

Together is Better

Acts 2:44-47

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I'm the bearer of both bad news and good news today. I'll start with the bad news. A story appeared on the front page of the Dispatch/Argus last Sunday with this headline: "*Is Your Religion Nothing?*" The article was a summary of a new Pew Research Center study entitled, "*In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.*"

A sense of sadness came over me when I read the report (we posted a link on Sermon Extras). Here's the opening paragraph: "*The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip...65% of American adults described themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular, now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.*"

I appreciate Albert Mohler's insight,

"We need to recognize...the fact that our nation is growing more distant from the Gospel, more distant from Christ, and hardening its resistance to Christian truth. These changes have been visible for some time, but there's a startling new velocity to the changes...the saving power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ remains as true as ever...our responsibility, regardless of the survey data, is to teach and preach and tell and take the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. This new report...should make us even more determined to be faithful in our evangelism, starting right at home."

After percolating on this bad news, I came across some good news from Christianity Today called, "*The Early Church Thrived Amid Secularism and Shows How We Can Too.*" Here's part of the article (this is also posted on Sermon Extras):

The success of the early church was certainly not inevitable. Christians could have accommodated to the culture to win recognition and approval, which would have undermined the uniqueness of their belief system and way

of life. Or Christians could have isolated themselves from the culture to hide and survive, which would have kept them on the margins—safe, to be sure, but also irrelevant.

Instead, Christians engaged the culture without excessive compromise and remained separate from the culture without excessive isolation. Christians figured out how to be both faithful and winsome. Nothing short of a change of church culture will suffice—from a culture of entertainment, politics, personality, and program to a culture of discipleship. Such a radical change will require patience, steadiness, and purposefulness.

The good news is, we are not alone, and the story of early Christianity reminds us of this fact. Faithful Christians have gone before us, bearing witness to the truth of Christianity, the power of the gospel, and the high calling of discipleship. Calling out across the centuries, they tell us that it is possible now, as it was then, to live as faithful followers of Jesus the Lord in a culture that does not approve of it or reward it. Two millennia ago, Jesus Christ—his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension—set in motion a movement that turned the world upside down. He is the same Lord today. It can happen again.

In our journey through the Book of Acts we've been learning that the first followers of Christ lived on mission in the midst of a messed up world. Last weekend we discovered *the depth of our devotion determines our awe and our impact*. These difference-makers made an impact because they were committed to *preaching, partnering, partaking and praying*.

Let's stand and read the closing verses of Acts 2:44-47: ***“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. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”***

Last weekend we focused on the actions of the early church. Today we'll unpack their attitudes and the affect they had on the culture around them. Here's what I want us to get: *When we gather together we will grow, give and go with the gospel.*

1. Gather together. Look at verse 44: “*And all who believed were together...*” All were together because every believer knew they belonged to every other believer. The phrase “*were together*” is in the imperfect tense, meaning they made it a practice of gathering together all the time. This is similar in thought to Acts 4:32: “*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...*”

Have you ever been tempted to neglect gathering together with God’s people? You probably know some Christians who have disengaged from church and are now drifting. Here’s one thing I’ve learned in 35 years of ministry: *If you unplug, you will unravel.* Listen to Hebrews 10:24-25: “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.*”

Tim Challies believes this passage provides two reasons you may be tempted to neglect gathering with God’s people.

- **You forget what you bring.** You and I have the responsibility to stir up other believers to greater love and labor for the Lord. The simple fact is we cannot do these things if we are not together. You have a gift to bring, and the church is only complete when you bring it and use it.
- **You forget what you need.** Just as you are gifted to help others, so others are gifted to encourage you. You are incomplete without your church because God has designed you to thrive and survive in community with other Christians.

