

## **FELLOWSHIP: A PLACE OR A PEOPLE**

ACTS 2:42-47

How do people assess churches these days? What are they looking for when they go? A cool building? Gifted preacher? Awesome programs for the kids? 100% Arabica beans?

I have the privilege of leading a ministry team that helps our new people find their place here. My team and I meet with them one-on-one to get to know them and always ask one very important question: What are your hopes in connecting with our church? We get lots of answers, but the number one answer is fellowship.

That seems like a great answer. I hear it said in Christian circles all the time. We often begin events or gatherings with open times of fellowship. Someone may even get a wild idea to use it in the name of a church. We even have a Hall named after it! But what the heck is it? “Fellowship” is a churchy word thrown around with abandon these days. We use it for hanging out. We use it for friendship. We use it for social interaction. And while it is these things, oh man, it is so much more.

I got to read about a church this past week that I think really has this fellowship thing nailed. It’s a church defined by intimacy and unity and care for one another, all seeking after the Lord together. It’s in a book called Acts, and we’re going to read about it together this morning.

Last week Randy kicked off our Life Together series by explaining that we’re learning about the church. He defined what the church is: “A New Covenant, Christ-centered community of the Spirit.”

This morning we’re going to look at what the church does in the context of fellowship. I want to recognize and celebrate the things we’re doing well and challenge us to come away with a renewed idea of what fellowship really is and what our place is in it.

We’re going to begin in v42 but I want to remind you of what just happened in the story. As Joel prophesied centuries before and Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all who trusted in Jesus. Every believer now has the Spirit of God living in and through them. They have been given new life, they have been given a new heart with Christ-centered affections, and the way they live their lives has been completely altered. That’s what this passage is going to show us. Lets start in v42:

**<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> 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**

There are two words I want us to really understand because they frame this whole passage. The first is “fellowship.” This word is most often used these days to mean something like “being together”, but the original Greek word, *koinonia*, used here means, “to have in common”. This is way more than just hanging out. It’s a word often used to describe the intimacy and unity of a marriage relationship. **And in this context, it refers to a closely associated, generous communion characterized by active participation of everyone in the group.** Because of that, we need to recognize that Fellowship is not a place we go to, it’s something we are a part of. Fellowship is not an organization, it’s an organism. It is an active, living body on the move.

The other word I want us to get right away expresses the approach with which this fellowship operates: devoted. You’ve heard the phrase “I have to do my devotion.” This word expresses persistence, perseverance, and steadfastness. This is not a fellowship that gathered once a week for an hour and a half. Their newfound faith was a day-to-day reality and their devotion to the fellowship, to each other, was lived out in the same way.

If we understand the pouring out of the Spirit coupled with the understanding of these two words it allow us to say, **“Fellowship is a Spirit-led community of believers passionately devoted to each other and to living out God’s mission together.”** It is a reordered way of life made possible only by the work of the Spirit.

So how do they live out? We’re going to spend the rest of our time looking at how this 1<sup>st</sup> century fellowship devotes itself to each other and to the Lord. The first thing I want you to see is that **a Spirit-led fellowship grows together.** V42 tells us they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the prayers. We know that we are to be lifelong learners and God’s Word is the be the focus of our study. At Pentecost you have 3,000 who just came to faith by the work of the Spirit through Peter’s sermon. Imagine the questions you’d have if you came to believe, after the fact, that Jesus was the Messiah. You can see someone raising their hand saying “Hey, Pete, I believe Jesus is the Messiah, but I need to ask you just one question.” What an awesome learning environment it would be as Peter and the other apostles showed how the Jewish Scriptures all pointed to Jesus. And it’s the same for us. Our day of salvation is day one in a lifelong journey of learning as we devote ourselves to the study of God’s Word.

But is there any value in doing that together anymore? We have the apostles’ teaching written down now. I can sit at home and stream any number of gifted preachers who will teach me the Word. What do I need the fellowship for? I’m confident the Holy Spirit would reveal all sorts of things to you if you sat down and read God’s Word by yourself. In fact, I hope you do that. But it would be incomplete.

