

God's Work Amongst His People

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 5:12-21 / May 18, 2025

Introduction:

What should the primary focus of the local church be? How we answer that question often determines how we think the church should function. One group of people might say, "the church should primarily do things that focus on building mature disciples of Christ." The other group, "the church should primarily do things that focus on reaching the lost." But what does God desire for the local church to focus on? The answer is both. God desires His church to focus on building mature disciples of Christ and reaching the lost. The real question is, how does God intend to accomplish both through the local church? Our passage today helps answer that question. Notice how Luke starts by pointing back to his summary passage in Acts 2:42-47. Look at verse 12, "Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles." Pause there. In Acts 2:42, Luke described the regular pattern of church life, as the church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, gathering regularly to break bread, pray and care for each other. Then, he says in verse 43, "And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." Note how Luke repeats the same statement almost verbatim in our passage. But his repetition goes beyond just this statement. In Acts 2:42-4:22, he begins with awe over wonders performed, moves to the church's unity and care for each other, shows Peter healing a lame man and proclaiming the gospel, and ends with a trial before the Sanhedrin. From Acts 4:32-5:42, each element is repeated. Luke starts with the church's unity and care, shows a response of fear, or awe, describes wonders performed, and ends with the apostles' proclamation of the gospel at a trial before the Sanhedrin. Now, look at how Acts 2:46-47 and Acts 5:42 both ends. At the end of chapter 2, the church was daily attending the temple and meeting in homes, and God was saving people. At the end of chapter 5, they were daily attending the temple and meeting in homes, while constantly teaching and preaching the gospel. This signals a pattern of church life and the extra details in Acts 4:32-5:42 reveal God's work amongst His people. In our passage, I see three primary aspects of God's work. First, in verses 12-13,

God Sets His People Apart

Notice how Luke expounds on responses to the signs and wonders God was performing. Look at verses 12-13, "Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem." Note first Luke's movement from "the people" to "they" in verse 12, and "them" to "the people" in verse 13, establishing a distinction between each group. Second, note the distinction in verse 12. Signs and wonders were performed "among the people," but the church was "together in Solomon's portico." Finally, pay attention to verse 13, "None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem." The term for join means "to stay near or be united with." Though the people thought highly of the church, no one joined them. Why? Look back to verse 11, "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things." God's purifying presence left genuine fear in people hearts and verses 12-13 show two results of this fear. It caused those inside the church to come closer to God together, and those outside the church to stay at a distance. Church, the question isn't whether people should fear God, but what will people do with that fear. Will it cause them to draw near, or withdraw? Let this sink in. God's presence amongst His people set them apart and caused the world to stay away. Consider an implication for us today. When we gather as a church, is there a reality of God's presence that keeps the world from joining us? This is the opposite of what the modern church seeks, isn't it? We want to remove every barrier to make church more comfortable and attractive for the world. We soften the demands of God's holiness and compromise the church's purity in the name of grace and remove offensive things from the gospel like the wrath of God and Christ's substitutionary payment for sin. We prioritize production over depth in worship, give feel good messages that tickle ears, and spend most of our resources on programs that sprinkle in God's Word in at best. Family, this is not the picture of the early church.

The gathered early church was avoided by the world because our holy God was clearly in their midst. Now, before we think God's goal is to isolate the church and never have it grow, consider the second aspect of God's work in verse 14,

God Expands His People through Faith

At first glance, verses 13 and 14 appear to contradict each other. Look at verse 14, "And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women." Wait a minute Luke, you said, "none of the rest dared to join," and now you are saying "more than ever" people were added to the church. Which one is it? Pay attention to the details, "more than ever believers were added to the Lord." It was only after believing in the gospel that people were added to the church. What changed? When they discovered God's mercy and saving grace, the awe and fear that kept them away moved them to draw near. Imagine it like this. You're hiking in the woods and suddenly hear the sound of heavy footsteps. You turn and see a large bear charging towards you. Your heart would be racing with fear, and your instinct would be to run, right? What would change if you knew the bear wasn't charging to attack you, but to protect you from a growling wolf behind you? That fear from the awesome sight of the bear, turns into peace, and maybe even joy. I think this describes the reality of knowing our holy and awesome God. When we see His glory, and understand His true nature, we have genuinely fear of Him with an instinct to run. But, when we discover His wrath is not directed toward us, and He is working to protect us from harmful things, that fear and awe of His power and holiness actually draws us closer to Him. How do we discover that? By knowing Christ made the necessary payment for our sins. And that, through repentance and trust in His saving work on the cross, we are no longer under God's wrath but are part of His chosen people whom He protects and purifies for their good. Here is what we need to understand. Turning from fear to faith starts by understanding of the very real and fearful presence of God. Follow the flow of verse 13-14 in light of this. In verse 13, "no one dared to join" the gathered church. Then, in verse 14, "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of men and women." Luke is drawing a correlation between God's purifying presence setting His people apart and Him expanding through faith. Through the church's sanctification, God was moving even more mightily to grow it through faith. How does that happen if people wouldn't dare to join the church? Well, one way is described in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is primarily speaking of the value of prophecy over uninterpreted tongues, but listen to how he concludes, "But if all prophesy," which often entails a declaration of God's mighty works. If all are prophesy of the mighty works of God, "and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." Don't get distracted by what prophecy may or may not be. Look at what Paul is saying. When an unbeliever notices God is really among us, God's presence convicts and moves them to worship Him. One way God adds believers to the church is by convicting them through His presence amongst His people. However, the primarily way is the third aspect of God's work amongst His people in verses 15-21,

