

COMMUNITY

5

THE MISSION OF COMMUNITY

Acts 2:42—47

By Beth Crawford

“...the Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit who created a missionary church.”
John R. W. Stott

“...the evangelistic work of the church continued daily. As the Christians were seen and heard by the other people in Jerusalem, their activities formed an opportunity for witness.”
I. Howard Marshall

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”
1 Peter 2:9—10

“Humanity was created as a ministry community. Their first call was to serve creation, to serve one another, and to serve God. Small groups are the microcosms of humanity’s call to minister together as a community. Community establishes the foundation for mutual service. Where there is no community, there is no ministry. Where there is no ministry, there is no community.”
Gareth Weldon Icenogle

Copyright©2004
Vineyard Church of Columbus
All rights reserved.

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To recognize that Christians in community do not exist for themselves or just the other group members, but together are an expression of the Body of Christ on earth called to advance the kingdom of God corporately.

KEY VERSES

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Acts 2:46–47

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

A small group of singles wanted to get away from life as usual to spend time with Jesus and each other. They planned a trip to the Chicago area for three nights and four days. They had little in common besides a love and hunger for Jesus. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty-seven, and none worked with each other or shared much in the way of similar interests. A handful had visited the group for the first time just the week before, but they enthusiastically came along. Fifteen drove to a suburb of Chicago where the women stayed with one of the group members’ mothers and the men stayed in the home of the mom’s best friend. During those four days, God worked among them in amazing ways.

Throughout the trip, individuals shared their hearts and prayed for one another. A new level of openness and vulnerability emerged. God was present in their worship and prayer times, and gave them significant dreams and words of revelation for each other. He also arranged divine appointments for group members to speak about Christ with strangers they met. On one train ride into Chicago, two guys spoke with a young man who was at the end of himself. He had told God that if He didn't show up that day, he was going to do something desperate. He was open to hearing about the Lord and their suggestions of how to find freedom from an addiction he'd felt trapped by his whole life.

When group members sang Christmas carols while waiting at bus stops, others joined in. A group of older women were amazed and refreshed when they learned that a few of the guys were also praying for a homeless man. At restaurants, their servers repeatedly asked who they were and what made them so different. The kindness they showed the waitresses and one another stood out from the treatment usually witnessed by the servers.

Since the trip, the group members hang out together every day. They continue to experience God's Presence in their meetings and to grow in their love for each other. The Lord has been the One to knit their hearts together through their desire to follow and obey Him. This diverse group of people probably wouldn't connect for any other reason than they have been united by God's Spirit into His Body. This is what Christian community is all about.

When we talk about "Christian community," we mean the following:

Christian community is people united by a common calling from God; a common salvation in union with Jesus Christ; a common experience of the indwelling, transforming, and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit; and a common mission to advance God's Kingdom. These people live out their lives together, mutually supporting each other in love and depending upon the Holy Spirit (Nathan and Crawford).

Pray and invite the Holy Spirit to come and teach you through this study.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is background information for leaders. You may decide how much to share with your group members.

Acts

Luke, a physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul, wrote a two-volume work we now know as *The Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles*. These were separated when the four gospels were collected and circulated together (Bruce, "Acts," p. 36). Luke stated his purpose for writing both volumes: to provide a certain Theophilus with 'an orderly account' of the life of Jesus and how His work was carried out after He rose from the dead and returned to heaven (Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1–2). Luke admitted he was not an eyewitness of the life of Jesus, but relied on others who had been (Luke 1:2–3), although he did write portions of Acts from the viewpoint of "we," indicating that he participated in some

of Paul's missions and could write authentically about those. Luke's details, including major historical figures and geographical names, help scholars estimate that the book of Acts covers about thirty years (Bruce, "Acts," pp. 42–43). However, it is not completely accurate to call Luke simply an historian since he did want to persuade his Roman reader that "...you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4, cited in Bruce, "Acts," p. 35–36). In Acts, Luke traced the growth of the members of the early church as they fulfilled their calling to be Jesus' "...witnesses in Jerusalem, ...Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Luke selected events that portrayed the gospel spreading through the lives of Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, and other first century followers of Christ. The book concluded around AD 62 when Paul was released from his first house arrest in Rome and was probably written shortly afterwards (Bruce, "Acts," p. 37).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Acts 2:42–47

- 1. Let's read verses 42–47 aloud, looking at Luke's description of the early church after 3000 people had been converted in a single day.**

How did Luke describe the young Christians' attitude toward life (v. 42)?

