

Part 5: Saving Faith and the Saved Community

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If you've just joined us, we have spent three weeks on one event in history which is often called, "the birthday of the Church." When the Holy Spirit finally fell on God's believers, it was accompanied by miraculous signs, a powerful message where 3,000 people got saved, and supernaturally generous community and awesome signs done by the apostles.

What in the world is going on here, and where is this happening today? I know one author who said the book of Acts is both transitional and programmatic. In this way we can think of the book like the removal of a dam in relationship to a river. When the dam is first removed, the supernatural waters behind it burst forth with a sort of ferocity as it fills the river bank, but once the river of supernatural waters is in place—it continues with all the same water and source but in a more simple way.

Acts shows us in signs this powerful transition to the church age, but it also sets the program and limits of the river of church history that we find ourselves in today. Having just finished Luke's gospel, it seems natural to move into his book of Acts. But the reasons we are in this book is not because it flows naturally—but because the elders saw it helpful for us given our current state as a church.

What Acts shows us is that the mission, the ministry, and the make-up of the church is not up to us. The church is God's idea, and this book shows us how God designed the church by showing us how he saved the church. As we seek to install deacons, adapt to life in a new building, raise elders, take on new members, and share the gospel globally and locally—we need first and foremost to assess ourselves by the mirror of scripture.

If you've ever played the game of "telephone" growing up, you know how original messages can become twisted and contorted as it moves on. This is why it is so important that we take our ideas of what the church is and should be not from culture, but from scripture. And throughout history the church has endured as an imperfect body with seasons of shame and seasons of beautiful renewal. But generally speaking, when the church has experienced reformation—the book of Acts has been its guide. Writing at one of those moments in the 16th Century on reformer said in Acts we see, "the foundations of the newborn church...through [which] we hope that the church in ruins will be reborn." (Erasmus)

Our passage this morning this is hugely important to this end—if you know members who are gone today, I would encourage you to reach out to them and have them listen to this sermon. It's helpful for two particular reasons. The first is that it answers the important question "What does it mean to be a Christian?" and then as a necessary response to that question it outlines, "What does it mean to be part of the church?"

While some people believe Christianity to be faith in Jesus with no consideration of God's people, others consider Christianity to be only participation with his people at a cost of a personal relationship with Jesus. But what Peter shows us today is that stemming out of faith in Jesus, we are bound by faith to his people. The same thing that makes a Christian is the same thing that makes a church.

This is our main point: **Jesus calls us out of sin by repentance and into the community of faith by baptism.** We will examine the essential principle of this in verses 27-41 as we see **The Anatomy of Saving Faith**, and then we will see the natural principle of **The Anatomy of Saved Fellowship** in verses 42-47.

To begin, let examine our first point this morning: **The Anatomy of Saving Faith.**

In my home we assume that our kids will make mistakes and break things, and we often say, "That's ok, but you need to try and make it right as best you can." They broke a cup, so they grab a broom. They spilled water, so they get a towel.

But what are we to do when it's not spilt milk, but spilt blood? What if the crime isn't accidental, but purposeful? And not against a pricey vase or TV, but against the object of infinite value--the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ?

If you were with us last week you remember how Peter ended his sermon: **Acts 2:36**, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." And these Jews, who prior to this moment were either apathetic towards or glad of Jesus death responded in this way: **Acts 2:37**, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, 'Brothers what shall we do?'"

Saving faith begins with conviction of sin. It's the bad news of our sin which makes the gospel so beautiful. When we are born into sinful unbelief we belong to this generation of wrong doers. You might think yourself a generally good person, but the court record shows that you're guilty of murder in the first degree.

Notice how they address their question not only to Peter, but to the rest of the apostles as well. It's almost as if they understand that the depth of their problem is so big, that they will need the help of a whole bunch of counselors on this issue. If someone came up to you after church, and expressed a same level of conviction and asked that same question, what answer would you give them? "What shall we do?"

Notice how their question, though cosmically weighty and complex in their own hearts—didn't cause the disciples to ponder their answer. Quick as their conviction came—quicker did the relief of the gospel come! Peter answered in **Acts 2:38**, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Have you wondered if you are beyond repair? Have you wondered if there's answers to your problems? Here the wonderful message of the gospel as your answer: repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. In other words Jesus has done so much to save you, that your response is simply to claim his work.