Consider this: There are six families in my community group. We all have kids. We have people gifted in prayer, administration, teaching, service, addicted to missions trips. We have sales and marketing people, teachers, an opera singer turned ER nurse, an IT professional and a stay-at-home mom. We have pastors and a pastor’s daughter. We have

a few who came to faith over forty years ago and someone who came to faith fourteen months ago. We have some who grew up in a Bible church, two former Catholics, a few former Baptists, we even have a few former “Metho-Baptists”. We have someone who heard the Gospel once in their youth and immediately came to faith, never to question again, and someone who wrestles with every doctrine they hear. Each of these people brings their own unique perspective to God and his Word. Their perspective helps my understanding and my perspective helps their understanding.

It’s the same with prayer. We are to pray without ceasing and our quiet, private time with the Lord should be covered in prayer. But consider how you can know God more through hearing others pray. Have you ever listened to someone confess their sin, seeking God’s mercy? Have you ever had your arm around someone as they prayed for God to intervene miraculously in a hopeless situation? What about someone thanking God for his miraculous intervention in a hopeless situation? Have you ever listened to someone so in love with the Lord that they can’t help but praise him for all that he is? One of the most meaningful times of my week is when we gather for prayer on Wednesday mornings. It’s a great privilege to pray for the requests and praises of this body. It’s also a great blessing because through you I know more about God.

CS Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, wrote of a group of friends known as the Inklings. The group consisted of Lewis, Tolkien, and Charles Williams. Williams died suddenly, Lewis wrote about it:

**“In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald’s [Tolkien’s] reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him “to myself” now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.”**

Lewis is telling us that he can know one friend only to a certain point on his own. It’s incomplete, though. But when he looks at that same friend through eyes of another, he can know so much more of him. It’s the same with Jesus. On my own, I can know Jesus only to a point. But each member of the fellowship, with their experiences, gifting, personality, struggles and triumphs, is a window I can peer through that allows me to see more fully who Jesus is. That’s why we’ve encouraged all of you to be in a group for Life Together. We are so fired up because we’ve distributed 1900 books. This is the most devoted I’ve ever seen our church about the apostles’ teaching and if you’re in a group I want you to be fired up too because **the best way to know the person of God is with the people of God.** And remember that if you start to fatigue reading at this pace. You have a ministry to the people in your group and it’s to share what God has communicated to you through his Word because a fellowship grows together.

To live in fellowship means we have to be in close proximity to one another. The second thing I want you to see is that **a Spirit-led fellowship gathers together.** V44 tells us “all who believed were together” while we see in v46 that day by day they were attending the

temple together and breaking bread in their homes. **An unmistakable characteristic of fellowship is unity.** This is a people for each other, who love each other, and who want to be together. And it wasn't just once a week on a Sunday morning! Luke again emphasizes they do it with devotion. V47 says "day by day they attended the temple together", that word translated "attended" is the same word translated as "devoted" in v42. There is a persistent gathering of this people as they worship together.

Do you recognize that our worship time here on Sundays is more than just a bunch of people meeting in the same room? It's a wonderful time to devote ourselves to the apostles' teachings, but it goes beyond that! Galatians 3:28 says "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**" Our gathering is a sign and expression of unity not only to ourselves but to an unbelieving world. That regardless of gender and race and age and wealth and education and whatever other differences we may have, we show up here Sunday mornings united in our Savior, and united in his mission.

I want to say one thing as an aside, here. We don't see it in this text but it's in several places in the New Testament. Just as unity fosters fellowship, disunity destroys it. I understand that things can sometimes get funky in church or in a community group. But we've got to address it. We've been given a ministry of reconciliation and need to live that out first and foremost in our fellowship. Amen?

Now, if you're going to be together all the time, eventually someone's gonna get hungry. V42 tells us they were devoted to the breaking of bread. V 44 tells us breaking bread in their homes. But we know this is about more than just satisfying hunger.

