

What is 'Church'? – Acts 2:42-47

I. INTRODUCTION

A. A/V Complexity

1. For those my age & older, think back to when you were 7.
 - a. Did you have a TV? Was it black & white or color?
 - b. We got our first color set in 1968 when I was 13.
 2. How many channels were there back then?
 - a. 12; Channels 2-13
 - b. But of course, there were *broadcasts* on only *half* of those.
 3. When you wanted to change channels, what was the process? You got up, walked to the set & turned the knob; clunk, clunk. (BTW – that's why today we still refer to “*turning on*” the TV.
 4. And what was the sound like? It came from a small mono speaker inside the set.
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5. Oh how things have changed!
 6. Today, we face a bewildering array of Audio/Visual choices.
 - a. Cable & Satellite TV carry *hundreds* of channels.
 - b. With *TIVO*, you can record a single show, *or* an entire *kind* of program, *or* a *whole season* of one show. And you can record it in low, medium, or high quality.
 - c. Do you want to watch a regular tube TV or an HD 16:9 widescreen? Plasma or LCD?
 - d. Do you want to listen to that in stereo or Surround Sound.
 - 1) If surround, 5.1 or 7.1?
 - 2) And do you want to use DTS or Dolby?
 - 3) If Dolby; A, B, C, Digital, Digital EX, Pro-Logic, Pro-Logic II, Pro-Logic Iix, or TrueHD?
 - e. On your movies, do you want regular DVD, HD DVD or BluRay?
 7. And we haven't even got to the half dozen *remotes* yet!

B. Complexity

1. As a 7 year old watching B&W cartoons on a Saturday morning while eating a bowl of cornflakes, we never could have imagined the *complexity* of today's media choices.
2. Researches have identified the tendency in society for things to move from simplicity to complexity.
 - a. Over time, things that are worth continuing get added to.
 - b. Innovation & modification alters the original, making it more complex.
 - c. It gets adapted to other uses, adding even *more* complexity.
3. Renewal movements & revolutions are often fueled by a desire to *return* to simpler times.
4. But what happens is that *over* time, even the reforms get added back into the mix, adding *a whole new* layer of complexity.

C. Church History

1. That's certainly true in the history of the Church.

2. Jesus intended His Church to be pretty simple.
 - a. But the centuries have seen it develop into a complex, massive conglomeration of all kinds of stuff.
 - b. Jesus foretold this in the parable of the mustard seed.
 - 1) A mustard plant is a small bush.
 - 2) But Jesus told of a mustard seed that grew into a **huge tree** that became the home of all kinds of birds, which in are a symbol of evil.
 - 3) The monstrous mustard tree spoke of something that had grown into what it was **never meant to be**, which becomes the home of evil – an apt picture of the Visible Church.
3. There have been lots of reform movements over the centuries.
 - a. Believers have realized the Church had departed from its divine mission & sought to purify it,
 - b. To return it to its simple & humble beginnings.
 - c. They were often shaped by a desire to return to what we see here in Acts 2.
4. If these reform movements weren't persecuted to extinction, they were so successful, they ended up suffering the **fate of success** = they became **new** complex structures that just got added on to the rest.
5. Most Christian denominations began as reform movements that wanted to get back to a simpler form of Church. Today, their just one more stripe in the corduroy fabric we call the Church.

D. Barna

1. George Barna is a well-known pollster & researcher of social trends.
2. As a committed Christian, he **specializes** in analyzing religious beliefs & how the Church is doing.
3. His most recent book is titled, *Revolution*.
 - a. Its message is that the average American church has become more of a **hindrance** to people's spiritual development than an **aid to** it.
 - b. Baran's conclusion is that if people want to have an authentic, growing encounter with God, they'll need to do so **outside** a local church.
 - c. He describes, & really, **calls for**, a revolution, a new reformation, in how we see spiritual development take place.
 - d. Though he doesn't say it outright, you're left with the impression Barna thinks the local church is done, that it's a dinosaur best left in the tar pit.
4. His conclusions come from his annual review of religious beliefs which he's been doing for several years now.
 - a. Each year, the results get worse in terms of people holding a Biblical worldview.
 - b. While the numbers of those who claim to be born-again grows ever so slightly, the particulars of **what they believe** indicates they know little to nothing of the Bible.
 - c. Barna concludes from this that the local church has **failed** in its call to make disciples,
 - d. So it's best to move on to a new way of **being the community of Christ**.
5. When I read this, I **could not believe** the statistics he quotes were indicative of

