



# CHURCH ESSENTIALS

## Introduction

Perhaps, some time in the past, you found yourself in a conversation with someone who said something like this: “I love Jesus, but I just can’t stand the church.” In an individualistic culture such as our own, this way of thinking has become surprisingly common. In an age where it feels like we can watch any church service in the world from the comfort of our own living room, many people seem to have concluded that the Christian life might as well be lived alone. After all, one might think, if I can read my bible, and pray, and listen to sermons on my own, why bother waking up early on a Sunday morning to spend time packed into an auditorium with a bunch of messed up, sinful people? Some might think this way because of past negative experiences with the church, while others may not even realize that our culture’s intense emphasis on individualism radically affects the way they understand the importance of the church.

One of the best examples of this kind of individualistic Christianity can be found in a well-known and often well-loved hymn titled “*In the Garden*.” Some of you might know this hymn, and in fact, some of you may love this hymn. If that’s the case for you this morning, I’m sorry for what I’m about to say. While I think there are elements of this hymn that are worth commending, listen to the chorus and tell me if anything about it sounds off to you. Speaking of Jesus, the hymn says, “*And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he says that I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known.*”

Most of us are very familiar with the concept of “having a personal relationship with Jesus,” because in our context, we’ve been hearing it our entire lives. While this concept does carry some useful truth, if we aren’t careful, like with this hymn, we can take it too far and fail to understand the clear biblical teaching on the importance of community in the life of the believer. As you read through the New Testament, it becomes quickly apparent that the idea of private, individualistic faith in Christ is nowhere to be found. Those who believe in Christ are saved into

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a community. Christ is said to be the head of the church—not of individual believers—and none of us as individuals are ever identified as the bride of Christ—the church is. On a more practical level, while individual bible reading and private times of prayers are wonderful gifts from God for us to enjoy, scripture never actually tells us that these are the primary means by which we are to grow into maturity. All throughout the New Testament, God is very clear that we mature in our faith in community, with one another, as we experience the means of grace that God has given not to individual believers, but to the church. Believers are called time and again throughout the New Testament to minister to one another with the gifts that God has given to them to build up the body and not to mature in isolation.

All this is to say that, as far as the bible is concerned, there is no such thing as lone-ranger Christianity. And as we continue in our sermon series on Church Essentials and turn our attention to the book of Acts this morning, I trust that we will be all able to see this clearly for ourselves. Over the last few weeks in this sermon series, we have seen that Jesus is the head of the church, that the church is his body, and that in the New Covenant this body is comprised of regenerate members whose hearts have been transformed by the power of the gospel. The question I want to ask this morning is this—what does this regenerate body of Christ actually do? What are their priorities?

I always personally appreciate it when preachers spell things out simply and clearly, and so in that same spirit, I'm going to give you the main point of my sermon right now. If you only remember one thing that I say, remember this—what we see in the book of Acts is that **The Church is Devoted to Community**. In Acts 2:42–47 we can clearly see this devotion work itself out in the lives of the very first Christians, and we can see how it informed every aspect of their daily lives.

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## Context

One verse before our passage in verse 42, we read that the early church had just experienced what one commentator called its “inaugural revival.” As the books of Acts begins, we are told that the church was made up of about 120 people, mostly the apostles, Jesus’ own family, and others who were close to Jesus during his life on earth. These 120 disciples formed the nucleus of a church which multiplied explosively after the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them at Pentecost and Peter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, preached a sermon that led to the salvation of 3,000 people in a single day. Just like that, the church had grown by nearly thirty times! These were the very first converts of Christianity, and without wasting any time, Luke tells us exactly how these new converts lived their lives.

Verses 42 and 43 tell us what the lives of these early believers looked like, and verses 44—47 give us further explanation and show us what the result of their new lives was. In verse 42, Luke writes that “*they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” From the very first words of this passage, we see that these new believers were in fact *devoted*, and we see that they were particularly devoted to four elements which together paint a picture of a life lived in community rather than in isolation. Luke tells us that they were devoted to **the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers**. So let’s take a moment and think about each of these things in a little bit more detail.

