

XI. Christ's Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia—Seven Distinctives
“#6: Reformed Worship and Vibrant Community, Part 2”
Acts 2:37–47
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I'd like to start by looking at Acts 2. Before I get started here is a great theological illustration. There was a southern mayor who had a problem in their town and that was they had a bat infestation in the steeples of the churches so the mayor got the three preachers together – a Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian. The mayor said ‘You all have bats in your belfries and you need to get rid of them. If you can get rid of them I'll buy you lunch next week.’ They agreed. So next week came and the mayor asked the Presbyterian pastor if he got rid of his bats and he said ‘no they are still there. I got my elders together to pray about it and when we finished we thought we were just going to go up there and get them but one of my elders said that God had predestined those bats to be in that steeple and it would be wrong to go against the decrees of God so he wanted us to wait until God would predestine them to leave when it would be time for them to leave.’ The mayor just shook his head.

The mayor then asked the Methodist preacher. The Methodist preacher said ‘I got my board together to pray about it and when we finished one of my board members said he thought those bats were in the steeple because of their own free will and he thought it would be wrong for us to coerce them to leave so we need to wait for them to leave on their own free will.’ Then the mayor looked at the Baptist minister and said ‘what about you?’ The Baptist minister said ‘Ours are gone.’ The mayor said ‘Would you please tell your colleagues how you did it.’ The Baptist minister said ‘We got our deacons together and prayed about it. We then went up there and caught every single bat and brought them down to the altar, baptized them, they joined the church and we haven't seen them since.’

When I was growing up a man wrote this book called Body Life and I want to approach this with two passages and some comments for this study. So let's start by looking at Acts 2:37–41 which says [37] *Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”* [38] *And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”* [40] *And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”* [41] *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

Previously, we looked at missional clarity where we have a mission. The warning was we need to be careful to get the mission of the church correct because mission always effects message. There are many times the church sees some of the beneficial consequences of our message and mission and desires these so much that those things themselves become the mission but you can't do that. For instance, statistical growth is usually the result of the church being on mission, on message and in ministry but you can't make statistical growth because if you do your message will one day get adulterated for the sake of growth. There are all kinds of other dynamics that occur when the church is doing its mission and its message but we can never let what the world tells us our mission should be or we can't reinvent our mission and make some of

the blessed consequences the mission but we have to make sure they are the consequences and stay on mission.

That mission is wonderfully put together for us in that glorious Great Commission. Jesus gives us that Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 which says [18] *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

I go back to that not only for the need for us to stay on the mission so we can stay on message and in the ministry God has called us to, but also because what we are seeing in Acts 2 is the consequence of a church on mission on message and in ministry. In Acts 2 is our Lord’s church in Jerusalem. It has an embryonic existence in Acts 1 of 120 and they are likely meeting as this church where the Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus and that would be in the Upper Room. As they are meeting and praying the Spirit of God, as Jesus had promised, empowered them and they began to get on mission. They went from that room out into the temple arena. “As you are going, go!” They began to preach the Gospel to call men and women to Christ. There was the primary means of grace preaching taking place through Peter. Then there were those filtered around the crowd explaining it to them.

God visited them with the fulfillment of Joel 2 which is the New Covenant that has now come and you see the reversal of the tower of Babel. At the tower of Babel the different languages came and then there was the dispersion. Here it is reversed by giving the gift of languages at the outbreaking of the New Covenant in fulfillment of Joel 2. Now people of all kinds of nations – Partheneans, Meads etc – are hearing the Gospel in their language, being drawn together and becoming one in the Lord there in Jerusalem. Here is a church that gets established by the grace of God because the embryonic church of 120 is on mission and on message.

Now, instead of simple addition and multiplication they go beyond to geometric expansion as they go from 120 to 3,000. Later a similar thing will happen in Jerusalem and there will be 5,000 more added just counting the men. Likely, Luke is following the Hebrew method of when taking census it is just counting the men. So when it says the men it is probably not only the men but their households as well. The same goes for the 3,000 as well. This church has now had unbelievable expansion statistically and numerically.

This text is also beneficial because we’re going to find both of the sacraments at work within the church here. One has already been mentioned in Acts 2:38 and that is baptism. They would not have been baptized but Jesus has already given the formula which is in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Peter affirms the authority of Jesus to command and institute baptism that will replace circumcision so that is why Peter says in Acts 2:38, [38] *And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* Now the forgiveness of sins is not attached to baptism for it is attached to Jesus because it is Jesus who forgives us of our sins due to His atoning work.

