

The Church is a Community

a sermon in the series
A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, February 1, 2015
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
by S. Michael Durham
© 2015 Real Truth Matters

Acts 2:42-47

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

This is a popular passage of Scripture. Some refer to this Day of Pentecost as the birth of the church but it isn't that. When Jesus was on this earth He was the cornerstone of the church, He said He would build His church, and when He left, He left a group of 120 or more. What we see on the Day of Pentecost is the filling of that church with the Holy Spirit and the power to be His witnesses and advance the kingdom throughout the world.

It is a remarkable day, a memorable day and why shouldn't it be? Three thousand people were converted that day! The famed backslider himself, Peter, was chosen by God to preach that Pentecostal sermon and God struck their hearts and 3,000 people were brought into the church that very day.

But, like I said, it's not the birth of the church but the empowerment of it. There are things that this text tells us that gives us great insight into what a local church ought to be. It shows us the very essence and nature of a church and therefore the essence and nature dictates what a church will do. If there is any passage of Scripture we should be comparing ourselves to I believe it is this text because this text tells us that this church, in Jerusalem, in its very beginning, was a community, a community of believers.

I. The Definition of Community

Community is a popular word today. What does it mean? What is a local church to be? We're living in a very confusing time for the local church. Different names are going around describing different ways of "doing church." You have evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, you have names like emergent and incarnational, attractive, seeker-sensitive church. We have all these ideas about

how a church should be and function that it's quite confusing. But if we go back to this text I'm absolutely persuaded we'll know what a church is. It's not about what we do it's about what we are because what you are will dictate what you do. We've must get our *being* correct. We've got to figure out what we are, what He's made us to be, and why, therefore, we can do what He says in this text we ought to be doing.

What do I mean when I say the church is a community? Let's define the word.

A. Definition

When we think of community we think of the root word *commune*. And our thoughts of commune raise red flags. In our minds it's a place where we all sell our properties and move on a farm, work together, and drink Kool-aid. That's not what this text tells us. It's nowhere close to that and that's not what I mean by church as a community.

When I looked up *community* in the dictionary several months ago, I found several definitions.

community =

1. The people living in one locality

For example, we say the "Reidland community" or the "Lone Oak community," these are suburbs around the Paducah area. These are people who live in that geographical location.

2. A group of people having cultural, religious, ethnic, or other characteristics in common

This is why we would say the Irish community or the Hispanic community. There are groups of people who have in common the same ethnicity. Or it could mean a group of people who have a hobby in common. A few weeks ago at the men's breakfast there was several bikers there and we talked about the Harley community or the Biker community. In this usage the word *community* means a group of people who have something in common—a hobby or favorite activity or major goal. You can say the Christian community or the Baptist community, which means you are talking about a group of people who hold a particular faith in common.

But it's the third definition I think is the most biblical in trying to explain what I believe the church is.

3. A group of interdependent people inhabiting the same region and interacting with each other through food and other relationships.

The example the dictionary gave was in ecology, plants and organisms. It said ecology was an example of community because there is interdependency between plants in a certain locality and they helped or strengthened one another.

So how do we define church as community?

B. Definition of Church as Community.

A local church is a community of believers whose lives depend upon each other and interact with each other through food, relationship, and sharing of life for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

That's our definition. That's what we are, not what we're to be but what we already are. How well we're doing it will depend upon how well we understand what we are and how in tune we are to the One who made us this way.

II. The Practice of Community

A. The Practice of Community Was Often.

That's the first distinctive. They practiced community often.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

They continued *steadfastly*. We would define *steadfastly* as Sunday morning, once a week, but in verse 46, Luke tells us what he means by “continued steadfastly.”

*“So continuing **daily** with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,” (Acts 2:46)*

Continuing *steadfastly* for this church was to be together in some form or fashion on a daily basis. They practiced community often, in fact, daily. You see this throughout the early church. For example, in Acts 5 you see it again.

“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” (Acts 5:42)

They didn't wait until Sunday or Wednesday night to have prayer but *daily* they were moving from one house to another, one group to another, and they were having church because they were church. That means more than just coming together in a particular location and having a “worship event.” For true community there has to be interdependency. We need one another for community and there has to be interaction. Frankly, there's not much interaction that can happen here. We've tried the best we can in a public worship service to set aside traditions and being bound by time and we do allow for more congregational interaction but there's only so much you can have. What ends up happening is the same few people that aren't fearful to put themselves out there will be the ones who do so and the rest will continue to spectate. It will always be that way when you are gathered in a public “worship service.”

