

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Ordinary Church

Scripture: Acts 2:42–47

Code: 44-13

I want you to open your Bible to the passage that we should be studying tonight and we'll look at it a little bit, Acts chapter 2.

When I left a couple of months ago, we were at the end of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, and that sermon closed out with an invitation in verse 38 where Peter said, "Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Then in verse 40, "With many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!' So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls."

We got to that point in Peter's sermon and then we did a special message on the theme of fellowship, but we never really looked at verses 42 to 47, so let's just do that briefly tonight. Pretty straightforward, but it has a wonderful message for us. I've entitled this message "The Ordinary Church," the ordinary church.

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity - " or simplicity " - of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

A week or so ago, I picked up a copy of *Tabletalk*, the monthly devotional magazine that's produced by our friends at Ligonier Ministry, and the theme was ordinary. And there was a wonderful article by our friend Michael Horton called "The Ordinary Christian Life." In that article, Michael Horton says this. "Radical, epic, revolutionary, transformative, impactful, life-changing, extreme, awesome, emergent, alternative, innovative, on the edge, explosive breakthrough, whole new level." And then he asks, "Whatever happened to ordinary?" Whatever happened to ordinary? He says, "Ordinary has to be one of the loneliest words in the evangelical church vocabulary. There is this constant call for more experiences that are highly emotional, radical, edgy, relevant, trendy." One other writer says, "There seems to be a growing weariness with the cult of extraordinariness."

I read an article this week written by an evangelical Christian who said, "There is beginning to emerge a longing in the lives of 20- and 30-year-olds for real church. They're worn out on the extremes."

Where does all this come from? Well, the original fountain for this is not the culture. This is a culture of extremes, but that's not the original fountain for this, though all these things are part of the culture, and in an effort to be extreme and edgy and impactful and relevant, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, the most bizarre elements of the culture are imported into the church. But the origin really goes back to American revivalism and goes back to Charles Finney, 1792-1875. It was Finney who decided that religion, to be valid, had to have some kind of high impact, high energy emotional element. It was about methods, feelings, experiences, sentimentalism, and it all trumped sound doctrine and theology. Gradual growth, by the normal ordinary means of grace, prayer, the study of the Word, fellowship was exchanged for a radical experience, the anxious bench, and there was introduced into the evangelical world a restlessness of those looking for something extreme.

Church, simply living out a form of that today, the church has become mired in restlessness impatience and selfishness. And by the way, that is characteristic of childishness. The church is an adolescent. Wanting to be indulged and entertained, the church is largely superficial and immature and experiences are designed for impatient, selfish, shallow adolescents. The God-ordained ordinary patterns of slow, faithful, thoughtful study and absorption of the Word of God and slow, steady growth in grace and the knowledge of Christ in the midst of a faithful congregation is far too ordinary for the salesmen of adolescent extreme radical experience. There seems to be an endless supply of adolescents to entertain, ready to be fooled.

I'm not saying God is ordinary. God is not ordinary. But God works through ordinary means, ordinary people in ordinary churches, doing very ordinary things. God uses real language and ordinary folks as his instruments to move his ordinary church to high impact in the world. Simply stated, Jesus, God incarnate, stayed nine months in His mother's womb and was born in an ordinary way in an ordinary place and "grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man" in an ordinary way. The Puritans used to talk about the means of grace, and they were ordinary means. People today are like adolescents chasing a wild experience. And, as I said, there's no end of places willing to offer it. I don't think it satisfies God's true people. I don't think that they can endure it for very long, I hope.

As we come to this section that I just read to you, I think we're introduced in a fresh way to an ordinary church, and ordinary church. This is the church that was born at Pentecost. Yes, the apostles were there, and because the apostles were there, according to verse 43, there were "many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles." Now, that was the one element that's different than the ordinary life of the church today, and we don't expect that because that was associated with the apostles, and there are no more apostles.

That first church was an ordinary church. Jesus had ascended, sent the Holy Spirit, by the Holy Spirit placed all believers into the body of the church, filled them with Spirit power, the gospel was preached by Peter, Jesus declared as Lord and Messiah, 3,000 people believed, were baptized, the church was born, 120 plus 3,000 makes 3,120. The first church was gathered at the feast of firstfruits, Pentecost.

