

Session 1

HOW: GROUPS

Acts 2:42,46-47

Memory Verse

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

– ACTS 2:42, CSB



How: Groups

THEOLOGICAL THEME: A church is not a place but a gathered group of people who come together under the headship of Christ to worship Him. Groups are an essential component of living in community as the body of Christ.

In twenty-first century America, Christians continue to find themselves being moved further to the edge of culture. That experience can be unnerving or even scary. But a close reading of the New Testament should bring hope. The church didn't begin as a dominant cultural force. Instead, the church began as a group of scared and confused disciples gathered in an upper room. It was from that rag-tag group of Jesus' followers that the church would grow exponentially and take the world by storm with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How and why was the church successful? The first and most important answer is that the Holy Spirit was at work. But the church was also successful because the church of the first century lived as the church. They lived in close community with one another. They relied on one another. They grew together in their understanding of what it meant to be a Jesus follower, they took care of one another, and they equipped others to do the same through gospel conversations and discipleship.

America in 2021 can cause Christians to feel a little out of sync—to feel what Carl Trueman calls “cultural vertigo.”¹ Even though this may feel odd or out of sorts for you, this feeling isn't new for the church. The church was born into a culture that did not accept her teaching or morality. In that cultural moment, the Holy Spirit used the church to transform the world through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

? How have shifts in our culture’s morality caused you to feel differently as a Christian?

? How have relationships within your local church—especially your small group—helped you live faithfully for Christ in a world that is increasingly hostile to His teaching?

? Jesus said that the world would know His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). How might your neighbors be influenced to love Jesus if they see you loving your church family well? How might division within a church cause non-believers to not trust in Jesus?

Session Summary

Acts 2 is one of the most important and exciting chapters in the entire Bible. The Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire and baptized Jesus’s first believers. Through the Holy Spirit’s power, these simple people become powerful evangelists, missionaries, and preachers. Through the power of the Spirit, Peter preached one of the greatest sermons of all time, and the church immediately went from a few hundred to over three thousand.

Beyond that incredible movement of the Lord, the church began to act and live like Christ’s followers. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles (those who knew Jesus and His teaching best) and fellowship with one another. They ate together, prayed together, and worshiped together. These new believers even helped each other financially and otherwise. It seems that as they grew in appreciation for how much God had done for them, they became more generous and loving toward one another.

1. Grow Up in Christ (Acts 2:42a)

What is a Christian? A Christian is a person who has been saved by Jesus. But is that all? Yes and no. A Christian is a person who has been saved by Jesus, but a person who has been saved by Jesus will also be growing up in Christ and continually look more like Him. So, you could also say that a Christian is a person who acts—or at least seeks to act—like Jesus.

The end of Acts 2 gives us a picture of how the early church attempted to live out their Christian lives together. Countless comments have been made through the years about how they lived communally, but it is important to look at why they behaved the way they did. Put simply: Early Christians lived as they did because they believed their living to be in accord with the expectations of Christ.

Much of the early Christian experience did not look like the Greek and Roman culture into which the church was birthed. Holding material possessions in common or referring to each other as “brother” or “sister” was unusual among pagans of the first century, but this was the norm among believers.



How have you found yourself living counter-culturally as you have matured in your Christian faith?



After becoming a Christian, in what area of your life was it most difficult for you pursue Christlikeness?

The early church knew that it was not a moral majority—it was a missional minority. As they met together, the early Christians focused first and foremost on the apostles’ teachings. Living as Christians meant that they had to understand what Christ taught. So, they devoted themselves not to cultural change or political action campaigns, but to learning what Jesus had said and what He expected from their lives.

Growing up in Christ requires a commitment to study and understand the Bible. People do not give meaning to the Bible, the Bible shapes and molds people into godliness. According to Dane Ortlund, we need the Bible because “Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us. The God revealed in the Scripture deconstructs our intuitive predilections.”² In other words, the purpose of the Bible is to change us.

First Century Christians didn’t have the New Testament in written form the way the church does today. Still, those early believers were committed to knowing and being changed by the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. They were “growing up” in their Christian faith. As a follower of Jesus, you should be growing up as well by studying God’s Word and learning how to better apply it with your small group.

 **Application: What is an area of your life where you need to apply God’s Word today?**

2. Care Regularly and On Purpose (Acts 2:42b,46a)

Caring for others is not a Christian option. As Jesus prepared the apostles for His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, He gave them a new commandment: “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). But this wasn’t the first time he had given them this commandment. We read the same words in John 13:35, only with this addition, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

 **How does Christian love for one another testify of faith in Christ?**

Early Christians seeking to honor Christ and live out their faith in the Book of Acts took Jesus’s words seriously. They loved one another in word and deed. Their love was evident by the fact that they spent time together, shared meals together, and held their

possession in common. But their commitment to each other was not an occasional event. “Every day,” they were “meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house” (Acts 2:46).

? How would our church look different if the people within our small groups took their relationships with each other as seriously as the Christians in Acts 2?

Early Christians cared for each other regularly and on purpose. No doubt they believed that it was necessary for the survival of their movement that they depend on and care well for one another. As you grow toward Christ in the twenty-first century, it will be increasingly important that you love your fellow believers well. In small groups, you are given an opportunity to exercise that love, care, and ministry for one another. In groups, you also have the opportunity to display the apologetic love of Christians to a watching world.