How then do we interact and relate to one another with a dependency upon one another other than Sunday or Wednesday? We see in the New Testament that they met daily, frequently to practice what the church was. In Acts 6:1 it says daily the widows were distributed food so there was some kind of ministry happening on a daily basis.

“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” (Acts 6:1)

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” (Acts 16:5)

The church was functioning daily and that’s why people were being converted daily. They didn’t just gather on Sundays. There have been some who have argued that this part of the book of Acts is early in the church’s development and it is showing the transition from the Old to the New Covenant so we can’t base too much of church life on what you see in the book of Acts. Okay, why don’t we go to the rest of the New Testament then? How about Hebrews? This was written long after Acts and closer to AD 70. The writer of Hebrews says,

“but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:13)

Daily. I want to ask you a question. This was a time before social media. They didn’t have cell phones; they didn’t have email, or telecommunication like we do. We have Facebook, we have Twitter, and many other kinds of social media that I don’t know anything about. We have email, we have all this ability to be instantly connected one with another and yet with all of technology the fact is we’re not so connected, are we? I wonder what the early church would have been like if they had all of that technology? Maybe they would have done the same thing we do—rely on the technology rather than true relationship. These folks were in each other’s lives on a daily basis.

B. The Practices of Community.

I. They heard God’s Word.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (v. 42)

Why was the hearing of God’s Word so important? This is the existence and the life of the church. The church comes into existence by the word of God. We come here today because of Christ who is the Word and the life that we have is by the Word, speaking the truth to one another. Hearing God’s Word is the basis of our community. We need to speak the Word of God to one another.

I was reading Bonhoeffer’s book *Life Together* this week and he said when you’re going through difficulty the word of God in your brother will often be stronger, more vital, more real than the

word of God in your heart. A brother's word of encouragement, speaking the word of God to you, will have more life than the life of Christ in you when you're really going through the difficulty. We've got to speak the word and that's what the early church did *daily*.

2. They ate together.

"... in the breaking of bread" (v. 42)

"... and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (v. 46)

It's good that we'll have lunch together today but we ought to be eating together more often. Not necessarily the entire congregation but all of us ought to be in each others' homes sharing meals together. That's where life gets more real.

Why is it that when you see world leaders coming together for major summits they always plan dinners and luncheons? The reason is because there's something about a table of food that tends to make us more relaxed.

Food is fun. There are certain things that we have to do for survival or to maintain ourselves that's not fun. I hate brushing my teeth and flossing. I do it regularly but I hate it. I get tired of it. I don't enjoy it. I do it because I know I need to do that. But it's not a drudgery to sit down at the table. My wife has learned the art—and it is an art—to present food that is attractive to look at as well as to eat. And when you eat good food, you think you're next to heaven. These are moments of ecstasy. You want to worship God as you're eating and tasting that food you think, "God, if You're better than this, this is amazing." And He is. "Taste and see the Lord is good."

Not only is the table enjoyable and fun, but there's an atmosphere that takes place at the table, a camaraderie that happens that literally opens the heart up to the person at the table. You don't know it, you don't think about it but it happens nonetheless. They were eating together because that's life.

3. They prayed together.

"... and in prayers." (v. 42)

Harken back to last month and our week of prayer. I heard repeatedly the statement, "This week was like a revival for me; just gathering with the church and praying." Some asked why we only did this once a year, in January, and why we don't do it more often because they were so helped by it. There is something about praying with God's people that is refreshing and revitalizing. But it's not just the prayers, it's the Christ in us ministering to us, seeing Christ in your personality and my personality. There is something that is necessary to our spiritual vitality in being together.

4. They shared material goods.

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” (vs. 44-45)

A community doesn't hold back selfishly but gives willfully and joyfully. There are some who read this text and are immediately convicted and say, “If I'm going to be a true follower of Jesus I can't own anything, I've got to sell everything and give it to the poor. I heard of a man who sat on milk crates and nail kegs because he wanted to be able to freely give. I applaud his willingness to live simply but that's not what the text is saying. You have to put it in its proper context.

