

“The Living Church”

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[0:00] Ah, good morning, church. Our text this morning is Acts chapter 2, verses 42 through 47. You can go ahead and turn there with me. If you'll remember the last couple of weeks, if you're with us last couple of weeks, the beginning of Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came down upon the gathered disciples at Pentecost, and then Peter, in the power of the Spirit, preaches a sermon explaining that the crucified Jesus is the risen Messiah and Lord, that He is the one who sent the Spirit upon them. Luke then tells us that 3,000 people responded to Peter's sermon, receiving the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name.

And that all leads up to our passage today. And in our passage today, we have Luke's description of the dynamics of that Spirit-filled church. What happens when the ascended Lord Jesus sends the Spirit down, when heaven begins to invade earth, when the new temple takes shape, and the church, when the rocket is finally released, when the firework finally ignites in the sky, what do they do? What was it like? That's what this text is going to show us. In other words, this text shows us a snapshot of a healthy, vibrant, Spirit-filled church. And, you know, before we read it, I think it's important to realize that this isn't some sort of nostalgic glimpse of an idealized past. Rather, this passage gives us a kind of clear image or pattern of what our church can look like today. It can encourage us, it can correct us, and show us where to thank God for His work in our midst. And moreover, it shows us what happens when Christ gets a hold of a community by His Spirit. So, if you're here and you're investigating Christianity this morning, I think this sermon will be helpful for you as well. Because, you know, if you want to get to know an artist, you often look at His work. And today we get to look at Jesus' work through His Spirit in the New Testament church. So, turn with me, as I mentioned, to Acts chapter 2, verses 42 through 47. That's page 857 in the Pew Bibles in front of you. And let me pray before I read God's Word. Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for this witness to the work of Your ongoing work, Jesus, in Your Spirit in the early church. Help us as we read these things to understand them and to apply them to our lives so that we might glorify You and know You, Lord Jesus, more deeply and fully. I pray this in Your name. Amen. All right, Acts 2, 42 through 47 says this, and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, 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 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.

[3:15] Well, I don't know what strikes you about this passage, but as you've read it along with me, but one of the things that strikes me as I come to this passage again and again is the simplicity of it. Look again at verse 42. Here's what they did. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. It's a pretty short list, isn't it?

Pretty straightforward. Now, in verses 43 through 47, Luke kind of fleshes that out a little bit, and we're going to spend our time this morning fleshing them out. But let's first just consider the simplicity of that. You know, this is no kind of elaborate scheme, no intricate programmatic endeavor, just teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Now, there are many things about Christianity that are deep, that are profound. Gregory the Great, the sixth century bishop, once said that the Bible is like a river where a lamb can wade, but an elephant can swim. In other words, the things of God are shallow enough for a little lamb to wade in and not be in danger, but they're deep enough for an elephant to swim inside. You know, it's like that with the church. Each element here in verse 42 is profound, is deep, but in all of it, there's an elegant kind of

simplicity to it. And I don't know about you, but to me, that is refreshing. We live in a culture of busyness, don't we? Sometimes our importance is sort of marked by how cluttered one's calendar becomes.

But when God enters the equation, and when we as a church are recalibrated through the Spirit and the Word, it's not busyness that reigns, but a kind of profound simplicity, a simple profundity. And why is that?

Well, ultimately, that is true, friends, because of what the gospel says. You see, the message of Christianity is that Christ has done it all. In His life, in His death, in His resurrection, He's performed all that's required for you and I to be right with God.

[5 : 18] Perhaps you've tried. Perhaps you've tried kind of frenetically constructing your own spiritual life to say the right prayers, to perform the right devotional acts, to build a kind of religious CV. But Christ comes to you in the midst of all that with a word of peace.

Rest in me, Christ says. Trust in my work and be saved. And when we do, we find that there's a two-fold gift. Peter's sermon ended with it in verse 38. He says, the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

You know, our deepest need as humans is not financial stability or a meaningful career or a loving family. Our deepest need is to have our relationship restored with our holy Creator God.

And in Christ, that reconciliation has been made for all who believe. Imagine with me two kind of travelers, and they're both headed to London or to Rome for a whole month, and neither have been there before, right? And one traveler, not knowing anyone there, well, they pack all sorts of gear for the trip, right? They pack their guidebooks and their clothes and their plug adapters and their walking shoes and on and on and on and on. And they pack it all in a cumbersome backpack and they lumber their way to the airport, a bit nervous about what they're going to find once they reach the destination. But now imagine another traveler. And unlike the first, this traveler knows that when they arrive in Rome, they won't be alone. In fact, their own brother will be there to greet them. The spare bedroom is all set out, the closet's full of clothes, the plans have all been arranged. Now, that traveler would probably bring a toothbrush, right? Maybe their laptop, change of clothes, not much else though, because it's all taken care of.

