

## Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

### Session 3

#### Unified

#### Acts 2:41-47

**Context:** Acts 2:41-47

**Memory Verse:** Acts 2:46

**Main Idea:** The impact of the gospel is seen in the unity found among Jesus' followers.

#### FIRST THOUGHTS

Division within a group can be deadly to its well-being, whether the group is a family, a corporation, a nation, or a church. Division shouldn't be confused with disagreement. Disagreements happen all the time in groups, especially in groups that value freedom and promote the respectful exchange of ideas. Of course, major disagreements that aren't handled properly can contribute to division. But when division occurs, the group—like a body attacked by cancer cells—has come to be at war with itself.

*(In PSG, p. 32) How would you explain the difference between a division and a disagreement?*

Abraham Lincoln was chosen by the delegates of the Illinois Republican state convention as their candidate for the United States Senate on June 16, 1858. The nation at the time was torn between slave and free states; whatever position candidates took regarding the issue of slavery was controversial. Upon his selection, Lincoln delivered his famous "House Divided" speech to the convention delegates. In the speech he referred to the well-known saying of Jesus that a house divided against itself cannot stand (see Mark 3:25). He was warning that the nation would not endure in a divided condition.

Lincoln lost that Senate race, but he went on to be elected two years later not as a senator but as president of the United States. The rest is history. The hallmark of Lincoln's presidency, and indeed his life, was an unflagging passion to preserve the nation's union that was based on the ideals of freedom and self-government.

Long before the United States grappled with the idea of national unity, the early church displayed an even greater form of unity—the unity of the Spirit. Luke described in Acts 2:41-47 what this unity looked like in the life and actions of the first believers. As the early church in Jerusalem multiplied in numbers, the believers took steps to strengthen their unity. We can learn much from their actions.

#### UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

##### Acts 2:41-47

The disciples waited in Jerusalem and were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. They were enabled to speak in languages they had not previously known, and the resident Jews and visitors in Jerusalem heard them speaking in their native languages. Some in the audience wondered what this meant and wanted to learn more. Others dismissed the speakers, accusing them of being intoxicated.

Peter addressed the crowd and explained the phenomenon as a supernatural enablement of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:14-39 records a portion of Peter's powerful sermon explaining that Jesus was the Christ who died on the cross and was raised to life according to God's will. Following the sermon, some of the hearers asked what must they do to be saved. Peter urged them to repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and receive the Holy Spirit.

The approximately 3,000 people who believed joined the 120 disciples and became the first church. These newly baptized believers did not have a fully developed understanding of what the church was but knew they were now a part of a new family. This week's session will examine some of the characteristics of the early church community that continue to define the activity of the church today.

#### EXPLORE THE TEXT

##### DEVOTED (Acts 2:41-42)

*<sup>41</sup> So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them. <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.*

#### **VERSE 41**

We do not know how many people heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Scholars estimate that the relatively small population of Jerusalem could swell to as many as 200,000 during festivals. Luke recorded that approximately 3,000 people believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and were baptized following Peter's sermon.

John the Baptist had used baptism as a sign of repentance (Luke 3:3), but the baptisms at Pentecost were the first to symbolize identification with Christ. Christian baptism, as Paul would later explain to the church at Rome, symbolized the believer's participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). Is water baptism necessary for salvation? No. We are saved by grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). While baptism is not necessary for salvation, it was expected that the early believers would submit to baptism by immersion as a symbol of their trust in Christ. Baptism was an important part of the Great Commission Jesus gave to His disciples (Matt. 28:19). New believers were instructed to submit to baptism in obedience to Jesus Christ and as a testimony of their faith.

#### **VERSE 42**

This verse summarizes the activities of the believers following Pentecost. The verb translated *devoted* denotes perseverance and commitment. The same verb was used to describe the commitment of the 120 to prayer while waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:14). They devoted themselves to four activities that formed the basis of church life. The emphasis is on the actions of the community rather than individual pursuits. The church was united, and they shared a passion and commitment to these four activities.

First, they were devoted *to the apostles' teaching*. The apostles consisted of the original Eleven plus Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (1:26). The apostles had firsthand information about the life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The converts at Pentecost had a hunger to learn about their Savior and how His mission was a part of the larger biblical revelation. They wanted to know everything about His life and His instructions for living. A passion for the study and application of God's Word should be a unifying force among Christians today. The study, application, and proclamation of God's Word must always be at the center of church life.