What is the proper context? The Day of Pentecost when 3,000 people were saved is the context. Some of the 3,000 people lived in and around Jerusalem but most of them didn't. Most of them lived in different countries in the Roman Empire because, in that day, there were three feasts in the year when you would leave home and make your way to Jerusalem—that's where the temple was—so you could honor the Word of God and obey it. The Feast of Pentecost was one of those feasts. There were travelers from all over the world there. Jerusalem swelled!

It's kind of like Quilt Show week around here. They say that Paducah's population triples in size. I think around 60,000 people will be in the city—that's triple what our population is. This is exactly what was happening in Jerusalem. Many of those people had heard this ruckus in the upper room and gathered. Peter gets up and preaches and 3,000 of them were converted. Where do they stay? They didn't go home immediately. They continued daily listening to the Apostles. They were new converts; they were not eager to go home, they wanted to learn more and be founded, established in their Christianity. For months they stayed listening to the Apostles. How do you take care of them? The hotels weren't like they are today, they were more like a bed and breakfast; they were very limited.

Therefore the hundred and twenty had to open up their homes and their kitchens to these people. They did it joyfully. They brought these new converts into their homes, fed them, and took care of them. This is a radical thought because in that day and age, when you went to work that morning you knew when you shut down that evening your employer would pay you so you could go and purchase bread and food for your family for that day. Eighty percent of their daily wages went to their daily food. After that is spent there's not much left over for your guests or extended family.

Consequently, they joyfully did what they must. They said, “Let's sell our possessions, whatever we can do to sustain this for right now so that we can disciple these new converts.” That's exactly what they did. They didn't hold onto their stuff and say, “No, I can't turn loose of that.” They were willing, for the discipleship of these people, to minister to them in this way. It was need-driven. The Gospel doesn't tell you, “If you want to be a Christian, go sell everything you have.” Jesus said that to only one man because his possessions was his albatross, the anchor around his neck and if he didn't remove it he would go to hell.

5. They practiced “hanging out.”

They just hung out together.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.” (v. 42)

*“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house.”
(v. 46)*

In first century Jerusalem they probably didn’t have the term “hanging out,” but you know what I’m talking about. We’re talking about just being together. They enjoyed one another. I told the new membership class this week it should not be an infringement on Karen and I if you just want to drop by and visit with us. So I’m saying to you that our house is always open to you. You’re always welcome to come by.

When you’re a despised community, a persecuted community, it’s important to be with each other.

III. Obstacles Preventing Community

There are many things the early church didn’t necessarily face but we do and it hinders this community.

A. American Culture.

The lifestyle of American culture is opposed to the biblical mandate of community. We do not understand real community because our way of life does really allow for it.

Work.

I love to work. I enjoy my work. I told my boys that I didn’t care if they pushed a broom for a living as long as they enjoyed what they do. I didn’t want them getting up and going to a job they didn’t like, that’s miserable. Enjoy your work. I enjoy my work. I love it. But sometimes I enjoy it too much.

According to the Center for American Progress in the U.S., 85.8 percent of males and 66.5 percent of females work more than 40 hours per week. In 1960 only 20 percent of women were in the workforce. That’s completely changed in my lifetime.

According to the International Labor Organization, “Americans work 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 more hours per year than British workers, and 499 more hours per year than French workers.”

Economic conditions have contributed to this increase in work. It seems to take more income to maintain the American standard of living. But it’s not just the economic conditions of our country.

Our culture places value of money over everything else. We love money, we want more of it, because we think money can buy happiness. Therefore, the more we work, the more we get paid and the happier we believe we will be. How many can honestly say it works that way? I don't know of an American who really has a good work ethic that's satisfied with his standard of living. Why do the billionaires still work to get more? Why, if you're offered, do you take the overtime?

Christianity has established a wonderful, biblical work ethic. The Christian ought to be the hardest worker at the factory, the office, the school, but we have allowed work to become an idol. We have allowed industry to become the means to acquiring the idols we worship so we don't have time to hang out one with another.