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- a. That's why we made up that poll many of you took a few months ago.
- b. I **had to know** if his stats were an accurate reflection of our fellowship. Praise God, not even close!
- c. Whereas, Barna's research showed that **nationally**, only **9%** of those calling themselves born-again Christians have a Biblical worldview, our results showed nearly **99%** do!
 - 1) In other words, nationally, line up 10 Christians and **only 1 of them** will believe what the Bible says on several essential subjects.
 - 2) At CCO, line up a hundred of us, and all but one will!
 - 3) Now – according to the margin of error in such research, I suspect that that 1 out of a hundred probably **read the question wrong**.
6. After our poll, I decided that instead of Barna's suggestion to scrap the local church, what he needs to do is study churches like this & find out what we're doing **right**, then suggesting **that** as the solution to the problems that are ailing the wider Church.
7. What's distressing to many of us is that years ago we tried to warn Barna & the church leaders who were listening to him about where they were headed.
 - a. You see, Barna wrote some books back then that **praised & promoted** the church growth methods that have brought us to where we are today.
 - b. In seeking to have bigger ministries by attracting the unchurched, there was a conscious decision to back away from Bible teaching & terminology.
 - c. Preaching was exchanged for programs.
 - d. It worked to gather a crowd – but as Barna has now realized, it didn't make them into disciples.

II. TEXT

A. **Set the Scene**

1. It's the Day of Pentecost & 3,000 have responded to Peter's call to faith in Christ.
2. As we saw last week, the Apostles immediately began discipling them.
3. Their idea of follow-up was to do what Jesus had done with them; hang out together & share His life.
4. That's what we see them doing here. V. 42 says they focused on 4 things . . .

B. **V. 42**

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

1. These weren't things those first Christians "**just kind of**" casually fell into. Luke says they "**continued steadfastly**" in them.
 - a. This is a strong word speaking of a devotion that was so loyal & eager **nothing** could weaken it.
 - b. It's Sam's devotion to Frodo as they climbed Mt. Doom.
 - c. It's Joshua's devotion to Moses and Jonathan's devotion to David.
2. As soon as these people became converts, they adopted 4 new **habits**; 4 things that embodied what the apostles had come to understand was **the best way** for them to perform their mission of **making disciples**. = Matthew 28:19.

3. Don't lose sight of the goal of being a disciple as we look at these 4 things.
 4. All of them were aimed at one thing – to help these new believers grow to become just like Jesus.
 5. The Apostles *modeled* these things because they're what they'd learned from their time with Jesus.
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1- They were devoted to the apostles' doctrine

1. This was the apostles' teaching on the life, work, & message of Jesus.
2. And remember, there wasn't a NT yet – they would write it, later.
 - a. All they had were the Jewish scriptures and their personal experience of Jesus.
 - b. But remember now – these new converts to Christ had something we don't – a well developed memory.
 - c. Learning was done by memorization, and all of the great stories, legends, myths, & histories were something people passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.
 - d. When children learned something, it was word for word from the memory of their elders.
 - e. They then passed it on to the next generation of children when they became the elders.
 - f. In this way, things were passed on virtually unchanged for many generations.
3. Coming from this background, the apostles quickly developed a standard set of teachings they shared with the growing church about the life, mission, and words of Christ.
4. The new converts were eager to learn all they could.
5. Specially the one's who lived far away and had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost and would soon be returning to their native homes.
6. They wanted to learn all they could as quickly as they could because they had no idea when they would again have an opportunity to be with other believers.

2 – They were devoted to the fellowship

1. Most of our Bibles leave out the definite article 'the' in the original. They shouldn't because it alters the meaning.
 2. 'Fellowship' is the Greek word *koinonia*; it speaks of a *mutual sharing* that includes *all of life*.
 - a. Koinonia means community, participation, even intimacy.
 - b. Where there's koinonia, the *concern for others* outweighs the concerns of self.
 3. But Luke doesn't mean that these first believers just liked hanging out together.
 4. They were devoted to **THE** fellowship, not fellowship.
 - a. In other words, they were devoted to one another *as a collective whole*, as a *new community*,
 - b. Not to some general ideal of getting along.
 5. These first believers were all Jews.
 - a. They didn't in any way think they were now some kind of new religion.
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- b. They believed they were even *more Jewish* than before.
 - c. They thought that because they'd come to the realization Jesus was the Messiah Who's coming had brought about a *fulfillment* of so much Judaism had looked *forward* to.
 - d. At this point, they didn't see themselves as "Christians." That was a label that wouldn't even be applied to them until much later.
 - e. They were a new sect within Judaism, like the Pharisees, Sadducees, & Essenes.
6. This shared identity of being a *unique community* within the wider nation of Israel was something they embraced with celebration & joy.
 7. As we read on in Acts we find that it didn't take long before a distinctive lifestyle came to mark the followers of Jesus and they became readily identifiable by others.