He used *devoted*, which usually means, "attend regularly' or 'actively engage in'" (Robinson, p. 752). Thus, the new believers were in the **habit** of meeting together at a time and place where they could be taught by the apostles, the official witnesses to the life of Jesus, and where they could continue to worship in community. They took the life of a disciple very seriously; their commitment to Christ and one another did not fluctuate with mood swings, having more interesting options for the evening, etc. They didn't need to be exhorted to gather, as later believers were who may have been tempted to fall away when persecuted: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

The Jerusalem believers also viewed life **corporately**, not individually, as joint participants in a new reality, life in Christ. Contrary to our highly individualistic culture, they readily identified themselves with a group, which was and still is normative for a Middle Eastern mindset. It also was the viewpoint of the nation of Israel, the special people chosen by God to depict His Presence and His blessings to the rest of humanity. Fee writes that in the Old Testament, "God chose, and made a covenant with, not individual Israelites but a people who would bear God's name and be [live] for God's purposes" (p. 65). This people continued after the resurrection and Pentecost as the Church. Fee comments on Paul's views that, "Though entered individually, salvation is seldom if ever thought of simply as a one-on-one relationship with God. While such a relationship is included to be sure, 'to be saved' means especially to be joined to the people of God.... The primary goal of salvation: an eschatological people, who together live the life of the future [kingdom] in the present age as they await the final consummation" (p. 64).

2. What activities did the new church participate in (v. 42)? What do each of these terms mean: *teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer*?

The ***teaching*** by the apostles must have focused on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They were all eyewitnesses to these events, especially the resurrection (Acts 1:21–26). Certainly they also taught what they had learned from Jesus, which we now have recorded in the gospels. Because these were primarily Jews embracing the long-awaited Messiah, the apostles needed to teach how the new age of the kingdom of God had arrived, and how to live in the tension between the Messiah’s first coming and His expected return.

The ***fellowship*** translates from the Greek word *koinonia*, and is the only time Luke uses this noun (Robinson, p. 752). It has a definite article in front of it—“the” fellowship. *Koinonia* and related Greek words have various translations in the New Testament. In Acts 2:42, it may refer to “...the unanimity and unity brought about by the Spirit” (Schattenmann, p. 642). Hauck writes, “In Ac. 2:42 *koinonia* does not denote the concrete community or society of Christians.... It is rather an abstract and spiritual term for the fellowship of brotherly concord established and expressed in the life of the community” (p. 809). In contrast, since scholars debate its precise meaning, Robinson thinks it refers to a physical gathering of the new Christians, not just the fact that they have a spiritual connection with Christ and one another (pp. 752–753). Marshall believes fellowship means they met for a “common meal” or “a common religious experience” (p. 83). Today, we often talk about “fellowship” referring to an act of sharing that takes place between two or more believers. But we apply that to a wide range of situations: in church services and small group meetings, during meals, brief conversations, work projects, and mission trips. To say that the Jerusalem believers were devoted to the fellowship means more than they regularly attending some meetings. They saw themselves joined to Christ and therefore joined to one another.

The ***breaking of bread*** and the ***prayers*** also refer to the activities of the early church as they gathered in Christ’s name. Marshall states that *the breaking of bread* is Luke’s way of referring to the Lord’s Super (p. 83) or what some Christians call “the Communion” or “the Eucharist.” *Prayers* might indicate that the church members regularly prayed together in their gatherings, or that they continued to participate in the Jewish hours of prayer (Acts 3:1 cited in Marshall, p. 83). In Acts 3:1, 5:12, and 5:42, we read that the followers continued to meet in the temple until fierce opposition arose.