Here we also see the echo of Abraham. God told Abraham He would give him a seed with the immediate fulfillment being Isaac but the ultimate fulfillment of the seed would be Jesus. That seed not only came by a miraculous birth by Sarah but the ultimate Seed is going to come from a miraculous conception and that will be through Mary, the virgin. God also told Abraham that in this seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. So after Peter tells them

what they must do to be baptized he then brings to their attention the promise of this New Covenant and the out pouring of the Spirit of God that is no longer found in the holy of holies but now it's affirmed through His place in the lives of every believer.

Where are these believers going to come from? God told Abraham that this promise was to 'you and your children after you.' The sign has changed to baptism but the promise had not changed for it continues to you and your children but something else is now changed. It is not just to you and your children but who is gathered around Peter? There are Jews gathered around him. It was not just to 'you and your children' but God also said 'to those who are far off.' This is code language in the Bible for Gentiles. Those who are near are the Jews and those who are far off, outside the covenant, are the Gentiles. God's covenant work had been taking place in Israel with forays to Gentiles from time to time to keep present the promise that was given to Abraham.

God doesn't have two plans – one for Israel and one for Gentiles, called the church. God has one plan and it's called the covenant of grace. It has unfolded from Adam after his sin when God gave him the promise that there would come a seed that would defeat the evil one. Then it goes from Adam to Noah and the rainbow covers the entire horizon of God's gracious promises. Then it goes from Noah to Abraham to Moses to David and all the stair steps of the covenant of grace unfolding now comes to its fruition in the New Covenant with a Mediator who doesn't need a Savior for there is one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus. Now Jesus Christ comes and He inaugurates the New Covenant which is the final fulfillment of the covenant of grace until we get into eternity with the Lord.

Christ now replaces the bloody sign of circumcision since He by His blood is our circumcision and He replaces that bloody meal of the Passover since He by His blood is our Passover Lamb. He now gives to us in place of that a bloodless sign of baptism and bloodless meal of the Lord's Supper. Just as circumcision and the Passover pointed to Him now these signs point back to what He did on the cross. So in Acts 2 we see Peter immediately telling them that they need to come to the sign of the New Covenant and in that single day all 3,000 plus I think their households as well, are baptized. I will not go over the mode of baptism which 3,000 plus being baptized in one day does bring to mind but you can certainly contact me if you are interested in my thoughts on the mode of baptism.

As that is established, what will happen in the life of this church? Let's look back at Acts 2 and see what happens. Acts 2:42–47 says *[42] And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common. [45] And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Now we get this profile of this early church at Jerusalem. We begin to see how they continually work out the Great Commission. The Great Commission was not only go and evangelize but it was also to baptize and we have already seen that but the Great Commission also said that as you make disciples you 'teach them to observe all that I have commanded you and lo I am with you always even to the end of the age.' We see that this church engages in an intentional preaching, teaching and discipling ministry of the whole counsel of God, the Word of God as they 'devoted' themselves to the Apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

Then it says to the breaking of bread. I think the ESV has the best translation of this verse for later on it will talk about the breaking of bread which is what you and I do when we get together for a meal. This literally means the breaking of *the* bread for this is looking at the Lord's Supper, with two elements – the wine and the bread – that nourish. When we partake by faith we partake of the body and the blood of the Lord. Even though those portions are seemingly insignificant, when you feast on Jesus it is an exquisite banquet – the breaking of the bread as we gather around the Lord's Table.

So as they were sharing their faith with one another there was also the fellowship. As we were starting to form small groups in our church we used to call them *koinonia* groups which is the word for fellowship in the Greek that is used here in Acts 2:42. It is reciprocal fellowship. I always extend my hand to anyone who doesn't know Jesus, as well as people who know Jesus because I want to be friends with you but fellowship is not just the extension of one hand but it's the opening of both hands whereby we receive one another into a reciprocal relationship. We are to speak the truth in love to each other.

Then it says in this passage that they were devoted to the prayers. Why would you be devoted to the prayers? It is because the One you pray to is the One who has all authority which we see Him say in the Great Commission. Everything that would concern me or cause me anxiety or anything that is upon my heart I am to bring to the throne of grace through Jesus Christ who pleads for me in light of His glorious sacrifice on our behalf. So we are seeing this glorious profile of this church unfolding here in Acts 2.

