

## LIFE TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT

### ACTS 2:42-47

One of the first English proverbs I learned was the simple rhyme, “Birds of a feather flock together.” Of course, this is literally true. But the proverb is not really about birds; it’s about human beings. People who share similar interests, values, or backgrounds, or people who have similar tastes or like similar things naturally gravitate toward one other. They instinctively find each other and hang out together.

This is part of human nature. We have an intrinsic need to belong, a need to associate with and be accepted by a group of peers who share our core beliefs and values. People who are like us—who think like us, act like us, value the things we value, like the things we like, stand for the things we stand for. Being part of such a group gives us a sense of identity, security, and stability.

There were about 120 Christ followers who flocked together in Jerusalem between the time Jesus ascended into heaven and the Day of Pentecost. They not only shared the belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, but that He had risen from the dead, for they had all seen the resurrected Lord. That was the glue that bound them together. But when these 120 people were baptized by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that bond was taken to a whole new level. While gathered in the Temple court, they were empowered and enabled by the Spirit to proclaim the good news about Jesus in the languages of worshipers who had come to Jerusalem from all over the known world to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

After hearing the good news proclaimed in their native languages, and especially after hearing Peter explain how Jesus fulfilled some of the most familiar prophecies in the Old Testament, over 3,000 of them became convinced that Jesus was, indeed, the Christ and that he had risen from the dead. So, they were baptized, and joined the ranks of the disciples.

Suddenly, three thousand people became part of that original fraternity of 120 disciples, bonded together by the same beliefs, the same convictions, and most especially the same allegiance to Jesus Christ. What is more, they were all indwelt by the same Spirit, which made their bond much deeper and stronger than a mere sociological bond. This was a bond that compelled them to be together often because, when they gathered, they experienced Jesus Himself in their midst as the Holy Spirit in them expressed and revealed Jesus to one another.

And so, we read in Acts 2, **verses 42-47**, *<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” (ESV).*

Let’s get something straight from the very beginning. This is *real* church. *Church* is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or an incorporated, tax-exempt organization.

According to this passage, church is a devoted community of believers who are compelled to gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing the Lord Jesus. Notice the focus in this statement. It is not on programs or activities or the places of worship. It is on the Lord Jesus. The church is all about Him.

One of the key words in the Acts 2 passage which describes the early church is “devoted.” *Devoted* means to be thoroughly committed. It is not describing people who are mildly interested in something or someone, or who have an on-again-off-again, take-it-or-leave-it kind of relationship with something or someone. It describes people who are wholeheartedly and enthusiastically invested.

Why were the early Christians devoted? It is very simple. They were devoted because they really believed Jesus was alive, that He, by the Holy Spirit, was present in their midst, that His kingdom had come, that when they met together they were encountering Him, that His power was present to do extraordinary things among them, and that He could return at any time.

And because of these things, they could not get enough of Him. That’s why *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching”*—the instruction that was given to the Apostles from Jesus and from the Holy Spirit about the Lord Jesus. They were getting to know Him—most of them for the first time. They were discovering how the Old Testament was all about Him.

But they were also devoted *“to the fellowship”*—the people who comprised the church. They were now a family, and they were getting to know and love one another. *“To the breaking of bread”*—eating together and, specifically, partaking of the Lord’s Supper in their meetings. *“...And the prayers”*—Talking to God the Father together, and talking to their Lord, Jesus, together. Seeking His face and His blessing and aligning themselves with His will.

And by doing these things together they were experiencing Jesus, which is why, **verse 43a**. *“Awe came upon every soul...”* There was an awareness of Christ’s personal presence in their midst. They were not gathering merely to commemorate an historical figure; they were not gathering merely to memorialize sacred events. They were gathering to be *with* Him, to experience Him, to encounter Him. And awe was the attitude that filled them because they knew that when they were together, they were on holy ground.

I want to remind you that these Christ followers were collectively experiencing something that very few human beings had ever experienced—direct, unrestricted access to God. Remember that when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain that restricted access into the Holy of holies (in the Temple where God’s presence dwelt) that was accessible only by the high priest on one day of the year—the Day of Atonement, that separated worshipers from direct access to God, that four-inch thick curtain was mysteriously and supernaturally torn from top to bottom, signifying that Jesus opened the way for every true worshiper to directly enter into the Holy of holies. Not into the Temple, but into the throne room of heaven.

These 3,000 plus disciples were entering that throne room every day, and it was as if they couldn’t spend enough time there. As they basked in the Lord’s presence, they were filled with reverential awe, which, incidentally, is not an attitude one can contrive, but an attitude that accompanies a genuine encounter with God.

They also knew that extraordinary things would happen. **Verse 43b**. *“...And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”* I told you that the church is a *devoted* community of believers who are compelled to gather regularly for the purpose of *experiencing* and *expressing* Jesus. One of the ways Jesus expressed His life was by doing miracles through the Apostles. Miracles that benefitted the lives of those in the church. But miracles that were also done to benefit those outside the church in order to validate the legitimacy and authenticity of the church and its message.

