

A Call to Deepening Fellowship

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[0 : 00] I'm from Oostberg Christian Reformed Church. I'm always touched by your gifts of music here.! A lot of giftedness in this congregation I'm thankful for.

! I'm going to invite you to turn to Acts chapter 2 this morning. Acts chapter 2 beginning at verse 41. It may seem, according to the divisions in your Bibles, like a weird place to start.

And hopefully I can make some sense of why we're starting with verse 41 as we go along. I should tell you that over the last several years I've grown increasingly interested in and passionate about what the church is.

What is the church? I think before really giving this some serious thought and attention, I had a woefully inadequate theology or vision of what we're doing here.

And so coming to understand Christ's purposes in his church has really helped me to increase my love for this, for what we're doing now.

[1 : 13] But when I say this, I don't just mean this hour. I mean this. You as an organism. Us as an organism. Christ's church. And I don't think I can get all my thoughts out in 20 or 30 minutes if you'll let me go that long this morning.

But hopefully this sparks some thoughtfulness in this congregation as to what it is we are. And what it is we're called to be.

And maybe we'll start by saying, just as kind of an introduction to the book of Acts, it's my contention, my thesis about the purpose that Luke writes the book of Acts.

Luke's goal is to show that Christ has not left. He's left in a physical sense. He's ascended to heaven in chapter 1 of Acts.

But Luke is showing he's not gone and away from us. And we're just like, oh, man, I guess for the next couple thousand years we just figure it out, sit around, wait. That is not the purpose.

[2 : 18] Luke is saying, yes, Christ has physically ascended to heaven. But look. Look what he's doing. And Luke lays out in the next 20-some chapters of the book of Acts the fact that Christ is still leading his church.

And the ministry of Christ continues through his church. And so we're in that. When we turn to Acts chapter 2, we're discovering, huh, Christ is still leading us.

And the ministry of Christ is ongoing. We're participating in that same ministry that Christ constituted when he came to earth. We are part of that. And so just by way of introduction, we've already got some thoughts in our head about some richness of what this is, the organism of the church, us as a people.

We are continuing the ministry of Christ. And so with that ringing about in our heads, let me read for you Acts chapter 2, 41 through 47. First, let's pause and pray for the Spirit's leader.

Let's pray for the Lord who has been here today. Almighty, eternal, and merciful God, whose word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path, open and illuminate our minds that we may purely and perfectly understand your word, and that our lives may be transformed to what we have rightly understood in your word, so that nothing may be displeasing to your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[3 : 44] Amen. Acts chapter 2, 41 through 47. So those who received Peter's, his word, were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship and 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 they 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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Many of you may know, and I don't know everybody's background or entrance into this church, but you're worshiping here at Covenant CRC.

[5 : 09] And that little acronym CRC, Christian Reformed Church, expresses that this church is part of a historic Dutch Reformed church.

And so you have a lot of people come fill your pulpits that start with van or end with sma. And we've done this dance before about the rich Dutch history. And as the CRC persists longer and longer in the United States, we've accommodated and grabbed some other people.

Praise the Lord. His church is universal. It's not just Dutch, as much as we like to think so sometimes. And so you have a pastor here this morning whose last name is Flipsy.

And you might say, well, what in the world? And so I have to confess this morning that the name Flipsy is French. And I say that through clenched teeth.

I know many of us have whatever harbored whatever will towards the French. But my last name is French. Now, it's been the family story. And I haven't been able to find this in any historic documents or anything.

[6 : 12] But the family story is that the Flipsys in France were French Huguenots, Huguenots, which means that as the Reformation was sweeping through Europe, my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather adopted the Reformation teaching, the solas, begun as we often attribute it to Martin Luther.

And because France at the time was Catholic-led, it was a Catholic country, those who accepted the Reformation were persecuted.

And they're referred to as Huguenots. And wave after wave of French reformers fled the country to flee persecution. And my great-great-great-great-grandfather apparently was one of these.