Friends, this is the gospel. Jesus Christ has become our true brother, and he has made all the provision we need so that when we arrive, the room will be ready. And that means our journey through this life can be light. Do you see now why the church in Acts 2 is marked by such a profound simplicity?

[7 : 36] They've been reconciled to God. The deepest longing of their heart, the deepest, the deepest core problem of their existence has been solved. And when the grace of God hits home, in that way, verse 42 tells us that they then devoted themselves to four things.

Beautiful in their simplicity. These four things are the marks of a living church, of a community that Jesus has set free and filled with his spirit. Now, before we flesh out each one, I want to say there's kind of two ways we could approach a passage like this. The first is to sort of approach it like a giant to-do list, right? There's a way of looking at this passage that says if you really want to be a successful church, you have to do this, and you have to do this, and you have to do this, and you have to do this, and you have to do it with the same intensity and persistence as they did, right? And if that's our approach to a passage like that, it's going to quickly become a burden, right? We'll start brooding over our own inadequacies and failings, and we'll start to despair over whether or not we can ever measure up.

But I think there's another way to approach this passage. The other way of looking at this passage says here's an invitation. Here's an invitation to enter into all the good things that Jesus has won for you. Here's an opportunity to recognize all that the Spirit's already doing in your midst and be thankful. Here's a good reminder to clear away all the things you don't have to be doing so that you can devote yourselves to what matters most. So that's the approach I want to take this morning, because ultimately I think that's what Luke is doing. I want us to be encouraged by this passage because I think that's why Luke put it here. Luke's not unrealistic about the church. In the coming weeks, we're going to see he's up front with all sorts of problems in the early church.

He knows that the church of every age is going to be a body of sinners, wholly dependent on grace, but in the church God's grace is at work. And this passage can help us see that in our own midst. So let's look at these marks of the Spirit-filled church with an eye toward thanking God for what he is doing in our midst and praying that God will grant us the grace to see them more and more.

So what do we see first? First we see that a Spirit-filled church is a learning church. A Spirit-filled church is a learning church. They devoted themselves, Luke writes, to the apostles' teaching.

[9:44] Now, the apostles had spent three years with Jesus during his earthly ministry, listening and learning. After his resurrection, Jesus had instructed them for 40 days more. And that time, no doubt, he was showing them how all the Old Testament points to him, as Jesus says in Luke 24.

So what are the apostles teaching here in Acts, right? Well, they were teaching all that Jesus had instructed them during his ministry. And they were teaching the Old Testament Scriptures from the standpoint of their fulfillment in Jesus. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

They devoted themselves to learning all about this gospel message and this new form of life that the gospel gave birth to. Now, of course, we don't have the apostles around to teach us today, but we do have the definitive form of their teaching preserved for us in the New Testament.

So just like the first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, we today also devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching. How do we do that? By submitting to and understanding and receiving the authority of the New Testament Scriptures.

So this is the first sign, as it were, of a church that is aflame with the Spirit. It's a deep hunger for biblical teaching. Now, why is this the first sign of a Spirit-filled church, right?

[11:12] We might say it's because the Bible, the Scriptures, the Bible is the Spirit's book. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, Paul writes in 617. In 2 Timothy 2, we're told that, in 2 Timothy 3, excuse me, we're told that the Scriptures are breathed out by God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit.

In the writing of the Scriptures by the prophets and the apostles, James tells us that God chose to give us birth through the Word of truth. You see, when the Spirit gives us life through the Word, the Word of the Bible comes alive to us, and there's a deep spiritual resonance between a Spirit-born believer and the Spirit-breathed Scriptures. There's like calling to like. There's deep calling to deep. I've been told, I've never actually tried this because I've never been around enough pianos that aren't electronic like this one up here. I've been told that if you open the top of piano and sing a certain note into it with the sustain pedal pressed, that the strings that are tuned to that note start to hum and start to vibrate. Someone's nodding their head. Yes, that's true. Great. You see, for the church, friends, the Bible is the voice of God singing into our hearts.