What was that first church like? Just a few reminders that struck me as I thought about this and wanted to share it with you. And, as I said, I'm not going to take a lot of time. They were involved in what we would consider to be ordinary actions, ordinary realities. Verse 42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Dear friends, those are the means of grace. Those are the ordinary things that every church should be engaged in. This is the life of the church. There's nothing in there about entertainment. Nothing in there is spectacular. There's nothing in there revivalistic. There's nothing in there that catapults someone to some other spiritual level.

First of all, we want to acknowledge that verse 42 begins, "They were continually devoting themselves." Who's "they"? The 3,000 souls that were saved. So the first thing to say about this church, the ordinary church is saved. The ordinary church is regenerate. The ordinary church is made up of true believers. Unless the church is the redeemed, the church is seriously compromised. Non-believers are welcome to come. Those of you who may be non-believers who are here, we are so grateful that you are here, but you're not a part of the church. You are not the church. We invite you to come to Christ and become a part of the church. But the initial reality, the initial action, you might say, in the church is the action that God takes through the faith of an individual to give life to that individual so that the ordinary church is a saved church. All the professors were possessors. This is an amazing, amazing beginning, isn't it? Because 3,000 people are saved at the end of one sermon on one day. This is the mighty work of God to bring together His church.

There are many churches today who would like to make unbelievers feel like they're a part of the church, blur the line. But an ordinary church is a church like the Thessalonian church. Do you remember them? "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith, labor of love, steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." One of the things that I'm so grateful for at Grace Community Church is that we are an ordinary church, ordinary by biblical definition. That is to say we are a body of people who are in Christ. We don't hesitate to say that. That's who we are. That's who we must be to be the true church.

Revelation chapter 2 church at Pergamum says in verse 14 in the letter to them, "I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit

acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.” That’s a compromising church. That’s a compromising church. This church had blurred the lines between the saved and the lost, the regenerate and the unregenerate.

That’s an obvious beginning, and I know you know that. The second thing that we might say about an ordinary church is that an ordinary church is a church committed to the Word of God. Verse 42 says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” The apostles’ doctrine. That is simply a reference to the fact that the apostles were the bearers of divine revelation which was authenticated by the miracles which they did, which then validated them as the spokesmen for God. And it was their teaching, the teaching of the eleven, that was the substance of the study of the early church. This is important. An ordinary church is a church that is completely involved in the study of biblical truth. It was the apostles and their associates who eventually wrote down their doctrine and it composed the New Testament, the New Testament.

Doctrine is everything. Sometimes you hear people a little skeptical about the word “doctrine.” It’s just the word “teaching.” Some translations of verse 42 say, “apostles’ doctrine.” Some say “apostles’ teaching.” *Didach* is just a word for teaching. It’s just truth taught, truth dispersed, truth disseminated. Teaching dominates a church where people are redeemed. An ordinary church is a saved church. An ordinary church is a church that is completely committed to the renewing of their minds through the Word of God. The great commission that came to the apostles, we read it this morning, what did the Lord tell them? To “go and make disciples of all nations, and teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Doctrine is the heart of the life of the church. The whole Bible is the source of that truth. This is an ordinary church, not an extraordinary church, but an ordinary one by God’s definition.

And then if you come back to verse 42, they not only were “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching - ” but also “ - to fellowship.” We talked a lot about that in the message before we left. *Koinnia*, spiritual togetherness, spiritual togetherness. The church is a partnership. The word *koinnia* means “partner, teammate.” They were together. They were not spectators. They were not part time attenders. They lived out their life in a wonderful kind of fellowship.

An ordinary church is not an event for people to come and watch. An ordinary church is a fellowship. It’s a shared life. It’s a practical, practicing fellowship. Hebrews tells us, you remember that, in chapter 10 not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together because we stimulate one another to love and good works. It’s where we use our spiritual gifts to build each other up. It’s where we do the “one anothers,” loving one another, instructing one another, praying for one another, rebuking one another, whatever.