Now, the most famous French reformer to flee persecution in France is John Calvin. And now you're learning a few things about me.

You know that I've got some French ancestry. You should also know that I really, really, really, really, really like John Calvin, bordering on a problem. And because of my fondness for Calvin, I dream, and again, I have no evidence for this, but I like to think that my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was a friend of John Calvin's and followed him to Geneva, Switzerland.

[7 : 43] Now, there's no evidence to suggest this is true, but if it were true, my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather would have had his choice of three city churches in Geneva, Switzerland.

Those three churches offered 33 worship services per week. At any given church in the city of Geneva, there were three worship services on Sunday, services each weekday, and a Wednesday prayer service.

My great-great-great-great-grandfather would have been required by city ordinance to attend at least two services on Sunday and the midweek prayer service at minimum.

Now, I really like Calvin. I can acknowledge there's a lot to be critiqued about some of his doctrines, much of it I love. Especially we could critique this messy relationship that the church had with the state in Geneva.

There's a problematic legalism at times. And yet, among those in Geneva who truly desired to attend all nine worship services at their church of choice each week, there's something in that that's really to be commended and aimed for.

[9 : 04] Perhaps my great-great-great-great-grandfather was among those. I think in Geneva, in our own tradition's history, there's a God-honoring copy of the picture we're given in Acts chapter 2 of the early worshiping community.

And so here's my contention. Here's my main point, if you're a note-taker. The church's witness is born from and depends on its deep and deepening fellowship.

The church's witness is born from and depends on its deep and deepening witness. When we talk about the message of the gospel, we have a little bit of a chicken-and-egg problem.

Does there have to be a community to share the message? Or does there have to be a message to constitute a community?

Which comes first, the community or the message? And it is a little bit like a chicken-and-egg. You need both. But I want to share this quote for you from Leslie Newbegin that emphasizes the role of the community in gospel proclamation.

[10:21] Newbegin writes, Without a living church where Jesus' witness is born, neither evangelism nor Christian social action is possible. The gospel is alive in the community.

And so as we look at our text this morning, first, we'll see that conversion creates a community of people that seek after God. Then we'll see that the resulting change in these people doesn't graduate them from seeking God.

You don't graduate out. But it inspires deeper seeking. And finally, we'll see that this deep and deepening community ministers Christ to one another and to the world.

So let us begin with verse 41, which your Bible probably separates from verse 42 with a new heading. Verse 41 in your Bible is the conclusion of Peter's famous sermon, what many refer to as the first sermon in the church age.

It's in this sermon that Peter identifies for the people. Jesus is Messiah. Peter articulates their sin problem. Peter calls them to repent and be baptized.

[11:43] And the result of this spirit-filled, gospel-centered, Pentecost Day sermon is 3,000 conversions. 3,000 people were baptized and added to the community of believers.

So we're clear. The result of good preaching is that believers are added to the community, to the church.

Jesus leads his people into a community. It is the necessary landing place for those who have received the message. As many as are baptized are added to the community.

They are added to their number. This is rather significant, actually. Peter is speaking to Israelites at Pentecost, the same people who 50 days prior had crucified Jesus.

Peter reminds them of this in his sermon twice. In 2, 23, And you, and I imagine him pointing his finger, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

[12:53] And again, in verse 36, 2, 36, God has made this Jesus, whom you, again, pointing directly at these Israelites, crucified both Lord and Christ. The fact that these very people can be added to their number in a united way speaks to the power of the Holy Spirit to bind man to man in peace.

Peter can welcome into his community the very people who shouted crucify him a couple of months ago.

Only the Holy Spirit could accomplish this kind of fellowship. This community, like any group constituting a community, must be identified by something they share in common.

Communities might share a location. Your location might make you a community. They might share a dress code. You might, I was emo back in the day, and so I was part of the emo community, and I was identified by the way I dressed, okay?