In a world filled with hate and animosity, selfless, life-giving love for others speaks loudly of a transformed life.

? Application: How is God calling you to specifically care for others in your group this week?

3. Equip Others to Move Toward Christ (Acts 2:46-47)

Acts 2:47 says something interesting. This group of early Christians was praising God and “enjoying the favor of all the people.” These people were oddballs. They stuck out. They were different, and yet, they still had favor with all the people.

? What about this description stands out to you? How might it look to live like this in the world today?

As a result of this favor, “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” This group of early Christians spent loads of time together. They were teaching and fellowshiping with one another, but they were also seeking out and investing in the lost, and God was doing a mighty work.

The early Christians were doing exactly what we hope to accomplish in our own church. These early disciples were heavily invested in making other disciples. Paul’s list for the qualifications for overseers or elders to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3 is pretty significant. Elders are to be good teachers and live holy lives. But they must also be “self-controlled, respectable, hospitable...gentle, not quarrelsome” (v. 2), and “must have a good reputation among outsiders” (v. 7). Christian leaders are expected to be disciple-makers—and making disciples is easier if you are pleasant and a blessing to others.

As you pray for God to enable you to be a disciple-making disciple, do not neglect the soft skills of the Christian life. Just consider a fuller list of these soft skills required of elders from 1 Timothy 3:

- above reproach—offering impeccable character.
- sober-minded—not allowing oneself to be easily influenced or carried astray; keeping a clear head.
- self-controlled (ESV)—a good starting point is to at least consider your tact on social media.
- respectable—how you carry yourself is important as a pastor. You have to carry yourself in such a way as to be considered worthy of respect in your church.
- hospitable—welcome people into your home (v. 2).
- gentle—not a bully.
- not greedy—we have to eat, but we don’t serve to get rich (v. 3).
- manage his household—seeking to lead one’s family in a God-honoring way.
- keeping his children under control with all dignity—those with children are called to be good fathers who properly discipline their kids in love (v. 4).

It is true, not all are called to be pastors, but this is not an exclusive list for pastors. Rather, this is a picture of what a Christian should look like and a reminder to Timothy that the leaders of the church should look like Christians.

The early church excelled in these soft skills, and when Luke wrote the book of Acts, he connected these soft skills with the work of the Lord. We would do well to consider how our personal investment in others can lead to equipping them to move toward Christ.

 What existing relationships in your life should you be trying to move toward Christ?

 Application: How can you be more intentional in building relationships with lost people to introduce them to Jesus?

Conclusion

In 2020, for the first time since such data was collected, American’s membership in houses of worship dropped below 50 percent. According to Gallup, only 47 percent of Americans “belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque.” That number has fallen 20 percent since the turn of the twentieth century.³ There is a temptation to try to explain away such dire news, but such explanations are just denials.

The rise of the religious “nones” in the United States is outpacing conversions. The need for the gospel in our own country has never been greater than it is today. Christianity will not be elected into office, holiness can’t be legislated, and complaining about culture will not fill our houses of worship.

America desperately needs her churches to speak prophetically and powerfully. America needs churches that look like the first-century believers. These churches may not look like the churches of the 1980s and 1990s. What worked then isn’t working today. Instead, these churches might be more relational, more purposeful, and more committed to one-on-one disciple-making. The task ahead will not be easy, but it was not easy for the early church either.

Our mission is to engage the *whole person* with the *whole gospel* of Jesus Christ *anywhere, anytime, with anybody*. Healthy groups are a core component of our church fulfilling that mission. Healthy groups enable us to function more like first-century believers and impact our culture with the good news of the gospel.

 How has your group helped you to grow spiritually? How have you helped others in your group to grow closer to Christ?

 How can you use the template of the early church from Acts 2:42-47 to change the way your group functions?

 When have you experienced Christian care from your group? How did that care help you to feel more closely connected to your group and your church?

 Why is it important that Christians seek to be well thought of by outsiders? How might this be challenging in our current cultural struggles?

CHRIST CONNECTION: The church is Christ's witness to the world. The world knows that the church belongs to Jesus when church members love one another well and live together as one.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Jesus ministered to large crowds, but He invested in small groups. As His ambassadors, you can make a difference in the world by investing in individuals and small groups.



FOR NEXT WEEK

How: Apprenticeship

Main Passages

- 2 Timothy 2:2

Session Outline

1. Dig in as a Disciple (2 Tim. 2:2a)
2. Invest in a Few (2 Tim. 2:2b)
3. Multiply Your Impact (2 Tim. 2:2b)

Memorize

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

- Acts 2:42, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Acts 2:42
- Tuesday - Acts 2:46
- Wednesday - Philippians 2:4
- Thursday - Ephesians 4:11-16
- Friday - 2 Peter 3:18
- Saturday - John 13:34-35

References

¹Thompson, Craig. "Episode 44: Cultural Vertigo and Modern Morality with Carl Trueman," CraigThompson.org, March 17, 2021, <http://www.craigthompson.org/2021/03/03/episode-44-cultural-vertigo-and-modern-morality-with-carl-trueman/>.

²Ortlund, Dane. *Gentle and Lowly: the Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.

³Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup.com. Gallup, March 29, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.