In his book, *A Meal With Jesus*, Tim Chester says, "**Hospitality involves welcoming, creating space, listening, paying attention, and providing. Meals slow things down. Some of us don't like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people oriented instead of task oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list.**"

I know the power of breaking bread personally. I fell in love with my wife over shared meals. Our first date was a meal. Our second date was a meal. Most of our dates were meals. And as we spent countless hours getting to know each other in the almost mysterious intimacy of sharing a meal, we connected in such a significant way. I also gained 30 lbs. in the process! A good German cleans his plate. A really good German cleans everyone else's plate.

Meals are a powerful force in our home. Last week my oldest son Christian, who just turned 13, asked me if Martha and I would be sad when all three boys are out of the house. It dawned on me the thing I'd miss most would be our family dinners together. Now, like most of you, our family meals can be a little chaotic. Mine might be a little less so because my boys love to eat and they know that, if they stray too far from the table, they won't be able to reach the food.

But our table times are rich times. It's an opportunity for us to talk about our days, which cute girl is responding to that legendary Pressler charm, maybe even work in a smattering of politics. We like to watch cooking shows and my boys will pretend they are judges from the show Chopped, and they'll critique Martha's and my cooking. But the conversation often goes deeper than that. We talk about God and the plans he has for our lives. We discuss the apostles' teaching. Last week, the boys went around saying whom they want to meet first in heaven. One said David, another said Elijah, and the other couldn't decide between Peter and Paul. I must be a lousy pastor and father because no one said Jesus. But as they named their person, they gave a little biblical history about them and, instead of talking about the heroes of Marvel, which we often do, we spent time talking about the heroes of the faith. These conversations don't happen at the ball field or in front of the TV or rushing to get people to school on time. They happen at the dinner table. It's an incredible place for fellowship and discipleship.

The story of our faith is full of things happening within the context of breaking bread. The nation of Israel celebrated seven annual feasts to commemorate all that God had done. Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding feast. In fact, in the book of Luke, which you just read, Jesus is eating or about to eat in most of it. Jesus' final moments were spent sharing a meal with friends. And we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes with bread and wine. And at the end of it all, Jesus will be united to his Bride at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Breaking bread plays a big role in this church. Our elders are united through a meal before they, together, lead our church. Many of our community group meetings include a meal. It's not just because we schedule them at mealtime, it's because it fosters intimacy between members. Ministry teams often come together for a meal before they get to work on what God is calling them to. Make sure you slow down and really connect with your people over a meal. It's too good of an opportunity to miss.

So a Spirit-led fellowship grows together, gathers together, and now we're going to see that **a Spirit-led fellowship gives together**. Just look at the generosity of this community. Starting in v44. **“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.”** Have you ever had someone say to you “What's mine is yours”? That's the attitude of this fellowship. Remember, these people have been paying a temple tax, under compulsion. This isn't that! This is a fellowship so motivated and inspired by a generous God who didn't even withhold his Son that they freely give of whatever they have to whoever was in need.

And I want you to see the context in which these things are given. It was pointed out to me by Ali Congrove, our Care Network Director, who has a background in social work and does a wonderful job with our benevolence ministries. I asked her a question about some of the work we do and mentioned that I'd be preaching this passage. I want to share some of her response with you: “You didn't really ask for this (but when Ali speaks, I know to listen), but I feel compelled to say that in my work now and with the elderly in the past, what I saw over and over was a lack of relationships with people and as I read

that section in Acts 2, that's what stands out to me. They didn't just give their stuff. They shared it, they spent time together, they genuinely cared for those in need." This is a generous church, from our love fund to Bridging the Gap to providing scholarships so that couples in need can attend the upcoming marriage retreat. Let's remember that giving is an opportunity for relationship that reminds people of their worth in your eyes and in God's eyes.

