

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
**November 24, 2019**

### **Lives that Intersect**

Acts 2:37-47 (NIV)

*37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*

*38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

*40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

*42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

#### **[Slide 1] Opening**

Good morning church! We’re coming to the close of this portion of a long journey where we’ve been thinking about rebuilding—restoring a foundation of worship, renewing a commitment to the word of God, and rebuilding the identity of the church as the people of God. Next week begins Advent and then comes Christmas and the new year, and we’ll take up new topics as the Lord leads us forward. But I can promise you this—these ideas about rebuilding, about being the people of God, they’re not going away. They’ll always be nearby, close at hand, no matter what topic is our focus for the week or the season. Because there is one thing I know that God is doing in the world today: he is building his church. So we can expect that he will continue to press home to us the importance of what he has taught us in these past six months.

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

As we consider what it is that God is doing in us, his church, it is vitally important that we understand a crucial point. Much of what we've looked at over the course of six months is related to the expression of our lives together as God's people when we gather for worship. And that is to be expected. Our weekly times of corporate worship are the primary vehicle God uses in building us up as his people. Sunday mornings are the one time when we are all together, listening together to hear what God has to say to us as a body, being instructed together, and encountering God together.

But there's a lot more to our life together as a body than our Sunday morning experience. At least there should be. The primary point of being a Christian is not attending meetings, it's living life as a follower of Jesus all week long. Sunday mornings are meant to prepare us for the rest of the week, *and the rest of the week is meant to prepare us for Sunday mornings*. If we are the church when we gather for worship, we are also the church when we scatter to be God's people in this world. And living out that assignment of being God's people to this world requires something essential: it requires the intersection of our lives beyond the Sunday morning meeting.

[Slide 3] *Background*

Our passage this morning comes from the book of Acts. It begins in the latter part of a longer story that began with Jesus meeting with the disciples after his resurrection. Then follows his ascension into heaven, the sending of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and Peter's first sermon as a Spirit-filled follower of Christ.

The setting for this part of the story is in the city of Jerusalem on one of the three major feast days in the Jewish calendar, when the city is overcrowded with devout Jewish travelers, who have come from a host of different nations around the Mediterranean Basin, northern Africa, and the lands to the east of Israel, to celebrate the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. Peter has just finished telling the crowds that are gathered the first proclamation of the gospel. His message was powerful and clear: God sent his promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, to you. He demonstrated that he was God's Messiah by performing miracles of healing. But you delivered him over to be crucified by the Romans; you had the Messiah put to death on a cross as if he were a criminal. But God raised him from the dead, to which we (all of the apostles) are witnesses, and seated him at his right hand when he ascended to heaven. And now, Jesus has poured out his Holy Spirit upon his people. Jesus, whom you crucified, is the Lord

(he is God himself come to us) and he is the Messiah, the promised savior of Israel for whom you've been waiting.

[Slide 4]

(Verse 37) When the people heard this, the Scripture says that they were cut to the heart. Peter's words cut like a knife, as the Holy Spirit opened them up to really hear and understand the weight of what Peter had said. The Holy Spirit leaned on those truths, and the realization of what they had done pierced through their own excuses, their own indifference, their self-justification. Whatever sense they had that they and God were just fine fell apart as they heard the truth. They were responsible for killing the Messiah. And they recognized that they had to respond. "*What must we do?*"

Have you felt that press from the Spirit of God? Do you understand that your sins put Jesus on the cross? Have you taken responsibility for the death of God's son? Your sin had a cost—it cost God the life of his innocent son. And he has something to say about that to you.

When God speaks, it's not a matter for disinterested discussion of curious religious ideas. When God speaks, it's not the time to say, "*Let me compare that to what I've heard from someone else.*" When God speaks, you must respond. And that response will determine the contours of your life, your future, and your eternal dwelling place. The Holy Spirit convicts us—that is, he reveals to us our own guilt and sin and failure, not to make us feel bad or to point out what a pitiful excuse of a human being I am. No, he convicts us of our sin in order to show us our need, to remind us that this was not what God intended for us, to present his love to us, so that we come to him to be made right, to be made well.

