



"Community and Kingdom Advancement in the Church"

Idea: The community expressed by the early church validated the Gospel's message before a watching world.

Intro: This summer we are examining the concept of biblical community. The working definition of community, which we have been using, is that of "a unified body of individuals" or *one-together*. In our study we have discovered that community exists and is desired in this world because creation follows the pattern of its Creator. God is a communal being who exists in three distinct Persons as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They dwell together in perfect community, equal in being but subordinate in role.

The Triune God created all that there is; therefore, creation bears His mark of community. What we see, then, in the universe is that every part has its counterpart. This is most beautifully seen in the creation of mankind. Adam was the very first human created. God formed him from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his nostrils (Gen 2:7). God also fashioned the woman Eve from Adam's rib, and the two of

them became a perfect reflection of the glorious community existing within the Godhead. Adam and Eve enjoyed the beauty and responsibility of overseeing God's creation without any shame (Gen 2:25).

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve's perfect community with God and with one another was destroyed when they sinned against the Lord by eating from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve died spiritually and later died physically. Despite their rebellion, God still pursued them. God covered Adam and Eve's sin and spoke of a Messiah who would come to put an end to sin. God furthered that promise in the call of Abram and the establishment of Israel as He called out a people to Himself through whom the Messiah would come. The promised Messiah came in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. God the Son came to man. He lived a perfectly holy life, and He offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. The work, which Jesus accomplished on the cross and in the grave, made possible the restoration of man to the community for which he was created.

Individuals who repent of sin and place their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ are brought into the household of God. They become part of the community of faith called the church, sharing a common life in Christ. They dwell in *community*. The believers who make up the church are a unified body of individuals who are one together in Jesus Christ.

The early church presents a beautiful picture of what this community looks like.

Read Acts 2:41-47.

Inquiry: Jesus Christ created "one new man" (Eph 2:15) from the two groups that, from a salvific perspective, comprise lost humanity. It is out of the Jews and Gentiles that the Lord has called and created a new people for himself. He has brought each believer into a community of faith whereby the members

make up one body, the church. Thus, as we have discussed, the Christian faith, outside of personal salvation, knows nothing of individualism. Instead, faith in Christ should be understood in the context of community, as Brad House suggests:

“Christianity is not an individual sport. We are part of a team. . . . We have to be more than a collection of individuals who occasionally gather together. We need a corporate sense of our identity. A gospel-centered community will find their identity in Jesus individually and corporately.”

The church of the Lord Jesus is the new Israel. Jews understood salvation in the context of the promised blessing of Israel as a nation. The community created through the gospel completes what was foreshadowed in the calling and establishment of Abraham and Israel, and it finds its expression in the small group. Commenting on this biblical concept, Sinclair Ferguson states:

“The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God’s new community. For His purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness but rather to build His church, that is, to call out of the world a people for His own glory.

The early New Testament church understood and embraced community. They recognized that it was Christ alone who had brought them near to God. Their belief in the gospel message ushered them into eternal community with the Godhead and with other believers. G.W. Icenogle, in his book *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, points out that the first mention of *koinonia* came immediately after the event of Pentecost. It was at that time that the disciples became self-conscious about their communal identity. Thus, emerged their understanding that they were the new eschatological community of Israel. Icenogle states, “The experiences and

lessons learned by the Twelve (and the one hundred twenty) as a small group became the key lessons in community for a whole network of ecclesia, and the prime model of ecclesia who have gathered throughout the ages.” Jesus’s disciples and those who were closely connected to him became the genesis of a multiplicity of small groups who met in the temple courts and homes throughout the city of Jerusalem. The early church became a community of communities who were interconnected and interdependent following Pentecost.

In response to the community they now enjoyed, the members of the early church devoted themselves to the Lord, to certain spiritual disciplines, and to one another. A. C. Hervey makes the statement in his commentary that “common indebtedness to Christ, and devotion to him, bring men together into a gracious sense of brotherhood and fellowship.” Perhaps this understanding explains why Acts portrays the early church in such a communal way.

We also see that the early church’s strong sense of community resulted in their advancement of Christ’s kingdom. Following the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter and the disciples were in dismay. They weren’t sure what to do, until they saw the resurrected Christ and spent forty days with Him. Just before Jesus ascended back to the Father, He told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. The Spirit came ten days later, filling the body of Christ with power just as Jesus had said in Acts 1:8. The church began to proclaim the greatness of God in the languages of those who were in Jerusalem for the Feast. The people were in awe of what was happening, so Peter stood up with the eleven disciples and preached the gospel to the people in Jerusalem. The result that day was that 3,000 people placed their faith in Jesus and followed Him in baptism. The Kingdom took a huge step forward that day.

I want to share with you two biblical principles from this text.

1. Embracing biblical community positions the church to be a strong gospel influence.

The historical account of the early church, which Luke gives in Acts, reveals that the early church's embracing of biblical community positioned them to be a strong gospel influence in their culture. He emphasizes that the Lord daily added to their numbers (Acts 2:47). The final statement in verse 47 raises a serious question. Why did the Lord add to their numbers daily those who were being saved? Perhaps the reason for God's blessing is found in the five verses that precede verse 47. Acts 2:42-47 presents the early church as living out what Israel failed to do. Their lives were committed to the teaching of God's Word, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer (Acts 2:42), and to expressing the community they enjoyed through Christ. Those commitments helped them become what the Lord intended for his church to be; they became a gospel light to the nations.