In another article, Challies expands on this, “*Christians don’t get to go it alone. Lone Christians are disobedient Christians who refuse to take hold of one of God’s most important means of grace. Living outside a community of Christians is not a legitimate option for the Christian.*”

According to verse 47, when believers gathered together they didn’t just hang out with each other but were “*praising God.*” Luke, the human author of Acts, uses the word “*praise*” more than any other writer, describing a cacophony of angelic exaltation in Luke 2:13: “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.*” When the shepherds saw the Savior, they too exploded into worship according to Luke 2:20: “*And the shepherds returned,*

glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

How are you doing in your commitment to gather together with God’s people?
When we gather together we will grow, give and go with the gospel.

2. Grow Together. In verse 46 see these new believers were committed to growth by gathering in both large groups and in smaller settings and in both formal and informal gatherings: **“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes...”** Notice this wasn’t once in awhile but all the time, day by day. It’s the idea of doing it over and over. The word **“attending”** means, *“to stay close, remain, continue steadfastly.”* As we learned last week, in that culture, having a meal together was both a mark and seal of friendship.

I really appreciated Pastor Tim’s article in the e-newsletter this week called, “What’s Your Plan?” Here’s part of what he shared: *“Rarely do great things ‘just happen.’ 2 Peter 3:18 says, ‘But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.’ This injunction by Peter places on the Christian the decision to grow spiritually...the elements of a growth plan are both obvious and obscure. The obvious is to read/study your Bible on an individual basis and to attend a worship service. The not-so-obvious is to commit to a growth group where you can process Scripture with others and learn in a small group atmosphere.”*

I encourage you to join a Sunday morning group (see the insert in your bulletin) or a weekday group *and* make a renewed commitment to gather corporately for worship every weekend.

This week I saw a beautiful example of how gathering in a group can help Christians grow. Meagan Gottcent, one of our Go Team partners, works with InterVarsity on the campus of Augustana. Here’s what she posted this week: *“We just launched our seventh small group so far this year and this is the one I lead...Almost all of them are new students. Three are brand new believers. At least three are wrestling with faith and trying to decide if this is what they desire. It’s an honor to lead them through the story of Jesus each week.”*

I started to tear up when I looked at the picture of this new group. Here’s why. Two weeks ago two Augie students repented and received Christ during our 10:45 service. Pastor Kyle is following up with them and I reached out to Meagan so she

could enfold them into a Bible study on campus. Logan (in the baseball cap) and Emmy are shown here with big smiles on their faces.

Since growth is intentional not automatic, what's your plan to grow? If you want to grow, gather here every weekend and join a group.

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3. Give together. Look again at the last part of verse 44 and verse 45: “...***and had all things in common. And they were selling their possession and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.***” This phrase is also in the imperfect tense, meaning they “*kept on*” doing it. To have “***in common***” is related to the word for “fellowship.” This was not a “me church” but a “we church.”

When those with property and possessions saw people in need, out of love for the Lord they liquidated what they had in order to give to meet those needs. Check out the results in Acts 4:34-35: “***There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.***” In 1 Timothy 6:18, the Apostle Paul exhorts those who have been blessed to use those blessings to bless others: “***They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.***”

It's important to remember there were thousands of new believers from other countries in Jerusalem for Pentecost who were in need of shelter and supplies. These new believers were ready to serve. Some of these pilgrims may have been in Jerusalem since Passover 50 days earlier, extending their stay in order to be disciplined in how to gather, grow, give and go with the gospel.

Some think this is evidence of communism or socialism but it was actually a voluntary response to specific needs. The early church experienced organic oneness, not organized oneness. In fact, verse 46 tells us they still owned their homes. Their mutual caring and commitment to one another was a spontaneous expression of how the Holy Spirit led them. Not only was this voluntary but it was also temporary because after Acts 5 there is no further mention of this practice. Simply put, because they were committed to each other they contributed to one other.

I'm reminded of how one Edgewood couple responded this summer after hearing what Jesus said about denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Him. They were convicted to sell their camper and gladly give all the proceeds to Grow Time! I talked with someone else this week who, after seeing all the facility changes, told me with a big smile on her face that she feels convicted because she's not given anything yet. I gave her a Grow Time booklet and encouraged her to give as God leads her to give. We have more booklets available in the hallway in the east lobby.

