

INTRODUCTION

America is a place that highly esteems team-work. Not just people under the spotlights are honored. Crew members who contribute behind the scene are often remembered too. For the last 19 years the Denver Broncos, a professional football team, has held an annual employee recognition day. From people who take care of the field to those who sell hotdogs and soda will come. The football players do not have to attend the event. But in 2017, one star-player, Von Miller, decided to show up. By the way, Miller attended the same school as I did. That made it extra special to me. He told the employees: “We couldn’t do what we do if it weren’t for you.” The janitors who mop the floor have nothing to do with winning a national championship. However, Miller did not want any smallest effort went unnoticed. When people work in unity toward the same goal, they can accomplish great things. The same principle also applies to a church. What makes a church, a church? It is about God working through His people. Without people a building is only a structure. Without people programs are just schedule. A church is a place where God mobilizes believers to inspire others to achieve His goals. At the beginning of Acts 2, we read that the Holy Spirit manifested His power in Jerusalem. It happened at the Pentecost when the Jews from the surrounding areas came back to observe the festival. God used Peter’s preaching to convert 3,000 people to become Christians. Naturally, those new believers would ask: “Now we are saved. What’s next?” Thus, the first Christian church in the human history was founded. Two thousand years had passed. Our mode of life is very different from the first century Jews. However, as Christians we basically do the same things as the early believers in the book of Acts. We shall see three trajectories of church life in this passage – upward, inward and outward.

EXPLANATION

1. Upward 向上

First, church life should be pointing upward. In other words, it is about our worship to God. The passage tells us that those Christians held meetings in both the temple court and homes. They had yet to have their own church building. Why did they gather in the temple court? Those believers were Jews from different places coming back to Jerusalem for their pilgrimage. The temple was the most common location they knew. Their gathering also became an effective testimony. Imagine a few hundred or even thousand of people meeting outside the temple every day. They proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the Messiah and Lord. It is like when devout Buddhists or traditional idol worshippers became Christians, some of them will go back to the idol temples to reach out to people of the same background. Besides meeting in the temple court, the early Christians also had home meetings. It makes senses for a large group of believers to break up into smaller congregations to worship at home. What did they actually do when they met? **Verse 42** tells us that: They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. At that time, they only had the Old Testament Bible. The apostles’ teaching can be understood as the leaders’ interpretation of the Old Testament, together with the teaching of Jesus. After Jesus rose from the dead, the apostles had a

fresh understanding of the Old Testament. Then they also broke bread. That can be referred to both having meals and observing the communion. When the Lord established the Lord's Supper, He commanded His disciples to remember His death with the bread and cup. In addition, there was also singing. In **Colossians 3:16** Paul highlights the importance of music in worship - Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. The "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" are different categories of music. Paul reminded us that no matter which style of music is chosen it has to serve two purposes – praise God and edify one another. Nowadays, some churches have heated debate whether to sing classical hymns or new songs. To avoid conflict, they hold separate traditional and contemporary services. Our church sings a mix of both songs. Problem solved! Based on what we have learned so far, let us examine our own upward Christian life. Does our Sunday worship serve the intents of praising God and edifying one another? I always have a worry that as we come here every Sunday, we may simply turn it to a habit. Some people may come to observe a service, rather than to participate in a service. When the song leader sings, do you sing along? When the Scripture is read, do you pay attention to the words? Ultimately, it boils down to your personal relationship with the Lord. It is like when you have a good relationship with your grandparents or parents, then visiting them during holiday seasons will be a joyful thing. If you do not maintain a healthy and daily relationship with God through Bible reading and prayer, then coming to church on Sunday will be a burden. We often see people arriving late, or even sitting in the gym to sip coffee with others, or they cannot put their phones down. If we truly know why we come here on Sunday, then your pastor does not need to keep nagging you anymore! As far as the preaching is concerned there is that much change I can make. Recently, I read an article written by a person who grew up in the church. As he looked back, he was thankful about all the repeated songs he sang and all the boring messages he heard. It was those basic elements that helped him grow in his faith. It is just like your mom's cooking. Once in a while you enjoy having a feast at the restaurants. But who will eat out on a daily basis, even if they can afford it? Who knows what exactly the chefs put in their secret recipes to make the food so delicious? It is the same home food you eat day after day for years that makes you grow. Similarly, before you grumble that your pastor is preaching another boring sermon, ask the Lord what He is teaching you through the message.

2. Inward 向內

Besides the upward church life, there is also an inward aspect to it. It is about cultivating relationship among the believers. The first century Christians turned their church into a love community. Their fellowship life is more than a once-a-week worship gathering. **Verses 44-45** tell us: 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. We see a beautiful picture of people sharing all that they had. As the early church continued to expand there would be a lot of needs. They lived in an era where there was no social benefit provided by the government. People like the elderly, the widows and orphans were on their own. After the church was formed, the believers took care of the underprivileged people among them. **Acts 4:34-35** gives us some further information – 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. In order for this support system to work some people had to sacrifice their own possessions. The believers must also trust the

