

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Marks of A Healthy Church

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Acts 2:42-47

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Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 2. Last week we came to the conclusion of Luke's account of Pentecost – what you might call “the birthday” of the New Testament church. Now, beginning in verse 42, Pentecost is in the rear-view mirror. The birthday party is over, and the church is ready to assume the mission that Jesus gave to them before his ascension. This mission was described in verse 8 of chapter 1:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.
(Acts 1:8 ESV)

At Pentecost, the church received the promised power. The rest of the book of Acts is now going to narrate their progress on this mission. In our passage this morning, we find a summary of how the church engaged with stage one – their ministry in Jerusalem. What we discover in this passage is that one of the most effective aspects of their ministry was the life of the church itself. They were a healthy church – and their neighbours were compelled by what they saw.

One of the greatest joys and weightiest responsibilities of being a pastor is preparing young couples for marriage. They giggle. They smile. I ask them if they've ever had an argument and they say, “Only about who's going to hang up first!” And then they break out into a tickle fight.

It's wonderful. It's frightening. It's young love.

Every couple I work with receives the same homework: I tell them to find a healthy Christian marriage, and to spend as much time with that couple as they possibly can.

I give that counsel because I know that most of the people that sit across from me did not have the benefit of observing a healthy marriage in their home. Most young people jump into marriage having spent 25 years living in dysfunction and learning unhealthy habits by osmosis. Most young people will unthinkingly repeat the patterns that they've observed. So, I encourage them to find a healthy example and to soak in as much as they can before they start their new life. I tell them to ask questions and to make observations. How do they talk to each other? How do they show affection? How do they handle disagreements? What do they do for fun? When do they pray together? What does that look like?

“What does this passage have to do with marriage? What is he on about?” Redeemer, we are celebrating our ten-year anniversary today. WE are the young, optimistic, wide-eyed couple! We have big ambitions, and lofty expectations! We're eager to be a healthy church!

But do we know what that looks like?

We certainly have some ideas. One of the things I've learned over the last ten years is that, in a church of 100 people, there are 100 different definitions of what “church” should look like.

And, just like that young couple, our ideas almost *always* resemble the churches of our past. That's why the church you want to build looks different than the church the person behind you wants to build. That makes for some challenges, but it's unavoidable, isn't it? We were all shaped by the examples that were set for us. And, praise God, some of that influence is good! But not all of it. We need to acknowledge with humility that none of us came from a perfect church.

So, what are we to do? Where can we find an example worth following? This morning, I want to invite you to look with me to Acts 2:42-47 where we will find the very first New Testament church.

They weren't perfect – we'll see that in the weeks to come – but they were gripped by the gospel, and their lives and their gatherings were powerful and compelling. If we want to be a healthy

church, let's agree for the next 35 minutes to take our eyes off of the 100 different churches of our childhoods and to fix them together on the church after Pentecost. Look with me to Acts 2, beginning at verse 42. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In these verses we catch a glimpse of a healthy, flourishing church. Let's consider their example and identify some of the marks of a healthy church.

Marks Of A Healthy Church

The first thing that we learn from this snapshot is that a healthy church is:

1. Devoted to the teaching of the Word

Luke tells us in verse 42:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

If a church planter asked me for a one-verse blueprint for building a healthy church, I would point him here. Get into the word. Be together. Break bread. And pray. The early church *devoted* themselves to these things. The Greek word Luke uses here¹ carries the sense of *staying close* to something and *persevering* in it. I picture a sailor tying himself to the mast of his ship in anticipation of a storm.

¹ Προσκατερέω in L&N, s.v. "Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains," paragraph 1.

And the first thing that Luke emphasizes in this list is that the early church devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles. Whenever they gathered, the Word of God was central.

You will never find a healthy church that is not committed to a faithful, Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting ministry of the word. Because healthy churches understand that God gives life through His word. Healthy churches remember that the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision were dead until the word of God was spoken. Healthy churches know that opinions and anecdotes have no power to transform a life, but that the word of God will never return void.

