

Part 1: Why We Gather?

Tyler Velin | Acts 2:36-47

January 9, 2022

We are starting a seven week series here at Sovereign Hope called “Some Assembly Required.” This is a bit of a pun for those who are nerdy because the Greek word for church is *ekklesia* which means most simply an “assembly” or a “gathering.”

But part of what we want to do specifically is to show you how this assembly that God gives us in the local church is not only required in scripture, but more so it is to be greatly desired according to scripture. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that Jesus desired the church so much so that he was willing to die for it and give up his life for it so that he could make it beautiful spotless and radiant! How much more ought we to not only use it, but desire to see the church as Jesus saw it.

My wife and I were once gifted a rice cooker which we saw very little value in, and mostly it's because we didn't know how to use it. We lost the instruction manual and it sat on our shelf for most of its life until someone came and showed us the simplicity and beauty of it, and now it's one of the most used kitchen appliances we have.

What we want to do in this series is show the simple utility and amazing beauty we have in gathering as God's church. This beauty, as we will see today, includes what we do outside of Sundays but it explicitly shapes what we do on Sundays. We will talk about why we have a call to worship, why we pray together, why we sing, why we do everything, because hidden in the simplicity of what we do here is something of amazing beauty and gospel utility for all who see it as such.

But today we are going to talk about what seems to be the most obvious aspect of our church that is “Why we gather?” A couple weeks ago our lot didn't get shoveled because the snow plow company assumed we wouldn't meet the day after Christmas. Next year Christmas is on a Sunday and we will still need the lot shoveled. But why? Why is the gathering of believers so essential?

This is an important question but not a new one. In fact one pastor in the 300s wrote a little pamphlet called: “To those who had not attended the assembly.” In it he mentions a few excuse he encountered in his own church: being in Turkey the summer gatherings were rather hot and sweaty, some people didn't know what to do with their kids, and some had even be annoyed or frustrated by others in the church. Yet he wrote back, as the author of Hebrews does, and as I might try to do today to “kindle your zeal for the assembly.”

Today we are going to examine the first community of believers in Acts 2, and we are going to answer the question of why we gather by looking at three points: First we gather because **The gospel creates a community**, then we are going to see how **the gospel compels a community** and then lastly we are going to see **The Lord's Day as the distinct center of the community**.

First, a bit of context. We are reading today in Acts 2. In Acts 1, the freshly resurrected Jesus prepared his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit before he ascended into heaven.

One day, the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, as God's believers were gathered together in one place, the Holy Spirit fell on Jesus' disciples and Peter stood up and declared an incredible message of the Lord's salvation to all who were in Jerusalem. Because it was the feast of Pentecost, there were Jews and converts to Judaism from all over. God followers from most of the known world had assembled and heard Peter's message.

Our passage today picks up with Peter's summary statement of his sermon and the response it worked in its diverse hearers. With that let us read **Acts 2:36-42**.

Here we see our first point this morning that we gather because **The Gospel Creates a Community**

What lead to everything that would follow in this passage was the message of the gospel which Peter proclaimed. The message was that this Jesus is the Lord's messiah and he was crucified in order to bring salvation to those who sit in their own sinful rebellion against him.

Where there is no preaching of the gospel there is no possibility of a church. The proclamation of the gospel is the only soil which can produce fruit. Where there is no gospel, there is no church. You can have many things apart from the preaching of the gospel. You can have a wonderful social club, you can have a great civics group, you can have live music and emotion hurrah, but if the gospel is not preached there is no possibility for a church.

But while the preaching of the gospel makes the church possible, hearing the gospel doesn't make the church either. What we see in this text is not only that the gospel was preached, but that the gospel was believed and responded to.

Many of us might think we've heard the gospel and that's what we need. But what we just saw is that the true community not only heard the message of salvation but responded to it with repentance. Look at what happened in our text: **Acts 2:37-41**.

The church is not only called out by the gospel, but it is also marked off by a Christian response to the gospel. Many people heard the story of gospel that day, but who were those who were saved? Those who repented, who were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, and as Jesus promised filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here is something beautiful about the good news of Jesus Christ. What happened in Peter's declaration is that people felt genuine grief over their sins. They were cut to the heart.