God Uses His People to Spread the Word of Life

The flow of these verses struck me as I was reading them. Look at verses 14-16, "And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed." "So that" tells us this is a purpose or results clause. Notice what follows. The results of the church being set apart and multitudes of men and women coming to faith was people coming in droves to be healed. Note how they assumed Peter was some kind of powerful holy man, just like they did in Acts 3, thinking even his shadow might heal them. Note also how they came from towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those "afflicted with unclean spirits." This recalls two things.

First is Peter's words from Acts 3:12-16, where he said, "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all." Second, is Mark's description of what took place with Jesus in Mark 6:55-56, where he says people, "ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard [Jesus] was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well." Luke main point is to show the continuing presence and power of Jesus to set people free. Finally, note how Luke says they were all healed. Though they were coming with false assumptions, God healed them all by the faith that is through Jesus. Look at how Luke continues in verses 17-21, "But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.' And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach." Let's move quickly through this to see Luke's focus. Luke starts by contrasting people coming to be healed with the Sadducees coming in jealousy. Then, he contrasts the Sadducee's attempt to show their authority by publicly throwing the apostles in prison with God's power and authority in releasing them. The "angel of the Lord" always indicates God moving in power. And when the apostles are released, they are recommissioned and told, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." To stand means "to stand firm or hold your ground." God's ultimate aim wasn't to heal people and send them on their way. It was for them hear the words of life, and that would come through the apostles steadfastly and resolutely declaring the words of this life. They were called to do this in the temple because that was the center of life for the Jewish people. We'll come back to this in a moment. Let's first ask, what are "the words of this life" they should speak? John 1:4 tells us "In him [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of men." In John 6:35, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." In John 14:6, He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And John says again in 1 John 1:1-2, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." The words of life to declare are the person and work of Jesus Christ. How Jesus gives true life to men, satisfying our heart hungers and thirsts. And how, through Him, we can be reconciled to God and have eternal life and fellowship with the Father and Son. These the words of true life. Nothing else will satisfy our hearts. If you are hearing these words for the first time today, repent of your sin and turn to Christ today. Now, consider what the flow of our passage reveals. God uses His people to spread the words of this life while He works in mighty ways. Before we think this is only through the apostles, in Acts 6:8, a church member named Stephen is used by God to do great wonders and signs, and then proclaiming the words of this life in Acts 7. In Acts 8:6, a church member named Philip performing signs after preaching the words of this life. And in Acts 14:3, Barnabas is used, together with Paul, to speak the words of this life while the Lord granted signs and wonders to be done by his hands. Family, God doesn't use only the apostles as His witness, he uses church members to speak the words of this life and work wonders among the people.

And note how this all happened outside of the gathered church. Think back on how they were sent into the central place of Jewish life. The primary mode of evangelism in the church wasn't an outreach program that brought people to church gatherings, it was people sent out to share the gospel. The way God added more believers than ever was by the church speaking the words of life away from the gathered church. God's pattern is to gather His people to strengthen their faith, purify their witness, and delight them with His presence. Then, send them to their spheres of life to speak the words of true life in Christ.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, what is God calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of our passage today? Maybe it is reorienting our understanding of how God works amongst His people. Do we need to believe it is right to have a holy fear of God? Do we need to desire God's purifying presence to set us apart from the world? Do we need to see our mission to speak to people the words of true life outside of church functions? We gather each week to be strengthened and equipped and then are sent out on a rescue mission to share the words of this life. Maybe you don't know where to start. One of the most helpful ways I learned to share the gospel was to look for bridges in conversations. These are ways to move from a regular conversation into the hope of the gospel. At your workplace, you may have a colleague who is struggling with anxiety or stress. In your conversations with them, look for ways to share how faith in Christ has brought you peace. When you're out in public and notice someone looking downcast, offer a genuine compliment or ask how their day is going. Then, find an opening to share how Christ meets you in tough times. Maybe there is someone at school who shares how they feel isolated and alone. As you talk with them, find a way to share about how you are helped by knowing Jesus is always with you. Then, offer prayer with people for their situation. Then, pray with them and share a scripture that provides hope. One way to constantly share the gospel is to look for ways to move into gospel hope in everyday conversations about life. Family, our passage teaches us to gather with an expectation to be refreshed by God's awe-inspiring presence and equipped with His word. Then, leave with a desire to share the life you received from God's presence with the world. God gathers His set apart people to grow in Christ and scatters them to take Christ to the world. And through this, He expands His people through faith. As the Lord leads your heart to respond, you can sit and reflect or stand and sing. You are always welcome to come and kneel before Him or come receive prayer from a member of our prayer team worshipping with lanyards on. Let's ask God to do a mighty work amongst us to fulfill His aims in building His church. Would you pray with me?