Second, the early church members devoted themselves *to the fellowship*. This is the only use of the word *fellowship* in the Luke's Gospel and Acts. The Greek word (*koinonia*) refers to holding things in common. Today we often use the word to describe occasions when Christians meet to eat or socialize. The word has a more comprehensive and deeper meaning. Fellowship is based on our shared relationship with Christ and therefore with one another. Our love for God should translate into love for one another. In a day when we often divide over matters of style and personal preference, we should let the examples of the first Christians teach us how to celebrate a fellowship with Christ and with one another.

Third, they regularly broke *bread* together. This may be an extension of the term *fellowship*. Meals were an important part of family life and socialization in Israel's history as well as secular culture. Paul described a practice by the early church that included a shared meal followed by observance of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20-34). The *breaking of bread* from house to house may have included both of these elements.

Fourth, believers spent time together in prayer. Some expositors have suggested that the plural *prayers* may refer to the set times for prayer at the temple in Jerusalem. Jewish Christians did continue to frequent the temple after salvation (Acts 2:46; 3:1). The reference more likely refers to the regular practice of spending time in prayer together when worshiping in one another's homes. Churches today would be wise to see the relationship between regular prayer and unity in the early church.

*In what ways do you participate in instruction in biblical truth, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer in your church? How do these activities promote unity in your church?*

#### **TOGETHER (Acts 2:43-47a)**

*<sup>43</sup> Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude, <sup>47a</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people.*

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### VERSE 43

The apostles performed numerous miracles that incited fear and awe in the people of Jerusalem. God used miraculous acts to authenticate the preaching of the apostles, just as miracles authenticated the preaching of Jesus in His public ministry (see Matt. 9:6). The miracles impacted believers and unbelievers. Believers had their faith strengthened, and unbelievers were forced to seriously consider the claims of the gospel. Numerous miracles accompanied the days of the apostles and provided a divine witness to validate the foundation of the church.

### VERSES 44-45

Thousands had responded with belief in Christ, but they remained a minority in Jerusalem. Violent persecution had not yet occurred, but the new community of believers experienced social and economic pressure from unbelievers in the Jewish community. Judaism was far more than a set of religious beliefs; it affected every aspect of a Jewish person's life, creating opportunities for those who conformed and obstacles for those who did not. Many in Judaism viewed believers in Christ as heretics, and the price these early Christians paid was social and economic isolation.

Widows who converted to Christ might be cut off from the economic assistance provided by their synagogues. The church needed to respond to take care of these widows deprived of their support (see Acts 6). Believing workers possibly lost their employment, and merchants found previous customers of their goods suddenly unwilling to buy from them. These and other economic pressures led to a serious problem of poverty in the early church.

Believers found ways to meet one another's needs. Those who had property *sold* it and *distributed* the funds *as anyone had a need*. These believers were not coerced to sell their property but did so voluntarily. They were motivated by love for their fellow believers.

In the account of the sharing of goods by the members of the early church, Luke emphasized that their unity was more than theological. They genuinely shared their lives with one another. When someone was in need, the church responded. The needs might be spiritual, emotional, or physical. They treated one another as loving family members.

### VERSES 46-47a

Some Christians today choose not to gather with fellow Christians even once each week. The early church members, however, chose to meet *every day* for worship, fellowship, and prayer. Large groups would meet in the *temple* courts. The temple courts were a familiar place of socialization and a place where teachers met with their disciples to instruct them. Those who believed in Christ continued to use the temple courts as a meeting place. The apostles could interpret the imagery of the Old Testament sacrificial system as fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The temple was not the only place where the believers regularly met. Smaller groups met *from house to house* where they enjoyed meals and fellowship. These house churches provided meeting places before the construction of the first church buildings. The description of the house meetings in Acts provides a glimpse of the deep love and new relationships formed by those followers of Christ. The early church members wanted to be together to learn, pray, fellowship, and worship with those of like mind.

Luke added that their joyful and humble attitudes found favor with all the people. Even those who did not believe in Christ admired the mutual love and support demonstrated in the new Christian community. The attractiveness of the love demonstrated in the early church reminds us of Jesus' statement that people would recognize His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35).