As the reformer Martin Luther reflected on how he had been used to set in motion a movement that would transform the world, he famously said:

See how much he has been able to accomplish through me, though I did no more than pray and preach. **The Word did it all.** Had I wished I might have started a conflagration at worms. But while I sat still and drink beer with Philip and Amsdorf, God dealt the papacy a mighty blow.²

The Word did it ALL! The word of God is living and active – sharper than a two-edged sword. Luther could have started a massive fire in the city (that's what conflagration means), but that would have PALED in comparison to what he did instead. No, rather than starting a fire, Luther simply and faithfully set the word of God before the people. And it was as if he released a lion from its cage! The word of God is far more powerful than we understand.

In the coming chapters, the church is going to continue to grow in Jerusalem. It's going to extend out to Judea and Samaria. Eventually, we'll find Paul preaching in Rome. This book tells us the story of how the church reached the nations!

But they didn't do it with politics. They didn't do it with weapons. They didn't do it with the latest church growth strategies or tactics. They devoted themselves to the word of God.

² Martin Luther as quoted by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1950), 212.

And you will never find a healthy church that is not devoted to that same conviction. The second mark of a healthy church is that it is:

2. Devoted to the fellowship

I want to point out that there is a difference between “fellowship” and “*the* fellowship.” Fellowship can be used to describe what happens when two or three of us get together for a coffee. That is certainly important, and those small, intimate gatherings are a piece of what Luke is highlighting here, but he doesn’t just say “fellowship.” He refers to THE fellowship. He is referring primarily here to the church-wide, large-scale gathering of the saints.

In the early days of the church, Christians were still permitted to gather at the Jewish temple, and so this group of 3,000 Christ followers did just that. They assembled in the eastern part of the outer court – a section referred to as Solomon’s Portico – and they listened to the teaching of the Apostles and prayed together. That’s where we will find them in our passage next week.

They made a *priority* of assembling. They *devoted themselves* to the fellowship. The early church understood that there was something special that happened when the congregation came together. Do you believe that to be true? In Hebrews 10:24-25, the Apostle instructs us:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

These people in Acts had been transformed by the gospel, and one evidence of that transformation was that they *wanted* to be together. Look at how many times the word “together” appears in this passage! Nobody twisted their arm. They understood the importance. They *loved* coming together to learn and worship. There was nowhere else they would rather be! THAT is a mark of a healthy church, and THAT is what I pray that our kids will see modelled in this place.

At the risk of being accused of legalism, I want to suggest that this is an area where our generation has proven woefully unhealthy. We *don’t* prioritize assembling together. We *don’t* devote ourselves to the fellowship. And we are modelling that unhealth for the next generation.

Now, sickness happens, and going away for vacation is well and good, but on any given Sunday 30% of the believers who *could* gather and who *should* gather are missing. And when the body is regularly forced to operate without 30% of its organs – well, I’m no doctor, but I think that’s a fair indicator of unhealth. We will be a church that walks with a limp unless and until that changes.

I have often said it from this pulpit, and I’ll say it again: The most impactful moments on a Sunday morning often come *after* the programmed service has ended. It’s that conversation that you have with that visitor before he slips back out into the world – it’s the prayer that you pray with that woman who is hurriedly wiping away the tears as she lingers in her seat – it’s the question you ask of that teenager who’s processing all that he’s heard – it’s in *those* conversations where discipleship happens. We have to be intentional about seeking out those opportunities and, can I let you in on a secret? They are most readily found when the church assembles together! Do you want to grow as a disciple maker? Devote yourself to the fellowship! Sit in a different seat than you sat in last Sunday. And block out ten minutes after the service to pursue one meaningful conversation. That kind of fellowship is a sure mark of a healthy church.

Next, a healthy church is:

3. Devoted to the breaking of bread

Now, there is some debate surrounding what exactly Luke has in mind here. It could be a general reference to the sharing of meals – he uses the expression that way later in Acts. Yet, as one commentator notes:

Yet it is difficult to believe that Luke had in mind here only an ordinary meal, placing the expression, as he does, between two such religiously loaded terms as “the fellowship” and “prayer.”³

This leads many to believe that Luke is referring here to the Lord’s Supper. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he gathered with his disciples, and they shared a meal together. Luke describes it:

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 290.

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19 ESV)

We refer to this commemorative meal with the names “the Lord’s Supper” or “Communion” or “the Eucharist.” This meal is an ordinance – meaning, it is a practice that was ordained by Jesus himself for the life of the church – and it has always been a central aspect of the church’s worship.