3. How is each of these important to the life of a growing Christian community?

Teaching: First of all, every Christian group must base its teaching and practice on the words of Christ. He commanded His closest followers to “...go and make disciples of all nations, ...**teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...**” (Matthew 28:19–20a). The apostles’ teaching and reliance on the Old Testament Scriptures was all that the early church had immediately following Jesus’ ascension. The Holy Spirit came to give the apostles’ not only boldness to preach and teach, but

also to lead them into all truth (John 16:13) so that God's people might be established in His truth. Over decades, the apostles and leaders wrote the documents now compiled as our New Testament. As we teach from the Scriptures today, guided by the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth, we are continuing to teach what the apostles taught.

Fellowship: Christianity is not solely an individual's relationship with Christ but also with other believers who likewise have been joined to Christ. Mutual participation in the life of the Spirit is the fellowship that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 13:13 and Philippians 2:1 (Hauck, p. 807). When Christians gather, they demonstrate that God can reconcile and unite very different individuals through the death of His Son and the presence and power of His Spirit (Ephesians 2: 14–22). Without meeting together, we have no credible witness to this amazing work nor can we show the world what it means for us to “love one another” as Jesus commanded (John 13:34–35).

Breaking of Bread: The commemoration of the Lord's Supper is a vital part of our honoring the death of our Savior and receiving and practicing forgiveness in the Body of Christ. While some churches regulate or restrict who can serve and who can partake of communion at the Lord's Table, all Christians need to have the opportunity to gather with other brothers and sisters for this sacred act. No matter how we view the actual elements of the bread and wine/juice, Jesus commands us to participate in the symbolic re-enactment of when He gave Himself to establish the New Covenant with God for us (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). As we receive the Lord's forgiveness, we are also reminded to extend that to others. Ongoing confession of sin, forgiveness in Jesus' name, and reconciling of individuals are fundamental to Christian community (1 John 1:5–10). [See more on this in the community study on 1 John 1, *Foundations of Community: Walking in the Light.*]

Prayers: It is absolutely necessary for the church to gather and pray together. Without this, our own prayer life may die. “While prayer is often private and personal, it is never outside the reality of the worshiping, praying fellowship. In fact, we cannot sustain a life of prayer outside the community. Either we will give it up as futile, lacking the support and watchful care of others, or we will make it into a thing of our own. Without the discerning life of the Christian community we will quickly turn prayer into a face-saving, self-justifying monologue” (R. Foster, pp. 253–254). He also writes, “We do not live in isolation, and we do not pray in isolation. The Christian number is plural, not singular” (R. Foster, p. 251).

Icenogle sees the apostles' teaching impacting the other three components of church life: fellowship, communion/community meals, and corporate prayers. Also, “the shared meal added substance and symbol to the community” not only as they pooled their resources to feed one another but also as they gathered around their leader, the Lord Jesus Christ and His meal. And the community prayer times meant they practiced dependence on their Lord and listened for His revelation, anticipating His empowering so they might carry out expansion of His church in His ways (pp. 265–266).

***Which of these are you participating in regularly?**

4. How did God work, and what attitude did people in Jerusalem have towards His miracles (v. 43)?

Although Luke was a bit vague in verse 43 when he stated, “everyone was filled with awe,” Marshall links this with Acts 5:5 and 5:11, which talk about the reaction of the general population, not merely the people in the church (p. 84). The “awe” of God was in response especially to the miracles the apostles performed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Vineyard movement, we do not teach that these wonders and signs were merely for the age of the apostles or for the early church to authenticate their message to help establish the church. We believe that these were among the works that Jesus performed and also were among the things He told His followers to teach to new believers in His “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:18–20). Jesus told His witnesses to make disciples and teach them to obey **all** His commands. When we look at the ministry of Jesus and what His followers were commissioned to imitate, we find that He preached, healed, cast out demons, and even raised the dead (Mark 1:21–39; Mark 3:13–19; Mark 5:35–43; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 6:17–19; Luke 9:1–6; Luke 10:1–3, 9,17). Therefore, in obedience to His words in Matthew 28:18–19, we seek the Holy Spirit’s wonders and signs today – not as an end in themselves but as God’s work to open hearts to His reality among us.