The early church was fervently dedicated to the apostle's teaching (vs. 42). During Jesus' earthly ministry, he taught with an authority unlike any of the teachers of law (Mark 1:22). Just before his ascension, Jesus delegated that authority to the apostles, who spoke in his name. Thus, they carried on the teaching of Jesus. Simon Kistemaker explains that the word *teaching* has a double meaning: "Extensively, the word refers to the good news of all that Jesus said and did. And intensively, the apostles were involved in the work of teaching an oral gospel to the converts, whom Luke calls disciples (learners) in Acts." Their teaching would have taken place in two major venues: public worship services and private home groups. The early church's commitment to the teaching of God's Word resulted in the blessing of God upon their lives and ministries in fulfillment of God's promise to Israel (Deut 6). It set them up for personal blessings from

God, but it also put them in a position for God to rain down blessings on the early church corporately.

The early church was also committed to fellowship. The word translated as *fellowship* in verse 42 is the Greek word κοινωνία. According to Robertson, it speaks of partnership and a sharing of common interest. Consequently, the partnership of those of the early church involved participation in the blood of Christ, cooperation in the work of the gospel, and contribution to those in need. He states that there is a wide range of opinions concerning the precise use of the term in verse 42. "It may refer to the distribution of funds in verse 44 or to the oneness of spirit in the community of believers or to the Lord's Supper (as in 1 Cor 10:16) in the sense of communion or to the fellowship in the common meals or agapae [*sic*] (love-feasts)." In any sense it speaks of the unity that the early church enjoyed. Fellowship describes the enthusiasm that was demonstrated in a common bond at worship, at meals, and in the sharing of their material possessions. It expresses their understanding of community. Their vertical union with Christ resulted in a horizontal union with other believers in Christ.

Likewise, the early church was committed to the breaking of bread and prayer. These two spiritual disciplines flow out of fellowship. John Polhill states that the key to correctly defining the fellowship found in verse 42 is to see "breaking of bread" and "prayer" in apposition to "fellowship." In other words, the fellowship that those in the early church devoted themselves to was expressed in their mutual meals and prayers together. There is speculation as to the exact meaning of "breaking of bread." Is it a reference to a meal in a private home or to a communion service? The grammar of the verse as well as the context suggests it could easily refer to the Lord's Supper. In the Greek, the definite article τῆ precedes ἄρτου

(bread), specifying that the believers partook of the bread set aside for communion. Kistemaker asserts that another reason to understand “breaking of bread” as a reference to the Lord’s Supper is that it appears within the sequence of teaching, fellowship, and prayers in worship services. A definite article also used before “prayer” has led some interpreters to understand this phrase as a reference to the keeping of formal prayer hours in the temple. Early in Acts, believers are seen as going to the temple for prayer (Acts 3:1); as Polhill points out, however, the reference is most likely much broader, including both temple prayers and prayer meetings in their homes. Both references, then, can be understood to include formal and informal functions as the early church lived out their new community in Christ. They enjoyed sharing meals together in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice and praying with and for one another.

The early church’s commitment to the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer fostered an environment whereby Jesus was free to work mightily in and through their lives. Miracles being worked by the apostles caused those outside the community of faith to stand in awe (Acts 2:43). Moreover, those inside the church shared such a kindred spirit that they “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Their *κοινωνία* led them to sell property in order to meet the physical needs of those in the church (Acts 2:45).

The difference Jesus was making in these Christ followers positioned them to be a strong gospel influenced. These leads to a second biblical principle.

2. Embracing biblical community results in the church living out the Great Commission.

The result of the early church's understanding and embracing of community was a fulfillment of God's commission to Israel. God called Abraham and created from him a nation that would be a blessing to the nations. It was through Israel that the Messiah was born into the world. The Messiah was believed on by both Jews and Gentiles. He created a new Israel from those who repented of sin and placed their faith in him (Rom 9:6-33). The early church became the light to the nations God spoke of to Abraham. Luke's portrayal of the church in Acts is one of fulfilling the commission Jesus laid before the church as he ascended to the Father. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). After the Spirit came at Pentecost in Acts 2, the church immediately begins to boldly spread the gospel message around Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8). The church is depicted as making disciples largely through the ministry of small groups or house churches. The preachers would proclaim the gospel and win converts to Christ, establishing a church that would then meet together in small groups. Those small groups followed the pattern set forth by the first small group of the Twelve. The book closes with Paul sitting in a Roman cell in Rome awaiting trial. He completed at least three missionary journeys during his ministry and planted countless churches, winning many to faith in Christ. The early church obediently followed Christ's mandate to be a light to the nations. They preached the message of the gospel and allowed their community to validate the message before a watching world. Likewise, the modern church should emulate their example and commitment to biblical community.

The fact that lost men and women could vividly see the difference that Jesus had made in the lives of those who

followed him is what validated the gospel message. When we dwell together in community, the result will be a fleshing out of the Great Commission. We will:

- Preach the gospel.
- Help those in need.
- Disciple believers.

Conclusion: The community expressed through the local church is the light unto the nations that God always intended. Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28. The providence and presence of God bookend the Great Commission. He said, “All authority has been given to Me”... “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In order for our community to be a light for others, we must:

- Be in community with Christ.
- Be in community with others.
- Grow in our community with God and others.
- Share our community with others.