Then we see how awe came upon every soul as many wonders and signs were being done. In other words, you couldn't explain that church simply by Peter's leadership or even later James' leadership as he takes over that church. There is something supernatural going on here and doesn't that harken back to the Great Commission? Jesus says 'I am with you always.' The Holy Spirit is with them. It didn't mean they acted irresponsibly but on the contrary, they acted responsibly. The presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's grace didn't cause them to be careless or a life that was thoughtless. On the contrary, they had this glorious lifestyle where they were intentionally engaging in the Word of God, loving each other, the Lord's Supper and the proclamation of the Gospel and the Lord was in their midst as things were happening there that could not be explained.

Then he goes on to say in Acts 2:44–45, [44] *And all who believed were together and had all things in common.* [45] *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* This doesn't mean they set up commune because later on in the text we're going to find out that private property continued but their mentality was that they were together. Their mentality was that what is mine is yours and what's yours you need to deal with but their intention was to minister to one another by allowing whatever they had to be available to others to care for someone else. It wasn't just what they could give but they would do it even if they had to sacrificially sell something to help. They were always ready to give to one another because they were together in the vibrant, robust community of faith.

In the mid 1970s a reformed evangelic church senate meet at the General Assembly when I pastored a small church I heard Dr. Barker's seminar on how to start small groups. He referred to this passage in Acts 2 when he was talking about small groups. He referred to the 3,000 who were added and those being added day by day. This church in a short amount of time could have likely been 14,000 to 18,000 in number and according to this text they meet house to house. After all my travels to that area I have never seen among the ruins a house that could handle

3,000 much less a house that could handle 16,000. The church wasn't going house to house but they were putting the pattern of Jesus' ministry into effect.

They would gather in the portico of Solomon's temple for worship and there was room for thousands there but then they were breaking down into small groups for discipleship, house to house. That is what we're trying to do here in our various ministries as ministries like our congregation communities, young business leaders, youth group and women's ministry break down into small groups. It is absolutely important that Briarwood meets in small groups and it needs to keep multiplying and mobilizing because that is what the early church was doing as they followed the pattern Jesus gave.

That is a healthy church where you gather for the large group worship and then you break into the small group for discipleship. Now the large group pulls the trigger on discipleship and the small groups can also do some small 'w' worship but the large group worship is the coming together to praise God with one heart, one mind, one voice and one soul. As you then break into small groups you can go into a whole other level of studying the Bible and intimate fellowship. It's amazing what gets initiated in a greeting time that come to fruition but that's not really where you get to in depth fellowship, is it? That happens when you get to sit around and have 'table' fellowship so is it any surprise that it says they were 'breaking bread house to house'? They were having their meals together, doing this with gladness and sincerity of heart. Jesus had the multitude, the 70, the 12 and the 3 that show all these small group possibilities that are taking place as we see here in this church that shows a healthy church in discipleship.

Then we get to the last part of this text and see that they weren't becoming ingrown but outgrown because they would intentionally reach out. By the way, that is one of the great challenges for a small group because you get comfortable with that small group and have a hard time letting others in. Small groups have a tendency to kind of close together but we want to be evangelistic so groups can open up 3 or 4 nights where they do evangelism intentionally. Then you can start praying for those you are going to reach with the Gospel who will join the group eventually. When you have worship, evangelism, discipleship and obeying the Great Commission, the result is the Lord adding to the number day by day, those who are being saved.

Here in Acts 2 we have the picture of a healthy church. In Embers to a Flame we call this a W.E.L.L. church – it is a church that Worships, Evangelizes, Loves and Learns. Would this Acts 2 church that I just profiled for you in this study be a W.E.L.L. church? The answer is yes but it is not a W.E.L.L. church because it's 3,000 for there are churches who meet as their large group in houses so it's not the size of the church that determines whether it's W.E.L.L. or not but it's the spiritual vitality, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the preeminence of Christ, the glory of the Father, the work of the Spirit of God causing Christ to be exalted, the Father to be glorified and in that context the church that is on mission, on message and in ministry is a W.E.L.L. church.

Was the Acts 2 a W.E.L.L. church? W – worship with authenticity, they gathered on the temple grounds to praise God. E – evangelize with intentionality, for the Lord is adding to their number day by day those who are being saved. L – love with purpose, they are selling their possessions and sacrificially giving to one another and opening up their homes to one another. L- learning with devotion, they are devoting themselves to the Apostles' teaching.