I want to testify and say that I've been challenged the last couple of years to do less what I call formal ministry work and just be with people but even then I'm working, but my job is a little different. But we want to open up our home and just hang out and we want to do more of that with more of you because not only must you hear the word you have to see it. I've been convicted that most of my work in the last twenty-odd years has not contributed one thing for the kingdom of God. A lot of the things I do don't really add much to the kingdom whereas just being with other believers and just fellowshiping has seen more growth in the kingdom of God than many other things I do. So I'm preaching to myself here when I talk about work, believe me.

When I first came here I worked 80+ hours a week and didn't take a day off, so I guess I worked more than that. I didn't take a day off for more than 10 years. I may have taken half a Saturday off. This went on until God began to show me this was not His system. I was totally disobedient to Him. God is really working in me in this area and I pray He will in your life too.

There's another issue in our culture.

Children's School and Extra-Curricular Activities.

Schools and parents are pressuring children to exceed in many different activities that by the time you get home from work, what do you have to do? You have to go somewhere and do something—watch your children perform. We think we're doing that in the name of "quality time" with our children. Stop and think about it. You're not having quality time with your child; you're just sitting in the bleachers watching. How much quality interaction is that? I'm not saying it's bad, I'm just saying wait a minute, is it really accomplishing what you think it's doing? Their coaches have more interaction with them than you do. We press upon our child to get involved in this, get involved in that so you're shuttling them to all these events and there's very little time for the family, much less the church.

American Individualism.

Individualism says, "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps."

Individualism is a philosophy that emphasizes the moral worth of the individual. It says every individual is important and that's true. But we as Americans have gone too far and we make everything about the individual. Today, anybody can claim they have constitutional rights and society has to stop and change whatever it's doing in order to honor the rights of the individual or group, all in the name of American individualism. And it's crept into the church.

We believe, because of our American culture, that God is to be experienced in and by personal experience. We say the best way to experience God is you alone on your own. But the Bible says that's not necessarily true. It's important to be alone with God everyday, but you do not only experience God on your own. In fact, some of your more vital experiences has been when you've been with others, whether you were in a church service, a home, or together on some ministry opportunity. God speaks, works and is demonstrated through fellowship with other believers. But we've made it about *me* having *my* experience so that we say, "Jesus is my personal Savior." He's more than a personal Savior! He's the Savior of His bride. It's not just about the individual.

The common understanding of church is an event where a person attends and get their needs met. So we come with the mindset that says, "I get what I need spiritually: reinforcement, encouragement, strength, a place where I can demonstrate my gifts and then I go home." That is hurting biblical community.

Church is a place where if you have needs, you ought to see God move through the body to meet those needs. But the purpose of church is not about you receiving. It is about you giving. The principle of the kingdom is that it's more blessed to give than to receive. Summarizing Second Corinthians 9:8-11, God's system is that you give to the kingdom to get. That's true. You give to receive. We listen to some televangelists who want us to plant our seed faith. You've heard it. "You give me your seed faith and God will give you a hundred fold." It's partly right that when you give to God you will get. But if you keep reading through verse eleven, Paul says the purpose of giving is to get to give. You give to God so you can get from God so you can give to God. That's the principle. I want you to come here if you're needy. I want you to declare your needs so we can pray and if we have what you need we can minister to you; we can give of our own resources. You better come here when you have a need. When you're going through spiritual battles, the first thing the devil is going to lie to you is that the church is the last place you need to go. He will say, "You can't go to church, they'll pick up on your spiritual condition and start talking about you and then you'll lose your godly reputation." Lie after lie will bombard you. Therefore, you need to run here! You ought to be the first one here. You ought to be here when you have needs. But you get your needs met so now that you've received you can give. You give so you can get so you can give. That's God's system.

Church is not about Michael, it's not about you, it's not about us. It's about Jesus and an interdependence on one another to advance the kingdom in each other so the kingdom of God is advanced outside of our community.

There's one more thing that's hindering church community.

B. Conservative Evangelicalism.

Conservative evangelicalism is hindering community big time. I know I've got to explain and I'm glad to do so.