An ordinary church is marked, then, by sound doctrine. And ordinary church is marked by life, vital life. And that's that ordinariness that I love so much about our church. It was very hard for me to visit churches when I'm away, very hard, because I'm so disappointed. Occasionally, I have the privilege of going to a church where the Word of God is upheld, and that's always a joy. But so many times the Bible is misrepresented. That's not a church that's ordinary by God's definition. So many times it's an event and you feel lonely and isolated. Can't wait to rush back here, where there's a saturation of the Word of God and where there's a living fellowship.

And then, to the breaking of bread. To the breaking of bread. That certainly encompasses the Lord's table. Certainly it encompasses the memory of the cross. But before the Lord's table was taken, there was generally in the early church a meal, a "love feast" it's called by the apostle Paul, a supper that culminated in a remembrance of the cross. Certainly, the Lord's table is critical to the life of the church. As you well know, only baptism and the Lord's table are ordinances left to the church. The early church sets the pace called to the Lord's table, called to gather around to take the bread and the cup and remember His death. It's a cross-centered church. It's a church that maintains that symbol.

And there's one other element in verse 42, and again, these are things that you're very familiar with, and that's prayer. These are the activities of the church. Truly converted people continually devoting themselves to the teaching that has come from the apostles and is now inscripturated to shared life and fellowship, to the table of the Lord which focuses them on the glories of the cross, and to prayer. They had promises from their Lord way back in the upper room, the apostles did, that whatever they asked in His name, the Lord would do that the Father would be glorified in the Son. Prayer. Can't be too much of it. Can't be enough of it. No matter how much you pray, you feel guilty most of your life for how little you pray. Isn't that true? When they met, they prayed. Talking about corporate prayer, coming together to pray.

A church was not an event. A church was not a place where there was a platform for some striking figure or over-the-top personality. It was just an ordinary place where the people of God who were genuinely converted devoted themselves continually to the Word of God, to fellowship, to the Lord's table, and prayer. Ordinary. I'm so thankful that this is an ordinary church. Not only ordinary activities, but secondly ordinary attitudes, ordinary attitudes.

Verse 43, "Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; - " or fear, *phobos*, it's actually the word from which you get "phobia." There was a sense that something supernatural was present. Well, in their case, many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles, but I still believe even though the apostles have gone away, in an ordinary church where the activities are the Word of God, fellowship, focus on the cross at the Lord's table and there is where we deal with the sin in our lives, and prayer, in an ordinary church like that, there is a sense of the divine presence.

There is an awe, something wonderful, something transcendent, something more than other places. Not terror, but reverence. The awe comes from the evident work of God through the ordinary means of grace. People try to manufacture that with lights. People try to manufacture that with loud almost unbearable music. People try to create almost bizarre experiences, but that's not awe. That's not the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. The word "*phobos*," the word "fear" or "awe" is reserved for times when people's minds are stunned because of some powerful divine reality. I think there's a sense of awe every time I come here. It's not mystical. It's the evidence of the working of God. Not in some miraculous way as the apostles did, but in the no less miraculous way in which God saves and sanctifies and works his providence to bring Himself glory. So the first attitude we see here is awe, and it's not an artificial one and it's not artificially induced. It's the real fear of the Lord. It's an awesome thing to be in a place where the Spirit of God is moving in power.

Another attitude shows up in verse 44. It's a pretty important one, love. "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need." All that believed were together. It was as if no one felt he had a right to anything of his own. They were all together. Was this communal living? No. Not at all. No. When it says they "had all things common," it simply means that they held whatever it was they possessed lightly in their hands and if anybody else needed it, they released it easily. They began, if necessary, "selling their property and possessions and sharing them with all, as anyone might have need."

By the way, this never happens again in the New Testament in any other church, which then speaks against the idea that the church is supposed to be the fountainhead of social justice and some kind of Marxism. This never happens again. You have to understand there are thousands of pilgrims in the city of Jerusalem who can't go home. Why? Because there's only one church and it's there, and they need to stay. But who's going to meet their needs? But they were so all together in the unity and love of the Holy Spirit that they were willing to part with anything that they possessed to meet someone else's need.

