

CHARACTER REFERENCE

ACTS 2:40-47 AUGUST 21, 2019

Recently I watched a YouTube video which tried to explain how *Jurassic Park*, a movie made more than 25 years ago, can look so *much more* realistic than its modern-day sequels. How is it possible that those 1993 dinosaurs are still so thrilling and effective, when they didn't have the benefits of cutting edge computing that are available to studios today? The person who made the video clearly knows a lot about filmmaking. He was convinced that much of the failure of the modern *Jurassic Park* movies to capture our sense of wonder has to do with the mechanics of cinematography. That they are shooting in the wrong aspect ratio. That angles and blocking should be done the way it was done before. That, if the current filmmakers would just follow Spielberg's methods, the sequels would have a better chance of living up to the original when it comes to realism and potency. It was an interesting video essay.¹

I'm calling this series through the book of Acts *Those Were The Days* because it *is* a history book. These passages detail what really happened after Jesus' ascension and how the Gospel took root and spread throughout the known world in a continuing story that finds its sequels in our *own* lives and churches today. But *Those Were The Days* also references the fact that Acts is often looked at as an idyllic *blueprint* of the way a church should pattern itself. It's often said that if we just did what they did, then we would unlock the power of Acts Christianity in our own churches. Probably the *most* popular passage for that type of thinking is our text tonight. The first days of the Jerusalem church are often held up as the purest pinnacle of church organization. And, it's true that what we're about to read is astounding. Awe-inspiring. The work of God doing incredible things. But the question that is demanded is whether what we see at the close of Acts 2 is a *blueprint* for us to mimic. Is *this* the ideal format that we should work to recapture in our own church? Let's take a look at these verses and discover where we find differences and where we find similarities.

Acts 2:40 - ⁴⁰ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

We spent the last two weeks looking at the portion of Peter's sermon that was recorded for us. Here we're told that he said a lot more to them, calling them to spiritual action. He wasn't trying to argue them into belief, that's never going to work, but they *did* need information. That information culminated in the choice to accept God's salvation or to reject Him.

We note that being saved "from this perverse generation" did not mean that they would *withdraw* from the city or the presence of unbelievers. In fact, they'd spend the rest of their lives rubbing elbows with those who didn't believe and would preach the Gospel to them. It also didn't mean that these Christians would always be saved from the hatred and persecution that would come from the people around them. Quite the contrary. But, ultimately, as born again believers, they would be safe in the arms of God and securely delivered into glory.

Acts 2:41 - ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

We like to say that the first church was a *mega* church. Sometimes Christians argue over what the "right" size is for a local church. As far as the Bible is concerned, we're never given a quota and

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKALxKbjOaE>

we're never given a cut-off. The church in Jerusalem was many thousands of people at first. Other congregations were so small they could meet in homes. The same is true today, and that's great. It should be the Spirit that calls local churches into being. The problem is when people come along and say that it's *wrong* to go to a mega church *because* it's mega. If that's how you feel, then you couldn't have attended the church in Jerusalem. Others feel that there's, realistically, no benefit to a small church. If that's the case, you'd not have been able to attend the church in Philippi.

The goal isn't to hit a certain number, be it large or small. The goal is to be a part of the work of God in a community, according to *His* plan at the time. We see it here: The disciples didn't go out and recruit 3,000 people, as if the church was some sort of pyramid scheme. These souls were *added* to them. And notice a couple things about that phrase: First, the *soul* was the unit of measure, as far as God was concerned. And that's a wonderful thing. Because every soul is equal. Their membership and belonging in the Church had absolutely nothing to do with status or prominence or resources or *desirability*. God doesn't need skilled people. He can create international ministries out of the lives of people who are paralyzed or limbless. Devote yourself to Him and see what He can do with your life!

But, second, we see it says that these 3,000 were added to the group. In verse 1 they had been 120 in one accord, united in heart and mind. Now, it was 3,120 put together, unified, connected with one another. As members of Christ's body we're not simply *affiliated* with one another, like when you see someone on the street wearing the same team's ball cap that you're wearing. We're built together, knit and connected by God as *one* Body whose members depend on each other and care for each other. And, we note they were not added to the Apostle's *squad*. They were added to the whole.

Before we move on, we should commend these guys for their wonderful flexibility. No one had made any plans to have a baptism that day. But they kept pace with what God was doing and adapted themselves accordingly. This would've been no small feat, by the way. We just had a baptism on Sunday. It took us about 100 seconds per person. We don't know how this worked out, but it would've been quite an adventure to get this crowd moved to water and then through the process.

