

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

Welcome to Week 4 in our Unstoppable Force series. When you read today’s Bible passages, you get the idea that the early church enjoyed doing life together. There was food, fellowship, good teaching, mission, helping each other ... well, it sounds ideal! But, that doesn’t mean community life was easy! They still had conflicts.

ICEBREAKER (10 mins max) – Living in the mountains, we’re used to having our own ‘space’ and back yards. But at different times, we venture into different forms of communal living. This might be for a very short time (e.g. being on a cruise ship or long distance coach trip, ministering at beach mission, camping or going on holidays with other people). At other times, the living arrangement is longer term (e.g. house sharing, living on a college campus or in a residential unit block.)

- What have you enjoyed about these sorts of experiences? What has been the most annoying incident you’ve put up with? Could you cope with living in a communal context, long term?

PRAY: Asking God to give us a picture of what Christian community could look like.

READ: **Acts 2:42-47 & 4:32-37**

- What things immediately stick out for you in these two passages about how early Christians did life together? What are some of the key principles of life in Christian community?

A critical aspect of the communal life of the early church was that that their relationships were characterised by “sincere hearts” (2:46) Peter later wrote:

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (1 Pet 1:22)

- What sort of things indicate sincere and authentic love? What sort of things indicate that people are insincere? Does being ‘real’ mean absolute transparency/ ‘baring all’?
- Why do you think that eating together and practicing hospitality were such a big part of the shared community life of the early church? (At that point in history), what would it have meant for Jews to eat with gentiles, women to eat with men, and slaves to eat with free, possibly (wealthy) slave-owners?
- [Optional] What other things do we learn about doing relationships as a Christian community from Romans 12:9-16 and 1 Peter 4:8-11?

Central to this community life was that “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship ... and to prayer”. (Acts 2:42) Rowe highlights that people who joined the early church knew why it existed because the church had developed ways of teaching new people, so there was “a transmission of and continuity in community identity and mission.”

- Who are the people who have ‘discipled’ you at different times and taught you about following Jesus?
- Do you meet regularly with - either an older or a younger Christian (or both) - to share things about your Christian walk and pray together? How do you fit this into a busy schedule?

It’s easy to love people who are ‘just like us’. It gets tricky when there are people who have very different opinions. But, the reality is that within any group of believers, there is diversity regarding gender, race/ ethnic background, age/ stage of life, marital status and financial/ socio-economic circumstances.

- In Acts 2:45 & 4:32 & 34, what very obvious issue arose?
- How well, as a church, do we care for those in our midst who have needs?
- What is our role - as individuals, couples and families - in ministering to other believers in need?

Some people suggest these passages imply everyone sold everything they owned (i.e. that it mandates some form of Christian socialism). They had “everything in common” (Acts 2:44), they ate in each other’s homes (Acts 2:46) and “they shared everything they had”. (Acts 4:32) But, we’re also told that from “from time to time” people sold their lands or houses (Acts 4:34), or alternatively, their “possessions and goods”. (Acts 2:45) The phrase “from time to time” would indicate that sale of property wasn’t an essential and mandated practice. These seem to be spontaneous gratuitous acts by some people to provide financial resources to those in need.

- In Eccles 5:19, we’re told that God gives us “wealth and possessions, and enables (us) to enjoy them”. As Western Christians, we tend to “enjoy” more so than “share” our possessions, even while appreciating God’s generosity. What would be the hardest thing for you to lend, sell or give away, from your ‘stash’?

Doing life together will inevitably involve disagreements – and the need to work through these issues. In Acts 6:1, a critical issue arose because the needs of one ethnic group in the community weren’t being met and there was a perception that there was favouritism and unfairness regarding the distribution of food to their widows. This issue could have escalated to conflict, but was resolved by appointing believers to serve these believers.

- READ Matt 18:15-20. What does Jesus teach as the pattern for conflict resolution?

In Acts 15, a major conflict threatened to split the church. People with a strongly held set of views on a topic raised very loud objections (Acts 15:5), while other people differed in opinion. These views impacted new believers from a gentile background, especially the expectations that were placed on them and the relationships between believers from Jewish and gentile backgrounds. The critical point that led to resolution of this argument, at what is known as the ‘Jerusalem Council’, was recognizing that God doesn’t distinguish between Jewish and gentile believers. God has shown this by bestowing the Holy Spirit on both groups alike. (Acts 15:8-9)

- READ Eph 4:1-7. What attitudes and mindset(s) do we need to adopt to maintain harmonious relationships within our Christian community.

REFLECT & SHARE

Mike Frost is a Baptist pastor, at a church at Manly: ‘Small Boat Big Sea’. Their church has tried to capture some principles of New Testament community life including “generosity, hospitality, faith, sacrifice, teaching, service, worship, prayer, laughter, justice-seeking, family, love, grace, etc.” as well as discipleship and mission. “Being missional together means we exemplify good community by looking after each other and extending care to our local and international neighbours.” <http://smallboatbigsea.org/> Five key aspects are incorporated into the acronym BELLS. Each week, people seek to:

- BLESS – celebrating the goodness of God and passing blessings received from God onto others
- EAT together – encouraging each other while sharing food
- LISTEN – being attentive to the voice of God (individually and as people meet together)
- LEARN – continually seeking to learn more about God and his word
- SENT – seeing ourselves as ambassadors of the gospel, bearing God’s image in the world.
- What is your response to this pattern? What things are you already doing regularly with other Christians?
- What could we do better (both in our Life Groups – and as a church as a whole)?

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER

Pray over the issues you have discussed from this study. Ask that God will give each of us wisdom and courage to speak and act in a way that honours God.

Springwood Baptist Church

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Study 4: Thriving Communities