How do you explain the joyful generosity of the early church? Basically, because these brand new believers held lightly to their property and possessions. They were quick to liquidate when the Lord led them to do so. Randy Alcorn, author of "The Treasure Principle," says we need to keep two truths in mind: "*God's ownership and our stewardship.*" Psalm 24:1 tells us God owns everything: "***The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof.***"

Here's a practical action step - when you talk about money, instead of saying "my money," simply say, "God's money." Instead of saying, "my car," say, "God's car." Figuratively speaking, we need to transfer the title of everything we own to the One who owns everything. Here's something else Alcorn writes, "*God prospers me not to raise my standard of living but to raise my standard of giving.*" God gives to us so we can give back to Him.

I understand hunters in Africa used to catch monkeys with a simple, yet extremely effective trap. They would take a hollowed-out gourd and drill a hole in it just large enough to put an orange inside. The gourd was then attached securely to a tree trunk. When a monkey reached inside to get the orange he couldn't get it out of the hole. He had a choice to make. He could let go of the orange and pull his hand out and be free or hold on to the orange and be caught. Many today are holding on to things that have trapped them. Here's the principle: *What you own, owns you.* Will you let go of the thing that is trapping you?

I read this passage several times before a phrase jumped out at me. Look at the last part of verse 46: "***they received their food with glad and generous hearts.***" These believers recognized every gift they were given, including the food they received, as coming from the generous heart of God. This made them joyful and generous. The word for "***glad***" refers to "*extreme joy*" and is often accompanied by jumping and smiling. Because they saw their property and their possessions as a gift from God they couldn't help but be generous.

After the Saturday night service last week I was in a conversation with Edgewood member Kathleen Kehoe and another member (I have Kathleen's permission to share this). We were discussing how God leads us to do different things when all of a sudden Kathleen's face broke out into a huge smile. She said she had to tell us something that happened during the service. She explained how she is very careful with her money and hesitates to spend it. Then she held up her hands and excitedly shared how God led her to give generously in the offering.

This week I reached out to her and asked her to write down her experience. This is what she wrote:

"I am still struggling to put what happened Saturday in words that do it justice. What happened was profound...since I have been on my own I have been happy to tithe out of obedience. I use Pushpay [on the Edgewood app] for my monthly tithe and don't give it another thought. I also get paid a bonus three times a year. For that tithe I write a check. So I wrote the check at the Saturday service. To me it was a lot of money. As I looked down at the check I just wrote I was overcome by a sense of awe. It was almost like an out-of-body experience. Like I was looking at a check someone else wrote thinking how amazing it was to be able to give back in such a big way."

Kathleen was so happy to give she was giggling as she told us about it. Her generosity gave her great joy. After she continued laughing for awhile, my mind went to 2 Corinthians 9:7: ***"Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*** This verse gives us four attitudes to cultivate related to our giving.

- **Give thoughtfully.** Giving should be a deliberate decision based on prayer, planning and God's leading.
- **Give enthusiastically.** Paul tells us not to give reluctantly. In a subsequent email Kathleen told me that her *"attitude about tithing went from neutral to awe-full"* (not that it's "awful," but full of awe).
- **Give voluntarily.** If you feel pressure to give to Edgewood or to Grow Time, then I've done something wrong. We believe in grace giving, not guilt giving.
- **Give cheerfully.** The word ***"cheerful"*** comes from the Greek word *hilaros*, from which we get the word "hilarious." God wants us to guffaw when we

give! I'm convinced one of the reasons Edgewood is such a joyful church is because it is full of people who delight in giving! Notice the last part of this verse: ***"for God loves a cheerful giver."*** When we give hilariously, we experience the love of God that is poured out on cheerful givers. God loves everyone but He's ecstatic about those who give joyfully.

Have you discovered the joy that comes from generous giving?

