

Christ Community Covenant Church

Sermon Series Small Group Material: Week of March 2, 2008

Living in Genuine Christian Community - Acts 2:41-47

The Big Idea

Christians are to live in genuine Christian community—united in learning of Christ, showing love to one another, worshiping God, and including new believers.

Question to Explore

How can genuine Christian community be developed in a world that emphasizes individualism?

Basic Truth

Unity experienced as an early church's priority in this text creates a community that changes the world!

Introduction

- **Is community a lost art in the 21st century America?**
- **What do you think contributes to a lack of community these days?**
- **If community is so important, why do we do so little prioritizing the time it takes to create community? Why does it seem that community at home the most difficult thing in the world?**

Content Block One - “Unschooling, ordinary men”

Let's begin with a comparison between ourselves and the first believers. First, their leaders were Galileans; we might call them country folk. Not one of them was from Jerusalem or any city you'd recognize. The vast majorities were foreigners; from all those fifteen nations Luke listed earlier (Acts 2:9-11).

1. Are you from the city or the country? From a town we'd all recognize or one we've never heard of? From the United States of America or a distant country and culture?
2. Second, how educated were they? The religious leaders in Jerusalem called them “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13; the NASB calls them “uneducated and untrained”). By comparison to the rabbis and religious authorities, they had only the most basic education, something approximating high school for us. How educated are you and how does your level of education affect your confidence in sharing your faith? Should it?
3. Third, what of their faith history? The oldest people in the church, spiritually, were Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and they had followed Jesus for only three years. Over 500 saw the resurrected Christ yet only 120 were in the upper room awaiting the Holy Spirit. What do you think happened to the rest? Do you think you would have been in that upper room waiting and praying?
4. Fourth, what of their resources? The New Testament had not yet been written. There would be no professional “clergy” for 250 years, no church buildings for 300 years, no Seminaries or church choirs for 400 years, and no printed literature for 1400 years. They had virtually none of the resources that you will use this Sunday. Yet in just thirty years their movement spread from Jerusalem to Rome and from 120 followers to multiplied thousands, soon millions. By Acts 17:6 their enemies said they had “turned the world upside down” (KJV). They soon became the mightiest and largest religious movement in human history.

So if they didn't have strong educations, years in the faith, or great resources, what explains their incredible success? What did they have that we need?

Content Block Two - The Fourfold Cord

The key to the people of apostolic Christianity lies in a Greek word we need to learn this week: *proskartereo*. This word means 'to be devoted to.' It means to make something your passion and your highest priority, to give yourself exclusively to it. What was the passion and highest priority for these early Christians? Think of the answer as a fourfold cord, a rope made of four strands interwoven for strength, the rope to which these Christians would cling for life itself.

Cord One - Power

When we trace the word *proskartereo* across the New Testament, we get a sense of its **power**:

- Mark 3:9: "And he told the disciples to have a boat *ready* [devoted exclusively to] for him because of the crowd, lest they should crush him."
- Acts 1:14: "All these with one accord *devoted themselves* to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."
- Acts 6:4: "But we will *give ourselves continually* to prayer and to the service/ministry of the word."
- Acts 8:13: "And Simon also himself believed, and having been baptized was *attaching himself exclusively* to Philip, and beholding great signs and powerful deeds happening he was amazed."
- Acts 10:7: "And as the angel went away who was speaking to him, calling two of the household slaves and a devout soldier *waiting exclusively on him*."
- Romans 12:12: "In hope rejoicing, in affliction showing endurance, in prayer *steadfastly continuing*."
- Romans 13:6: "Therefore pay taxes, for they are ministers of God for this very thing *attending constantly*."
- Colossians 4:2: "*Continue steadfastly* in prayer, watching in it with thanksgiving."
- Ephesians 6:18: "By means of all prayer and petition, praying at every time in spirit, and watching to it in all *perseverance* and petition concerning all the saints."

Cord Two - Hunger

The word also indicates a **hunger** for the apostles teaching and suggests a commitment to an **exclusive** devotion. What priorities captured the hearts and passions of these early believers? How are they different from our passions today?

They clung to "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Having no New Testament, the doctrine and teaching of the apostolic leaders became the word of God for them. These early believers didn't just read the word of God; they staked their lives on it. They learned and obeyed the Bible. All through the Book of Acts we find these Christians reading, quoting, and depending on the word of God (see 1:20; 2:16-21; 25-28, 34-35; 3:22-26; 4:11; 4:25-26; 7:2-50; 8:32-35; 13:33-36, 41, 47; 15:16-18, 21; 17:2-3, 11; 23:5; 28:23, 26-28). There are forty-nine different Old Testament passages quoted from memory and used in their lives and ministries. They were saturated in Scripture. It became their food and drink, their sustenance and life.