And the more of the Bible we hear, the more the Spirit's work will begin to resonate and reverberate in our midst. That's why, as a church, we're committed to the preaching and to the teaching of the Bible when we gather on Sundays and in small groups, because we want to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, because in it the Word of Christ comes to us and makes us truly and finally alive. Many people today are looking for significance, trying to root their personal identity in something that will be lasting. I mean, all of us as humans, really, we ask, who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What's it all about? Right? And we, each of us, have a deep hunger to be part of something that's bigger, something that's worthwhile. And friends, that hunger resides within you because you were created to be a part of something bigger and something more worthwhile. You were created to be a part of the great drama that God is unfolding in history. Right? Why do we spend hours and hours and hours playing video games where within those video games we can, you know, achieve victory and glory, right? You can talk to me afterwards and I'll tell you how many hours I've played Breath of the Wild, right? Right? But friends, there is a narrative of glory and victory that God is inviting each of us in to enter into through faith in His Son, right? And the Bible is where we find this narrative recounted for all of us to hear, right? It's in Scripture that we finally find out who we are, humans created in the image of God, fallen because of sin, fallen because of sin and redeemed and restored through faith in Christ, and we're called to live for His glory and His cause. I mean, honestly, do you fear, do you fear that devoting yourself to the biblical teaching will make you seem like a prude or a boar or a conservative?

Right? Do you fear that it will make you closed-minded or irrelevant? But friends, don't you see, if the Bible is God's Word, then it's the only thing that can finally shake us free from our prudishness and our boredom and our narrowness and our rigid conservatism, right? The Bible is the only thing that can really open our minds and free our minds from the passing whims of intellectual fads. Because the Bible is God's Word, it has the power to wake us up to who we really are and who God truly is. And most of all, it's in the Bible that we'll hear something that we'll never hear anywhere else.

[15 : 21] It's in Scripture that we'll hear the good news that God has not left us to our own devices, but He's entered the fray in flesh and blood in the midst of our rebellion and apathy, and He's become our victor, and He's come to set captives free.

Is that message boring? Is it irrelevant? Is it conservative? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, Luke says, and in 30 years, they turned the world upside down.

So that's the first sign of a Spirit-filled church, devotion to the apostles' teaching found in Scripture. A Spirit-filled church is a learning church. Let's move to the second point. They devoted themselves, Luke says, to the fellowship. A Spirit-filled church is not just a learning church, but it's a sharing church. That's what fellowship literally means, sharing in common. The same root is behind the word common in verse 44 and behind the word generous elsewhere in the New Testament. The picture Luke paints here is of a group of men and women who are willing to share not just a couple of hours together on Sunday, but share their very lives with one another. You see, the church is not just a gathering where teaching happens. It's a family where genuine love is expressed. There is truth, yes, and with that truth there is love. Not one without the other, but both fully at the same time.

Now, we should remember at this point how diverse this group of early believers was. If you can't glance back at the beginning of chapter 2 in verses 9 through 11, you can see all the various regions where these people were coming from. Now, it's true that at this stage in Acts, the first Christians are all Jewish, or they're all converts to Judaism, but from the Jewish diaspora, they come from this stunning diversity of regional backgrounds. And it's enough to make us pause and ask, what is it that binds the Christian community together in such fellowship, such common life? What binds them together? Is it race, class, or background? Is it a common political party? Is it a common set of hobbies or special interests? I mean, look around this morning. Gathered here at Trinity are men and women from literally across the globe, from Canada, from Brazil, from Germany, from Ghana, from India, from Indonesia.

[17 : 37] What could possibly bind us together, not just for a meeting on Sunday, but bind us together in the very fabric of our lives? Bind us together such that we'd be willing to expend our time, our hospitality, and our money in such generous ways as Luke describes here. The answer is our common sharing in Jesus Christ.

We belong to the Son. His Spirit dwells in us. His Father is now our Father, and because we share in Christ together, we share out with one another. This is the twofold significance of our fellowship, of our common life in God and out to fellow believers. And this includes, this sharing includes spending time together, eating meals together, getting to know one another's needs, and sacrificially giving so that those needs can be met, expressing a kind of solidarity with each other in our needs. And we see that sacrificial giving right here in Acts 2. Now, of course, the early church didn't completely abandon private property, right? Verse 46 tells us that they still owned homes. And in chapter 5, right, we're going to get to this, in the episode of Ananias and Sapphira, we see quite clearly there that no one was forced to sell their goods in the early church. No one was forced to do so. Peter tells Ananias flat out, the house was yours before you sold it. The money was yours after you sold it. The problem with Ananias and Sapphira was that they lied to God, not that they only gave part of it to the church. Now, we're going to come to that a little later in our series, but the thing to notice here in chapter 2 is that the sharing of goods was voluntary. It wasn't a kind of proto-communism.

