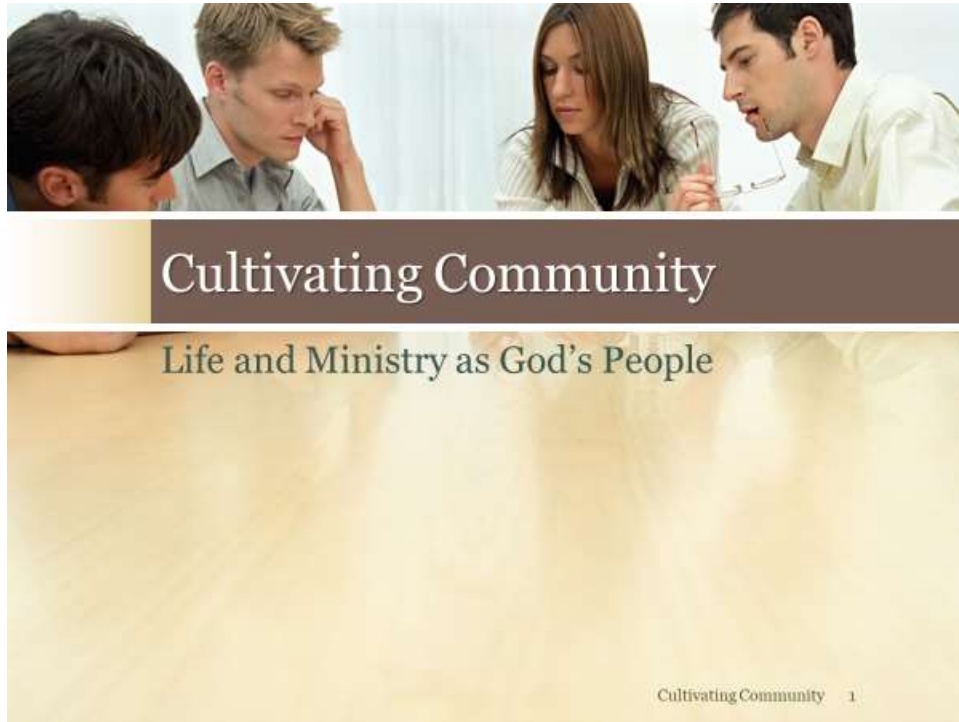


Framework: Cultivating Community

Acts 2:42-47

July 2, 2017 AM

Speaker: Pastor Mark Schindler



This morning we continue our series on Cultivating Biblical Community. Dale started us off with a look at our identity as a community. Two weeks ago, Pastor Tim reminded us of the importance of our unity in our community together. And then last week Russ focused on the importance of growing together as a community of faith.



Cultivating Community

Life and Ministry as God's People

Cultivating Community 1

In this message, we will look at the pattern of the early church in Acts and the framework of their community. A framework that drew and held them together, providing both life and structure to their community as the body of Christ.



Cultivating Community

Life and Ministry as God's People

Cultivating Community 1

This morning as we look at the early church, one of the essential characteristics we will see is their devotion and dedication to being a community that functions together. As the church began to grow through the grace of gospel living and the power of the Holy Spirit, there was a sense of

community that gave strength to their relationships and life together. As we come to our text this morning, it is important that we see that biblical community was not an accident. Nor was it something devised and created by the early church leaders to better organize believers. It was nothing less than the divine intention of God for His people to live together in a way that reflected the community of the triune God.

Now there is one other community that God ordained that was designed to help us see the mystery of the Christ and the Church. What other community did God institute that pictures a relationship of serving, love, and belonging? The community of marriage. I point this out because I believe we all understand the higher and holy sense of commitment, devotion, and love that is to be present in a marriage relationship. Throughout our lives, we will belong to any number of communities; each of which defines us and our interests in some way. These communities could include families, sport teams, companies we work for, cities, neighborhoods, and schools just to name a few. But we would all understand that there is a special weight and priority to the community of marriage that flows out of love and commitment to something that is beyond us.

