



YEAR 3—The God Who Pursues Relationship: A Story of God's People

Module 6—Jesus and His Church

Lesson 4: The Early Church and Their Role as God's People—Acts 2; 4:32–37

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

I can't imagine what it must have been like to follow Jesus so intensely for three straight years and watch Him die, only to rise again, as He promised He would, in order that, with victory over sin and death, the peoples of the earth could be restored to God. After years of walking miles with Jesus, the disciples must have been living on adrenaline alone—being with Jesus, watching Jesus calm storms and walk on water, listening to Him teach so deeply and show compassion over the crowds of people out of pure love—and now wondering if all that was going to end with Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus told the disciples the work they were to do. So the disciples met together at Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them, to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, the disciples would not be able to carry on the mission and message of Jesus.

Jesus had given His disciples the instructions for how to carry on His mission and message, both before His death and since His resurrection. Jesus made it clear that He would now be in heaven overseeing the concerns of the world, with God, His Father, in perfect wisdom, truth, and love. The disciples, having spent all that time learning from their Master, are now ready, with the Spirit's help to build Jesus' Church.

Before they move forward, they must choose a replacement for Judas, their now dead former friend. This is a great picture of how disciple-making happens organically. In short, there are two men ready to take the place of Judas. They are ready because they have been with Jesus and the disciples the "whole time"—from John's baptism to the time Jesus ascended into heaven (1:21–22). How could it be that there were two qualified people ready to take the place of Judas, who is now dead (1:18–19), when those two people are never mentioned in the gospels? This is how discipleship works! Through the ongoing learning and growing from the explicit and implicit teaching of the disciple-maker, people stand ready to participate in the mission of God with great preparation and developed skill, talent and gifts. This is the mission of the Church as given to the disciples by Jesus—to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). Through prayer and reliance upon God's direction, the disciples in Acts 1 are well on their way to disciple-making as they recognize that two men are ready to stand with them to carry on the mission and message of Jesus into the world of lost, broken and needy people.

GOD'S STORY

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled at Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Spirit descended on the disciples' community (120 people) and He baptized the disciples' community into one—the body of Christ. Pentecost then, is considered the birth of the Church as a spiritual body of Jesus.

When the Spirit came, as Jesus had promised, the Spirit came with a noise like a rushing wind (v. 2) and with fire overtop of all of them (v. 3). These temporary outward signs of the Spirit are, of course, significant of God's power to show up mighty and full. Equal, however, to the significant outward signs of God's power in wind and fire were the permanent inward signs or gifts of the Spirit. The Bible says, "They were all filled with

the Spirit,” meaning that they were all one, a collective people just as the prophet Joel had prophesied some many years earlier (Joel 2:28-32). A collective people share a mission, even if they are from other languages as nations. The people of God share a mission to send the message of Jesus forth into the world as God’s witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to all parts of the earth (1:8-9).

Peter preached a message of repentance and thousands of people received his word. This is the power of God, to use ordinary men from all nations, tribes and languages to share in a mission. That mission? It is simple: to restore the world to its intended wholeness through the ongoing participation of the church as empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit.

OUR STORY

Peter’s message to the people at Pentecost was a message of repentance. Repentance is a change of mind and heart, a renewing of the mind, turning away from the sins of our lives and turning to the truths of God. We trust in God alone for our salvation and in that trusting relationship we strive to move away from trusting in self and instead trust exclusively in the saving grace of God for all of our needs. It is also important to note that although repentance is a change of mind, the mind and the will are not exclusive to one another. Our will and our minds are tied together and in that connection absolutely all of our thoughts and overall conduct are affected by our repentance.