## The Apostles’ Teaching

The first thing we see is that these new believers devoted themselves to **the apostles’ teaching**. The apostles were those men who walked with Jesus during his time on earth and who were appointed by him to be the leaders of the early church. They were commissioned by

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Jesus himself to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all that Jesus had commanded. It seems clear from this first part of Acts 2 that the apostles took this commission seriously, and the believers whom they shepherded took their responsibility to listen to and obey the apostles' teaching equally seriously.

But what did the apostles teach? What was the content that these believers were actually devoting themselves to? While we don't have every single bit of this teaching recorded for us in history, much of the apostles' teaching has been preserved in the letters of the New Testament. And while these letters address many different people in many different circumstances, at their most fundamental level, you could rightly say that they are all about the same thing. They are about Jesus. They are about his life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, and also about his significance in God's plan of salvation. The apostles' teaching continually emphasized the all-sufficient, finished work of Christ on behalf of his people and then called them to live in light of that marvelous grace which they had received. So what did the apostles teach? While it could certainly be said that they taught about many things, it should also rightly be said that everything was about Jesus.

Now, it will come as no surprise to anyone here that we don't still have the apostles living with us today. So as we think about how our passage applies to us this morning, how can we also devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching like the early church did? I've already given away the answer, and I'm sure most of you have already caught on. We may not have the apostles alive with us today, but we have their teachings with us in the very bibles that we hold in our hands right now. And it is instructive for us that this teaching comes first on the list in verse 42, because it is the most fundamental and foundational. Before we devote ourselves to anything else, we must root ourselves deeply in the truths of the gospel. We must ourselves be constantly reminded and must be constantly reminding one another of the all-sufficient merit of the Saviour who lived a perfect life on our behalf and died a sinner's death in our place. We

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need to be reminded and to remind others that his work satisfied God completely and forever, that no judgement remains for those who are in Christ, and that we will be kept by him for all eternity. The church is devoted to community, and that devotion stands on the foundation of the gospel found in the apostles' teaching.

## **The Fellowship**

The second thing we see in Acts 2:42 is that the early believers were devoted to **the fellowship**. I think this word fellowship is perhaps one of the most commonly misunderstood words in the Bible. What is fellowship? When most of us are asked this question, our minds almost automatically jump to an image of drinking coffee and eating cookies, hanging around after a Sunday service or other church event and talking with friends. Make no mistake, these are wonderful things, and we will come back to them in a little bit, but the biblical concept of fellowship is so much more than that, and we can start get a sense of that by noticing that Luke doesn't actually refer to fellowship in general, but *the* fellowship in particular.

Fellowship isn't fundamentally about hanging out and eating food. The biblical term carries a connotation of 'sharing,' not in the sense of how a child might share a toy with a friend, but in the sense of participating together in a shared reality. Take this for an example. Just last week, I found myself on the road in the middle of the night, driving back to Southern Ontario from Atlanta having visited my wife's family. Now, anyone who has ever driven through the night knows that it isn't always the most pleasant experience. Maybe you're sore from napping in a car. Maybe you're feeling tired and trying to stay awake as your eyelids begin to feel heavy, and there certainly isn't much to look at as you drive straight into a black void for hours on end. I don't know if this has ever happened to anyone else, but one of the things I found remarkable was the sense of unity I felt with everyone else driving on the road at that time. In spite of the fact that I knew nothing about any of the people around me, it was like we were all somehow in this mildly miserable experience together and could empathize with each other's circumstances.

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In a very small and imperfect way, this experience illustrates the sense of what fellowship means in biblical terms—it means that we all have one common experience that binds us together and gives us a deep sense of unity. In the case of the bible, we aren't talking about something as inconsequential as a road trip, we're talking about the shared experience of the gospel, and in particular, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul would say it this way, *"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all"* (Ephesians 4:4–6). In Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all of God's people share together in the most glorious and important realities that history could ever hope to know, and this mutual sharing brings with it a depth of unity that could not possibly be attained by any other means and which works itself out in a myriad of practical ways.