[Slide 5]

(Verse 38) The people heard Peter, they felt the cutting in their hearts of the Spirit's conviction, and they asked, "What must we do?" That's the right question. And Peter's answer is crucial for us to understand what it is that God asks of us.

Peter answered: Here's what you need to do. Start by repenting. Start by turning away from your own sin, from your own selfish, self-centered, self-referenced way of living, from being your own master, doing whatever you feel like doing, thinking that you were in charge of your life. Start by turning to God as a desperate person who needs both forgiveness from the penalty of sin and deliverance from the power of sin.

Repentance is always the first step in conversion. There is no genuine faith apart from repentance, and therefore no genuine salvation apart from true

repentance. And the Bible, from beginning to end, insists that repentance is a necessary step for us to be saved and transformed.

The next step, Peter says, is to be baptized in water as a public testimony that you were repenting and seeking God's forgiveness. John the Baptist had come with that message, and Jesus had echoed it in his early ministry, endorsing John as a prophet of God, whose message and ministry fit perfectly with his own. So the apostles continued to follow Jesus' lead, incorporating John's message of repentance and baptism as the initial steps for anyone who wished to become a follower of Jesus Christ. But they added a very significant detail to their call for the crowds to respond by being baptized—being baptized in Jesus' name.

What did that mean? And why was it important?

[Slide 6]

Throughout the OT, particularly in the Psalms and certain of the prophets, such as Isaiah, we come across the idea of “calling on the Lord,” or, “calling on the name of the Lord.” (The two phrases have the same meaning.) These expressions reflect the common experience of everyone in the ancient Near East, and the distinctive experience of the righteous in Israel.

The common experience of people in the ancient world—and throughout most of the history of the world until recently—was this: They understood that they needed help or deliverance when facing such things as sickness and calamity and war, and especially when they faced death and unavoidable evil. They needed salvation, deliverance, rescue, and so they would call out for help to the gods, who presumably were able to help. And since there were so many gods, it was important to identify who it was you were asking for help, and to indicate to that particular deity that you were willing to trade your allegiance to that god or goddess for their help. So you called on the name of a god, acknowledging your need, requesting help and salvation from the god/goddess, and pledging your allegiance in return.

But the righteous in Israel knew something that the rest of the world did not. They knew that there was only one God, so calling for help to another god would be useless. Calling on the name of Yahweh for deliverance or salvation therefore was not simply a matter of calling out and making sure all of the other gods knew you were only asking for help from this one. Nor was it a shout-out into the abyss: *“Is there anybody out there who can help me?”*

No, calling on the name of Yahweh meant that you were acknowledging the truth that there was no other God but him. You were saying, “I am committing myself to this truth—there is no other savior, no other help available, no other God

but you. And I am asking you to save me; I am abandoning all other gods, and abandoning the notion that I can somehow save myself. Instead, I am calling on you, God, to save me. And I will surrender all of me to you; I will be your man, your woman. I will be known as belonging to you. I call on your name.”

So when Peter says to the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem that they must be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ (Jesus the Messiah)*, he is saying to them something that is revolutionary to the ordinary Jew, something that requires a completely new understanding of who God is. Peter is saying: (1) You must confess your sins, repent, and acknowledge your need for forgiveness, *something that can only come from God*. That much was familiar. But the next part was mind-boggling. (2) You must acknowledge that Jesus is divine, that he is the God of Israel, the only Savior there is, who offers the only salvation that is possible. Jesus is the only one who can save you. (3) You must acknowledge that you are submitting to him as your Lord and your God. You will worship him alone and be identified as belonging to him. You are pledging your allegiance to him. He will be your God, and you will be his people.

