

Acts 2:37-47: The New Community

1. The first of the “big four” practices of the early church listed in 42 is apostolic teaching. The disciples had just finished a forty-day crash refresher course led by Jesus. Given the Jewish audience, try to name at least five things included in the apostolic curriculum.
2. The early church in Acts 2 was radical in several ways: (a) the amount of time spent together; (b) their sharing of possessions; (c) their diversity; (d) the public nature of their life; (e) their shared living space. Which of these feels most *uncomfortable* to you?
3. The nearby Essene community followed the Damascus Rule, which required adherents to relinquish all possessions, which were held in common and administered by community officers. While this sounds, at first, similar to Peter and the gang, there was an important difference: commentators agree that sharing of goods was voluntarily, not obligatory. What hints do you see here to support this?¹ (See also 12:12-13; Lk 6:34-35; Lk 14:12-14.)
4. Ajith Fernando writes of the emotional climate of the early church,

First we are told about the “awe” that everyone was filled with, and about the ministry of miracles performed by the apostles (v. 43)... The believers also had “sincere hearts” when they met. The word translated “sincere” can also mean single-minded devotion, the absence of pretense, or simplicity and generosity... We can confidently say that it signifies an openhearted attitude, where there is no pretense and performance in the way believers behaved. The joy came from the heart, because people were not trying to impress anyone. They had developed an attitude toward each other that enabled them to truly enjoy each other.

The combination of excitement, awe, expectation, and a sincere and generous love, may sound so remote as to be from a fairy tale. Yet many of us can remember similar periods. When I was beginning my junior college year, I recall the leadership group meeting at a charismatic conference and being prayed over; daily prayer meetings; and a spontaneous prayer meeting in one of our dorm rooms, so packed with newly returning students that we were practically spilling out the windows. The sense then was also of joyous expectation. Some of these things faded as the year wore on, others persisted.

When have you experienced an Acts twoish community in your own life?

5. The early church was devoted to *koinōnia* (42), a word often translated “fellowship” and connoting mutual participation in a “life together” (Message) characterized by sharing things in common. Listen to Ben Foust’s [“Community,”](#) 52:50-54:15.

¹ Spoilers: (a) the imperfect tense; (b) the reference to their homes in 46.

- a) To what degree is Foust's assessment true of us or our culture?
 - b) Foust suggests a modest step toward greater *koinōnia* —finding a fellow believer to meet with weekly. Is this something you've ever tried? Is it doable?
6. To the early church, the community of changed hearts and minds (not to mention the signs and wonders) were new and unexpected. To us they are also unexpected, not because they are new, but because we have learned to live without them. To what degree is the spirit of the Acts 2 church driven by *not* knowing what is coming next?



Fun fact: "Reception history includes various attempts to evade the text's demands, domesticating them to fit one's context. Nevertheless, various renewal movements in history have successfully emulated the radical model of Acts 2:44-45, including not only monastic movements, but also early Moravians, John Wesley, and, more recently, the communitarian Jesus Family in China. Although among them only Hutterites practice full communal sharing, Anabaptists have provided a consistent and desperately needed witness to the rest of the church in this area." (Keener, 176-7)

Fun quote: Stott, in discussing the praise (47) which sprung from their glad and generous hearts (46), asserts the worship was traditional, but spirited. "**It is right to be dignified in public worship; it is unforgivable to be dull.**"

Further fun quote: Keener points out that the baptism of 38, like John's, most clearly paralleled not a Jewish purification rite but rather the baptism of a Gentile convert. "Because baptism represented an act of conversion, requiring this act of those who considered themselves heirs of the kingdom showed that no one could depend on their ancestry or another default status... Today some articulate this concept in the saying, '**God has no grandchildren.**'" (Acts NCBC, 168)

Background and Leader's Notes:

Before jumping in to the “new community” passage, a couple thoughts on Peter’s speech. Peter’s speech has four parts:

- I. The disciples’ prophesying (tongues) shows the last days are here (Joel 2:28-32)
- II. Jesus worked miracles, showing he was from God, but you killed him (gulp)
- III. This was God’s plan, as was that Jesus be resurrected (Ps 16:8-11—and clearly this can’t refer to David, who *is* decaying at the time of Peter’s speech, but must refer to “great David’s greater son,” the Messiah)
- IV. God, as anticipated in Ps 110:1, has exalted Jesus beyond even David, making him “Lord” (a title elsewhere reserved for God the Father)²

Noteworthy:

- a) The Pentecost tongues are seen as a form of prophecy and fulfillment of Joel 2
- b) Peter presents all of Joel 2:28-32 even though only part of it has been fulfilled. The unfulfilled part includes judgment, giving a natural bridge to his call to repentance
- c) Very possibly, some of those in attendance were last in Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus was crucified
- d) Peter then uses arguments likely originating with Jesus himself, to demonstrating the divinity of the Messiah and the resurrection as part of God’s plan
- e) These arguments are made using the Psalms, with the principle that what is true in a small way with David is true in completion for the Messiah

If we were to ask a question about this, it might be as follows: Peter’s speech ranks among one of the most powerful evangelistic messages of all time. Yet for a modern reader, Peter’s speech is a giant hammer of guilt inscribed with esoteric prophecy. It was right for his listeners, not for all time. E.g. Paul’s Mars Hill address has much more bridge building. And whereas an outreach message 30 years ago would necessarily include *apologetic* elements, answering objections, a modern listener might be more swayed by something like the Uncover lectures given by Tim Keller at Oxford in 2015. In these lectures, rather than focusing on apologetics (Os Guinness takes this on), Keller, in five lectures, describes his belief that

² Peter uses Psalm 110’s famous and enigmatic “thy Lord said to my Lord” to show that the Messiah must be exalted beyond even David, worthy to be called “Lord,” a title elsewhere reserved for the Father. “While the same word is used in the Greek both times for ‘Lord’ [in Ps 110:1], the Hebrew of Psalm 110:1 reads, ‘Yahweh said to my Adonai.’ Peter sees this as God speaking to Jesus, who is David’s Lord” (Ajith Fernando’s Acts commentary). Use of “Lord” (Gk *kyrios*) for Jesus was a groundbreaking development.

Christianity uniquely provides hope, meaning, identity, satisfaction, and freedom. In these talks he presents what the gospel means for each of these, often in contrast to other worldviews.

What would you add or remove from Keller's five hot-button topics which are compelling to modern people?

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This passage, set apart by change of tense, is one of about five such brief cameos in Acts (see also 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 9:31; 12:24), which provide a snapshot of the church. This passage is both well known and is often written off the way we would write off the well-meaning periods of naïve religious excess from our own lives. It is not generally taken for a blueprint of church life. The best way to read it lies in between. First, we must recognize that the conditions were in some ways highly unusual: We have here a church with a core group of 120, many poor Galileans, and 3000 pilgrims. The community is launched by a highly unusual miraculous event, and supported in part by more miraculous events. And these pilgrims were in Jerusalem temporarily for the festival, so whether they were able to stay a few days or a few weeks, this describes a transitory start to the new church in Jerusalem.

Second, though born in an unusual situation, this is not some youthful excess to be written off. (Here it is important to note that the sharing of possessions here is voluntary, in contrast to e.g. the cloistered Essenes, who were required by their Damascus Rule to relinquish all possessions to be administered for the good of the community. It should also be noted that this pattern of voluntary sharing did not persist in a widespread form into the churches of Paul's letters. As Stott points out, Christian movements have generally not been in the pattern of the Essenes, which very few exceptions.) Elements of this early community in all healthy churches, particularly the focus on the "big four" of 42. And to a greater extent still, it has been repeated in countless contexts since the first century, whether revivals or retreats or church movements—themselves perhaps including everything from the Benedictines to the Azusa Street revival.

By seeing these we can both demystify this first community and try to abstract its principles so we can imitate its pattern. The questions attempt to guide this process. We need to both recover the excitement which this passage exudes and through analysis and the Spirit consider carefully how to recover this in our churches. If the excitement we find here is something we haven't felt in a long time, why is that?

One other question which should be asked of all Acts passages: What, if anything, in paralleled or alluded to in Luke? The feeding of the 5000 has some echoes. But perhaps more, the community of Acts 2 in many ways in the fulfillment of the parables of the kingdom. And poignantly, the empowerment of the Spirit shows a spontaneous generosity which lay beyond the reach of the Rich Young Ruler. The theme again is that all of the things which seemed impossible in Luke are brought about by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This may seem obvious, but preaching which focuses too narrowly on the gospel as only the atoning death of Christ will miss the role of the Spirit here. The gospel implies a powerful new reality going beyond the ledger of sin and death to its implications for new life.

Finally, as we try to apply this passage to our lives, it's worth asking questions like, (a) Are we as devoted to the big four (42) as they were, or are there some we ignore (if at the expense of others); (b) they were excited; when was the last time we were excited? (c) to what degree was their willingness to devote money and time a result of the movement of the Spirit and to what degree did it open the door to that?