A way of life might identify you with your community, or maybe a set of beliefs, or a shared ethic. You might, for example, identify with the fitness community.

[14:16] Not me, you might. You might be identified with the fitness community. How do we know if someone's part of the fitness community? Well, they've got gym shoes on all the time.

They've got a gym membership, maybe. They've got a shared concern for proteins and calories, and a much too large water bottle always with them. So, too, the community created by conversion to Christ is identified by something shared.

Importantly, Luke does not identify them by their Jewishness, though at this point, the entire community was Jewish. Luke's writing recognizing that this thing's not going to stay Jewish very long.

It's not their Jewishness that unites them. Luke identifies membership in this community as those who make use of four spiritual disciplines.

How do we know you're part of a community? You do these four things. They were the ones devoted to apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the prayers.

[15:30] We'll take each of them one by one. First, they were devoted to apostolic teaching. Or we could say, they were devoted to the New Testament message.

The teaching of the apostles, which constitutes our New Testament, was as authoritative in the very first days of the church as it is for us today.

Sometimes we think, well, they had the Old Testament scriptures, and we've just sort of made up on our own that this New Testament stuff that we chose, we voted on, and we said, okay, this can be authoritative for us.

We'll allow it. That's not what happened. Right? In the very early days of the church, the teaching of the apostles was already authoritative for the community.

In the very first days, they were devoted to the apostolic teaching. Christ called, appointed, and ordained his apostles to have authority like that of the Old Testament prophets.

[16:40] So Christ knew that what the apostles were teaching was on par with the prophets. And the apostles knew that what they were teaching was on par with the authority of the Old Testament prophets.

Luke himself records Jesus saying in Luke 11, 49, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute. The apostles understood this calling.

We see this from Peter himself in 2 Peter 3, verse 2. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command, authority, given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

So Jesus said, I'm going to give my message by prophets and apostles, and Peter says, yep, got it. The apostles are giving your authoritative message. Not only Peter.

How about Paul, likewise, recognizing the authority of the apostolic teaching in Ephesians 2, 20, saying that the community is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

[17:50] Teaching of the apostles, which we call the New Testament, is as authoritative as the Old Testament scriptures. Jesus said so, and the apostles realized this, and the community is those devoted to the New Testament message.

Not only are they devoted to the apostolic teaching, they're devoted to the fellowship, the second in the list mentioned by Luke. The word fellowship there is *koinonia*. And maybe you've heard pastors talk about this concept before.

It's actually a really, really rich kind of fellowship. It's constant and united sharing. Sometimes I've described it like a brick in a brick wall.

You are reliant on something else, or a brick sets on something beneath it, but also supporting what's above you. More bricks are on top of you. The Christian community is like that deep fellowship.

We're always leaning on someone else, and others are always leaning on us. There's no getting away from being part of the community.

[18:56] It's a constant and united, deep sharing. They're devoted to the apostolic teaching. They're devoted to this deep, rich fellowship. They're devoted to the breaking of bread.

Now, this term might mean a few things, and I think all of them are appropriate. It might mean meals, eating together.

This would mean that the church is more than what happens in a worship service. That beyond the four walls of the church, this community was still in *koinonia*, in fellowship.

That in their homes, in the evenings, in the mornings, at lunchtime, at school, they broke bread together.

It might mean serving. It might mean that they recognized that others in their community had needs that they could meet, and so they shared with them. That's perfectly appropriate, too, to say that this community is those who realize the needs among us and meet them if we have the ability.

[20:09] I think maybe most correct, if I had to pick one of the options, would be to see this breaking of bread as a description of the sacrament of communion.

On the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus broke bread. So here, Luke is using those same terms to say they broke bread together. They celebrated communion. This was a sacramental community.

And finally, they're devoted to the prayers. The word should be plural. It's referring to the three times of day that the Jewish worshiper would pause to pray.