Acts 2:42 - ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The life of the Church is characterized in these 4 categories. We're told, that these new believers devoted themselves to *constant attention* to these things. First, there was the teaching of the Apostles. The Church was not going to be held up by feelings or experiences, but by the truth of revelation, handed down through this doctrine. God has gone to great lengths to record, protect and deliver the Scriptures to us. If a local church wants to be faithful, it *must* continue to teach the whole counsel of God. And if a person or group comes along attempting to re-define the Bible in a way that is in contradiction to what was given through the Apostles, Paul says in Galatians, "let God's curse fall on them."

So first, they were a church that taught God's word. Second, they were a church of *fellowship*. Fellowship here does not simply mean they were socializing a lot. The word is much more significant than that. It's a word that means intimate association and *participation*. The person who is in churchly fellowship is someone who has a *share* in the group. In this sense there weren't church members who were just *consumers* of the ministry. To *be* in fellowship meant that a person was a *contributor* to the ministry. And this is exactly what is fleshed out in the Epistles, where it's explained that *each* Christian is gifted to serve and to participate in some way, not just in the universal Body of Christ, but in their local church as well.

Third, we're told they continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread. Many scholars believe this is a reference to the Lord's Supper. I'm encouraged that, when they got together, their focus was not on simply their own felt needs but on remembering what the Lord had done for them and His great future plan for His people.

Fourth, they gave constant attention to prayers. This doesn't just mean individually, but in context it means they were gathering again and again for prayer meetings together. Prayer, in the Bible (particularly in the book of Acts), is shown to be an indispensable and inexhaustible resource given to us. And we're also shown that when God's people get together and pray there it accomplishes what other efforts can not.

Acts 2:43 - ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

A deep sense of awe characterized their mindset and their meetings. Ours is a culture that loves distraction and shallowness. Our default mindset works against the reverential fear of God. But close communion with the Lord demands this fear. The Bible says the fear of the Lord is the *starting* point for things like wisdom and spiritual security. It must be *foundational* to us as it was to them.

Acts 2:44-45 - ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

The birth of the Church coincided with a Jewish feast, which meant there were thousands of out-of-towners there in Jerusalem, visiting from faraway lands. Many of them had gotten saved and now were staying around, at least temporarily. Again we note the gracious flexibility of the disciples. They were constantly having to think on their feet as they saw the Spirit moving in their midst. With hundreds or thousands of people far from home, of *course* there were a lot of physical needs that cropped up. In response, *other* believers were stirred up by the Spirit to intervene on behalf of their brothers and sisters. We see no command going out from the Apostles, no official charter being drawn up, detailing how much each person was allowed to keep before they had to start selling. As God was working wonders through the 12, He was also working wonderfully in the hearts of the rest to do His work of hospitality and generosity in *particular* situations where needs arose. And, remember, this was all done without phones or internet or geolocation. They didn't need a scheme or a system at this point, it was accomplished as the Spirit led and people followed.

Acts 2:46-47 - ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

We often think of the first church as a 'house church' and, in part, that's true. They met from house to house. But we see them gathering together *in the temple*. The temple complex would give them the ability to have much larger gatherings than any house could accommodate. So, though regular groups *were* meeting in houses, the first church was *also* meeting in a large, beautiful building. And, as they did these things, gladness and humility were two of the most visible characteristics to the people around them. These Christians were *joyful* and contented. They weren't complainers, but were constantly heard praising the Lord. And each day, God's work continued and the Church grew. I doubt that since that Pentecost morning there has *ever* been a day in history where *someone* was

not added to the Church. And that is a very pleasant thought! Every day *someone* is being brought from darkness to light, from death to life, and we're commissioned to be a part of that.

The question is: Is Acts 2:40-47 a *blueprint* of how we do it? Should we mimic exactly what we see here: The communalism and the daily, house-to-houseness of the Church? There are groups who feel this *is* the framework which we all should be applying to ourselves. And, certainly, we want to see God moving mightily in our midst. So, is this the formula to see it happen?

We have to come to the conclusion that the *communal* structure of the church in Acts 2 is *not* a blueprint for every church. For one thing, we *never* see it replicated in the rest of the New Testament. Paul did not set up churches this way. And, later we'll see that many local churches *depended* on wealthy believers who owned sizable homes for meeting places. After all, Christians weren't allowed to build buildings for themselves until hundreds of years later.² Even in this context, the Jerusalem, communal Church, Peter is going to tell Ananias and Sapphira that their property was theirs to do with what they wished. There was no command or program established by the Apostles. It was a dramatic and particular work of the Spirit.

So why *did* God work this way through this first church? I'll venture a couple of suggestions.

First of all, it will not be long until these Christians are going to be scattered by violent persecution out of Jerusalem. They would then go and carry the Gospel to places unknown. And so, this daily, live-in church experience becomes, in hindsight, like a school of ministry. They had an intense preparation for the fact that they'd soon all be launched out as missionaries. We see in the Bible God taking time to prepare people for service. Think Moses or David or Paul.