I am going to argue that THIS is what Luke had in mind when he wrote that they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. A healthy church returns to the table often. So much of the Christian life centers around remembering. And, in the Lord’s Supper, our memory is powerfully stimulated. As Matthew Henry notes:

The Lord’s supper is a sermon to the eye.⁴

As the bread is broken, we tangibly see that Jesus – the only perfect man who ever lived – the Son of God – was physically broken for us. As we drink the wine, we see and taste and smell the reality that Jesus’ blood was shed in our place. As we eat and drink, we receive a tangible reminder that, though we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and though the wages of sin is death, our debt has been paid in full! We are forgiven! We are cleansed! We are loved! This is the gospel, and if we lose sight of this, then we lose sight of everything. We need to remember.

Jesus loves us. He knows what’s best for us. And he ordered us to do this until he returns. The early church didn’t take that lightly. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. You will never find a healthy church that doesn’t do likewise. Some will return weekly. Some, like us, will return once a month. But every health church will return regularly to the table to remember the gospel.

Next, we learn in this snapshot that a healthy church is:

4. Devoted to prayer

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 37145.

This is where we first found the church after Jesus' ascension:

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (Acts 1:14 ESV)

This is where we found the church when it was decided that another Apostle was to be appointed:

And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen (Acts 1:24 ESV)

This is almost certainly what they were doing on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the church:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, **they were all together in one place**. (Acts 2:1 ESV)

This is where we will find the church time and time again in the Book of Acts. In times of crisis, they will be in prayer; in times of fruitfulness, they will be in prayer; in times of worship, they will be in prayer; as they send missionaries, they will pray; as they seek direction, they will pray. As J.I. Packer so powerfully puts it:

Men who know their God are before anything else men who pray, and the first point where their zeal and energy for God's glory come to expression is in their prayers... If there is little energy for such prayer, and little consequent practice of it, this is a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God.⁵

This vibrant, healthy church understood where her power came from!

It's also worth noting that the prayer that Luke is highlighting here is corporate prayer. "The prayer" is happening in the context of the Apostle's teaching, the fellowship and the breaking of bread.

There is something special – something powerful – about praying in community. For some of you, you've never had that experience. Let this be the year that changes!

⁵ J.I. Packer as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Prayer That Turns The World Upside Down*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 45.

Our theme verse for this year is from Luke 11:1 where we read:

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1 ESV)

Lord, teach us to pray! There has never been a healthy, vibrant, flourishing church without a faithful, humble commitment to prayer. Let this be found in us!

I will move quickly now with these last observations. Luke set those first four marks apart as a distinct summary of the life of this young church, but in the content that follows I see a few other marks that I would consider “honourable mentions.” For example, we learn in this passage that a healthy church is:

5. Filled with grateful people

Look again at verse 46:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. (Acts 2:46-47a ESV)

Day by day, they were glad. Day by day, they were a people of praise.

A healthy church – a church where the gospel is clearly proclaimed and where saved men and women equip and encourage and love one another – is a grateful church!

Alternatively, a church that is marked by grumbling and dissatisfaction – a church that devotes its time to fighting over minutiae and muttering about the glory days long past – is a church that gives every indication of deep, fundamental rot.

When we understand the cross – when we see our sin and recognize the unimaginable display of love that God demonstrated for us in sending His Son – all of the superficial things that used to disquiet our souls become so small, don't they?

There are 100 people in this room who used to be dead in sin who are now alive because of Christ! Isn't that a miracle? There are 100 people in this room who could be anywhere else but who are instead worshiping Jesus together! That is tremendous! And 55 kids are in the rooms next door being disciplined by 15 older believers! Amazing!

Now, we can all find something to complain about if we want to. The music is too loud, or perhaps too quiet. The people around me are dressed too casually, or they're dressed too formally. It is EASY to grumble. In fact, one of the primary attacks of the devil is to sow dissatisfaction into our lives so that we will distrust the goodness of God. As Sinclair Ferguson notes:

He knows he cannot destroy the salvation of God's people; but he is bent, indeed hell-bent - as he was in Eden - on destroying our peace, liberty, and joy in God.⁶

That's his game plan! Don't give him an inch. People who have been transformed by the gospel are grateful people! They eat together with gladness! They are marked by praise! Let that be increasingly true of us.

