pure. And their oppressors they appease and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; and their women, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest; and their men keep themselves from every unlawful union and from all uncleanness, in the hope of a recompense to come in the other world.

Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free.

And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near.

And when a child has been born to one of them, they give thanks to God; and if moreover it happen to die in childhood, they give thanks to God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And further if they see that anyone of them dies in his ungodliness or in his sins, for him they grieve bitterly, and sorrow as for one who goes to meet his doom.

Such, O King, is the commandment of the law of the Christians, and such is their manner of life.^[2]

May this be our manner of life at Rock Valley Bible Church

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 8, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, p. 383.

[2] Apology of Aristides, chapter 15, 16. You can read one translation here: <http://prenicea.net/doc2/20801-en-01.pdf>.