But there were other ways that Jesus expressed His life through His people who were part of His church, and we find some of those ways in **verses 44-45**. *“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.*

Not only was there a profound sense of Christ's presence at these gatherings; there was a profound sense of Christ's love that manifest itself in the lives of His followers. The concern and the compassion of Christ was being expressed through His followers to one another, compelling them to pool their resources and share everything with each other. We are told in Acts 4, "*...the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to Him was His own, but all things were common property to them*" (4:32).

What is being described here? I would submit to you that this is a description of real love. Real love is selflessness—it is the opposite of self-protection and self-promotion. Real love is sacrificial giving and extreme generosity toward those who have needs.

When Paul wrote to the Philippian church he said, "*...being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to His own interests, but also to the interests of others*" (2:2-4). That is exactly what was going on in Jerusalem just after Pentecost, only they did not need an admonition to do it. I would suggest to you that they were loving each other this way without even trying to do it.

Why? Because this is what it looks like when the Holy Spirit is in control, when the Holy Spirit is presiding in a church, when the Holy Spirit has filled individuals to the degree that they are expressing the fruit of the Spirit, which is, among other things, love.

Throughout church history Bible scholars and students have read these passages in Acts 2 and 4 and debated as to whether the socioeconomic practices of the Jerusalem church are prescriptive for the church in every generation. I would suggest that is not the point of these passages. The passages are historical; they are simply *describing* what happened when Christ followers, full of the Holy Spirit, got together. They loved each other, they got along with each other, and they shared everything they had with one another.

And I believe the same thing happens today when the Holy Spirit is presides in a church and people in that church are filled and controlled by the Spirit. Needs being met, people being cared for, unselfishness, generosity, community. All of which produces joy and harmony and peace. All of which are characteristics of Christ, by-products of the gospel, and fruits of the Spirit.

Look at **verses 46-47a**. *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.*

I repeat: This is real church. *Church* is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or an incorporated, tax-exempt organization. Church is a devoted community of believers who are compelled to gather regularly for the purpose of experiencing and expressing the Lord Jesus.

OK. What is the application, for us, in America, of Acts 2:42-47? Although this passage is historical and descriptive, I want to suggest to you, that it does show us what a spiritually healthy, robust, and dynamic church looks like, simply because the Holy Spirit presided over the church. So, in that sense, it does provide a model or a standard for us. To say it another way, these are the activities and attitudes and characteristics that we ought to strive for. We ought to be devoted to the same activities to which the Jerusalem church was devoted. We ought to have the same attitude of reverential awe for the Lord Jesus that they had. We ought to express that same love—consideration, deference, generosity—that they had.

Is that happening? I certainly think it is, to some degree. I love what is happening, for

example, in our Acts 2:42 fellowship group; I love what I hear is happening in some of our Life groups; I love what happens in our Wednesday night prayer meeting.

But if we learned anything from the American church's response during the pandemic, we learned that the devotion and love and commitment to one another is not as deep as we might have thought. I'm still reeling from what I observed in our own church during the pandemic, and I'm still trying to keep from becoming jaded.

But if I thought we had it hard here at EBC, George Muguro told me a week or so ago that in the church he pastored in Florida, he was fired because he prayed for President Biden the week after he was elected. Never mind that he had publicly prayed for President Trump every single Sunday before the election. Because he dared to obey Scripture that commands pastors to pray for kings and governors and those in authority, he was fired. And that church, which was affiliated with a major evangelical denomination that all of you would know, was defunct three weeks later. Its light was extinguished.

If the church's attitudes and reactions during the pandemic tell us anything, it tells us that we possess precious little of the selflessness described by Luke in the early church. "No one can tell *me* what to do! The governor can't make *me* wear a mask! Better not infringe upon my rights!" What is that? "Me, me, me, me, me!"

It is exactly the opposite of the character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit. It's exactly the opposite of the Spirit-filled community of believers who considered others as more important than themselves and were considerate of their needs and interests.

So, by way of application, I believe the first question we need to ask ourselves is do we even want a Spirit-filled church? Because we cannot be filled with the Spirit and at the same time be self-willed, self-reliant, and self-centered. We must, with the help of the Spirit, crucify self each and every day. We must get out of the way and let the Spirit preside in every nook and cranny of our hearts. Then and only then will we experience the kind of community that is described in Acts 2.

Second, we may need to change our fundamental concept of "church." I've said it several times already today: "Church is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or a non-profit, tax-exempt organization." Yes, I realize that the word "church" is used in our modern vernacular to mean these things. When we say, "I'll meet you at the church..." everyone knows you are talking about the building. Or when we say, "I went to church today..." everyone knows you are talking about a Sunday morning worship service.