leaders completely. No one suspected that anyone would put the money in their pocket. There was no worry about partiality when the goods were distributed either. God used the early church to bless everyone in need. The believers did not just talk about God's love, they also practiced it. In **James 2:15-16** the author used a rhetorical question to challenge us to put our faith into action to love others: 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? James said that faith without action is a dead faith. He encouraged Christians to take care of the poorer people in the church. In our society, such kindness can often be contagious. A 19-year-old Wal-Mart cashier in Texas was recently rewarded for his generosity. John Lopez offered to pay for a customer's grocery when she could not come up with \$110 for the bill. Another shopper saw what Lopez did. She quickly shared the story on the social media. Another person in the neighborhood caught the news. He then mobilized people to offer money to complement Lopez for his good deed. A sum of \$31,000 was collected, which Lopez decided to save for college. A few days later, even the mayor and police chief stepped in and presented awards to honor Lopez. If someone with a good heart was willing to help an unknown person, how much more we as believers should care for the people in our church family? Thankfully, we do have a lot of loving brothers and sisters in our midst. They are willing to share what they have. Just recently one couple asked me to serve as a middle person to pass along a sum of money to another family. I was greatly encouraged by that. You know what? I would love to play the role of secret Santa like that. Many of you also take similar actions. It may be money, home-cooked goodies, used clothes for children, etc. What matters is a heart to care for others. It all begins with paying attention to people's needs. They may be lacking something or they may need some encouragement. Then you use what the Lord has blessed you to minister to them. The person who receives the benefit should not feel that he/she owes people a favor. Today I may have certain need and God moves you to help me. Then in the near future when the Lord blesses me, I can pass on the blessing to others. That is how things should work in the family of God.

3. Outward 向外

A balanced church life does not just go upward and inward. It should also point outward. In other words, a church should take the gospel beyond its four walls. How did the believers in the early church reach out to others? Look at **verse 43**: Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. What were the people amazed about? It could be everything going on in this newly-formed church. If we back-track a little, the death and resurrection of Jesus just happened no more than two months ago. The frenzy about this new religious movement started by a carpenter in Nazareth should have come to an end after the death of its founder. People might think that Jesus' disciples would be running for their lives. Instead, these little-educated nobodies took a new religion to a higher level. Thousands of people were converted. They did not cause a riot as the Romans were afraid of. Rather, they had peaceful worship and they took care of needy people. All that amazed people. The verse also tells us that people were attracted by the many wonders and miraculous signs the apostles performed. Those supernatural acts confirmed God's power. Back then when Jesus was still on earth, He also used miraculous signs and wonders to verify that God's Kingdom has come. Like Master like servants. The apostles derived power from Jesus to perform supernatural works. In Acts chapter 3, Peter healed a crippled man by asking him to stand up in the name of Jesus.

Some bystanders were astonished. The apostle then testified in [Acts 3:12](#) – ...“Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” Continue in [verse 16](#): “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.” Peter attributed the healing to Jesus. The apostle was just a vessel through whom God ministered His grace. People often ask if miracles still exist today. Since God can do anything as He pleases, He can certainly allow miracles to happen. Sometimes we read testimonies from missionaries that God used their prayer to heal patients with critical diseases, especially in places where modern medicine is inadequate. God’s intent is the same – to testify His own power. However, since we now have the full Bible we should not depend on miracle as the only indication of God’s presence. When a person sees a miracle, he/she may not necessarily believe that it is from God. Many religious leaders in Jesus’ time saw Him heal the sick and cast out demons. But they refused to acknowledge that Jesus was God. We have to keep in mind that God’s Word alone is powerful. You can share your personal testimony or quote dramatic stories of well-known people to seeker friends. However, if you do not present the gospel message from the Bible, you have not done a faithful job. Paul once said that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Highlight a few key verses in your Bible, or bring a gospel track with you. Do not worry that people will doubt the authenticity of the Bible. All authority rests in God’s Word. Let God speak to their hearts. Besides witnessing God’s power, leaders of the early church also won souls through their love toward fellow believers. In [John 13:34-35](#) Jesus encouraged His disciples at the Last Supper by saying: 34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” There was no secret in Jerusalem that the followers of Jesus gave sacrificially to serve others. Even people outside of the church could connect what the Christians believed and how they lived. We need to ask ourselves: “What do people in Memphis think of FCBC?” Can they see our love for one another and for the community? Or will people conclude that we are just some religious fanatics who do nothing but meet every Friday and Sunday on closed doors for religious talks? We should not only read the Bible, we have to live the Bible too.

CONCLUSION

A church is a place where God mobilizes believers to inspire others to achieve His goals. God blessed the early church as a result of all that the leaders did. The [last verse](#) of the chapter tells us a happy ending: ...And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Any church will be envious of that! If you are familiar with the ongoing development of the early church you should know that the believers suffered a lot. They were despised by the Jewish religious leaders and persecuted by the Romans. But as the believers continue to build on their upward relationship with God and inward relationship with each other, God blessed the church with outward growth. From Jerusalem, the gospel was taken to other parts of the known world. God is doing the same thing even today. We are too spoiled by the religious freedom we enjoy. Many of you should know the oppression going on in China, and in other countries. As we start a new year, are you eager to see God use FCBC to influence our community? It all begins with the basics and it all begins with you. Would you pray for yourself and pray for fellow church family that we will strengthen our upward relationship with God and our inward relationship with each other? As we do so, God will help us take the gospel outward through our church doors.