



We're continuing our study today on all three campuses of The Story. We started months ago looking at the big story of the Bible in 31 chapters from Genesis to Revelation. Today we come to chapter 28, called New Beginnings, which covers the first 12 chapters of the book of Acts.

Why is it called New Beginnings? Look at it this way: Way back in the book of Genesis God created human beings in his image. He placed them in a beautiful garden and gave them meaningful work to do. But it wasn't long before they rebelled against God and the result was death. Not just physical death but spiritual death, and that spread through the human race. Spiritual death means separation from God. God is holy and he can't have fellowship with that which is unholy. But God is also loving. As a loving Father, he looks at humanity as a lost child. We all know of parents who've lost a child, maybe one who's run away, been kidnapped, or just disappeared. Parents will spare no expense to search for their lost child. God is like that. And so, he initiated a massive rescue strategy to find and restore his lost children. This strategy had three phases.

The first phase was Israel. God chose a nation through whom he'd show his character and call people back to himself. Remember what God said to Abraham? "Through your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed." This led to the second phase, which was the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost." He claimed to be the way back to God. He died on the cross to pay for our sins and rose from the dead to give us eternal life. But then he ascended into heaven, which brought us to the third phase of his rescue effort—the church. Now God is working through the church to lead this rescue effort. The birth of the church is recorded in these opening chapters of the book of Acts. These chapters tell the story of how the Gospel spread beyond a few Jews in Jerusalem to both Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman empire. To this day, God uses the church to seek the lost.

That may surprise some of you. How could the church be God's plan to reach the world? Isn't it filled with racism, immorality and corruption? Some of you have been personally betrayed by the church or a church leader. Or maybe when you think of the church you just think of boredom. Who wants to waste a beautiful day to sit in a stuffy room and listen to a lecture about a book written thousands of years ago?

Dorothy Sayers once described what she called God's great humiliations. There was the incarnation when God humbled himself and took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. Then there was the cross when God subjected himself to the shame of public execution. Finally, there was the church where God chose to reveal himself in this very human and fractured institution.

In many ways, she's right. The church is made up of fragile, broken, hardheaded people. Look at the people Jesus chose as his first disciples. They had shady pasts, they couldn't get along, they were uneducated. But Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." And that's what he's still doing. He's taking sinful, broken and weak people and using them to build his church. For better or for worse, he uses this odd thing to show the world his power, love and grace. The question is, How is that possible? How can this frail and broken thing called the church be used to storm the gates of Hell? Turn to Acts 2.

The Church is Born at Pentecost

Acts starts in Jerusalem, where the church was born. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to wait there for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. He didn't want them doing anything without the Spirit. So they waited, all 120 of them. Then, during a Jewish feast called Pentecost, the Spirit fell and some unusual things happened. They spoke in languages that weren't their own. There was a purpose for that. Jerusalem was filled with visitors from all over the ancient world for the feast. All of a sudden, these disciples are praising God in languages these visitors understood. It's like they're instant missionaries!

The people watching didn't know what to make of it. They thought these people had too much to drink. So Peter stands up and speaks. Remember he's the one who'd denied Jesus three times, but Jesus had restored him, telling him to "Feed my sheep." So Peter stands up, empowered by the Spirit, and he explains to the crowd what it all means. He preaches the good news about Jesus to them. When he's finished, Luke says,

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (v. 37).

That's a good question, and Peter gave them a straight answer. Look at verses 38–39.

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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

He says you must change your mind about Jesus, trust him as your Savior and Lord, and then get baptized to show the world what's happened to you. By the way, it would be no small thing to do that. They'd be joining hands with a movement founded by a man recently executed by the Roman authorities. This would be a costly decision to make. But there'd be benefits, too. Peter says your sins will be forgiven and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it's not just for you, it's for your children as well.

Down in verse 41 we see their response.

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Wow! That's quite a response! We baptized about 40 people on three campuses last Sunday. Imagine doing that for 3000 people! When it's done, what do you do with all those people? That's a lot of baby Christians! Well, almost in the next breath, Luke answers that question in verses 42–47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

They didn't just send these people home with a booklet and a fish sticker for their car. Babies can't survive on their own. They need care and feeding. They also need community. The idea of following Jesus without becoming a part of his community never occurred to them. Notice four things about their life together as a church, four things that ought to be true about us in order to be the kind of community that will have an impact on the world.