That's not necessarily wrong, and it's certainly not going to change. But let us be mindful that the New Testament's concept of church has reference to the corporate *gathering* of believers in a community. The literal definition of "church" (ecclesia) in the Greek language is "the gathering" or "the assembly." So, when you think of "church," what ought to come into your mind first is the *people* who comprise the church—our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And there is an assumption and an expectation in the New Testament that we gather regularly. How often? The New Testament does not specify, though there is evidence to suggest that it ought to be at least once a week. On what day of the week? The New Testament does not specify, though there is evidence to suggest that most churches met at least every Sunday (which they called the Lord's Day—a reference to the fact that he rose from the dead on Sunday). But Paul makes it clear in Romans 14 that it doesn't really matter on what day we meet, because in the new covenant what makes the gathering sacred is not the day of the week, but the people who meet, because we have the Spirit of God living in us.

Where should we meet? The New Testament does not specify. We know that many churches in New Testament times met in homes, some met outdoors, and some met in public

spaces (like the temple court). We also know that when Jesus established the New Covenant, He declared that places of worship were no longer sacred, because God does not occupy buildings anymore as He did the Temple and the Tabernacle. He occupies people, therefore, wherever His people are gathered is sacred, whether it is in a sanctuary like this, or a home, or at the beach, or in a garden.

Do you understand what I am saying? Do you understand the implications of this? When we gather on Wednesday nights for prayer meeting, we are doing church, and it is every bit as significant and consequential as when we gather on Sunday morning. Next weekend, as the men gather together at Twin Rocks for the Men's Retreat, we will be doing church, not just when we meet in the chapel, but as we are sitting around the table having a meal, as we are gathered on the beach having conversation. As Life Groups meet this week in homes throughout our community, they are doing church.

But let me take this one step further. Almost two years ago, when the pandemic started and the governor closed down public meeting spaces so that we could not gather on Sunday mornings in our sanctuary, some of us were outraged and said, "Wait, she's prohibiting us from doing church!" I can see how you might think that if your concept of church is a Sunday morning meeting in a building designated for worship, but that is not the New Testament concept of church. Many of us still met in homes in smaller groups during that time, and that is just as much church as when all of us are together on Sunday mornings. It's okay to miss and lament our typical Sunday morning gatherings, but a governor's mandate does not prevent us from doing church or being the church. The underground church in China has been thriving for decades, meeting at odd times in various places (mostly homes) under the radar of government authorities.

Third, if the gatherings of the church are for the purpose of experiencing and expressing Jesus, let us remove anything from our meetings that hinders this, and welcome anything that facilitates this.

Some of these things are obvious. Shallow songs with bad theology hinder authentic encounters with Jesus, as does shallow preaching. So does entertainment-oriented worship where the focus is on the performance rather than a Person. So does political commentary from the pulpit. So does an attitude of superiority—that our church has got it right, or we *do* it right, or we are better or more spiritual than the church down the road.

The New Testament writers identified a number of things that either hindered or facilitated churches experiencing or expressing the life of Christ. For example, eating with one another during meetings was encouraged, but Paul did warn the Corinthians of being over-indulgent at their mealtimes, especially with wine. He also warned against being too tolerant of those in their midst who were living in willful, unrepentant sin, and He was particularly critical of a divisive, argumentative spirit, because it threatened the unity of the Spirit. James singled out social injustice and favoritism as hindrances to an authentic encounter with Christ. Pride, cliquishness, rigidity, and legalism are other things the New Testament cites as barriers to Christ-honoring gatherings.

The point is, if we are not careful or thoughtful, we can easily detract from Christ in our midst. In fact, we can miss Him entirely, and if we do, our meetings are in vain. Let's keep Jesus in our focus at all times. Let us fix our attention on Him, gaze at His beauty, marvel at His majesty, delight in His goodness, and be awed by His glory. Let's look for Him in each other, and in everything we do. Amen.

## Life Together in the Spirit Acts 2:42-47

**Main Idea:** The early church was eager to gather regularly because they got to encounter and experience the Lord Jesus in their midst.

The devoted community  
Their activities

Their attitudes

Their impact  
In each other's lives

For the Kingdom of Christ

Application for Emmanuel Bible Church

We need to answer the question, 'Do we really want a Spirit-filled church?'

We may need to change our fundamental **concept** of "church".

If the gatherings of the church are for the purpose of experiencing and expressing Jesus, let us **remove** anything from our meetings that hinders this, and **welcome** anything that facilitates this.

### Application Questions "The Meetings of the Church"

1. We live in a culture where privacy, individualism, and independence are some of our most cherished values. How can we at EBC experience a *communal* life together in the Spirit with these competing forces?

2. What might Spirit-generated *community* look like at EBC?

3. Evaluate your participation in the community life of EBC. Are there any things that might be preventing us from experiencing the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 1:23) in the life of His Body? Are we resisting the Spirit in any way, and thus forfeiting an opportunity for the life of Jesus to be imparted to us or expressed through us?