**[Slide 7]**     *Building on Jesus*

Rebuilding the church’s identity begins with this truth—and never moves from it. Our foundation is Jesus Christ. Not religious ideas, not social progress, not cultural development, not moral codes and commandments. Not activities or events or nice people. Personal allegiance and total surrender to the person of Jesus, the living Lord and resurrected Messiah. We recognize him as fully God who was also fully human. He is the unique Savior; there is no other way to know God except through him. And responding to his call requires us to abandon our attempts to be good on our own or through any other religious means. Instead we come simply and humbly to the cross, confessing our sins, receiving his forgiveness, and choosing to let him live his life through us by inviting him to be Lord, receiving the Holy Spirit—the indwelling person of God the Spirit within us.

**[Slide 8]**     *The indwelling Spirit*

The promise of the Holy Spirit was actually one of the main points of Peter’s sermon. You’ve heard it often—and rightly so—that Christianity is not simply another religion, but a relationship with the living God. That relationship is possible because when you respond to God with repentance and faith, he sends his Holy Spirit to live within us. The result of having God’s Spirit within you is that you’re changed—you’re spiritually alive, born again, cleansed from sin, and empowered to live an entirely different way of life, a life that is much more than just trying to be a good person. When we surrender to Jesus Christ, the Spirit of

God takes up residence inside us, and he begins to make himself known. He starts cleaning up the house, throwing out some stuff that didn't belong there in the first place, and replacing them with his stuff. He starts cleaning out the lust and the bitterness and resentments. He starts changing the way we think and speak. The Holy Spirit starts reminding us of what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus, to be identified with him and his people. He gives us hope that isn't based on how we're feeling, faith that is more than positive self-talk, convictions about what is right that aren't merely opinions or preferences, but are based on the character and nature of God himself. We're converted, changed, given a new life in place of one that was going nowhere. And God promises to walk with us through every day.

[Slide 9]

Well, when Peter finished his sermon that day, and the people responded by repenting and being baptized—immediately the disciples had a problem. There were about 120 or so disciples who were gathered together earlier that Pentecost morning, probably most or all of the disciples of Jesus who remained faithful to him after his crucifixion. Now there were 3,000 new followers who were added to the group.

If all you want is crowds, this looks like a win. Get the signatures on the cards, get some donations for the campaign, put out the press release, and move on to the next event. But God is after something much bigger—he is building a people in whom he dwells, among whom he can move and make himself known. He is building a people who know his truth and follow his ways, who display his character, whose thinking and attitudes and way of responding have been shaped by his influence, who are vessels through whom he can love and heal the world.

How does God do that? How does he build a people? He starts where we started in May with the building blocks we've been given. (1) He awakens us to the need for worship—meeting with God, personally encountering him as we make him our highest priority and learn how to respond to his mercy and grace with thanksgiving and praise.

(2) He starts transforming us through his word, his teaching. Our lives are transformed as we come more and more into conformity with him, learning who God is, what he is like, what he wants for us, what he made us to be, what it means to be like him. As we submit to his word and take it into our hearts and lives, we gain wisdom—right understanding—and we grow in godliness—moral and spiritual improvement. Those qualities—right understanding and moral/spiritual improvement are not what we present to God so that he will accept us; they are not

our tickets to ride the train to heaven. They are the fruit of a life of discipleship, the evidence that Jesus Christ has come to live in us.

(3) And he brings us into a family—his people. Because the shaping of your life toward godliness, practicing the ways of the kingdom of God needs more than just your efforts in the privacy of your heart. It requires being joined with his people. God isn't building Lone Rangers or rugged individuals; he's building a people—and inviting you to be part of it.

[Slide 10] *The picture of the earliest church*

The description in this passage of Acts gives us a picture of the earliest church, and shows us the key ingredients in the creation of a community that is built on Jesus Christ. Let's look at them together.