Next, a healthy church is:

6. Abounding in generosity

We see this in verses 44-45:

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. (Acts 2:44-45 ESV)

Now, I don't want you to misinterpret these verses. They didn't surrender *every* possession to some form of common trust. This wasn't an early expression of communism. No, later in the book we will see that there were believers in the church who possessed houses – even large houses – where the church could assemble. This verse isn't suggesting that true Christians rescind any

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 133.

claim to personal property. But what it IS saying is that this was a church that was RADICALLY generous. As one commentator notes:

Theirs was not a utopian vision, but the expression in real life of the love and care that believers in Jesus extended in practical terms for one another.⁷

With a fresh understanding of the price that Jesus paid to cover over their sins, these people held their worldly possessions loosely and they actively looked for opportunities to meet the needs around them. They understood that their *stuff* was temporary, but that the people around them were eternal. And they conducted themselves accordingly.

I want to take a moment to commend you here. Over the last ten years, by God's grace, I have seen this in you! You have given sacrificially to people who were in crisis. You have rolled up your sleeves and jumped into the work when tragedy has struck. You have given of your time to people who have needed a listening ear, even when you seemingly had no time to give. I have witnessed that kind of sacrificial generosity here in this church, and it is a mark of health. Praise God for what He's done and will continue to do in and through you.

Next, and flowing out of all that we've seen, a healthy church is:

7. **Compelling**

Luke tells us that this early church was:

praising God and **having favor with all the people**. And **the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved**. (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)

A clear proclamation of God's unchanging truth is compelling in a vague and ever-shifting culture.

Regular, authentic fellowship is compelling in an isolated, fractured community.

⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 181-182.

A tangible explanation and demonstration of how we can be forgiven for our sins is compelling in a condemning, vindictive climate.

Faith-filled, expectant, intimate prayer is compelling to the self-made men and women who don't know how to climb out of the hopeless mess of their lives.

As this church in Jerusalem continued to gather each day in worship and fellowship, the community took notice, and day by day more were coming to Christ.

Joyful, generous people are a compelling witness in a grumpy, stingy world.

Listen: A healthy church is a powerful witness. When we put first things first in this place – when we repent and live like the followers of Jesus that we were made and saved to be – our neighbours notice, and our city changes. But that leads to the last mark that I want to make sure that we see here this morning. A healthy church is a church that is:

8. Empowered and emboldened by the Gospel of Jesus Christ

A healthy church isn't fuelled by guilt. A healthy church isn't empowered by shame. True health only comes from a deep and transforming understanding of the gospel.

This church was made up of the 3,000 Jewish men and women who had been converted at Pentecost. These are the people who had heard a roar like thunder and had rushed into the streets during Pentecost to figure out what was going on. They were met by 120 followers of Jesus proclaiming the glory of God in languages that they had never learned. They stood enraptured as Peter boldly stood up and preached a powerful sermon. He told them that Jesus had ushered in the last days. He told them that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He told them that Jesus was the reigning King. And he declared to them that they were guilty. They had crucified the Lord. They had rejected the King. That was the sermon. And Luke tells us:

Now when they heard this **they were cut to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37 ESV)

Peter called them to repentance – to turn away from their sin and rebellion. He called them to be baptized – to public proclaim their allegiance to Jesus Christ and to declare their faith in his completed work on their behalf. And he called them to receive the Holy Spirit – to receive the promised Helper that Christ has sent to indwell the church.

3,000 people went through the waters of baptism that day. 3,000 people were filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit that day. And I need you to know that the health that we see in verses 42-47 is an OVERFLOW of that gospel transformation that we saw last Sunday. I need you to see that, because I need you to understand that we can't be a healthy church like THIS unless we have a healthy grasp of THAT! It is only when God opens our eyes to see and receive Christ, and when He fills us with His Holy Spirit that we CHANGE! Only the Gospel does that!

This church in Jerusalem was filled with genuine, passionate, on-fire-for-Jesus believers, and everything else that we've observed today is an overflow of that reality! They were marked by all of these signs of health, not because they were forcing themselves to do things that they didn't want to do, but because they had received new hearts that had new desires.

A healthy church never, ever, ever takes her eyes off of Jesus. A healthy church never grows tired of the gospel. A healthy church understands that she can't do anything in her own strength.

So, Redeemer City Church, let's resolve this morning to remember exactly where our help comes from. Let's pursue health, and let's strive to grow in everything that we've seen in this passage. But let's remember that true, healthy change, will only be possible as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. To that end, let's pray together.