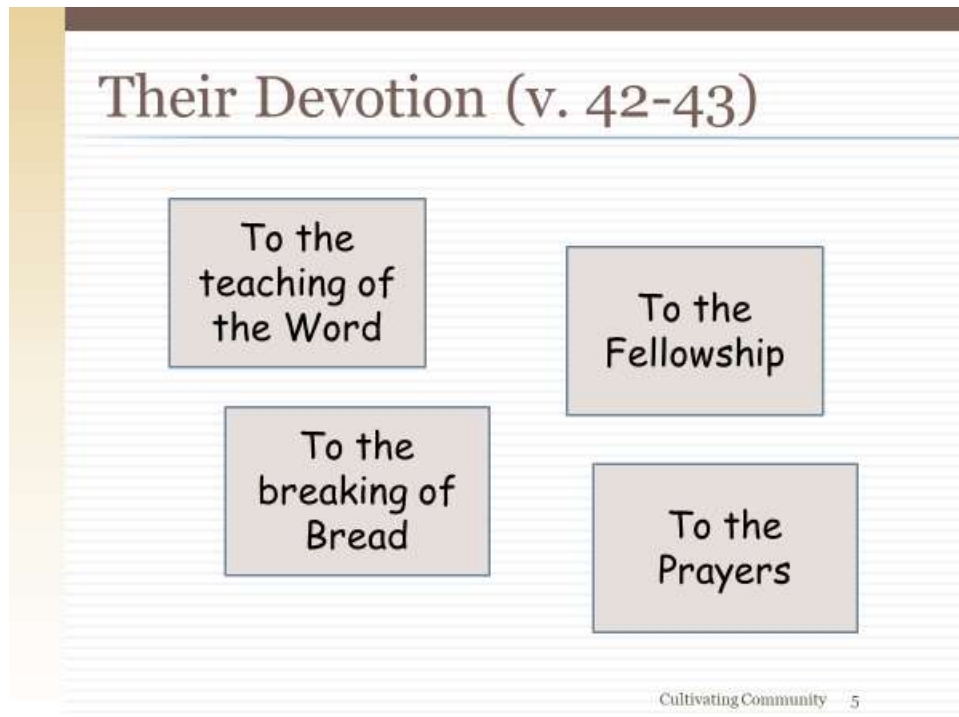
Imagine if a husband went to his wife and said something like this. “I know our marriage relationship is important, but you see I have other priorities in life. So tomorrow I will be moving to a house across town. Now don’t worry. I will be back at least once a week to check in on you. And I promise to send you one or two romantic text messages each day. But I hope you can understand that I really need to take care of myself. There is only so much pressure and stress I can handle taking care of your needs and concerns. And to be honest, lately it’s beginning to interfere with my career and other responsibilities. I’ve even had to miss seeing some of my favorite weekend sports on TV. Please understand I’m still committed to our relationship. Oh and don’t worry, I really won’t be that far away. So if an emergency comes up, just give me a call. I’ve got your back. Sound good?”

As humorous as we might find this, I wonder if it at some level it doesn’t reflect the message we may be sending to God about our commitment to the local community of believers that He has called us to. And while it is, at one level, a community that we have chosen to belong to; it is no less, a community God has chosen for us. A holy community scripture refers to as the body of Christ. A living community of people and relationships God has brought you to. An organization with biblical structure and roles that reflect a unity and selfless love that is unlike any community you will find in this world.

As we jump into the last section of Acts 2, we find Luke describing the early church immediately after Christ’s ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter’s powerful message. Just prior to our passage this morning in verse 37 of Chapter 2, Luke records that those who heard Peter were “cut to the heart” and over 3,000 of were baptized and added to the church. Something powerful and wonderful happened there in Jerusalem. And as new believers were added, there was an immediate commitment to community in the early church.

In verse 42, Luke begins to describe the characteristics of the early church. It is a picture of the life and structure of a community that brought about strength and growth. Please turn to Luke 2:42 and follow along as I read God’s word to us.

“42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”



Imagine the challenges of bringing in thousands of new believers into the early church. Baptisms, gatherings, teaching, and collections among many of the activities that had to be worked out. In the midst of all this, what were the main things that church did to come together as a community of faith? What is it that Luke summarizes as characteristic of and essential to their life together.

