

South Woods: A Tree Planted
Acts 2:41–47
August 17, 2025

I've mentioned a couple times how this series came about due to some reflection on the new/prospective members' class. And some of our thinking was that *many* of you haven't attended that class in five, ten, or maybe even fifteen years. My own wife hasn't heard the material since February of 2008.

Is that a big deal? Well, it *might* be if the things said in that membership class are important. And it might be a big deal if we're the kind of people that need reminders.

Well, I certainly hope the things we cover in that class are important. And I am fairly confident we *are* the kinds of people that occasionally need reminding. And I think that, in part, because while my wife hasn't attended that class since 2008, I've attended parts of it 30+ times. And each time I do I—personally—have been reminded how easy it is to forget the most essential matters. So, with that in mind, this series will draw on *some* of those things we emphasize in that class.

And today I want to begin with how that class begins, which is, talking about the history of this local church.¹ Now, when I teach that, I have about 25 minutes to cover 38 years. And because my time is so abbreviated, I decided a few years back to group decades, giving each decade something of a chapter title. So, with 38 years in mind, I have four “chapters”: 1987–1997, 1997–2007, 2007–2017, and 2018 to now.² Now, I bring all this up, in part, because the chapter titles I give those decades might sound familiar. They all have imagery regarding trees, or more broadly, horticulture. For example, I use “planted” for 1987–1997, “growing” for 97–07, “multiplying” for 2007–2017, etc.

And I bring that up because the passage I use to describe the “planted” season is our passage today. In my mind, Acts 2 is the clearest biblical snapshot of what life looked like in the early church.

In that chapter, we read about a church planted in Jerusalem, a church *God* planted—one He intended to use, not merely in the book of Acts, but for centuries to come.

1. God plants a church (vv. 41–42, 44a, 47b)

Now, I can't spend *too* much time catching us up. But I assume you recall much of Acts 1 and 2. Jesus has risen from the dead. He's met with the disciples for weeks, speaking of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). They ask questions about the timing of said Kingdom. Then, the way I like to say it, Jesus responds, “You want to see a Kingdom? Watch this.” And He ascends to the Father to sit at His right hand, enthroned (Acts 1:9–10).

Christ, having lived and died and risen from the grave, ascends. And then He does something else. According to Acts 2:33, He pours out all that the disciples see and hear in Acts 2. What did they see? What did *He* bring about? Pentecost, when God briefly reversed Babel, putting on vivid, even audible, display a unity that transcended languages. In fulfillment of what the prophet Joel wrote, the Spirit came in power.

What happened after that? Peter stands up and preaches the gospel—from Joel, from Psalm 16, and from Psalm 110. Before a massive crowd in Jerusalem, Peter makes quite plain that *all* those

¹ We do this, in part, to emphasize the things we value. I teach that for about 25 minutes, setting up Jim to talk about what we value most: the gospel.

² Clearly, we're in the middle of this particular “chapter.”

passages have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the King the Scriptures promised; He is the One His people awaited. Or in Peter's words, **Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified** (Acts 2:36).

And though only a few verses prior they'd asked, **"What does this mean?"** (Acts 2:12), after Peter's declaration of the gospel, the crowds had a *different* question: **"What shall we do?"** (Acts 2:37). Peter answers, **"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ"** (Acts 2:38).

And, then, many of them do. Which is where our text begins, in verse 41 today: **So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.** Note, first, that *everything* that follows in this passage concerns those **who had received his word**. What does *that* mean? It means those that *turned* from self and *believed* in the One Peter preached about. How do we know that? Verse 44, continuing to describe this *same* group, calls them **those who had believed**. Imagine an equal sign between these two clauses: "Those who had received His word" *are* "those who had believed."

And by the way, keep in mind that only a few weeks prior men and women in *that* same city had gathered in fury and shouted repeatedly, "Crucify Him" (Luke 23:18-25). They'd *hated* Jesus. Then, on the Day of Pentecost, in the *same* city, 3000 said, "We're with *Him*." And further, they did so publicly, in the waters of baptism.

