

SESSION 3

UNIFIED

The impact of the gospel is seen in the unity found among Jesus' followers.





HOW WOULD
YOU EXPLAIN
THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN A
DIVISION AND A
DISAGREEMENT?

DIVISION WITHIN A GROUP CAN BE DEADLY TO ITS WELL-BEING, WHETHER THE GROUP IS A FAMILY, A CORPORATION, A NATION, OR A CHURCH.

In 1858, the United States was torn between slave and free states; whatever position candidates took regarding the issue of slavery was controversial. Upon his selection as the Illinois Republican candidate for the Senate, Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous “House Divided” speech to the convention delegates. In the speech he referred to the well-known saying of Jesus that a house divided against itself cannot stand (see Mark 3:25). He was warning that the nation would not endure in a divided condition.

Lincoln lost that Senate race, but he went on to be elected two years later as president of the United States. The rest is history. The hallmark of Lincoln’s presidency, and indeed his life, was an unflagging passion to preserve the nation’s union that was based on the ideals of freedom and self-government.

Long before the United States grappled with the idea of national unity, the early church displayed an even greater form of unity—the unity of the Spirit. Luke described in Acts 2:41-47 what this unity looked like in the life and actions of the first believers. As the early church in Jerusalem multiplied in numbers, the believers took steps to strengthen their unity. We can learn much from their actions.

➤ ACTS 2:41-47

41 So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them. **42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. **43** Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. **44** Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. **45** They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. **46** Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.

Think About It

Identify words or phrases that describe things done by the early church. In what ways do you see these actions being done in your church?

What words or phrases point to attitudes possessed by the members of the early church? How are these attitudes connected to the actions identified earlier?

► UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Acts 2:41-47

Acts 2:14-40 is Luke’s record of the “sermon,” or message, that Peter delivered to the crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Onlookers asked for an explanation of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of believers to communicate the gospel in languages other than their native tongues. Peter explained that what had happened was nothing less than the divine fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the dawning of the new, messianic age. He quoted from the Book of Joel and from two messianic psalms (Pss. 16; 110) and then concluded with a passionate declaration that Jesus—the very One whom the Jews had recently crucified—was both Lord and Messiah.

Peter was filled with the Spirit, but he was also filled with God’s Word. As a result, those who heard his message were compelled to reach a verdict about Jesus in their hearts. Consequently, Peter urged his listeners to repent of their sins and be baptized as a testimony of their surrender to Christ.

The response to Peter’s message was staggering, as 3,000 people became new believers. This burgeoning community of Christ-followers became actively engaged in listening to the apostles teach, in talking to and encouraging one another, in taking meals together, and in praying together. They demonstrated Christlike love for one another, and they acted with grace toward others in Jerusalem. Furthermore, their example continues to shine across the centuries and to beckon churches today to manifest the mission of Jesus.



➤ EXPLORE THE TEXT

DEVOTED (*Acts 2:41-42*)

⁴¹ **So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them.**

Can you imagine the addition of 3,000 new believers to your church in one day? The picture that Luke presented about the beginning of the church is beautifully compelling. It was a holy celebration for the Jewish individuals who repented and accepted the message of the gospel. The Greek word translated accepted carries the idea of a glad reception. The new believers delightfully embraced the truth about Jesus and then demonstrated their obedience publicly through the act of baptism.

The inward change and the outward rite underscore the proper order and sequence: faith (conversion) first, then obedience (baptism). In other words, these thousands of new believers were not saved by being baptized. Rather, they were saved when they repented and believed in Jesus. Their baptism was an act of obedience as believers and a testimony of what had occurred in their hearts.

⁴² **And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.**

The first activity of the believers' devotion involved spiritual growth through the apostles' teaching. The believers submitted themselves to godly instruction from the apostles. This instruction was life-transforming truth that Jesus had taught the apostles. It likely included truths such as the nature and work of Christ, His atoning death and victorious resurrection, as well as practical godliness from the Old Testament Scriptures.

A second activity the believers were devoted to was fellowship. As a family of faith, the first believers celebrated their shared salvation through Jesus. They practiced a dynamic connection to one another because they were joined by a common faith in the Savior.

Third, the believers practiced the breaking of bread together. This could refer either to eating meals together in fellow believers' homes or to partaking of the Lord's Supper in worship. In either case, the practice enhanced the believers' shared life in Christ.

Fourth, the early believers devoted themselves to the prayers. Jews were accustomed to regular times of prayer each day. Jewish believers continued this discipline as Christ's followers, but their prayer lives became deeper and richer as they realized they could pray about anything in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14).

How does participation in these activities promote unity in a church? Can a church be unified and not focus on these elements? Explain.

KEY DOCTRINE:

The Church

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

TOGETHER (*Acts 2:43-47a*)

⁴³ **Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.**

At first glance we may wonder why fear came over everyone. This reaction was not a feeling of dread or doom. Instead, it was a profound sense of awe and reverence about all that the Lord was doing. The Bible instructs us in many places to fear God, because doing so humbles our ego and magnifies His attributes. It is a disposition of the heart in response to the awesome power of God.