Although, I claim the title conservative evangelical, I am convinced that the more conservative evangelical you are the inclination is less community because the emphasis of church is more about learning rather than being. Conservative evangelicalism is much better explaining the church than being the church. That's the problem. We understand the Bible and its doctrine. We can explain our ecclesiology—our understanding of the church—and we can tell anybody what a local church is supposed to be. We think that because we possess that knowledge that somehow we're doing it when we are not. Thus, we do not practice community. We're not doing it because we made everything about Christianity intellectual, academic, and mind-oriented. Learning, learning, learning, that's all church has come to mean.

You know I'm not against learning. Teaching is one of my gifts. You are to learn, you are to understand the Word of God but you do not learn more of the Word of God so that knowledge becomes the goal. You learn more of God so you can be more like God. That's the goal. But somehow we've made learning and knowledge the end not Godlikeness. Everything is geared toward somebody standing and giving a lesson. Daily the early church attended and listened to the Apostles' doctrine; they wanted to learn. It's essential. Hearing the Word of God is a practice of community but it's not the only practice as we have made it. We've shut down church to be nothing more than coming together, listening to a preacher preach, and then go home.

What I'm preaching ought to be impacting Monday through Saturday! What I'm saying to you ought to have some kind of practical application, otherwise I might as well beat my head against this pulpit.

I know what we're going into is going to frighten some of you and I want to address that and then I'll conclude.

I think some of you are already suspicious and are saying, "Okay, I know where this is going. You're going to get us hooked with the Bible where we can't argue a defense. Then we will feel the guilt and pressure to do these things, but that just means my life just gets more crowded. I don't have the time to do what I'm supposed to be doing now and you're just going to add another activity. I see where this is going. You're going to spring on us at the very end this great program that you've devised that's going to facilitate all of this community." I want to alleviate those fears because that's not what we're going to do.

I learned a long time ago if I have to make it happen it's not God and it won't work. If you're truly saved, you're already a part of the church. You're hearing this and something in you is resonating, saying, "That's exactly right." Why did those who came to the prayer meeting in January say, "This was great for me. This strengthened me. My life was different this week"? Seeing God through the

prayers of other people is tremendous, but being with other Christians is the answer because God intended us to feed off of each other. The Christ in you feeds me, the Christ in me feeds you, it's a mutual sharing just like when you sit down at a table and you serve one another.

Community doesn't work now for you because you do have too many things on your plate. I'm not suggesting we add some other program to your plate—it won't work. I know it won't work. It's dead on arrival. But what if we change our whole mindset about what church is? What if we see that it's not just one of the facets of my life, it's not just one thing I do a week but it is a part of my life, it's the center of my life, because you can't separate Jesus from the church? You can't have church without Jesus and you can't have Jesus without the church. What if I make Christ and the people of Christ the very center that impacts everything else I do?

A few weeks ago I described the church like the center of a wheel, a hub, where the spokes are the different activities of your life but right in the center is Jesus and the church. You're still able to do everything because what you're doing is taking the community into to the workplace. I conclude with this illustration. It proves my point.

Bobby shared with me this week that this week he had to learn to evaluate his employees because his position calls for that. One young man came in a little reserved and fearful. Bobby began to talk with him and the young man said, "I just need to tell you right up front that I'm a Christian and I try to practice the Golden Rule just like Jesus, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" He continued to talk really guarded and nervous, because he didn't know Bobby. After he got done Bobby reassured him that he too was a Christian. He said that young man just began to beam. Then the man opened up to him and said, "In the department in which I work there is nobody else that's a Christian." He began to share how it's so difficult and so dark but now he has hope because he found another believer! He was strengthened by the fact that he wasn't alone and he's been in constant communication with Bobby through texting and conversations since then.

Why did this make a difference to this young man? Because he's getting strength from Bobby and Bobby is getting strength from him. This is the way God designed church! Church wasn't designed for you to come and get doctrine and an inspiring message so you can go out on your own and face the world. No! Even Jesus didn't send out the disciples one by one but two by two.

You say, "But I have nobody else at work that's a Christian." Then that fact necessitates all the more that you need association with your brothers and sisters more than just Sundays and Wednesdays. You need to get with other believers more often and receive what they have and you give what you have and both of you will be able to maintain what you have throughout the week. If you do that you will not come in here limping on Sundays saying, "Fill me up again. Bandage me up. Help me to get through another week." A church is a community; not a collection of individuals trying to do the best they can by themselves. Amen.