The love and unity seen in the early church is regrettably not found in many churches today. Legitimate reasons for the lack of unity may exist, such as disagreement over essential doctrine. The causes of many church divisions today, however, are rooted in pride and selfishness. The modern church can learn much from the unity and mutual care exhibited by the first believers in Jerusalem.

*What can you and your fellow church members do to learn about and respond to the needs of people in your church family? What is your church's reputation for unity in your community?*

### GROWING (Acts 2:47b)

*<sup>47b</sup> And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.*

### VERSE 47b

Luke concluded his summary of the activities and progress of the early church in the sentence that concludes the last half of verse 47. He attributed the success of evangelistic efforts to *the Lord*. The disciples had followed Jesus' command to wait in Jerusalem until

they received the power of the Holy Spirit. The results were daily additions to the church made possible by divine enablement. There are at least two important truths implied in this final sentence of chapter 2.

First, there is an emphasis on the sovereignty of God in evangelism. Believers are commanded to witness, and the lost must hear the gospel before salvation can occur (see Rom. 10:14). The conviction of sin and the regeneration of a lost person, however, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Salvation does not occur when we successfully convince someone of biblical truths. Human witnesses do not save the lost as a result of successful argumentation. Witnesses for Christ are sowers. We have the seed of God's Word in the gospel. We are to sow the seed by declaring the truths of the gospel to the lost and urging them to believe. God alone makes the seed grow (see 1 Cor. 3:6). If your church is growing through evangelism, it is the Lord who is ultimately responsible for those additions.

The fact that the Lord is responsible for salvation is liberating for the Christian witness. We may feel pressure when we witness. We may feel inadequate to answer the questions of the lost. We may feel that we lack the eloquence or ability to convince another of the truth of the gospel. All pressure is relieved when we remember that our job is simply to clearly share the gospel with the lost and leave the results to God. We do not need theological degrees or sophistication in argumentation to be successful witnesses. All we require is the courage to trust God and a basic knowledge of how to present the simple truths of the gospel.

The second truth in the final sentence of chapter 2 is the observation that people were being saved *every day*. This suggests that those recently saved were sharing their faith and leading others to Christ in their daily lives. Over 3,000 believed following the sermon by Peter, but the additions continued through the personal witness of those who believed. Evangelism is not just for the church leaders but also for every believer. We are saved to tell others the gospel. We can envision these early believers encountering family and friends in the temple courts and sharing their faith in Christ with them. We can picture believers inviting neighbors and friends to join them at their home for food and Bible study. Believers were excited to share their faith in Christ in the marketplace where people came to shop and sell.

Evangelism in the early church didn't happen just one day of the week. Believers shared Christ daily, wherever they went. They did not depend on the church leaders to do the work of evangelism. Each church member took responsibility to grow his or her church by sharing the gospel. The early church provides an important example for evangelism today. Statistically, people are less likely today to attend special meetings and church services. We must go out to find the lost. Lifestyle evangelism is all about sharing the gospel in the context of daily life. We can find opportunities to share our faith at work, school, and places of recreation. Our meetings can be intentional when we invite people to meet us for a meal or social activity. Our meetings can be providential as when Jesus met the woman at the well (John 4). Sunday worship should be the place where we bring those who have positively responded to the gospel during the week.

We may think that today's culture is less receptive to the gospel. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that some in our culture today are hostile toward the gospel. But we should take comfort in knowing the early church was born in a similar environment. The Holy Spirit is as effective today as He was in the early days of the church. Share the gospel and see how He is still calling the lost to salvation today.

*What are some excuses you have used to avoid sharing the gospel with lost people you know?*

## **KEY DOCTRINE**

### *The Church*

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

## **BIBLE SKILL**

*Do a concept study of the Greek term koinonia, rendered "fellowship" in Acts 2:42, by considering other appearances of the term in the New Testament. (English words may differ in translations.)*

Find and read the following verses: 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16 (sharing); 2 Corinthians 6:14 (partnership); 9:13 (sharing); Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5 (partnership); 2:1; 3:10; Hebrews 13:16 (to share); 1 John 1:3,6,7. How does each verse help you better understand the nature of the relationship of *koinonia* among believers?

## **BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR**

For additional context, read "Baptismal Practices in the Early Church," an archive *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2016 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.