This is another thing I love about Grace Church. This is a church where we all celebrate the awesome work of God – don't we? – in the lives all around us. And this is a church where people hold what they hold so lightly. You give. You amaze me with your giving, amaze me. You are generous. I say this is an ordinary church, ordinary in the sense that it's just the way the Lord designed it to be. It's not extraordinary. It's ordinary.

And when you give like that to one another and when you love like that, there is a joy and a sweetness in fellowship. Verse 46, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity - " or simplicity " - of heart." The first attitude that I see here is the attitude of awe and wonder over what God is doing. The second is the attitude of love. The third is the attitude of unity. They're one mind.

And the next is the attitude of joy at the end of verse 46 and simplicity of heart, uncluttered. This again, simplicity kind of is a word like ordinary. Your lives are knit together in one mind and you break bread from house to house.

And by the way, the fact that they continue to break bread from house to house means not everybody sold their house. There were still people who owned their house. So so much for communism. But they were “taking their meals together with gladness.” So another attitude in an ordinary church is joy, gladness, joyous unity, singleness of heart, caring for each other, simple definition.

And then in verse 47, a final note, “praising God.” An ordinary church is a church that worships, worships. I don’t think I need to tell you that that’s part of our life – isn’t it? – together. We look forward to worship. We elevate worship. We have an undivided purpose, the glory of God, from the very beginning, from the first weeks that I was ever here, I tried to hold before the congregation in those early years that the glory of God was the supreme reason for everything. We recite the wonderful works of God, which is worship. We recite the glorious attributes of God which is worship. And we praise and thank Him for both, which is worship.

This is an ordinary church. There’s nothing flashy, nothing radical, nothing extreme, nothing over-the-top, nothing borrowed from the culture. This is an ordinary church. But this ordinary church earned “favor with all the people,” and this begins to look at the effect. We saw the activities. We saw the attitudes, the effect, “favor with all the people.” Through the years here at Grace Church, we have received so many honors, even from the community around us, from the city of Los Angeles.

I remember one time when the mayor, Mayor Riordan, was here and he wanted to honor Grace Community Church from the city of Los Angeles because our church had meant so much to the city. And he stood in this pulpit and I was nervous, as you would imagine. And he said, “I know one thing about this church. You will not discriminate. Race, color, creed, or sexual preference.” Yikes. It was that last one that got me. I accepted his tainted honor at that point. Through the years, we’ve been a chosen place for funerals of policemen, firemen, and I’ve met with city councilmen through the years who have so much respect for this church because there’s something supernatural here, something beautiful here, something wonderful, something attractive. It should be that way. We should “let our light shine so that men would see our good works and do – ” what? “ - glorify our Father who is in heaven.”

But in the end, this ordinary church experienced extraordinary blessing. Verse 47 ends with this. “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” I don’t know how to get this message across. The Lord builds the church, doesn’t He? He adds. He doesn’t ask us to be radical, extreme, over-the-top, transformative, emergent, or any other adjective. He asks us to follow the ordinary means of grace and faithfulness to the Word of God and the Spirit of God, and He will take care of the extraordinary part. I love our ordinary church. I want you to be an ordinary Christian.

Don't be chasing wild things. It is the slow, steady, consistent, faithful loyalty to Christ and obedience to His Word that honors God. And if spiritual growth is slow and steady, so is church growth, real church growth. An ordinary church can by the power of God have an extraordinary impact.

Father, we thank You for our time together tonight and just thinking about these things. We have never tried to be anything other than what we saw in Your Word from the very beginning. We have tried not to get caught up in manipulation of people, in doing thing for show, changing our theology in order to accommodate a certain segment of the population. We have not redefined ourselves to make the world feel like they're a part. We want to be an ordinary church. We want to be what you have designed us to be using the ordinary means and the slow steady patient way to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ. With the right action, the right attitude and then leave the impact to you. And Lord, we praise You, for You have done extraordinary things. You are adding to Your church daily, here in this place, and through our missionaries You're adding to Your church daily all over this world. And through the men and women that they have trained, multiplied thousands of them, 4,000 pastors now trained on the mission fields through them. Doing ordinary ministry in an ordinary church through ordinary people and ordinary means, You're adding to the church. You're building Your church, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. We're so blessed, so grateful, so thankful. Keep us all loyal and faithful. We give You praise. And everyone said, "Amen."

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