I remember a bumper sticker that said 'do random acts of kindness' and I think I know what they are getting at but Christians don't do random acts. We do intentional acts to love each other. It is no secret what God can do. I also love the song that says 'when Jesus looked beyond my faults and saw my needs' for that's what it means to love each other. We look beyond our

faults which are many but we see each other's needs and we move into each other's lives and we can always excel still more in the body of Christ.

I am truly amazed at how much I see this church sacrificially love. We had just seen the church reach the sacrificial goal for world missions and we were on the verge of the hallelujah goal and someone found the giving card that had been forgotten to be put in which put us over that goal. I thank God for what that represents in your life and the fruit that comes from that. Pray for that mission's committee as they make decisions in our stewardship in all of this. I could go as I see this being done in ministry after ministry but we could ask God to help us listen a little closer to look beyond faults, see needs and respond to where people have a great need.

I will pick up on the spiritual gift part in the body of believers from Ephesians 4, I Peter 4, I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 in our next study because we all have one. I know people are wondering how they find out what it is and how to use it and we'll get to that at another time. Stop and think about a robust, vibrant community that is W.E.L.L. This community loves to worship. I am asking God to open up your heart and this congregation that we would love simple, Christ exalting worship where our delight is in hearing the Word of God in our confession, singing the Word of God with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and even with the inadequacies of your senior pastor to hear the Word of God preached because the Spirit of God will use the preaching of God in your hearts.

God, make us a people who don't go to worship to watch it on a platform but go to worship to worship. Then God would You open our mouths and our hearts that we would not only live the Gospel as we build bridges but share the Gospel, the Good News of saving faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus loves to save sinners.

I want to share this illustration. I man called me one time that pre-dates my conversion and I will call him Larry. I remember where we were and how we used to live, how we cross pollinated with each other. One day after I had become a Christian I saw him out and about and as he saw me he turned around to come over to see me. I was in my car going one way and he was in his car going the other way. We started talking with each other out our windows and he began by giving me a greeting in the basic vocabulary that I would have been using three months earlier. Now I wasn't responding the same way and then he saw a Bible on my car's dashboard.

There are signal lights in Charlotte that are so long that I can get a full chapter read in my Bible sitting at that light. So when I became a new Christian I would start bringing it with me. Another reason I would put it on my dashboard is because it would open up conversation and so it did with this friend from my past. When Larry saw it he said with interesting vocabulary 'What are you doing with that Bible in your car?' I had been praying for God to open a door and here it was. I said to him, 'Larry I'm so glad you asked because I have recently become a Christian' and I tried to get out all this stuff I wanted to tell him but I noticed I was rolling backwards in my car but I really wasn't rolling backwards for he was rolling away. He was trying to get away from me as I am hanging out the door still trying to tell him. He then yelled back at me 'Hey that's great, I'm glad to hear you got some religion. I'll see you later.' So he pulled off.

There is this famous fish camp in Charlotte, North Carolina that my wife and I were eating at and we hadn't been married very long. As we were eating this lady came up behind me, put her arms around me and said 'Harry, I love you.' I'm thinking 'Oh no! this is a blast from the not too distant past.' My wife is there next to me and I turned around only to find out that it was Larry's mother. She said to me 'Larry, became a Christian.' I said 'He what?' I had told my wife, Cindy what had happened recently between me and Larry and wondered what kind

of impression I made on him. My wife didn't think I did too well and I said to his mother 'I have recently become a Christian and I just talked with him to tell him not too long ago.'

Larry's mom said to me 'Yes, Larry came home telling all of us that you had become a Christian. I said 'So he came home to tell you this and now he's a Christian?' She said 'Yes!' I looked at Cindy and said 'Was it something I said?' Larry's mom said 'No, he said that you didn't make a whole lot of sense but anything that would change someone like you and that you are carrying a Bible in your car, he wanted to go find out about it. So he and his wife went to church the next Sunday and somebody made it clear for him and the Holy Spirit led him to saving faith in Christ.'

This is so much fun, just take a Bible and start talking to people at stoplights. Just share the Gospel with people. Don't be silent. Speak. We should have a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship. So not only do you have a worshipping church but an intentionally evangelizing church, a sacrificial loving church and a church that is learning. They are eating the Word of God every single day. Praise His Name! We want healthy churches. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the privilege to be in Your Word. Thank You for the vibrancy You bring to Your church so God make us Gospel healthy, Spirit-filled healthy and bring the vitality of the Gospel of the Kingdom into our lives. Father, start with us, in Jesus' Name, Amen.