Our world is really good at cutting people to the heart. Our world can make you feel guilty at the drop of a hat. You don't accept enough, you don't recycle enough, you don't eat clean enough, you don't love enough, you don't care enough, you don't exercise enough, you don't make enough, you don't have sex enough, you don't matter enough. And the solutions the world offers are always moving solutions. The standard for what is enough is always changing.

We know what it's like to be cut to the heart. That's because whether we know it or not, there is nothing more common to humanity than our brokenness. So when our attention is drawn too it, anyone with an ounce of sobriety can see it. But it's only the message of the gospel, and the good news of Jesus Christ which comes to those who are cut and tells them what they might do to be saved.

Repent and be baptized every one of you and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That is the gift of conversion in Jesus Christ. The mark of a Christian is not simply that they hear the message of the gospel, not simply that they are convicted of their sins or compelled by the offer of eternal life, but that they are converted. How? By turning away from our sins in repentance, by being identified by the life of Jesus in baptism, and by being filled by the Holy Spirit.

This is the first way the church is marked off in this text. In this text those who are converted by believing, repenting, baptism and Holy Spirit filled life are distinctly marked off from those who were not.

You see even in the gathering at this time there were many who heard and responded, and many who simply heard. But the true community of the church which followed was made up of those who were converted together.

Our gathering today, just like the gathering back then, has individuals who are marked off based off their response to the gospel. In our day and age it is very easy to feel like one belongs to the church simply because they go to church. But if you are here and you have not responded to the gospel I want you to feel incredibly welcomed here, because at one point each and every one of us sat where you sat. But at some point, I want you to feel uncomfortable here if you're unwilling to be converted to Jesus.

I want you to become annoyed that every song, every sermon and every small group keeps talking about believing, loving, serving and living for the glory of Jesus. Because that's what creates a church: conversion to Jesus by faith and repentance.

So not only does the gospel mark out those who in the gathering believe and are baptized, but the church is marked off from the world itself.

Look back at Acts 2:40. Peter didn't simply say: "You believe, good, you're done!" Look at what happened next: **Acts 2:40**.

The church in its conversion was a group of people who were called out of the ways of the world and into something entirely new. The community who believed this gospel together was still to be in this world, yet their faith and Holy Spirit filled lives was to call them to look less like this crooked generation and more like God's distinct people.

What does that look like? Here we see our second point this morning: **The Gospel Compels a Community**.

Read with me: **Acts 2:41-47**.

What's interesting here is that the gospel which was just freely proclaimed, the Holy Spirit which was just immediately given to those who repented and believed, so moved this group of people that they automatically started spending time together.

I've officiated lots of weddings and done lots of pre-marriage, and I've never had to teach anyone that they should live together after they are married. It just happened!

So here the gospel was believed by a community of people and immediately those people formed a community.

Did you see what was said in verse 44: "And all who believed were together."

The community of the church was formed as what was believed in the gospel gathered people together in the gospel. This is the kind of unity our world clamors for, but can never see apart from the church. We live in a world that longs for diversity, but here is diversity based not off where you're from, what color your skin is, who you voted for, how much you make, how many kids you have or whether you're single or married. Here is a community gathered together by grace bound by their belief in the gospel.

This passage we are looking at today is what makes up the goal of our covenant membership at Sovereign Hope. We like to say that membership is where we believe together (vs. 44), belong together (vs. 44-46) and become more Christlike together (vs. 40). What does this look like? It looks like a community of believers who by nature of their belief in the gospel and their response in repentance and baptism, covenant themselves together to help each other follow Jesus.

The whole nature of what we see follow in the passage shows us the community of believers was gathered primarily for two things: 1. Because it was their joyful design in their salvation, 2. Because it was of benefit to their faith as well as each other's faith.

So why did the church begin to gather and be together? Because that's the way God designed it, and that's the way we need it.

But practically what does this look like? Luke shows us five specific functions in this passage and we can boil those down into three categories. These believers were committed to teaching, to hospitality, and to piety.