How might such a change be possible? Don't miss the phrase in verse 41: "and that day there were added" a phrase further explained when that *same* verb returns in verse 47: **and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.**

There's no contradiction in Luke's mind. There *are* those that received his word (v. 41). There *are* those who had believed (v. 44). And *they* are those who were added (v. 41), those whom the Lord was adding to their number (v. 47).

Why bring that out? Because this is a fulfillment of what Jesus said in Matthew 16, to Peter, **I will build my church** (Matt. 16:18). Jesus told Peter He'd do it. Then in Acts 2 Peter saw it happen. This church in Jerusalem was planted by God.

Now, why say, "church" and not "3000 individuals"? Because of what verses 42–47 go on to describe. Let's hear verse 41 and 42 together: **So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**

It's instructive as one reads through the narrative of Acts to note that those who believed in Christ didn't *then* go out and start following Him on their *own*. Instead, God brought a people to Himself; and He *also* brought them—*added* them—to one another.

Now, if I might connect this, when my 25 minutes are up in the membership class, I've said a lot of things. I've said a lot of names—of members and missionaries. I've said a lot of places—even mentioned somewhere called the Alamo. Because when you do history, *people* are seen to be doing things in certain places.

However, I end my session saying something like this: If we look at these 38 years rightly, meaning, theologically, we know the history of South Woods began a long time before 1987. Yes, people did things in those four decades, but it was because Someone *else* acted. In fact, the history of this congregation is the history of Christ's rule—His providence, His provision, His mercy—on behalf of a people.

Said another way, while we strongly hold to the sovereignty of God in salvation—the doctrine of soteriology—we affirm it just as strongly in our doctrine of ecclesiology—that is, our doctrine of the church.

One of my favorite stories about this involves a conversation Debbie Jones and I had about a former member named Michael Dirrim. If you don't know Michael, he was an intern that South Woods sent out to pastor 15–20 years ago. He's now in Oklahoma, where he and his wife are from. In this conversation with Debbie, she told me that *before* Michael came to Memphis she knew someone out in Oklahoma. That person knew Michael. And as you might expect, Debbie had a role in telling Michael about this church. When they moved, he came and joined. He and his sweet family were here for years. If you know them, you love them.

What Debbie didn't know when she was telling *me* about *her* role in the Dirrim's landing at South Woods is that one summer Saturday in 2007, as newlyweds, Julie and I were walking into our apartment building. A guy was sitting outside our building in a camping chair looking over his sermon notes for the next day. I started talking to him. I asked him what he was preaching and *where* he was preaching it. That guy's name was Michael Dirrim, and that conversation was the first time I ever heard of South Woods.

And that's just a footnote on page 64,229 of what God has purposed for this particular body. In fact, if we attempted to grasp *all* the factors that led each of us to August 17, 2025 in this room, there would be too many dots to connect.

Paul emphasizes this aspect of God's sovereignty in his letter to the local church at Corinth: **God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired** (1 Cor. 12:18).

God is sovereign over salvation. And God is sovereign in the planting and preservation of His people—the church. And that's not *just* in the past, that's true in the present, and the future. And it's important to point this out in the *first* week of this series. Because everything we're going to talk about for the next few weeks is something *He* brings about. We get to participate, but He's the source.

So, back to Acts 2, those that received his word didn't believe in Jesus and then start following Him on their own. God brought a people to Himself, and He also brought them to one another. And He did so for His purposes.

2. God plants a church to do something (vv. 42–47)

As a heads up, I'm going to be a little brief—and certainly not exhaustive—here. Because in one sense the main ideas in these verses will be unpacked in the coming weeks. Next week we'll talk about the church and the Word. The following week we'll talk about the church and fellowship, followed by a week on mission and, then, a week on worship. And I think as we walk through this passage, you'll see *each* of these emphases.

So, for example, in verse 42 Luke begins to describe what the church in Jerusalem began to do: **They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching.** That's *next* week's emphasis—the church and the Word. We'll introduce it today.