Cord Three - Love

Even their enemies noticed their **love** for one another. Tertullian (died about A.D. 230) quoted the admiring statement of their enemies, “How they love one another.” And Lucian of Samasota (died 185), an obvious enemy of the gospel who called Christians “poor wretches” and Jesus “that crucified sophist”, records the fact that Christians care for their own with “incredible speed.”

They were devoted passionately to “the fellowship,” the *koinonia*. Fellowship has been defined as *two fellows in one ship*. Imagine 3,000 people in one ship and you’ve got a good picture of these first Christians. They sold their possessions when necessary to give “to anyone as he had need” (2:44-45). Theirs was not, however, a communal or communistic life. “Selling their possessions” is in what is sometimes called the customary imperfect in the Greek syntax, meaning that they *sold from time to time*. This word does not describe a requirement or continual program. Barnabas’s act likely was noted because it was unusual (4:37), and Ananias and Sapphira had complete freedom over their possessions (5:4).

Too, they extended their ministry of love to those outside their “ship” as well. When unwanted newborns were thrown out with the trash, these Christians would rescue them and adopt them into their families. When the plague swept Jerusalem and everyone abandoned the sick and dying, the Christians stayed behind, risked their lives, and cared for them. They clung to the word of God and to the people of God.

Cord Four – Worship

They were passionate about **worship**. They worshiped God publicly: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts” (Acts 2:46). This was their regular practice: “All the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade” (5:12), the eastern edge of the outer court. This was their “sanctuary,” where anyone could see them.

And they worshiped God privately: “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (2:46). They worshiped on Sunday and all during the week. Theirs was a passion for the worship of God. Question: What is it about the Communion table that contributes to community?

And this worship included a disciplined practice of communal prayer. It is clear in the Greek. The reference is to not just occasional or sporadic praying, but to a definite schedule and discipline. They were so passionate about praying that they scheduled it and practiced it habitually at specific times of the day, everything stopped and the people prayed, the same way you and I schedule appointments important to us and make sure they happen.

The results of this four fold cord of devotion were amazing:

- “Everyone was filled with awe” (2:43), living in reverence of God. “Many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (2:43). The Holy Spirit moved within and through them with amazing power.
- They worshiped and ate together “with glad and sincere hearts” (2:46), living in the joy of Jesus. Someone has pointed out that a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.
- They were “enjoying the favor of all the people” (2:47). You think the community around 4Cs notices our influence or community?

- Most striking of all, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (2:47). Only God can convert souls and grow his church through changed lives. They did their part, and God did his.

One Final Thought

The people God often uses would seldom have been nominated by their peers for the honor. Some you’ve heard of, and some you haven’t.

Some became famous. Dwight Moody’s family was so poor that the children carried their shoes and socks until they got in sight of church. Then they put them on so their shoes and socks would last longer. Billy Graham was a farmer’s son from the country hills of North Carolina. Chuck Colson was a convicted felon before his conversion. Mother Teresa was a frail, unknown nun laboring in obscurity in India for dozens of years before the world found her. Others should be famous, but aren’t.

Have you ever heard of Samuel Mills (1783-1818)? He was a freshman at Williams College who became the leader of a small prayer group on campus. A spiritual awakening began among them. This awakening spread to Yale, Amherst, Dartmouth, and Princeton, leading to the conversion of half of their student bodies. This prayer movement began the modern missions movement in America.

Have you heard of a city missionary in New York named Landfear? In the nineteenth century, he and two other men began praying for revival and awakening, and others joined them. Their prayer movement led to the Third Great Awakening in American history. It spread to Ireland, where the courts were adjourned because there were no cases to try and jails were closed because there were no prisoners to keep.

Why did God use them so significantly? Perhaps because they wanted God to. Perhaps, following the prompting of the Spirit, they entered into the plan of God that He was already about and found God’s favor in that. Perhaps God has already used you in a significant way that will change the world, but the evidence is not clear to our eyes yet! In any event, ***proskartereo – a singular devotion and passion*** - for Scripture, for prayer, for worship, and for the people of God, and a willingness to pay the price with joy to see the Kingdom of God expanded seems to be at the heart of the transformed life!

Theirs was unity, not uniformity. They were all committed to the same priorities and purposes in their lives and souls. As a result, their community changed their city and culture, and eventually their world. Such a community of faith always will.