So how did this fellowship work itself out in the daily lives of the believers in Acts 2:42? Luke tells us in verses 44 and 45. He writes, *"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 fellowship they had through their shared experience of the Holy Spirit who dwelled within them led to an otherworldly love and care for one another, even at great personal cost.

It probably won't come as any surprise to many of you that a lot of time has been spent arguing over what exactly Luke is referring to in these verses. Did these believers live in some kind of idealized communist utopia where nobody owned anything at all? While some have tried to make this argument, that idea falls apart relatively quickly when we look at the book of Acts as a whole. We can clearly see later in the book that many believer still owned homes and property, because they still regularly met in each other's houses. We even see a few chapters later in the infamous story of Ananias and Sapphira from Acts 5 that believers were under no

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obligation to sell their property. Ananias and Sapphira faced judgement for lying in order to seem more generous than they were, but they weren't judged merely for holding on to their own stuff. Peter said to them, "*While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?*" All of this is to say that the earliest believers were almost certainly not forced to give up everything they owned for community-wide distribution. The point of these verses is that they felt such a deep sense of unity and kinship, and they loved one another so much, that they were willing to sell their own possessions and give the money away to anyone who was suffering need. They would do anything to see their brothers and sisters cared for. This was a church devoted to community, not content to live a life of isolated spirituality. But instead, they were partakers of the fellowship of the gospel and of the Holy Spirit that brings a unity deeper than anything else on earth.

We live in a time when many people in the church—even those we might not expect—are struggling to make ends meet and find themselves facing incredible need. These are brothers and sisters with whom we are united closer than any blood relative through a shared experience of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous gospel of grace. Should that amazing unity not drive us to make certain that we also don't have a needy person among us?

### **The Breaking of Bread**

Thirdly, we see from Acts 2:42 that the early believers were also devoted to **the breaking of bread**. Now, if anyone here found themselves maybe feeling a little bit defensive of the potluck lunch when I was talking earlier about the fellowship, this is your chance for some vindication. Because yes, while the fellowship of believers is so much more than coffee and cookies, we can clearly see from these verses that these early believers were devoted to those things as well! We see that they loved being together. Verse 46 tells us that "*day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with*

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*glad and generous hearts.*” On a daily basis, Luke tells us, these believers attended services together, and ate meals together in their homes. This doesn’t necessarily mean that every single person was a part of every single meeting on every single day, but the pattern here is unmistakable. These people loved each other, they loved spending time together, and they loved eating together.

Like before, many commentators have gone back and forth about what exactly this breaking of bread means. Is Luke talking specifically about The Lord’s Supper? Or is he referring to the ordinary, everyday meals that believers would share together? While I’m not entirely convinced that we absolutely must choose one over the other in this case, I think that Luke is most likely referring to ordinary meals, to believers sharing life’s joys and difficulties, bearing one another’s burdens, learning more about each other’s lives, and finding ways to practically love one another and serve each other’s needs. Without a doubt, these believers would also have spent time reminding themselves of God’s grace toward them in Christ and encouraging one another with the truths of the gospel, but at this very early point in the Church’s history, the formalized understanding of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper as we understand it today likely hadn’t quite yet been fully established.

But here again, we see a church absolutely devoted to community. This kind of sustained and prolonged time together in relationship by definition simply can not be accomplished in isolation. This breaking of bread is one of the most primary things that the early church in Acts was devoted to and it is absolutely something we should strive to see flourish in our own church as well. To be the church is to be devoted to community, and to be devoted to community means so much more than being devoted to a Sunday morning gathering. Of course, the Sunday morning gathering is of enormous importance and absolutely should not be neglected, but the life of the church isn’t lived one day per week, it is lived in

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community, seven days a week, around great food and great drinks, and with love and care for one another.