It was actually something much more radical than that. It's a community of men and women who are so certain of the love of God and so certain of his ultimate provision that they become eager to sacrifice for the other, and they become willing to sell their possessions and goods to help a sister or brother in need. Isn't this the kind of human community that so many are longing for today? The end of verse 46 continues to strike me. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Such a beautiful picture, isn't it? And friends, I'm convinced that if by God's grace that reality took hold of us, it'd be nothing short of revolutionary. The word sincerity there means something like being single-minded or being genuine. The idea is one of having zero pretensions.

No one's pretending, no one's posturing, no one's worried about image management. Here's a group of people who are so rooted in their identity in Christ that they can finally be free to be who they are before one another without any fear of rejection. How much of our time is spent today in image management? Is one of the reasons we're afraid to sit around a table with someone, even a

fellow Christian, and share a meal together is because we feel like we don't have the strength to put forward the best version of ourselves? Are we worried what others might think or say if they caught us at our worst?

[20 : 54] What if we turned out to not be as smart or as good or as funny or as wise as they thought we would be? And yet the gospel comes and says, your sins are forgiven and you are a child of God.

And it's that freedom that makes real fellowship possible. But friends, you see, it's also the fellowship that continues to remind us of our identity, as God's children. We need our brothers and sisters to remind us again and again that we do belong to Christ, that our sins are forgiven, that the Spirit is at work in us, so they devoted themselves to the fellowship. Right? Next week after the service, we're going to have Trinity 101, which is our membership class. What is membership? Membership is devoting yourself to the fellowship, saying, I know I need a living, breathing, flesh and blood local church to be a part of, not just so I can serve others, but because I need the Word of Christ in my own heart to remind me of who I am, so I can lay my pretensions down and be free in Christ. So we see a Spirit-filled church is devoted to the fellowship. Let's look at the third sign. The third mark of a Spirit-filled church is that it's a worshipping church. Verse 42 continues, it says, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. Now, if you study the book of Acts, as we're going to do this over the next months, you know, you'll start to see that this language of breaking of bread, you know, commentators are kind of split. Does it refer specifically to the Lord's Supper, what we're going to do in a couple minutes, or does it refer more generally to just eating meals together? If it refers to just kind of eating meals together, then Luke seems to be especially emphasizing one aspect of the fellowship that we just spoke of. But if it refers to the Lord's Supper, then it seems to be a natural pair with what Luke lists next, which is the prayers. Now, if you have a different translation, or even I think if you have an older version of the ESV, it may just read, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and to prayer. But the text does literally say the prayers. And here, most scholars are in agreement that that expression, the prayers, refers more to just the sort of general act of praying, but refers to set prayers, to organized prayer. In other words, it seems that what Luke has in mind here is what we might call corporate worship gatherings. So the third mark of a Spirit-filled church is that it is a worshipping church. It gathers to praise God and to pray to God. And this happens in both large contexts and in smaller ones. Verse 46 says that they met together in the temple courts and they met together in one another's homes. And there isn't one form that's somehow apparently better than the other. The early church saw both kinds of gatherings. And it's good for us today to have both large gatherings and small gatherings. But what's most striking, I think, is verse 43, where it says, everyone was filled with awe.

In this community, there is intimacy with God, true spirituality. God is real here. God is palpable.

[24 : 26] Here, the deeper springs of transcendence have kind of burst through the heavy concrete of the mundane. And the two-dimensional has suddenly become three-dimensional. The black and white and gray has been overtaken by a flood of color. Their lives have literally been opened up to the reality of God.

The literal word in verse 43 is fear. Fear came upon every soul. Do you know what it is to fear God? Not kind of frightened in a cowering way, but to be so in awe before the reality of Him that everything else, our own selves included, starts to recede into the background.

It's like when you stand before the immensity of the ocean when the waves are kind of crashing against the shore, and all you can see in the distance is that seemingly infinite expanse of water. And what strikes you is just a sense of awe. There's a bigness to it. There's a sense of uncontainability, of both power and serenity, that no photograph could do justice.

Friends, that's just a small hint of what it's like to be in awe of God, the creator of all oceans and the ruler of all the earth. Now, in thinking about worship, we have to remember that God is omnipresent, right? He's not limited to one day of the week and one specific time. We can worship God anywhere at any time, but with that being said, God has promised to be with His people in a special way when they gather for prayer, for praise, for preaching, for the celebration of the ordinances.