We see they dedicated themselves first to the apostles **teaching**. We are going to look at how this teaching happens later on in this series both in "Why we read" and "Why we gather." But for the time being it's important for us to see that we need to gather because we always need to be taught.

Look back at Peter's word in **Acts 2:40**. There is always continued teaching left for all of us! For those of you who think you know the Bible enough, and you've studied enough theology that you can't possibly learn any more that is actually a sign of your ignorance not your enlightenment.

I'm the chaplain for the Grizzly Football team and God was so gracious once that I was able to watch one of those guys come to Jesus. One day, not long after he was saved we were sitting in a Community Group and he pointed out something to me about a passage we were reading that I had never seen and it shapes to this day how I think of and even preach that text.

Whether we are following Jesus for little bit, or a long time, we need each other to help us look at God's word and love him even more. We need help seeing how we are to live and how we apply God's word to our own lives.

They also devoted themselves to **hospitality**. Day by day they were fellowshiping together and breaking bread in their homes.

When Jesus brings us to himself, he brings us into the life of others, physically and in a known way.

I understand that we offer a live stream and I understand that COVID has placed a unique burden on the church in many ways which need wisdom and prayer. But I want us to all understand the significance the Bible places on fellowshiping and showing hospitality in person to our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith.

When you arrived here this morning God was already calling you to participate in the walk of others through your greeting and care of others.

In talking to many church leaders we are seeing many church members walk away from the gospel during this season. As painful as this reality is, how affirming is it that the regular gathering of the Lord's church is that powerful! When we are committed to gathering and encouraging one another on Sunday's and throughout the week Christian faith generally flourishes!

This is what the author of Hebrews assumes about our care when he says this: **Hebrews 10:23-25**.

Not only was the church committed to teaching and hospitality, but it was also compelled to acts of *piety*. When you think of piety you might think of stodgy pious people. But piety is simple acts of faith lived up publicly and privately. Here that piety was praying together and being generous towards each other and the needs of the body.

It was both prayerfulness and generosity in the gospel which shaped the hospitality of the church. The care they gave was not only relational, but it was spiritual and it was physical. While these people learned together, while they ate together, they were also growing together. Spiritual disciplines like Bible reading, prayer, sacrificial giving grew not in an isolated lab, but in the community of the Lord's people!

What you'll notice is that this teaching, caring, and praying community actually gathered day by day. There was not simply a one-day-a-week mentality. This wasn't legalistic, they weren't commanded to, but the joy of helping one another follow Jesus naturally compelled others to do this.

Both introverts and extroverts, both morning people and night people, both parents with kids and college students were drawn towards each other in the power of the Holy Spirit for care and fellowship.

This is why we have community groups at Sovereign Hope. Our community groups are meant to be neighborhood based groups where it's easy to gather and care for one another in gospel-centered ways because you live near to each other. What you'll see in this text is that not only were the people believing and gathering together, but they were also (vs. 47) having favor with all the people who were in the city.

In line with this the goal of our community groups are simply to encourage one another and serve our city in a distinctly gospel centered way.

I watched news report once about biologists going into places where the coral reefs died and putting up artificial reefs that were designed to host the life of the coral. After a while the concrete structures were so covered with living things, that all it looked like was a healthy reef.

That's what our community groups are designed to do. They are concrete structures that we hope one day are simply seen as places where the church does church things. They exist not apart from the church, or as a distinct ministry of the church, but they are places where the church is encouraged to continue to be the church.

And if we look back at our passage in Acts we see something pretty cool about this community. We see in verses 37 through 41 that the preached word of God produced salvation in about three thousand people!

But then we see the community of God in the church in verses 42 through 47 and it ends with more conversion: "God was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved!"

There's a sect of Christianity that assumes there are two types of Christians. There are those who care about evangelism, and there are those who care about the church. Here we see that it is the gathering of the believers in teaching, hospitality and piety which bears the fruit of evangelism.