Look again at the beginning of verse 42. Luke writes that “they devoted themselves”. Let’s stop right there. The first point Luke chooses to emphasize; the very first point, is their devotion. Something had happened to change them and move them to an intentional commitment to a new way of life, **together**. Keep in mind that at this early point in the life of the church these were mostly Jews converting to Christ. The sense of their devotion here is that of a commitment to a constant practice. They consistently practiced and valued several important aspects of their life together.

So then, what was their devotion to? Luke records four important elements of their lives together. It is likely that Luke did not mean for this list to be inclusive. But we should read it as four key aspects of community which brought them together in way that strengthened relationships and helped them grow. Whether at the Chapel or at any number of churches across

the world, God's people have heeded and modeled their own pattern of community after these four areas. They are indeed foundational characteristics of a healthy and vibrant church.

First, they were devoted to the teaching of the word. What does it mean to be devoted to teaching? I think we can look to the whole of scripture to answer that question. Being devoted to teaching means first that we must heed and submit to it. It means we are committed to its authority in our lives. But it also must mean, now don't miss this, that we are present in a biblical community to hear it. We cannot absent ourselves from the church or from regular parts of gatherings where the word is taught. Being devoted means that we will listen as we are present to receive the teaching of the word. This doesn't diminish our own personal study and time in the word. But means that we yearn to feast on God's word as we gather rather than skipping meals and getting by on as little as we can.

Second, they were devoted to the fellowship. Notice that Luke does not say "devoted to fellowship", but that they were "devoted to **the** fellowship". The word fellowship here is a noun. In other words, they were devoted to the community of faith that was the church. They had a sense of priority to their identity in Christ that overflowed into their relationships as a community together. There was no separating the two. To identify with Christ was to identify with His body, the church. I think there is also an implied contrast here that in Christ, devotion to self and individual is now eclipsed by a devotion to brothers and sisters in the church. And as we shall see, a gospel community is one of sacrifice and preference for others that follows in the example of Christ.

Third, they were devoted to the breaking of bread. It is possible that Luke is referring here to both the sharing of the Lord's table together as well as sharing of meals in one another's homes. In the initial sense of the Lord's table, the early church was committed to following the instruction of the Lord to remember Him through the sacrament of the bread and wine. But not only did they consistently remember the Gospel through the Lord's table, they also practiced the Gospel through expressions of love and caring for one another around a meal. We may think of this as hospitality, in that there was a desire to be together and to share a meal and fellowship together.

Lastly, they were devoted to the prayers. Here again, we have the word "the" indicating prayer as a noun. This may refer to formal prayers or times of prayer. But in a general sense, it likely means that they were committed to times of formal prayer in their gatherings. What we should take away here is that prayer life was an important aspect of their community life together. In the broadest sense, it is likely that the early church consistently practiced prayers that were offered to God as well as for one another. Devotion to prayer was an essential part of their life and community together.

In verse 43, Luke further describes the community experienced by the early church. Luke writes that "awe came upon every soul". As the church grew in numbers and devotion, there was a sense of awe among them. What is being described here is best described as a reverent fear. This probably had something to do with the apostles performing many signs and wonders. These miracles, along with their growing sense of community around Christ, brought about a sense of profound amazement and awe at what God was doing in their midst.

While we may not see such signs and wonders as did the early church, we no less should be in awe of the power of the Gospel and miracles of transformed hearts and lives of those in our community. I believe it is still right for us to have a sense of reverence for the church; both local and globally. God is still at work in this world through His church.

Their Dependence (v. 44-45)

They were Together

They held all things in Common

Cultivating Community 6

As Luke moves on into the next two verses, we see a description of the community of believers in the early church that demonstrates their dependence upon one another. There was a depth of fellowship and love that was evidenced by a commitment to and upon one another. Look at how Luke describes their selfless community in verse 44; “And all who believed were together and had all things in common.”