If we would have kept reading into Acts chapter 3, Acts 3 verse 1 tells us that one day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer at 3 in the afternoon.

We learn that these three times of prayer may have been attended to in a public communal setting at the temple. Three times a day, Christians are gathering to worship together.

[21 : 20] This puts John Calvin's Geneva even to shame. This is a community who loves being together and who loves worshipping together.

Here we have a community of converts making use of scripture, apostolic teaching, making use of fellowship, making use of the sacraments, and making use of prayer. There is nothing here that we don't have easy, easy access to.

And what do these disciplines result in? What do they produce? Everyone was filled with awe. Everyone was filled with awe. The goal of this deep and deepening fellowship in the early church was not that everyone would be at ease because they were sharing stuff and so nobody really was poor.

it wasn't some political end. The goal was that people would know God and stand in awe. This is why we worship, to be in awe of God.

[22 : 31] This is why we pray, to be in awe of God. This is why we make use of the disciplines, to know God more and more. But the text doesn't end there. It's not as though we come to be in awe of God once.

once you realize, maybe all of you have had one moment at least of this in your life where you go, wow, God is good. It's not as though you get to that moment and you go, whew, good, I got there. Now I'm done with this whole Christian thing. I recognized how great God was and so check. Right? That's not the end of the depiction of this community.

They came to be in awe of God and they kept pressing into those disciplines. The text doesn't say they were devoted until they were filled with awe, then they returned to their homes.

The community is who they are. You might know the song, I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.

[23 : 39] We are the church together. together. I am the church. And the more I understand who I am in Christ, the more I desire the church together.

The church is what I'm created for. It's where Jesus is leading me. It's where I belong. Therefore, the more I become in awe of God, the more I press into his community.

Again, it's not unlike the fitness community. It's not as though the more you become fit, the less you need the community stuff. Right?

The more you become fit, the less you need the gyms and the diets and the gear. No, what do we find with people who get interested and smitten with fitness? The more you become fit, the deeper into the fitness community you go.

Maybe you started by working out once or twice a week and then it became three times and then all of a sudden you started tracking your calories and now you're working out every day and now you're not only tracking your calories but you're buying fish oil supplements and all this other stuff.

[24 : 49] The deeper into the community you go, the deeper you keep going. And the church is not unlike this. The deeper into Christ we press, the deeper into the community stuff we press.

This is precisely what Luke is expressing about the Christian community. They're attending worship daily. They're communing from house to house. As I consider this constant attending to the word, to worship and sacraments of the community of believers, I can't help but think about Calvin in Geneva.

That those among them that truly desired that rich, busy rhythm of worship and community had recaptured something the church had long since lost.

And then I think about us. Brothers and sisters, we've found the bottom, the bare minimum expression of who we are.

the only way to do any less is to go out of the church entirely. It's no surprise then that, quote, more people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the first great awakening, second great awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined.

[26 : 18] Quote, in the Protestant tradition, Presbyterians lead the detaching, that includes us, by the way, by generation, the baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, are de-churching in larger numbers as more than 35% of the boomers living today have stopped attending church.

These quotes are from a book called The Great De-Churching. They go on to describe what they call the missed generational handoff, seeking to understand why so many children raised in Christian homes are leaving the faith.

The conclusion is about belonging in a community. Quote, if we don't prioritize gathered worship in our lives, why would our children do so later in life?

There's nowhere down from here, only out. Instead, we could demonstrate that belonging to the fellowship of believers is more important and more central to who we are in Christ, who we are created to be, than the school community, than our careers, than the sports teams. To be clear, I'm not proposing putting people in pews. The goal is not just to worship nine times a week. Rather, I'm calling us to reorient our lives around Christ in a way that requires our deepening fellowship with Christ's church, his bride.