Our Christian lives, therefore, may be represented by a coin. On one side of the coin is repentance—turning away from sin. On the other side of the coin, then, is faith—turning to God through allowing Jesus to form us spiritually under His reign. Our repentance is tied to our conversion, our baptism, and our ongoing prayer life. Without repentance we cannot be saved. Without repentance we cannot truly experience our baptism—our death-to-life experience. Our patterns of confession through prayer are tied to living in a way of repentance. Often Christians rely on their repentance at the time of conversion and neglect the discipline of confession and repentance as an ongoing rhythm of sanctification in their lives. Here are some steps in the repentance process that can help us live under the lordship of Jesus:

1. Do something with the sorrow you feel. Don’t live with sorrow. Get rid of it instead through confession (move to step 2).
2. Confessing your sins to God—telling God the truth awakens forgiveness and allows you to hit the reset button with your life (move to step 3).
3. Ask for forgiveness. Asking for it, although God already promises to forgive, helps you to live in a posture of humility and genuine acknowledgement that what you did (or do) is wrong and in direct conflict with the way God wants you to live (move to step 4).
4. Is there a need to take your forgiveness to another level? In other words, have you wronged another person? If so, part of repentance is going to that person or group of people and making it right. God forgives when you ask for forgiveness. However, to live in a rhythm of repentance requires that you make it right with others (move to step 5).
5. Make a commitment not to repeat the sin and then ask another person (friend, spouse, co-worker, pastor, Sunday School teacher, mentor, mentee, etc.) to hold you accountable to your commitment (move to step 6).
6. Receive forgiveness. When you repent, asking God and others to forgive your confessed wrongdoing, don’t allow yourself (or others you may be mentoring) to live in guilt or pity. True repentance awakens forgiveness and brings freedom of the soul.

OTHERS’ STORY

Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-36 are prime examples of the ways that our faith communities are to live. These communities are the earliest representations we have of what it means to truly be the Church. Here are some examples from the Scripture as to the patterns of the church as illustrated in Acts:

- They were devoted to the disciples teaching (v. 42).

- They were committed to fellowship and sharing meals with one another (v. 42).
- They were committed to praying together (v. 42).
- They relied on God's power and remained in awe (v. 43).
- The believers were together, sharing everything they had (v. 44).
- They possessed nothing individually but collectively as a community (v. 45).
- They met together every day whether in the temple or in their homes (v. 46).
- They worshipped together in love (v. 47).
- They continued to see conversion and repentance—salvation (v. 47).
- They were of one heart and mind—or of one mission (4:32).
- They shared everything, choosing to live a simple life free of material possessions (4:32).
- They preached about the resurrection and lived it publicly (4:33).
- They saw to it that no one was needy. Justice was a big concern (4:34).
- They funded the movement, giving generously not only to those in need but to the mission of the church as a whole (4:36).

What might it look like if communities today practiced the proclamation of good news through teaching and preaching? What if faith communities today sought to fellowship more deeply with one another, leaving no one out? What if worshipping together was a priority and if serving others was the key to the growth of the Church, of the kingdom? What would happen? Well, we know what would happen. God would add to the Church, through conversion of souls as we see in verse 47 of chapter 2.

THE WORLD'S STORY

Clearly the Church has a big role to play in the mission of God. We, the Church, have our work cut out for us, don't we? The Church must find ways to make the gospel of salvation and justice known and felt. Lacking a spirit of timidity, we must boldly and clearly present a gospel of love. We must live out a hospitable gospel that presents the atoning work of Jesus in the light of grace, mercy and truth.

When the Church actively participates with God's mission and performs and proclaims the gospel to the world, it offers the world something new. I believe that the world has had enough moralism and benign deism. The world needs something else entirely different and new—the world needs for faith communities to practice the habits of the Acts 2 and 4 Church. The broken world hardly needs to be reminded that it is broken. Instead the world needs to be told through our modeling that in exchange for their disharmony, guilt and shame, we are all given access to a lasting peace that surpasses all of our own particular circumstances—peace with God, self, others and the world is a new message that is best articulated by communities of practice that reflect the earliest of churches.

As Christians we know that God is not watching from a distance. God is present among us, actively working to bring restoration. How can not-yet believers know this unless the Church responds to God's call as the early church did?