Second, this communal oneness would've gone a long way to protect the fledgling Church from the natural divisions we, as humans, struggle with. The Lord was working to establish, from the beginning, that there weren't different classes of Christians. Your place in society didn't matter when it came to the Body of Christ. Rich or poor, slave or free, talented or debilitated, all had equal place and equal footing. All were welcome. All could be used. All could take part. They were one.

If the communal structure of the Acts 2 church was what God wanted for *every* local fellowship, then we'd expect it to be *replicated* somewhere else in the book. But we don't see it. *And* if this was a "magic" formula for peak performance, we wonder why this Church struggled so much with things like racism and legalism?

What we see in this passage is not the establishment of a formulaic *structure*. We see the Holy Spirit moving on a particular group of people in a particular set of ways. As He will do throughout the rest of the book and continues to do today. Depending on the time and the place and the people, the way He *organizes* will be personal, like it always is. And this makes perfect sense. The underground church in China cannot operate, logistically, the same way a free church in Hanford can. However, no matter the time or place or circumstances, the *character* of the church should remain the same as what we see here.

The question is not whether we replicate a communal organization, but instead is: Are we being faithful to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to those *characteristics* that define the Church in every time and place? We see some of those characteristics first demonstrated here in Acts 2.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/november/why-and-when-did-christians-start-constructing-special.html>

First, this Church was *glad*. They were glad when receiving salvation and glad when living out their Christian life. The Psalmist says “Lord, [You] have made me glad through Your work.”³ Part of being a Christian is choosing to allow God’s gladness to do its work in our hearts and our minds and our attitudes and our words. That’s always characteristic for God’s people.

Second, this Church was a *Bible teaching* church. I think we can stand confidently in our devotion to teaching God’s word as a local church. Not just teaching things that are pleasant or palatable, but teaching the doctrines of the Bible, as delivered by the Apostles.

Third, this Church was a *fellowshipping* church. Remember, that doesn’t *just* mean being social, but it was a place of active participation. Here at Calvary, we try to give many different opportunities for people to participate in worship and prayer and service and church life. Whether you are actually *sharing* and contributing is between you and the Lord. You’re a part of the Body of Christ, but if that flow of fellowship is not taking place, well it’s like a finger that’s lost blood flow. It’s going to pose a problem for everyone eventually. Every Christian in every church is called to live in unified fellowship.

Fourth, this Church was a church that broke bread often. In recent years we’ve been increasing the frequency of having communion together. We’ll have a chance even tonight. Hopefully this has been a blessing to your spiritual life.

Fifth, the Church was a praying church. Like communion, we’ve tried to increase the ways that we, as a group, can be praying *together*. It’s a part of our Men’s Morning Study and it’s become a staple of our nights here at Midweek. Our Saturday night prayer meeting has *always* been very lightly attended. That’s just reality. Here’s what I’ll note from our text tonight: Even the Apostles needed regular prayer meetings! Guys who had walked with Jesus and wrote the New Testament and were working miracles were saying, “We’ve got to get to a prayer meeting, like ASAP!” One commentator I read pointed out that the small attendance at prayer meetings indicates that, perhaps, we don’t really believe we *need* to pray. I don’t say this to burden us or condemn anyone. But the New Testament Church is *always* called to be a praying Church. Praying *together*.

Sixth characteristic we can see here: This Church was a *generous* church. It’s clear that there was no blanket command for everyone to sell everything. But the New Testament *does* speak very clearly about the absolute essential of generosity. James said if we see the needs of our brothers and do nothing to help them, how can we say we have a living faith? The Apostle John would later write, “whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” The compassionate generosity we read about in this text wasn’t just something God did through one congregation. It is a *characteristic* of God’s work through the church. Expressed differently in various times and places, but characteristic for all of us.

It’s easy to look at a passage like this one and think that it’s the *structure* that needs to be replicated. Kind of like that YouTube video. If the filmmakers would just *copy* Spielberg, they’d be able to catch lightning in a bottle like he did in the first *Jurassic Park*. But, even in movies we know that’s not how it works. And we know that because Steven Spielberg *also* directed *Jurassic Park (2): The Lost World* and everyone hated it!

The power of this first church wasn’t found in their organizational structure any more than Samson’s power was found in the length of his hair! It was the *work* of God, moving in the midst of faithful people who were surrendered to Him. God works in many different ways, but that work will always

³ Psalm 92:4

share common characteristics, like these we've listed. Generosity. Unity. Prayer. The study of the Word. Gladness. Worship. The fear of the Lord. We're *all* called to continue steadfastly in these things because this is not just the work of God in Acts 2, but in the rest of the book and the rest of the Church age. So tonight, I'd invite *all* of us to take a look on the shelves of our hearts. Take an inventory. See whether we're stocked up on these characteristics or whether we could use a fresh filling in some area. We can trust the Lord not only to show us, but to help us and supply us with all that we need to continue the wonderful work He began in Acts 2.