5. How did the church members express the humble, self-sacrificing heart of Jesus towards each other (vv. 44–45)?

The believers who were united in Christ lived in close contact with each other. It might sound as if they pooled all their resources into one fund, but Acts 4:32–5:11 indicates that they voluntarily sold some of their possessions to provide for one another when a need arose. Since this was not a commanded or forced requirement, we cannot call it socialism or communism in the political sense these terms have been used in the past 100 years (Marshall, pp. 84–85). Basically, the Christians were demonstrating God’s heart for the poor and needy that had always characterized His ethical standards (Deuteronomy 15:7–11; Deuteronomy 24:17–22; Amos 2:6–7a; Zechariah 7:8–10; James 1:27).

***Should every Christian community pool all their resources? Why or why not?**

Jacobs finds no command to do this, and believes “it came from the spontaneous impulse of the sense of brotherhood in Christ, when the band of disciples was still small, making them in a sense one family, and under the external constraint of extreme want and persecution. Under such conditions, they had so much in common already that they were ready to extend this to all things” (p. 754). However, it seems that the believers generally held on to their possessions, and then sold items when a need arose, as in the case of Barnabas in Acts 4:32–37 (p. 754). Jacobs also notes that this financial arrangement didn’t last very long (p. 754).

Later in Acts and in Paul's letters, there are references to taking up a collection for the mother church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29–30; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15). The poverty among Christians in the city was likely a result of deciding to follow Christ no matter the cost, which meant that many would be cut off from Jewish families and business connections. Also, there was a widespread famine (predicted in Acts 11:27–28), causing Jerusalem believers to be more impoverished. Schattenmann points out that fishermen and peasants following Jesus from Galilee who remained in Jerusalem would not have found work easily. He states, "the impoverishment of the early church was not a consequence of the sharing of possessions" (p. 642). Additionally, Jesus taught His followers to ask for daily bread, implying that it could be normal for Christians to not have much stored up here on earth (Matthew 6:11 and 19, cited by Christensen).

6. What did they do on a regular basis (vv. 46–47)?

Daily they met for worship and prayer both in the temple compound and in each other's homes. They might have simply used the temple area as a gathering place since Solomon's colonnade, a porch (L. Foster, p. 1649) that ran along the east side of the outer court is mentioned in Acts 3:11 and 5:12 (Bruce, *Commentary*, p. 81). Or they may have attended the regular sacrifices and prayers conducted by the priests. Since they believed Jesus was their Jewish Messiah, they had not yet made a break with formal Judaism nor had the authorities begun to openly persecute them (Marshall, p. 85).

They shared meals together, indicated by "...broke bread together..." (L. Foster, p. 1648) although this wording seems similar to the way Luke described taking the Lord's Supper in verse 42. Marshall suggests we read 1 Corinthians 11:17–22 and 33–34 to get an idea of the meals they shared which could have included the Communion sacrament (p. 85). While Paul criticized the Corinthians for not giving equal consideration to all members of the fellowship, he stated that celebrating the Lord's Supper was a reminder of the death of Christ. It was this self-sacrificial death which set the pattern for their shared meals and which instituted the New Covenant with God that made them one people despite racial and economic differences.

Luke also mentioned that they had glad and sincere hearts and regularly praised God. Whether they rejoiced that the risen Jesus was the long awaited Messiah or that they had been forgiven all their sins including rejecting their Savior, or whether they simply were filled with the Holy Spirit's joy, this was a people that overflowed with thanksgiving. Christian community ought to be characterized by all the fruit of the Spirit and those in close fellowship should enjoy His Presence in worship, as well.

7. What impact did this have on the people around them (vv. 47–48)?

The general public held the early Christians in high esteem. And God added new converts daily as this community of people fleshed out the life of Jesus.