Remember the problem these Jews saw as 1.) That they did not have the Holy Spirit, and 2.) That they did have guilt. Yet in both of these acts—repentance and baptism, both of those were overcome.

We will look at these quickly because even though they are connected in importance, they are distinct in order and effect. First we see Peter calls them to **Repent**.

Repentance is a directional word. It displays the direction of the heart turning from something and returning to something else. Here Peter says, return in humble confession to God and you'll be saved.

By repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus their sins would be forgiven.

I want us to consider the wonder of this. Imagine if you were in court today for a crime you committed. And if you stood on that stand and repented, admitting your crime, confessing it in full—that returning would in now way free you from the consequence! It would actually secure it!

But because Jesus has taken our consequence of sin on the cross, when we return in confession and repentance to God we are not condemned, but we are converted, we are forgiven. And because the problem of sin is dealt with, so too is the problem of the Holy Spirit! The promise they thought they missed will be granted to them! Peter continues: **Acts 2:39**, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone who m the Lord our calls to himself."

It doesn't matter how far you are away, it doesn't matter how near you stood to the cross, it doesn't matter if the very nail was held in your hands—to call out to God in repentance is to realize that he has first called out to you! Repentance is not a manipulation of God to change his mind towards you--repentance is proof that God is already for you in the gospel. How for you? So for you that you cannot divorce the response of repentance from the filling of the Holy Spirit.

That's why we can call these "essential responses." Without repentance, we have nothing. You can be a good person, you can go to church, you can give—but unless you have repented you cannot be saved. Even baptism is secondary to this, but where baptism is essential it is in regards to faith itself.

Look at **Acts 2:40-41**, "And with many other words, he bore witness and continued to exhort them saying, "save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

You'll notice that here the command to repent is substituted for the phrase, "received his word." Later on we will see that those who repented, and received his word are called "believers" (vs. 44). But we also see that as a matter of proper response those who believed, repented and received the word were baptized. Stemming from the internal responses of faith, Peter adds an external response: **Baptism**.

Who should be baptized? Those who repent of their sins, those who receive the word of God, and those who believe.

When we take the Lord's Supper, I often say, "This is for baptized believers, and so we would ask that you participate only if you profess faith in Jesus Christ and have been baptized." It's on this that I receive the most questions, but it's here that Peter explains why.

Baptism itself doesn't save you, this same Peter tells us this in 1 Peter 3. But it is an essential response to what does save you: faith and repentance. Baptism is repentance in action, symbolizing that we have been joined to Christ in his death and resurrection, buried with him, and forgiven.

Baptism and belief are tied together, one leads in effect, one follows in affection. Writing in the 4th Century, John Chrysostom says that Peter didn't need to say, "repent and believe," because the command to be baptized includes the command to believe.

There are churches who baptize infants and babies. Some of those are heretical churches thinking that baptism magically does something that saves. Others are gospel believing churches but they connect baptism not to faith, but to simply belonging to the community of the church. At Sovereign Hope, we see passages like this, and others in the New Testament and conclude that baptism is for those who repent and believe. All of our members are those who have been baptized as believers.

It is those who repent in verse 38 who are to be baptized, those who received the word in verse 41 who are baptized. And those who do these things are called in verse 44, believers. You'll notice that the promise Peter connects it to is not those whom God may call to himself, but those to whom God "calls to himself."

But whether you baptize believers or babies, every church tradition recognizes that baptism not only signifies your salvation by how you are joined to Jesus, but it actually marks you off from the world by also joining you to God's people.

That's why Peter calls them to be saved out of a "crooked generation." The baptism which they receive adds them to a new family—the full number of those who believed—the church.

What does the Holy Spirit produce by repentance and baptism? A church. This is our second point: **The Anatomy of the Saved Fellowship.**

We just saw three thousand people saved, but what do saved people do? If you remember back to the story of Babel in scripture, a collective of people gathered together in unity to attempt to reach up to the heavens. But they did so in a way that was sinful and apart from God. So too, we must be careful in our modern day to not view the church in the same way.

