

# Explore the Bible: Unified

March 2, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 20 focuses on Acts 2:41-47*

## **The Church With No Name (Acts 2:41)**

The apostles and the other followers of Jesus who had gathered in Jerusalem received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and the first thing they did was to “declare the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11) in the languages of the Jewish pilgrims. Peter stood up, a different man than the one who had denied his Lord just a few weeks earlier, and proclaimed the wonders of God—that is, the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Jewish Scriptures through the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth. He called his hearers to believe, repent, be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, “Join us!”

Did these 3,000 who believed and were baptized that day think of themselves as having “converted” to another faith? Did they think of themselves as having left Judaism and joined a new religion—Christianity? It seems unlikely that they did, and not only because the term “Christianity” didn’t exist yet. They continued to meet and pray in the temple (Acts 3:1). As they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, they were committing themselves not only to hearing the things Jesus did and taught, but also to the study of the Jewish Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 45). Luke simply calls them, at this stage, “the believers” (Acts 2:44). What did they believe? They believed God had done in Jesus Christ exactly what he had promised—to return and be present with his people, to forgive their sins, renew them and begin a “new age.” They became part of the renewed Israel by believing in Jesus’ death for their sins, and his victory over death in his resurrection. Their baptism was the outward sign of their belief, the symbol of their participation in Jesus as Christ/Messiah. The “church” (that

term didn't exist yet, either) did not replace or supersede Israel. It is the fulfillment of God's purposes for Israel for the blessing of the whole world.

Every single person who received the Holy Spirit and participated in the kind of life described in Acts 2:42-47 was a Jew. But through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, this group grew to become not just a renewed Israel, but also a renewed humanity. They would see the promises of God for the whole world come true in Jesus Christ, as well.

### **What Believers Do (Acts 2:42-47)**

“Belief” in the New Testament is never just something that happens in the mind. Belief presupposes the change the Holy Spirit brings about in the believers' minds and hearts will be lived out. These first believers lived out their belief in some particular ways that set a pattern for all believers.

- **Devotion to the apostles' teaching**—As mentioned earlier, this included not just Jesus' own teaching and teaching about Jesus' life, but the whole story up to that point. They studied the Jewish Scriptures and discovered God always had been building to this, as the teaching of Jesus also emphasized. It is amazing to look at the New Testament and see how much of it is the Old Testament! Nearly every book in the New Testament contains a direct quote from the Old Testament, and every book depends on the Hebrew Scriptures to explain its key terms (like Christ = Messiah)

- **Fellowship**—This is more than “hanging out together.” This is the life of a family and a community. This is purposefully committing to share life together, because God has created a new community, a renewed people of God, in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

- **Breaking bread**—It is unclear if Luke means specifically celebrating the Lord's Supper or the more common table fellowship around normal meals, or both. Regardless, this is a sign of new community. Who you share a table with says something about who you are and who others are to you. Think of

the politics of the high school cafeteria or the seating arrangements of formal dinners. Sharing a table as equals was a continuation of Jesus' habit of hospitality and welcome.

- **Prayer**—This is another area of continuity with Judaism. These believers are marked by their devotion to approaching God with their praises and their needs.

- **Sharing in common**—“What’s mine is yours.” This attitude cuts deep to the idolatries of our modern world. The Holy Spirit inspires believers to love their neighbors as themselves and value others’ needs before their own, to value others’ lives more than their own possessions and wealth. How much trust was required for the believers to live this way? They not only had to trust one another, but also trust the Holy Spirit to be at work in one another so that all could be provided for.

- **Praising God**—God received all the glory for this kind of life, for this new community. He should, since it was his idea, and his Spirit that made it possible.

- **Witness**—The Lord added to their number, but not without their testimony by word and deed of the truth of Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

The legitimacy of this community was confirmed by signs and wonders at the hands of the apostles, by growth and by the “favor of all.” In a Jerusalem occupied by pagan powers, with a temple run by priests more interested in holding on to their own power than seeking God, and teachers of the law who were massive hypocrites, the community of believers built by the Holy Spirit shined like a light on hill. This community would be challenged soon enough by persecution and by new questions no one had to ask before: Can Gentiles be part of this new community “as is,” or do they need to become Jews first? But the Holy Spirit would guide them.

The same Holy Spirit is at work in the church today. The most powerful witness to this truth is a community pursuing this pattern of devotion to learning, fellowship, prayer, sharing as any has need, praising God and a life of witness. Where is the Holy Spirit working to transform your church, and the churches in your community, to attain to this pattern?