3- They were devoted to the breaking of bread

1. If Luke simply meant *eating*, he would not have again used the definite article.
2. He's describing something specific here; something those first believers were devoted to that *nourished their growth in grace*.
3. Accounts from this time give us a picture of what happened when the believers gathered.
 - a. We're told they'd meet before dawn in various homes & public places for morning prayers, then head off to work.
 - b. In the evening, they again gathered in each other's homes where they'd begin by singing hymns of praise.
 - c. Then they shared with one about what they were learning from the apostles & how it was affecting their lives.
 - d. After that, they ate a common meal from what each brought. This meal was called "the Agape, the feast of love."
 - e. The meal concluded with *communion*. They'd take a piece of bread & a cup of wine, & as Jesus had instructed, they remembered what He'd accomplished through the Cross.
4. This daily return to the cross through communion is one of the things that kept their passion for Jesus burning so bright.

4- They were devoted to the prayers

1. Prayer was an important part of Jewish religious life.
2. It was understood that the godly man or woman was devoted to pray.
3. In Jerusalem at the temple, the priests had set specific times when the people were to pray & had developed specific patterns to be used in prayer.
4. The problem is, then as now, prayer was a mostly neglected part of life & religion.
5. But these first followers of Jesus became passionately renewed in their commitment the practices they saw as pleasing to God – prayer being one of the most important.

C. V. 43

Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

1. As the believers devoted themselves to these 4 things, an even deeper work of the Holy Spirit began.
2. A profound awareness of the presence & power of God came over them, and moved them to such carefulness about how they lived that God's power was released through the apostles.
3. AS in Jesus' ministry, the miracles affirmed they were sent by God.

D. V. 44-45

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

1. This seems straight-forward enough: They took care of one another.
2. But it's not that simple. Look at the first part of v. 44 -

Now all who believed were together . . .

- a. In Greek, the words are awkward; it really bad grammar which is totally unlike Luke.
 - b. The Gospel & Acts which he wrote are considered by scholars as some of the most eloquent Greek from the ancient world.
 - c. He butchers the grammar here because it's the only way he can express what he wants to say.
 - d. And that was this – The believers came together to forge a totally unique community that was distinct from the rest of Jewish social life.
3. It would be some time before they became the object of widespread hostility & persecution.
 - a. In V. 47. Luke says that at this time, they enjoyed the *favor* of the people.
 - b. They were well-liked even by those who weren't part of their group.
 4. His point here is that they were already a definite, distinct group, a new sect of Judaism.
 5. And they took personal responsibility for one another.
 6. In a voluntary display of love, those with means provided for those with needs.
 7. For the first time in history, *humanity's ideal of brotherhood* was being consistently lived out among the followers of Jesus.

E. Vs. 46-47

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

1. Here's further insight into how they lived out their 4 new habits.
2. The only place large enough to accommodate them all was the outer court of the temple.
3. Later we read they met at the southern side of the court in a place called Solomon's Colonnade.
4. There they gathered and listened to the Apostles teach on the life & work of Christ.
5. Then they'd meet in one another's homes for prayer, fellowship, ministry, taking care of one another, & the Agape.

6. This simple pattern produced a vibrancy of faith in those first believers that turned the world upside down.
7. A day didn't go by that more weren't led to faith & began the journey of faith in Jesus.
8. But I want to ask you to note something here in v. 47 –
9. Luke says that the new converts were *added by God to the Church*.
10. He means *this new community* of people who've found a new identity through their union with Christ, a union that's brought them into a tight, intimate community with one another.
11. In those first days, the idea that one could be a lone, isolated, single, solitary follower of Jesus wasn't anywhere on the horizon.
12. As it says here – to be saved MEANT entrance into the *community* of the saved.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *What To Do*

1. And what did that community do? 4 things!
2. They were devoted to the apostles' doctrine, the fellowship, communion, prayer.
3. What made that church great is what will make *any* church great.
4. Today we have an even better witness of the Apostles' doctrine than those first believers because we have the NT.
5. Here's where it has to begin for us; as it did for them – with God's Word!
6. Then we must be devoted to one another as brothers & sisters in Christ.
7. That devotion has to find practical expression by really sharing our lives, by getting into one another's homes & eating together, doing things together, using our individual spiritual gifts to serve one another.
8. Then, we need to regularly come to the Lord's table & remember what He did for us at the cross.
9. Communion is like the breath of God that fans into flame the dimming embers of our love.
10. Finally, we need to be devoted to prayer as a lifestyle – as something we walk in.
 - a. If all of life could be prayer, just walking in the conscious presence of Jesus!
 - b. How different things would be if every word, every breath was unto Christ!

B. *CCO*

1. Over the years people have come from churches that are into big programs & productions & they want to know when we're going to do them. That's just not our thing.
2. We occasionally stage an outreach or event as a way to bless the community.
3. But our real desire is to stay focused on these 4 things.
4. So we gather here to worship & study the Word of God.
5. Then we encourage people to meet in small groups, to open their homes & lives to one another, to pray for & minister to one another.

6. While we come to the Lord's table once a month here, we encourage you to partake of it *often* in small groups, families, roommates.
7. Because we're doing these 4 simple things, God is adding to His church.
8. And who's getting the glory? He is – not some slick church-growth program.