The first thing we should note is what I've been saying throughout the message so far. This new community consisted of new people—people who had been born again and identified with Jesus Christ as savior and Lord. All of the people who responded to Peter's preaching were Jews. That means they already thought of themselves as belonging to God's covenant people by virtue of the fact that they had been born into a Jewish family (or converted) and followed Moses' laws. Now they had to re-identify with God and his people, but on a completely different basis—as followers of the Messiah. Their identity as the people of God was not based on being Jewish, but on being disciples of Jesus—even though they were still Jews. *Their identity as Jews hadn't changed; but their basis for claiming a covenantal relationship to God had changed entirely.* Now it was based on a new covenant initiated by Jesus Christ and sealed with his death and resurrection.

This new basis for identification as a people meant learning new commitments, new patterns of living that reinforced their sense of being a distinct people, even though they continued (for a time) to live as they had lived before, following the patterns of Jewish customs prescribed by the Law. But gradually the realization grew that the nature of their unity as a people was not based on the Law of Moses—though they continued to live by its principles—but on the teaching of Jesus. This meant that they had to let go of the idea that what made them the people of God was that they were circumcised and kept the Sabbath and the kosher laws, in order to embrace the truth that they were the people of God because they had been born again through the Spirit of God as followers identifying with Jesus Christ as Lord—and that this people could include non-Jews as well (a thoroughly revolutionary idea, in every sense of the word!).

[Slide 11]

So what did this new life look like? What did this new community of God's people look like? Luke tells us.

(1) They were devoted to the apostles' teaching. The very first and most significant characteristic of the life of this new community was that they were committed—devoted!—to learning Jesus' teaching and applying it in their lives. *Their lives intersected Jesus' life through the apostles' teaching.* It wasn't a casual, occasional thing; it was central to the life of the first Christian church. It has been central to the life of every Christian church through the ages and around the world. And if we are going to be the First Christian Church that God has called us to be, we must learn to be single-hearted in our devotion to Jesus' word—listening to him, learning from him, following him.

You know, I've noticed that the world (particularly Hollywood) loves to mock people who go to Bible studies instead of partying or social climbing or getting into trouble. We're viewed as ridiculous, naive, infantile; the kind of people everyone rolls their eyes at and gives each other a knowing smirk. But when I think about the people I've met at Bible studies, the things I've learned from studying the Bible, the things I've seen in other people who have studied the Bible—both academic professor types and ordinary Christians—I can't think of a richer soil for building a life that matters.

The truth is that the world may mock us for going to Bible studies, but you cannot grow up spiritually without the word of God. You can go to church for fifty years and never grow up if you don't get into the word of God and start learning what it says. I have known people just like that, people who have been faithful churchgoers for decades who have never grown spiritually at all. And the only conclusion I can draw is either that they were never really born again at all, that they never had a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ; or that they simply never bothered to give themselves to the task of learning to follow Christ by learning his word. On the other hand, I've known lots of people who came to faith in Christ with almost no knowledge of the Bible at all who continued to grow and became very knowledgeable and spiritually mature leaders because they gave themselves to Bible study and made it their goal to understand their Bibles. I think of an older man who told me that when he came to Christ in his desperation as an alcoholic, the only thing he knew was that "*Jesus' last name was God.*" But he became a leader in a recovery group for alcoholics, sharing the truths he had learned from Bible study. I think also of a friend of mine who has served faithfully in pastoral ministry for over thirty years. But when he came to Christ, he was one scary dude, straight out of drug dealing with some scary connections, and filled with suspicion



and little interest in the Bible. But he changed when his life intersected with Jesus—and God transformed him and he’s a great pastor.

For followers of Christ, the evidence that we are really following is seen in the way our lives are increasingly shaped by biblical values and teaching. Our thinking is characterized by conformity to the will of God; we want to find God’s answers to the problems we see in the world and in our life, not just mouth a popular saying. We subject our opinions and preferences to the Scriptures to be measured and refined and even re-made entirely. The lives of disciples are constantly intersecting with the life of Christ, and being changed as a result.

[Slide 12]

The other features of the life of the earliest church that Luke mentions all involve life-intersections with other people in the community. These were all equally impactful for their lives, and for the overall life of the church as a whole. But what made them so important was that they grew out of the first characteristic—as those who were now identified by their allegiance to Jesus, they were devoted to listening to his word, learning his teaching, and living according to what he said. That impacted everything else in this new community.