But before we briefly look at each aspect, we might consider what it means that the early church was “continually devoting themselves.” The verb means to “occupy oneself diligently with”; to “hold fast to”; “to pay persistent attention to”; or “continually to be in.”³ As you can see, “to devote themselves” is *not* something that merely occupied eight times a year, seven minutes a week, or six percent of their energy. If you thought of someone that has “devoted themselves” to something in those kind of terms, you wouldn't call that devotion a hobby, or some kind a side-hustle.

³ Scott Kellum, *Acts*, EGGNT, 43.

So, with *that* kind of ardent devotion in mind, Luke writes that those in the early church **were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching**. Now, for the church in Jerusalem in Acts 2 to be devoted to the Apostles' teaching actually meant to be taught *by* the Apostles themselves. Peter, James, and John would've *all* been there, teaching that congregation regularly. I think we all can admit that's *quite* the lineup.⁴

And yet, Peter in the pulpit is *not* the case with us, nor is it for *every* other church during the thousands of years of church history. So, how might believers in 2025 devote themselves continually to the Apostles' teaching? John Stott writes, "Contemporary devotion to the Apostles' teaching will mean submission to the authority of the New Testament."⁵ So, while James, John, and Peter aren't *here*, they did write a good bit of the church's curriculum. And *together*, we're to devote ourselves to it.

To press this a little further, to be devoted to the Apostles' teaching isn't *merely* something that happens on Sundays. It does happen in these moments. It *must*. But the context of this passage, and the book of Acts itself, describes devotion to the Apostles' teaching in the early church's day-to-day *and* before their unbelieving neighbors. So, being devoted to the Apostle's teaching means you're someone that submits to the Word of God. The banner over your home, the insignia over your life, is that you listen to, believe, and are guided by Scripture.

That was the case with the church at Jerusalem. We aim for that to be the case here at South Woods—both in our gatherings and in our lives. More on that, *next* week.

As Luke goes on, we see that's not *all* the early church was devoted to. Verse 42 goes on to say that **they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship**. We'll give fuller attention to fellowship in a couple weeks. But, to introduce it, this is the *first* time in the New Testament *that* word is used.⁶ And it's not incidental that Luke uses it *immediately* after what happened at Pentecost. That's significant because the Spirit Himself is the One that makes fellowship possible. *He* brings about the commonality, the shared life, that we see running throughout the New Testament.

And we don't have to go far to see it. The verses *immediately* following describe what the Spirit brought about. Luke writes in verse 44: **And all those who had believed were together**. That means a number of things, but one aspect—maybe the *chief* aspect—of its meaning is that the people of God gathered. We see this shared life—this commonality—in who these Spirit-indwelt believers spent their time with.

Verse 46 says they gathered regularly at the temple. It goes on to say they met often from house to house. And then Luke writes that as they **broke bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together**. To put it simply, the New Testament church spent time *together*.

By the Spirit God united a people. That unity was expressed in their gathering together. But the Spirit did *more* than change their calendar. He changed minds. In fact, verse 46 says their gatherings were marked by this reality: **Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple**. When they believe the gospel, the Spirit transformed them, and not just *aspects* of them, but *all* of them. In fact, a couple chapters later, Luke describes this *same* church with these words: **And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul** (Acts 4:32).

That verse makes clear that this commonality, this shared life, meant not *only* that they were of one mind, but also that they *felt* and experienced life together. Verse 43 says this: **Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe**. Not one or two felt awe. *Everyone* did. And then in verse 46 Luke once again describes their collective affections, that when they were together, they were so **with gladness and sincerity of heart**.

⁴ I'm sorry.

⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST, 82.

⁶ John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 1st ed., 69.

What Acts 2 describes is that what happened to one, happened to *more* than one. This is what the Spirit produces, when He in might connects otherwise scattered individuals one to another in a living organism we call the body of Christ. Paul echoes this reality in his letter to the church at Corinth: **if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored; all the members rejoice with it** (1 Cor. 12:26).