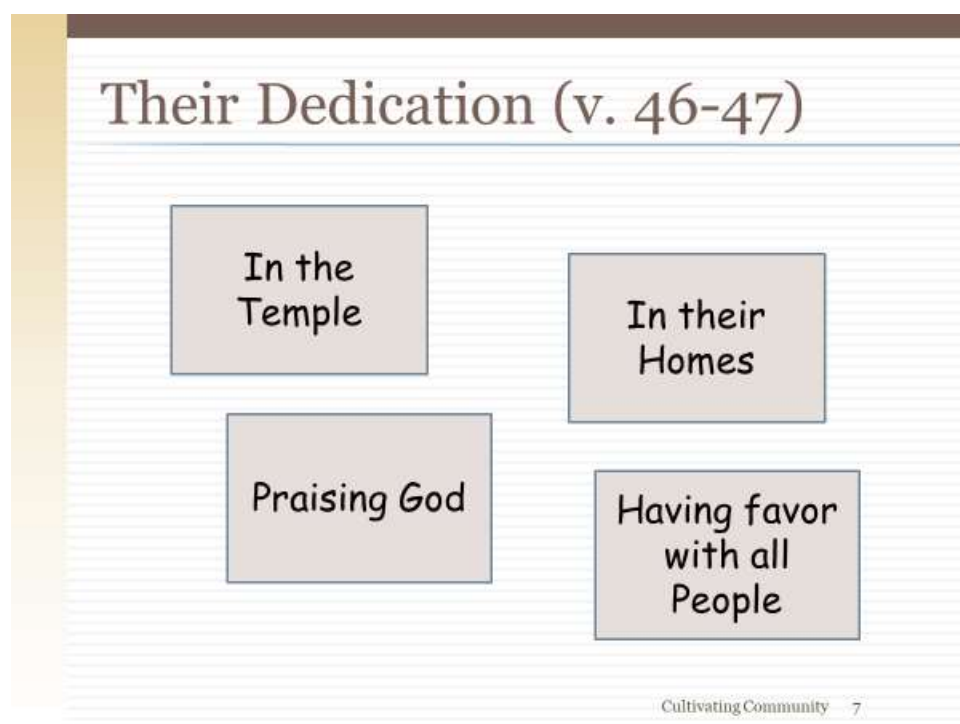
Note the two characteristics of the early church that are described in this verse. **First, they were “together”**. I believe the idea here is one of both unity and identity. Unity, in the sense that they were together in purpose and for their common good. And identity, in the sense that they had a strong sense of belonging to their local gathering. So strong was their togetherness, that there were often expressions of love and care within their community that led to acts of sacrificial love for one another.

This sacrificial love that flowed out of being together as a community led to the second characteristic Luke records, **which is that they “held all things in common” for those in need**. The practice described here is not unlike our own collections and offerings for the common needs of the church and those who have need. What Luke records here is that there was a continuing practice of selling possessions and distributing the proceeds to others as there was need.

In their economy, they could not simply write out a check against a bank account. One’s wealth was the sum of one’s possessions. It required them to sell what they owned so the proceeds

could be given to others. I find this to be the more challenging aspect of what Luke records both here and in Chapter 4. We see hearts that are not holding on to any of their possessions. Whatever they owned they considered to belong to God and thus they withheld nothing that might benefit their brothers in sisters in need.

From the richest to the poorest, all who believed were willing to give all they had for the sake of those in need. The implication here is that those who had were humbly willing to give and those in need were humbly willing to accept such gifts. Humility and unity were valued above possessions as they lived out lives that accepted their dependence upon one another. Also, we see here that God sovereignly gives both the wealthy and poor to the church so that those who have are able to give to those in need. So that in the end, the needs of the church were supplied in a way that gave witness to their love and care for each other in way that reflects the love of Christ.



In the last two verses of this passage we see their dedication. Luke starts out verse 46 noting that these activities were a part of their daily life. "Day by day" he records, the early believers were experiencing the blessings of biblical community. We cannot dismiss the daily nature of what is described here. There was an intentional and regular cadence to their gathering. They valued their unity and togetherness within community in a way that led them to frequently be together. Day by day, not just once a week. Day by day, not just when it was easy. Compared to the convenience of our modern lives and the relative absence of persecution, their dedication to community should convict our hearts.

In verse 46 we see two locations where they were engaged as community daily. The first of these was in the temple. Here they gathered to be taught and fellowship together. It was the place the Gospel was proclaimed. Their gathering at the temple was evidence of their dedication to

hearing the word and to proclaiming their testimony to Christ. And note Luke's emphasis that they attended the temple "together". This was not an individual activity. It was a community activity where they came together under God's word.