### The Prayers

Lastly, Luke tells us that these early believers were devoted to **the prayers**. Again, interestingly, just like with *the* fellowship, Luke doesn't refer to prayers in general, but *the* prayers specifically. While we don't know for sure exactly what these specific prayers may have been, they almost certainly included prayers during public times of worship in the temple and prayers in each other's homes—the places where verse 46 tells us that these believers spent their time. Just like the apostles who lead them, these early believers understood the incredible importance of prayer for the life of the church. All throughout the books of Acts, Luke makes an immense effort to highlight just how often the early church prayed and for just how many things they prayed. In total, Luke mentions prayer 32 times in the book of Acts alone, which is more than once per chapter. By comparison, in their respective gospels, Matthew mentions prayer 10 times, Mark 12 times, and John only 5 times. All throughout the book of Acts, we see God doing amazing, miraculous works in the life of the church, and these believers understood that their own power and ability had nothing to do with their success. They prayed because they understood that it was God who was working, both on their behalf and within them—as Paul would say—both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Having already seen the striking context of community all throughout this passage, we can safely assume is that Luke isn't telling us that these early believers locked themselves away and prayed in their closets by themselves. As I said earlier, private prayer is a wonderful gift that believers get to freely enjoy, but that isn't what we see here. What we see is prayer in the life of a gathered, unified community, and that sort of corporate prayer is no less important for us today than it was for the early church back then.

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## The Result

And so, we see that the early church was devoted to community as they devoted themselves to **the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers**. And after all this, what does Luke have to say about the result? As these early believers devoted themselves to these things, what happened? Equally importantly, we might ask, if we as a church in the modern day devote ourselves to these things, what can we expect to see happen? To wrap up our time together this morning, I want us to look at two results that flowed from the early church's devotion to community—**joy in the church** and **witness to the community**.

## Joy in the Church

First, **joy in the church**. Here in Acts 2, Luke paints a picture of a community that doesn't meet together begrudgingly, but finds great joy in their fellowship. At the end of verse 46 and the beginning of verse 47, we read, "*they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.*" When one commentator looked at this passage, they posed the question, "where can true joy be found?" They went on to argue, and rightly so I think, that the kind of joy experienced by the church as they devote themselves to community is a true, lasting, eternal joy that can not be meaningfully achieved by any other means. This is a joy that imperfectly but increasingly reflects the perfect joy that all God's people will experience for all eternity together in the new heavens and the new earth, when every tribe, tongue, and nation will live together in perfect unity forever. And of course, this joy didn't stay buried deep in their hearts. Luke tells us that it worked itself out in praise to the God who chose them, loved them, saved them, and brought them together as Christ's body—the eternal new creation community.

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## **Witness to the Community**

But secondly, the early church's devotion to community didn't only bring them joy, it also made them a profound **witness to the community**. Luke tells us in verse 43 that "*awe came upon every soul*" in Jerusalem, and in verse 47 he said that the church was "*having favour with all people.*"

In John 13, Jesus said to his disciples, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" This group of believers in the book of Acts, devoted to community, lived private and public lives that were so abundantly transformed by the gospel that the people around them couldn't help but take notice. The world around them was filled with awe and looked highly upon them because of how their lives outwardly reflected the glorious gospel that saved them. And what happened as a result? Luke tells us at the end of verse 47 that "*the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*"

## **Conclusion**

Luke's final words serve as one final important piece for us to consider about the life of the early church. We can look at their amazing unity, their love for one another, and their witness to the world, and then we can look at ourselves and feel deeply insufficient, like we couldn't possibly measure up to this standard. But pay close attention to what Luke says. He doesn't say that people were saved because of how amazing these believers were. He says *the Lord* added to their numbers. Every aspect of this church's success was fuelled by the sovereign grace and mighty power of God. Salvation belongs to the Lord, and the success of the church then and now can only ever be attributed to him and him alone. The church is

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devoted to community because it has been sovereignly chosen and saved by him and continues to be sustained by him each and every day.

One commentator summed up this passage perfectly when he said, “. . . [T]he church in Jerusalem was a model of what could happen when people were bound together by a belief in the gospel, an understanding of its implications, and an enjoyment of its blessings.” These are realities that can not be experienced alone on the couch in your living room. We don’t walk in the garden alone—we are the body of Christ together as a community, and together as a community we are his bride. From the very first days of its existence, the church has been devoted to community, and so let us not neglect to devote ourselves to community in just the same way. Let’s pray.

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