This shared life meant they spent time together, thought together, experienced things together, but it *also* affected how they took care of one another. We see this in verse 42: **And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common.** As you might know, the word for “fellowship” actually has the word “common” implanted in it.⁷ It’s *in* the word, vital to its meaning. We’ve already seen this commonality play out in all kinds of ways, but verse 45 goes on to say that the early church, **began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as any had need.**

Now, later in the New Testament we’ll read that this same church experienced quite a few difficult financial realities. Paul, in fact, will take up a collection for *this* body. And yet *here* we see, that from this fellowship’s inception, when someone in the church had need others in the body showed up to meet it.⁸

Why? What would possess someone to do something like that?

Because to have *this* kind of fellowship is not only to gather on occasion, to clock in and out of relationship, it’s to participate in something *together*. It’s to share in something “above and beyond the relationship itself.”⁹

So, though we’ve *briefly* seen this commonality—this shared life, this *fellowship*—in how the early church thought, what they felt, *and* how they treated those they spent their time with, finally we’ll note how this shared life affected what they *did* when they were together. Verse 42 says that they devoted themselves, not only to the Apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread, but also to **prayer**. When they gathered, they didn’t neglect or forget the One who’d brought them together. In fact, they called out to Him together. When they gathered, they worshiped. Which is what verse 47 describes, the people of God, **praising God.**

This is a snapshot of their life together. These are the things they were devoted to. The early church didn’t do a thousand things. But they were committed to, devoted themselves to, a few things, that is, the word, fellowship, and worship. And because of that, we read in verse 47: **the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.**

In Jerusalem, God planted a church, in order that He might do something *through* them. And some of that is to teach us.

3. God plants a church that instructs us

How? How might a church that gathered two thousand years ago instruct us?

First, by reminding us of what defines us. That is, if we’re *here*, it’s God’s doing. He builds the church, through His Son, and by the Spirit. He brought us to Himself, and brought us together.

Secondly, those things the early church were devoted to are instructive for us. We don’t have to do *everything* under the sun, trying to be the true and better Rotary Club. We’re the local church, a people purchased by the life and death and risen life of Christ.

⁷ Fellowship is *koinonia*. Common is *koinos*—(κοινωνία and κοινός).

⁸ In chapter 5 Peter will affirm that Ananias and Sapphira’s house—and even the proceeds of their house’s sale—were their own (5:4). Further, about 10 years later, Luke tells us about Mary’s house in Acts 12. So, just for the record, Luke’s not abolishing private ownership.

⁹ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC, 160.

So, we devote ourselves to the Word of the One that lives, the One that united us. This is why we walk slowly through books of the Bible in this hour. This is why we do the same thing in our Sunday morning Bible studies. This is why, regardless of what the world applauds as good and true, we lean on what God declared. We believe He's spoken. And we believe what He's spoken is sufficient for life and godliness.

And, like the early church, we too devote ourselves to fellowship. A shared Christ leads us to a shared *life*. So, when one mourns, we show up. When one bears a burden, we bear it with them. We spend time together. We break bread together. And we do so with gladness and sincerity of heart.

Because we have new hearts. We've been given an affection for the One who loved us, died in our place, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father's right hand. When we gather, like the early church, we plead together for needs. And, in a few moments, we'll give Him praise, expressing together gratitude for what God's done in His Son.

In summary, in looking at Acts 2 we're reminded that—like them—we've been brought together because God purposed it. And secondly, we're reminded that we've been brought together to do what He's purposed.

Conclusion

Maybe you've heard someone describe Acts 2 as borderline idealistic. As in, it *can't* be instructive. It's too lofty, too "pie in the sky." Well, I'm not sure I agree.

I noted earlier those chapters of South Woods' history mentioned in the membership class, decades entitled "planted," "growing," "spreading/multiplying," etc. What I *didn't* mention is what I've titled this current chapter, the one we're in the *middle* of, living in.

That chapter is entitled "rooted." And, in that class, after I mention *that*, I seek to emphasize this: what God plants, endures.

I'm not close to convinced this passage is too idealistic. Because much of what I read *there*, I see *here*: devotion to the Word, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, praise, and the Lord adding to our number.

So, as we begin this series, the aim isn't to chastise, saying, "You're not doing enough. Or, you need to do *more*." Instead, the aim is this: Look at what God's done in His Son. Look at what He's doing by His Spirit. And let's give thanks.