[26 : 11] And looking at our text, certainly part of what struck awe in the hearts of those first Christians was what Luke describes in the rest of verse 43. Many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. Now, many Christians today differ over how to apply this verse, right? Some faithful Christians would say that these wonders and signs are meant to be part of the pattern

for the church today, right? That we should expect God can and will do such things in our midst. Other faithful Christians say that these wonders and signs were a special thing that God did at that time to authenticate the ministry and the message of the apostles. It was God's way of giving special testimony to their witness, the witness that we still devote ourselves to today, right?

Now, in all, I honestly think we shouldn't get too worked up over this issue. This question of the sort of ongoing validity of these kind of sign gifts is certainly one where Christians can have differing views and still maintain fellowship. In all, I think we do need to maintain that the ministry of the apostles was unique, right? There are no more apostles today.

So it makes sense that God would work through them in an especially powerful way, right? And in a way maybe that we wouldn't quite expect today. We have their God-authenticated message in Scripture, and that's the most important thing. But I think we also need to realize that God can still do powerful and even miraculous things today. After all, God is God. Why couldn't he do such things?

But when we think about worship, when we think about fearing God, of being in awe of him, friends, the truth is we really don't have to have miraculous signs and wonders performed in our midst to genuinely fear God and worship him rightly. After all, God is God.

God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. God took on flesh. He died on the cross. He rose again.

[28:17] This is the foundation of our worship. This is what formed the core of the apostles' teaching. This is what formed the basis of the fellowship. And this is what the sacraments or the ordinances visibly demonstrate. Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and coming again, and even now at work in our midst through his Spirit, impressing upon us his majesty and mercy and driving us to pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

You see, in our culture that's, I think, longing for transcendence, friends, the Christian church ought to be the place where people can find a true sense of the reality and fear of God, where his majesty and mercy are on display, where everything rightly fades in comparison to knowing him, loving him, worshipping him.

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. A Spirit-filled church is a worshipping church. Lastly, then, we find that all of this leads to witness, to witness.

Now, to see the fourth aspect of a Spirit-filled church, we have to look at the very last verse, where it says, And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. It's clear from this verse that the early church, full as it was with the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, with the breaking of bread and the prayers, it's clear that they couldn't keep the message of Christ to themselves.

They had come to know Christ crucified for their sins, risen as their Lord. They had received the gift of the Spirit through faith in Jesus' name, and they spread this good news throughout the entire city. A Spirit-filled church, brothers and sisters, is a witnessing church, an evangelistic church.

[30:00] As we come to the end of the passage, we see that there's a great comfort, isn't there, in verse 47, When all is said and done, it's the Lord who adds new men and women to His church.

The Lord does this work. Our part is to speak the message of Christ truthfully and lovingly with our words and reflect that message authentically in our lifestyle. We're not called to manipulate others. It's not our job to convert other people. We ultimately leave it in the hands of God as we just bear witness to what we know to be true and real of our risen Lord. And what confidence that brings. What confidence it brings to know that ultimately it's the Lord who is building His church. What confidence it brings to know that when you speak about Jesus and all that He is and all that He's done with your neighbor, your friend, or your co-worker, that it's the Lord Himself who's at work to bring that person to Himself.

So friends, here's the New Testament vision of a Spirit-filled church. It's a learning church and a loving church. It's a worshipping church and it's a witnessing church. And at the center of each of these activities is the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31:13] He's the one we learn about. He is the one we love in our brother and sister. He's the one we worship in our gatherings, large and small. And He's the one we witness to in the world.

Let me end with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his book Life Together. He says, Christian brotherhood, meaning Christian community, Christian community, church life is not an ideal that we have to realize.

It's rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is Jesus Christ alone, the more sincerely and serenely we shall think of our fellowship and pray for it and hope for it. Well, friends, with that in mind, let's pray and let's thank God for Christ and for the reality that He's made here in our midst at Trinity. Lord Jesus, we confess that as we look at this picture of the early church just bristling with life and awe and learning and love, Lord, how our hearts long to be that kind of church.

Thank you for all the ways in which we've seen that work in our midst here at Trinity. Oh, Lord, help us to surrender and keep in step with your spirit more and more so that we might continue to become this kind of place.

[32 : 45] And Lord, in your sovereignty as you choose to add to our number daily, Lord, we pray that each one you bring would hear the saving message of Christ, be saved, and devote their lives to you.

We pray this in your mighty name, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Thank you.