So we've seen the way members of the fellowship relate to one another. But what impact, if any, does it have on those outside of the fellowship? I want you to see that **A Spirit-led fellowship goes together.** V43 says "**And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.**" I must confess that I am an over-user of the word "awesome". The word itself is just so...awesome! But when we find that word in the Bible, we must see that it is not used in the same way it's used today. Another way to read that word is "fear". And you can imagine why. This movement was centered around a guy who was crucified, resurrected, and present for 40 days. Not long after, a group of Galilean followers of this guy were sitting in a room when a rushing wind came, tongues of fire appeared over their head, and they began speaking in tongues. And now wonders and signs. The people are afraid. There is a presence and power of something they don't yet understand, and they are paying attention.

Now, we don't necessarily experience wonders and signs like these in the American church. God uses such things at special and unique times. But it doesn't mean that supernatural and miraculous things aren't happening here. The outside world recognizes when a life is changed because of the grace of God. It pays attention when someone with a terminal illness is later given a clean bill of health. It notices when an addict lives a clean and sober life. It marvels when a dead marriage is resurrected. So many of us have a testimony that would result in someone saying, "That is awesome! Tell me more."

But notice that it's not just the extraordinary that grabs the outsiders' attention. It's the daily activity of the fellowship they are attracted to. V47 tells us the disciples were "**having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.**" Could you imagine if someone came to faith every day in this building? For some people, theological truth is irrelevant until they see the impact that truth has in your life. Those outside of this fellowship are witnessing family and neighbors and friends living in this new way, they're inquiring about it, hearing the Gospel, and becoming members of this fellowship through faith in Jesus.

I told this story last summer and it's worth repeating. I was in the midst of an unproductive decade-long theological debate with a family member of mine when someone in our family passed away. Relatives from all over the country flew into town, including a few who are followers of Christ. We spent the majority of two days together and, as you might expect, the believers in the bunch continued to find each other's company. And a few days later, I was talking with this family member and she said, "I watched you guys and you have something together that I don't have. And I want it." She didn't overhear us conversing over the four spiritual laws or pouring over the book of

Romans. She observed us breaking bread together and caring for each other, and that was enough. We've had well over 100 visitors this year? That's the kind of impact our fellowship can have when someone walks into our church or visits our small group and witnesses how we love one another.

So what do we do with this? I had the opportunity to preach this sermon a couple of weeks ago. It was to an audience of one, and the guy looked just like me. Very handsome. I found myself studying this passage while, at the same time, struggling to figure out how I could possibly wedge a weekly meeting with my community group into my schedule. And it began to feel like a burden.

Then I read in this passage about the devoted spirit these people had with two things: their time and their stuff. They gave freely of both, having them in common with everyone. And then I saw the results of this devotion. V46-47 says they had glad and generous hearts and were praising God. **A Spirit-led fellowship lives out their calling with joy and praise.** Does that describe you?

I'm convinced that my maxed out schedule oftentimes steals my joy and steals God's glory. And I bet I'm not the only one. If we have barely any time for our fellowship, we either squeeze it in to our schedules begrudgingly or we look at it like an item on our Christian checklist that we can tick off. There's probably not a lot of joy and praise coming from either of those approaches. If we've maxed out our lifestyle where we have zero margin to give, we either don't participate at all or do so with a bad attitude. Psychology tells us that generous people are happier and Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver so if we have no room to give we once again miss out on our joy and God's praises. If we're missing these things, we have to realize that **we can be AT Fellowship without actually being part of THE fellowship.**

If that kind of feels like you, know that it's not too late. I had a chance to meet with a gentleman last week who wanted to find his place here. I have lots of these conversations, but this one was different. It was different because this guy has been going her for eight years. He told me that 2015 had been a challenging year and that God's stirring in his heart led to a decision to become devoted to our church. He's on his way to becoming a Covenant Member and living out the things we discussed this morning. This might be a perfect opportunity for all of us to follow his lead and consider how we might repurpose our time and our belongings.

This is our fellowship. The people in this room and the ones you meet with in smaller gatherings, that's our fellowship. It's not some random collection of people who all decided to show up at the same place on Sunday morning. It's a body God has assembled, so intimately connected, that Scripture describes us as brothers and sisters in Christ. These are the people God has placed in your midst for you to be devoted to, and for them to be devoted to you. These are the people with whom God has called you to Life Together. Let's pray.