That's why the book of Acts is so helpful. It shows us how God builds the church. So that we, united in the singular language of the gospel, might not be drawn to what we think works best—but we might be bound by what God thinks works best for us to safely reach the shores of heaven.

As a church, we want to make sure that all of our ministries both structured and organic represent what God has laid out in scripture. So as the elders lead the church, and as members serve as the church we can begin to assess three key features of a gospel church.

The first is ***The Reality of New Identity.***

Notice the language Luke uses here **Acts 2:40-41,47** "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls," and "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

In our day, it's often odd when you tell someone not only that you're a Christian, but that you've joined a church. It seems radical. And to a degree it is! But consider the humbling new reality this repentance and baptism indicated for these Jews.

Typically, Jews weren't baptized. They were circumcised. It was only Gentiles who converted to Judaism who were baptized. But here, the Jews were called to respond as if they were outsiders. This would have been a radical casting off of their previous identity.

When Peter says, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation," he's actually quoting Deuteronomy 32 where Moses sings a song of hope calling faithless Israel, "a crooked generation." Baptism wasn't a "me and Jesus" issue only—baptism was a total switching of allegiance. It came out of personal conversion, but it demanded public identification and participation.

John Stott says it this way: **"Peter was not asking for private and individual conversions only, but for a public identification with other believers. Commitment to the Messiah implied commitment to the Messianic community, that is, the church. Indeed, they would have to change their communities, transferring their membership from one that was old and corrupt to one that was new and being saved."**

When my youngest daughter was born, she was immediately a sibling of three others. She didn't have life because she was a sibling! But her life naturally produced these relationships. So too the gospel saves us and births us into this community of new identity. We belong to one another in the church. Paul himself makes this clear when he says we are baptized "into Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27) and also in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "baptized into one body," the church.

It's a uniquely modern and western idea that one can belong to Christ without belonging to Christ's people. But the New Testament shows us that makes about as much sense as a man getting married and then moving back in with his college roommates.

That's why we would encourage those who want to become more involved here at Sovereign Hope to pursue belonging to the church. We call that church membership. We belong to Jesus, and are added to the fellowship of those around us. You might say, "I do belong to the church, the global church!" And while we would affirm that—we can also see that the global church gathers together as local churches!

This is the second reality: ***The Reality of Ongoing Assembly.***

If you remember back in Acts 1:14 we saw Luke use a word which meant "resolute, and ongoing persistence" to describe the prayerful gathering of the disciples before the Holy Spirit came. But here Luke uses that same word to communicate resolute persistence to four particular activities. **Acts 2:42**, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

The traditional view of this passage is that what we see here are the official and necessary activities of the church. While they are similar to what the individual Christians would do from day to day, all of these include a definite article, and all except for "the prayers" are singular. This formal language seems to indicate that these are the non-negotiable priorities for the church's gathering on Sunday, or as they called it, "The Lord's day."

The word "church" means assembly. What does a church do when it assembles? It submits itself to the teaching of God's word, the fellowship of God's people, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and prayer.

I would encourage you to hold up our gatherings on Sunday and help us make sure that these things are present!

The primary center of the church community is the preaching of God's word—the apostolic teaching of the gospel. I'm not an apostle. But anyone who preaches in this pulpit must give us the teachings of the apostles.

But this gathering for teaching was not a spectator event. While it was an assembly, it was more fully “a fellowship.” Coming to church is not like coming to a concert or attending a lecture.

That's why the author of Hebrews makes this connection: **Hebrews 10:24-25**, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” There are times where we will all miss church, that's to be expected. But many of us miss church even when we show up! We either deny knowing or being known by others entirely--or we seek to only know those who we already know!

But the weekly fellowship of the church, around the preaching of God's word ought to prioritize care for and community with each other--including the kids who are in our midst.

Thirdly, they were devoted to the Lord's Supper, or the breaking of bread. As opposed to what we will see in a couple verses where “the breaking of bread” was just a meal—this was a special meal that Jesus gave to his disciples before he died. Both baptism, and the Lord's Supper are the symbols that God has given the church to steward.