The believers' fear was reinforced by many wonders and signs that God performed through the apostles. The purpose of this miraculous activity was to draw attention to the gospel message and to validate the gospel messengers.

⁴⁴ **Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.**

Friendship and cordiality between followers of Jesus is an intense and edifying bond. A solitary follower of Christ who claims he or she doesn't need partnership with other followers is an easy target for Satan, the enemy.

Scripture exhorts us to worship together, to encourage one another, and to love and honor others. These biblical activities are fulfilled in a shared passion for Christ and in a mutual bond with one another. Strong relationships among believers require attention and effort, however, especially in the increasingly high-tech world of digital communication and social media. Virtual reality must not replace authentic, personal togetherness.

⁴⁵ **They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need.**

The believers living in Jerusalem demonstrated a deep commitment to Jesus that overflowed in mutual support for one another. As needs arose, they sold their possessions and property to help other believers. There was no expectation that new believers must immediately relinquish all their possessions upon conversion. The emphasis in the early church was on compassionate ministry, not asceticism or political socialism.

When Christians discovered that someone was facing great need, the grace of Christ moved them to sell items to help relieve the hardship.

Generosity is an attribute of God's grace, and He delights to see it practiced in His church. Numerous surveys throughout modern times have revealed that most churches function with less than 20 percent of the members committed to consistent, proportional giving. Too many church members seem to develop an allergic reaction to calls for generosity. If every believer practiced godly generosity, it would not only advance the spread of the gospel but also enable churches to minister mightily in the name of Jesus to people with desperate needs.

⁴⁶ **Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude,**

Every day the believers in Jerusalem met together in the temple complex. At this early stage, Christ's followers continued to worship within the structure of their Jewish heritage. They had opportunities in that setting to interact with other Jews and to testify about Jesus. The Greek term rendered together refers to more than the proximity of people to one another; it speaks of people being united in spirit and purpose. Believers were united in their faith in Jesus and in their mission of telling others about the gospel.

The early Christians' life together also included visits into each other's homes for shared meals. Such occasions were marked by a joyful and humble attitude on the part of believers. Their lives were not easy and trouble-free, yet the Spirit filled them with joy and hope.

As believers today, we sometimes think that solemn reverence is more important to the Lord than overt gladness. Certainly there is a time and place for both, but Scripture teaches us that joy is as much an expression of sincere worship as is subdued seriousness. When we reflect on the forgiveness of our sins through Christ and the eternal hope we have because of His resurrection from the dead, there is more than enough reason to be filled with gladness and generosity!



BIBLE SKILL:

Do a concept study of the Greek term koinonia, rendered “fellowship” in Acts 2:42, by considering other appearances of the term in the New Testament. (English words may differ in translations.)

Find and read the following verses:
1 Corinthians 1:9;
10:16 (participation);
2 Corinthians 6:14
(in common); 9:13
(sharing); Galatians
2:9; Philippians 1:5
(partnership); 2:1;
3:10; Hebrews 13:16
(to share); 1 John
1:3,6,7. How does each
verse help you better
understand the nature
of the relationship
of koinonia among
believers?

^{47a} **praising God and having favor with all the people.**

Gratitude and good will overflowed in abundance. The believers praised God with energetic gratitude and won the respect of others by their joyful, humble fellowship. A vibrant church shines in two directions: (1) upward in adoration to God for the gift of His Son and (2) outward in grace toward others. Both directions are vital.

What does a consistent display of sincere adoration to God and grace toward others show about what a church believes about God?

GROWING (Acts 2:47b)

^{47b} **And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.**

The early church in Jerusalem was a healthy witnessing community. Believers testified about Jesus. They related to and connected with other citizens in the city. The Holy Spirit used their testimony to draw unbelievers to faith, and the Lord added to the church those who were being saved.

In other words, the early church experienced both qualitative and quantitative growth. Believers grew in their faith, and more people came to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The people being added to the church were those whom the Lord had saved by grace through faith in Jesus. That is, the new believers weren't being saved by “joining” the church. The church is the community of those who have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:10-12).

What does this passage teach about the relationship between church growth and church health? How do they enhance each other?

➤ OBEY THE TEXT

To be spiritually healthy, believers need to be connected to other believers. In churches, believers can do life together, meet others' needs, and worship together. Every believer is to be a witness.

If a dozen people were randomly selected to observe you every day for one week, how might they evaluate your devotion to Jesus? After studying this session's Bible passage, what do you think needs to improve regarding your devotion to Jesus?

What are you doing to help strengthen unity in your church and Bible study group? Identify some strategies you can apply to sweeten and enhance your relationship with others in your congregation and group.

Reflect on how doing life with other believers helps you share the gospel. What can you do to help motivate other believers to share the gospel?



MEMORIZE

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude.—Acts 2:46

Use the space provided to make observations and record prayer requests during the group experience for this session.



MY THOUGHTS

Record insights gained and questions to discuss during the group experience.

MY PRAYERS

List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.

MY MISSION

Acknowledge ways you will obey God's Word this week.