[27 : 55] Twice a Sunday, church attendance doesn't make us super Christians. It has nothing to do with how many sins are forgiven. But increasing church attendance, an increasing desire for worship is probably a good sign, a symptom of spiritual health, of a heart that desires to worship Jesus more, to know God more, to bless and be blessed by the believers more.

Church attendance is not the only metric. Are you devoted to the apostles' teaching? Are you doing daily devotions? Are you attending to the prayers? Are you attending to opportunities to fellowship with one another?

The point is not to have nine services next week, and it's certainly not to leave here and pat yourselves on the back because we're doing better than the people who didn't show up this Sunday. Remember that the point is to increasingly live in our new natures.

As people of awe, the goal is to more and more be people whose lives are characterized by worship because we're smitten with God.

This benefits us in two ways. Verse 46 and 47, respectively. First, in our deepening fellowship with Christ, sorry, in our deepening fellowship, Christ is ministered to us.

[29 : 32] Notice the progression in verses 45 and 46. From selling to giving to receiving. I prefer the way the ESV renders it, received their food.

But even received their food is a bit narrow translation there. Receiving their share would be a little bit more word for word. Don't get me wrong, food is definitely in view here.

There's certainly a thriving food ministry in Jerusalem at the time. We'll see so when we get to Acts 6. We keep reading from here. But the people who are sharing are sharing more than food.

And so they're not just receiving their food, they're receiving their share. In a parallel passage to ours this morning in Acts 4, 32 through 37, the community is described as sharing everything, including possessions and money explicitly mentioned.

And whatever else was needed such that Luke writes, quote, there were no needy persons among them. In our passage, notice the circumstances by which the people receive their share from the church.

[30 : 47] when they attend temple together daily and with praising. That's when they receive their share. When they attended temple together daily and with praising.

Christ continues to be ministered to us by his church. And we receive this ministry when we press into the fellowship, to the community.

The deeper we press in, the more we receive Christ. Christ, the more we attend, the more we receive instruction and offer praise.

The more we share our lives, the more prayers we receive. It's particularly frustrating to me that in our day, people often withdraw from the church and then complain that they aren't receiving the ministry of the church.

I haven't been there in four weeks and I haven't heard from anybody. Okay, shame on us for not reaching out. But you haven't heard from anybody because you haven't been here. We receive our share when we're attending to the community stuff.

[31 : 58] Our text this evening reminds us that we receive when we press in. And finally, in our deepening fellowship, Christ is ministered through us.

Christ is ministered to us by the community and he's also ministered through us. I started with two verse 41. The result of Peter's sermon is that 3,000 were added to their number.

Verse 47 uses the same exact word for added. The result of the witness of the deep and deepening community is that more were added daily.

And so we can say that in the same way that a sermon, that a gospel presentation witnesses to Christ, so the distinctive unity of our community witnesses to Christ.

I opened with Leslie Newbegin. Let me close with Leslie Newbegin again. I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

[33 : 07] I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel. Evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one.

But I am saying that these are all secondary and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.

The unique unity, peace, joy, and service of our communities witnesses to the Christ who we serve. Sadly, Christians in our society spend most of their time trying to look as much like the world as possible. Why would the world want what we're offering if we're not offering anything different? We're meant to be representatives of the color blue, for example. But we're wearing green.

[34 : 16] All the while telling people wearing green that they should be wearing blue. You see what I mean? We're not putting on Christ and taking Christ to the world. We should look, live, think differently so that we can tell them that there's something else, something better for them in Christ and his church.

Brothers and sisters, we have something to offer the world. We can minister Christ to one another and to the world.

The deeper we press into who we are as a community of believers, let's act like it. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you for constituting a community of believers, for leading us into a church where we are cared for and ministered to.

We pray that the deeper we press into those things, the deeper we desire them. And that as our communities begin to look more and more unique and distinctive, that the world would see that we have something to offer, something better.

And that our communities would begin to become a witness to the gospel that changes our local communities and changes our world. We accomplish this only by your spirit.

[35 : 48] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.