The other location of their community was in their homes. Luke tells us that they were "breaking bread in their homes". The sense we get here is that they did not just attend temple and then go on with their lives as if their belonging to community stopped the moment they stepped out the doors. Rather, their community extended beyond a physical location and was expressed through hospitality and sharing meals in their homes. This example cuts against the grain of a culture that encourages a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Instead, the church is an organism that finds its life in strength of godly relationships. Relationships that flourish and grow as God's people share their lives and homes around a meal.

At the beginning of verse 47 Luke tells us that the early church community was also daily "praising God and having favor with all people." Perhaps I'm speculating here, but I think there was such a quality of joy among the early church, that there was a constant flow of people giving of glory and praise to God. If we could go back in time and visit the early church Luke is describing here, I think we would find people who had a zeal for Christ that overflowed in expressions of praise to their God. In fact, such was the positive nature of their witness that they found favor with all kinds of people. They were a community that loved God and one another. They lived and served in a way that earned the kindness and respect of even unbelievers around them.

Verse 47 also reflects on the growth of their community. Luke says that daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. As the church was faithful and lived in biblical community God blessed them and as they were strengthened spiritually the church grew numerically. We know from the rest of Acts and the many letters to the early church that not everything stayed this way with respect to their community together. But I believe this passage in first part of Luke is meant to convey to us what some of the essential characteristics were for a growing and healthy church.

Reflect and Respond

- We all sense the struggle over the priorities
- Where do the Chapel gatherings and the Chapel family fit into your priorities?
- Ask God to give us hearts to love the church and be devoted to community, dependent upon one another, and dedicated to fellowship together
- We are all called to be hospitable compelled by our love for Christ

Cultivating Community 8

As we conclude I think there are a number of areas we can reflect on as it relates to our own community. One of the primary take-aways from this text for me was the example of dedication and devotion to community in the early church. When I consider how easily I can excuse myself from fellowship or not value the sharing of our lives together, I must confess my selfishness to God. When that happens, I've bought in to a lie that I don't need the community of believers God has given to me and they don't need me. This simply is not true.

I think if we are being honest, we all sense the struggle over the priorities we give to other areas of our lives and being a greater part of our community together. But the harsh truth is that if we really want to be here for God and for each other, we would make it happen. I understand that there are legitimate reasons why we can't make it to flock or to our evening gatherings. But for some of us, we simply don't make time for being together because we don't value being together. And what we value is easily evident from how we spend out of our checkbooks and our time. So where do the Chapel gatherings and the Chapel family fit into your priorities?

But frankly, I really don't want this to be a message that guilt you into a deeper participation at the Chapel. If your response to this passage is to participate simply out of sense of keeping rules or earning favor with God, then you are doing it for the wrong reasons. But if you participate, because like the early Christians, you treasure Christ and therefore treasure community with his people, then engage in Chapel life with all you are. My hope is that we all will confess our failures to God and ask Him to give us hearts to love the church and be devoted to community, hearts dependent upon one another, and hearts dedicated to our fellowship together.

To me, the most convicting aspect of the practice of the early church was the example of hospitality. Many of you have gifts in this respect and you encourage the rest of us to do well and invite people into our homes. But even if you don't have that gift, we are all called to be

hospitable compelled by our love for Christ, love for one another, and as a testimony to the world. I believe that the clear example here is one of a regular pattern of sharing our lives together by inviting other into our homes.

The problem is that many of us have become so busy that we no longer have time for this kind of hospitality. School activities, sports programs, weekend leisure, hobbies, and so many other activities clutter our lives to the point where it is nearly impossible for us regularly share our lives with others outside of when we gather together. Too many are content sitting on the outer edge of water of community; dangling our toes in, so to speak, when scripture calls us to be immersed. Brothers and sisters, this is not the way it should be. Let me ask you this morning to examine your own lives or to have a family conversation about ways you can open your homes and your lives to others on a more frequent basis.

I hope that you do not see this simply as a call to some old-fashioned idea about the church. It is a call to biblical community. And in closing, let me especially urge you to think of those who live alone and do not have the community of a family. These are the singles, the widows, those who have been divorced among us, and those who may have challenges to joining in fellowship. May God especially give us a heart of hospitality for them, that we may all experience the blessings of Christian community together.

[closing prayer]

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