So these new Christians were not only devoted to the apostles’ teaching, they were devoted to several other activities as well, with three particularly noteworthy activities: fellowship, breaking bread together, and prayer. Each of these subjects are worthy of its own sermon, and perhaps I’ll come back to them at a later time. This morning I simply want to point out what I believe is the most important thing to note about these activities: *all three involved sharing of their lives, not just going to meetings.*

[Slide 13]

When we think of “fellowship,” we often think of something like chit-chatting over coffee or doing something fun with a group. And those kinds of activities can certainly qualify as “fellowship.” But what makes having coffee with someone or going bowling with people from church “fellowship” isn’t the activity itself, or whether it was fun or not. What makes it fellowship is when what we’re doing is helping us to grow deeper in our relationship with one another as fellow followers of Christ, and helping us to grow in our ability to follow him.

The word translated “fellowship,” is the Greek word, *koinōnia*, which has the idea of sharing something in common. Fellowship requires sharing, not just being in the same place at the same time. There is a giving and receiving, opening up and allowing someone in, and daring to enter into someone else’s world and life. Fellowship is not attending a meeting—though a meeting can be a starting

point for fellowship! Fellowship is sharing lives. It is what happens between friends or people-on-their-way-to-becoming-friends in between the times they are in the meetings. It is found in the innumerable threads of connection that bind people together, people who have decided to follow Christ together and to help one another along the way as they go.

[Slide 14]

One of the most notable ways this *koinōnia* was built was through eating together—“breaking bread.” The church in Jerusalem took their meals together, Luke says. Not all of them in one place, not usually anyway. But from house to house, in small groups, extended families and friends, sharing what they had with one another, reminding each other of how Jesus had invited them to table, had eaten with sinners in anticipation of the great feast that would mark the end of the age. They lived out what it looked like to trust in grace, by inviting strangers to be friends and to eat with them as equals, giving welcome as they had received welcome from their divine Lord.

There’s something that happens when you eat with people. Especially when you do so in your home, and most especially when you do so in a way that makes them feel comfortable and welcomed. All kinds of marvelous things can happen when we take the time to share our lives with someone else over a meal.

[Slide 15]

The other thing that Luke mentions about the early church is their devotion to prayer. Prayer is a particular interest for Luke, so it’s not unusual for him to mention it here. But what I want us to see is that he is not talking so much about private prayer—though that is certainly vital for personal spiritual life and growth. No, Luke has corporate prayer in view, as he will emphasize in the chapters to come. It is prayer together, whether in large groups gathered in the temple or in smaller groups meeting in homes following a shared meal or early in the morning before the workday began.

The life of the church is carried through prayer. Sharing pains and concerns, joys and thanksgiving; holding one another up through challenges; facing persecution together; interceding for the weak; contending against the enemy on behalf of the lost or the sick or the needy—this is the work of the church as we pray together. And as we do so, God knits hearts together. If you really want to get to know someone, the two best things I know to suggest are these: (1) work with them on a project; and (2) pray with them over a period of time. You’ll soon know a person’s heart, what they’re really like, what they really believe and care about, when you share those two opportunities with someone.

[Slide 16]

What distinguished the earliest church and made them noticeable was that their lives were constantly intersecting. They were intentionally and continually involved with one another in ways that built deep connections among them. They knew one another's needs and worked together to meet those needs, building friendships as they went along. Their communal love for one another made them stand out among all the other Jews in the city. Those who were seeking for something better than what they had, saw the love and wanted to join them. Those who hated them heard their devotion to Jesus and wanted to attack them. But no one could ignore them. They were just too different from everyone else. That difference was the presence of God: when the love of God comes to reside in us as his people, and we share that love amongst ourselves and with the world, it's a visible reality that shows the world that there is a God and that there is only one way to know him—through Jesus. And that is how God builds his church.

[Slide 17]

*Transition to communion*

[END]