When we gather together and take the bread and cup, we remind ourselves that we only exist because of what Jesus has done. And it's actually in this participation by faith, that we are joined to one another in a profound way. “Because there is one bread,” says Paul, “we who are many are one body.”

And lastly, they were devoted to prayers when they gathered. We've already talked of prayer earlier, and we will again in a few weeks, so all I will say right now is that if our gathering is not helping our people pray more, then it is not a biblical gathering.

The ongoing assembly of the church was formally sustained by these four actions: preaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and prayer.

But, this was not all the church did! Notice how the formal gathering and the teaching of the apostles produced in the body itself ripples that carried throughout the week!

Acts 2:43-47, “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

John Bunyan once said, “Alas! The first day of the week is the Christian's market day, that which they so solemnly trade in for sole provision for all the week following.”

Bunyan uses the analogy of the weekly gathering of the church as a grocery store where you fill up on all that you will need for the week. Notice how the formality of the gatherings, the teaching and signs of the apostles give way to what was the day by day ministry of the church.

And what did the members of the church do day by day? All that was modeled for them on the Lord's Day! They attended additional teaching at the temple, they broke bread from home to home, they had glad and generous community, and praised God. Paul says in Ephesians that the apostles and pastors are to equip the saints for the work of ministry, and here we see what that saint-sourced day to day ministry looked like. And if there were a pastoral pinch point we are working through as a church—this would be it.

This is our final point: ***The Reality of Supernatural Community.***

On scholar pointed out Luke's language here borrows from both the Old Testament and Aristotle as if to show the community which both the Jew and Greek sought is found here in the daily life of the church.

The formal practice they received on Sundays, flowed into joyful practice day by day. They built their schedules around more teaching, they used the proceeds of their jobs to open their homes in hospitality, they spent their evenings praising God with their brothers and sisters around the dinner table and in discussion.

I've heard a question posed before that goes like this, "If your whole church stopped believing the gospel tomorrow, would your relationships look any different?" What a profound question to consider! How many of us think we have Christian community and yet when we zoom out, our schedules and our contact list are filled with people and activities we would already be drawn to on the base of our station in life, friendship, and interests?

While those are all good, supernatural community, Christian community draws us together in a unique way. We love what is shared: Christ. And therefore we love those with whom we share him: our fellow church members.

This is how we structure our Tuesday nights at the church. Our ongoing assembly of first importance is Sunday morning, but for those who feel lost as to what it looks like to live Christianly throughout the week--Tuesday nights model this. For a third of the year we gather in geographic community groups to build community, praise God, and care for one another in a distinctly Christian way. For another third, we devote ourselves together for additional teaching in age specific and concentrated ways. And for another third we intentionally leave open so that you might have a focused night of care for your family, sharing the gospel with your neighbors across the street, or having another single person or family from the church over for dinner.

None of these are sufficient to satisfy our longing for Christian community or discipleship! Luke tells us they did this day to day! It wasn't the apostles facilitating this, it was the people eagerly pursuing it under the motivation of the Spirit and the care for each other. As elders we are trying to figure out more ways to both model and equip us for this day-to-day model of ministry. But notice here that by gathering on Sundays—this is part of that training program. As a church we want to grow daily by these means: faithful doctrine, generous hearts, hungry minds, full bellies, and rich praise.

And we want to do this because church ministry is evangelistic ministry! It was through this daily work that day by day people were being saved! If you want to grow in evangelism, grow in being a church member! Participate with the church so that gospel fluency grows more and more.

God has created the church by the blood of Jesus in such a way that both the growth of the Christian and the conversion of the lost is best accomplished by submitting ourselves to his divine means of grace in the community of faith.

I heard one professor in seminary say that we should always have a “sugar-stick sermon.” A “sugar-stick sermon” is your go to, beloved, winsome, and familiar sermon. It’s one you’d be a guest preacher with, or candidate with. Peter just gave a pretty sweet sugar stick sermon: 3,000 people saved.

But Jesus has done something better. You and I might never have such a sugar-stick sermon. But we are all part of Jesus’ sugar-stick church. One through which day by day, far more than 3,000 people are saved through. May we ride this river faithfully as long as God would have us.