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4. Go together. When these first followers lived out their faith and shared it with others, God did some amazing things. Look at the last part of verse 47: ***"...and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*** The word ***"favor"*** means ***"grace, gratitude and pleasure."*** Note that ***"all the people"*** found these first followers to be favorable. I'm reminded of what was said about Jesus in Luke 2:52: ***"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."***

The phrase ***"having favor"*** is in the present tense, meaning these followers were looked upon favorably, at least at the beginning. It doesn't take long for this to change because persecution is right around the corner (we'll see that next week as we focus on praying for the persecuted church).

But for a brief window, they enjoyed the promise of Proverbs 16:7: ***"When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even His enemies to be at peace with him."*** While there will always be some who don't like Christians or the church, it's important to build bridges and to do all we can to find favor with people. In a culture filled with unkindness and conflict, we should strive to be winsome witnesses. We see this in Colossians 4:5-6: ***"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."***

One way we do this is by simply blessing people. This fall we've been encouraging everyone to be a blessing by following this B.L.E.S.S. strategy:

Begin with prayer
Listen attentively
Eat together

Serve by meeting a practical need
Share the gospel

When I'm out in the community, I often hear positive things about the people and programs of Edgewood. Over the last month or so I've heard people mention Celebrate Recovery, On Mission on Moody Radio, Awana, Super Saturdays and Mainspring. I'm glad we host Fall Festival of Fun as a way to connect with families in our community. Here are two specific examples:

- When I came in on Thursday I saw this picture of food piled up on the Café counter. This was given by our Awana kids for our Go Team partner Christian Care to assist in their ministry to the homeless in Rock Island.
- Another practical way we have found favor in our community is through the Safe Passage Initiative. Props to Pastor Dan and the Celebrate Recovery team for stepping up to help people in Rock Island County struggling with opioid addiction. This program allows users to voluntarily bring in their drugs and paraphernalia to law enforcement without being arrested. Law enforcement disposes of these items and then take participants to a treatment or detox facility. When these individuals need transportation to Rockford or Chicago a servant from Celebrate Recovery drives them there. Several months ago, this story appeared on the front page of the Dispatch/Argus along with this quote from Sheriff Bustos: *"The initial cadre of volunteers is from Edgewood Baptist Church..."* How cool to have Edgewood's name come out of the Sheriff's mouth!

I like how this chapter ends: ***"And the Lord added to their number day by day those who are being saved."*** I long for the Lord to do the same here in our community and on the continents! What a great reminder that it is the Lord who does the saving. Salvation is from the Lord and a person is saved only as the Lord draws him or her to Himself. 1 Corinthians 3:7: ***"So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."***

The Search for a Perfect Church

Is Edgewood a perfect church? Far from it. Like the first Christ followers we are flawed in many ways. I like what Charles Spurgeon said in this regard: *"If you wait for the perfect church, you must wait until you get to heaven! And even if you*

could find a perfect assembly on earth, I am sure they would not admit you to their fellowship, for you are not perfect yourself.”

Billy Graham often said, *“If you find a perfect church, don’t join it. You’d spoil it.”*

As I read the Book of Acts I’m struck by the fact God has always used ordinary people doing ordinary things. We could say it like this: *When ordinary people practice obedience, God does extraordinary things.* How are you doing at gathering, growing, giving and going with the gospel?

I close with a quote from Carey Nieuwhof: *“Christianity is not collapsing. Now, more than ever, the world needs Christians working together humbly under Christ to lead people into a growing relationship with Him, in whatever innovative and fresh forms that takes. The church is not dead. Far from it. Maybe it’s just beginning to take shape for a brand new era that desperately needs it.”*

It’s our privilege today to have a couple with us who know first hand that *when we gather together we will grow, give and go with the gospel.* As Go Team partners, they serve in Asia. For their own safety, we’ll turn off the video and audio recording. Pastor Dan will introduce and interview them.

Interview

New Members

8:00

Josh Stinson (Kyle)
David Stinson (Kyle)
Reagan LaBerge (Kyle)

10:45

Monica Brown (Ed)