The nature of biblical church is so gospel rich that it is in the church people see the glory of the gospel and are saved by it. The church is God's greatest evangelism plan! Many of us treat personal evangelism like a dating relationship. We don't really introduce the person we are dating to our weird family until we have enough relational capital built up. It's almost as if we share the gospel with someone, and then we have that awkward moment where we introduce them to the church and we hope they aren't too weird. But the weirdness of the church is part of God's gracious gift to show others that there's nothing special about us but something astoundingly beautiful about our Jesus.

We gather because everything we do is meant to cause people to see and serve Jesus all the more.

But lastly, and in closing we gather because **The Lord's Day was the Distinct Day of the Christian Community.**

There is something really interesting that happened as Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath Laws of the Old Testament. For Israel there was always one a day a week which was markedly distinct from the others, and that was the Sabbath. It was the day of rest.

But when Jesus was on earth his treatment of the Sabbath, though not sinful, always annoyed the religious people. Why? Because the religious people were so concerned about what you couldn't do on the Sabbath and Jesus was dedicated to showing people what they could do on the Sabbath. Though it was distinct, it was a day of mercy and healing and fellowship.

So what is beautiful to see is that in the book of Acts the distinct day of the week moved from the last day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath, to the first day of the week, the day Jesus was resurrected. It was on this day that what was done scattered throughout the week was shared by believers gathered on Sunday. This day was called by the apostle John in Revelation 1, "The Lord's Day."

The gospel which promises us a Sabbath still to come (Hebrews 4:9), has fulfilled our day of rest and now we center community weekly not only on a day of rest, but on a day which commemorates Jesus' resurrected life.

The puritan pastor John Bunyan called the Lord's Day, "The Market Day of the Soul." It's when all of us gather together to fill the carts of our soul for another week of labor as God's church. It's where all of us together begin to show the world what resurrected life looks like in Jesus Christ. It's where anyone who comes in and sees us learning, loving, and living together says: This group is electric!

This means that as we gather in on the Lord's Day with two distinctions.

First ***We Gather For Participation.***

When we come together, we come to participate in the Christian life together. Look at how Paul puts this in **Ephesians 5:19-21**.

The gathering of believers is where we address, give thanks, and submit to one another out of reverence to Jesus. Men, I want to speak specifically to you for a moment. If you're the guy who goes on a rant on Facebook about these kids and their participation trophies, you better not be a guy who treats Sunday like a participation trophy. How many of us come, and we sit, and we observe, and we pat ourselves on the back that we did a thing! How is that any different than getting a "Most Improved Sunflower Seed Spitter" trophy in 4th grade T-ball?

Men, dads, lead in participation. Pray yourself, pray with your families on Sunday night that God would work in you and give you opportunities to work in others that Sunday morning. Lead in worship, lead in welcoming one another, lead in bring your kid's friends to church. Participate in the gathering and see how God richly rewards you as we together sing, learn, pray and give.

But secondly, ***We Gather In Anticipation.***

I've mentioned this before, but I'm always shocked at what amazes missionaries when they return home to their churches to visit. I know a family who served the Lord in one of the most commonly shared Instagram island destinations. It was absolutely gorgeous, but behind the scenes it is one of the most dangerous places for Christians due to the hostile Muslim government.

They live where all of us would give up anything to live. But when they come home you know what excites them? The gathering of believers in the local church. Why? Because despite our warts and weaknesses, despite ongoing construction and limited kids classrooms, despite snowy days and global pandemics, the gathering of the Lord's church on a Sunday is as close to heaven as we can get this side of death.

When we get to heaven it's going to look a lot less like Sandals Jamaica and more like Sunday in Juliet, Montana. What we see in heaven is an assembly of God's people who forever sing the praises of our God and King, we see all the nations together captivated by and walking in the light of the lamp of the lamb.

These gatherings are where we remind ourselves in the hurt of life that the best days of the church are still ahead of us. These reminders are where we look at the best of the church and we say, I can't wait until this gets better.

The privilege then for all of us then is not to view the gathering of the Lord's saints and say, "What's the minimum I can do?" but instead to say, "How do I get more of this in my life?"