8. How did their community life fit into God's plan of salvation?

Luke didn't say that they saved people, but that God added to their number. Salvation is God's work, but the relationships of the people reconciled to Christ and each other make a powerful statement about the love and forgiveness of God. Their joy, mutual concern, sacrificial lifestyles, and daily connections made an attractive alternative to the isolation that human pride and worldly achievement foster. Icenogle points out that the meetings in homes "...was also the space where a glimpse of God's future for humanity could be seen, where men and women, adults and children, free and slave could relate with one another based upon the new values, new character and new hope of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Christian small group was to be the foretaste of...heaven" (p. 264).

9. What sacrifices do you think they had to make in order to live in community and to regularly worship and fellowship together?

Obviously they gave up time that they might have used to pursue their individual interests. Some may have shortened their work hours or lengthened their days in order to work and fellowship daily. They must have spent less time alone, less time deciding what the day or evening's agenda would be, more time listening to others than monopolizing conversations, and more time thinking about the needs of others than themselves. Some gave sacrificially to help reduce financial strains on other church members. Instead of each person adding to his fortune, these Jerusalem dwellers were so concerned for fellow Christians' well being that they sold what they had and gave to "anyone" as he or she had need. This must have meant a sacrifice of food, clothing, and provisions for future hard times. Those who owned homes practiced hospitality, which probably required extra cleaning, extra food preparation, and a certain loss of privacy. Middle Eastern hosts usually responded to the request of a guest at any moment, and were generous with whatever they had. [Remember they didn't have refrigerators, freezers, microwaves, or instant anything to make entertaining others easier.] In summary, each person learned to die to his or her own will, a daily denying of self and cross bearing for the sake of the community's good.

APPLICATION

***What motivates you to participate in our small group community?**

***What is our group doing that draws you into deeper relationship with God and the other members?**

***What are you willing to sacrifice to experience closer community with others in our small group?**

***How has God used our life together to advance the gospel? Or How could God use our life together to advance the gospel?**

***What changes would you like to see in our corporate witness to the people living around us?**

WRAPPING IT UP

As God's people, we are called and are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, His Son (Romans 8:29). God is accomplishing this through the power of His Holy Spirit, not in isolation, but in the context of community. As we relate to God, we are changed by His love into people who love Him and others. God is love (1 John 4:8), and love is acting for the good of another person (1 John 4:9–10). Love can only be seen in relationship, in the action between two or more people. That's why "Love is only visible in community, where at least one person may feel and act upon love for another.... Love is mission and ministry. Love must have an intention to reach out to another..." (Icenogle, p. 233).

As we meet for worship, Scripture study, prayer and mutual ministry, we can't forget that we are called to be God's love in action both in this group and also outside it. We don't exist just to help each other feel better. We exist as a visible expression of God's love to the rest of the world. In the weeks ahead, we want to reaffirm this part of our small group life: to love and worship God by the way we serve others, pray for others, and share the gospel with others. We are a community of God's ambassadors, representing His kingdom, to those who are not yet fellow citizens with us. Let's close by praying together that our diplomatic efforts on behalf of our King will bring others in contact with Him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce, F. F. "Acts of the Apostles." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Revised ed. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- . *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Ed. F. F. Bruce. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Christensen, Bill. Personal conversation. 16 Jan. 2004.
- Fee, Gordon D. *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. 1996. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001.
- Foster, Lewis. "Acts." *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985.
- Foster, Richard J. *Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Hauck, Friedrich. "KOINON." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel. Trans. and Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 1965. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Icenogle, Gareth Weldon. *Biblical Foundations For Small Group Ministry*. Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1994.
- Jacobs, H. E. "Community of Goods." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Revised ed. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Acts of the Apostles*. 1980. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Ed. R. V. G. Tasker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Nathan, Marlene and Beth Crawford. "Definition and Explanation of Christian Community." *Community Bible Study Series*. Westerville, OH: Vineyard Church of Columbus, 2004.
- Robinson, D. W. B. "Communion; Fellowship." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Revised ed. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Schattenmann, J. "Fellowship: Koinonia." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Ed. Colin Brown. 5th ed. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*. The Bible Speaks Today. Ed. John R. W. Stott. Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1990.