They Were a Learning Church

First, they were a learning church. It says they “devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching.” They became learners. You might say school opened on that day in Jerusalem. Three thousand little ones entered kindergarten. You know how excited a child gets to start kindergarten? They were eager. And you know how nervous we all get about **who** our teacher will be? Well, here, the apostles are their teachers. Why were they so devoted to the apostle's teaching? Part of it was they were the ones who'd been with Jesus; they were the ones he'd entrusted his message to. Also verse 43 says the apostles were performing miracles. I'm

sure those miracles caused people to listen to them; they authenticated their message. If I were to heal someone of cancer, you'd listen to what I have to say; none of you would be falling asleep right now, that's for sure!

Today we're devoted to the apostle's teaching as well. It's come down to us in what we call the New Testament. We believe these apostles were actually inspired by God to write and so their teaching comes from God. That's why we're committed to teaching this book, line by line, chapter by chapter. That's why we encourage you to read it, study it, meditate on it, and most of all obey it. We don't believe we have the right to tamper with this teaching. Yes, we need to thoughtfully apply it to our day and the issues we face, but we don't change the message. We don't have the right to say, “Well, that's what they said back then but they didn't have all the info we have today, so we can't take what they said as definitive.”

This past week we've had the joy of having our grandchildren staying with us. One of them is seven months old. His name is Gunnar. One thing I think I'd forgotten about babies is how often they have to be fed. The other night I fed him a bottle he sucked down in about five minutes. And, of course, if you don't feed him, he'll let you know about it. Peter must have had a few babies around his house too. That's why he said in his first letter, *“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation”* (1 Peter 2:2). I wonder if Peter was thinking back to those 3000 baby Christians who gulped down their teaching in those days following Pentecost.

Over the years this has been a strength of our church. I'm thankful for that, but let's not take it for granted. I believe in the years to come there will be temptations to get away from that and to compromise our commitment to teaching. I hope and pray we never let that happen.

They Were a Loving Church

But still, it's not enough to be a learning church. They were also a loving church. Some churches are all about filling your head with truth, but there's no heart; there's no love. Notice it says they were also devoted to fellowship. That word is so overused in churches it's become like soggy toast with no substance. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*. It means to hold or share something in common. As believers, there are many things we share in common. The most precious thing is our fellowship with God. John writes *“our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ”* (1 John 1:3). We're part of the same family. We have this deep connection that causes all differences to melt away.

That's why the church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free, rich and poor, black and white, and everything else. The church ought to be a place where human distinctions are respected and honored, but where what we share together

in Christ trumps everything else. The church ought to look like the inside of the DMV. You go there and you're confronted with an amazing cross section of humanity. You see the owner of a new Tesla renewing his license right alongside of a disheveled person who hasn't used deodorant for a week. Sometimes we're not sure we like this, but when people with every reason to divide end up loving one another you know something powerful is at work.

And there ought to be a practical outworking of this love for one another. That's what Luke describes down in verses 44–45. He says they had everything in common. Some of them even sold their property to provide for those in need. These are challenging verses, especially in our materialistic and individualistic culture. This doesn't mean we should all sell our homes. First of all, this was a voluntary thing. It wasn't mandated by the apostles. We know some of the believers kept their homes because that's where the church met. But here's the point: when the Spirit of God enters a person's life this is the kind of thing that happens. Money and possessions no longer define you. You want to respond to your brothers and sisters in need. John wrote, *"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?"* (1 John 3:17).

Because I work here at the church I have a bird's eye view of so much giving that goes on. For example, in 2014 you gave \$123,000 to our Special Needs fund. From that we gave out \$88,000. That money covered travel costs for a man to attend his brother's out-of-state funeral, two months in a sober living environment for a woman fighting addiction, rent support for a mentally disabled woman. Those are just some of the ways we meet needs as a church, but each of us are called to demonstrate the love of God by sacrificing our comforts to meet needs.

They Were a Worshipping Church

So they were a learning church and a loving church. The next thing is they were a worshipping church. Luke says they devoted themselves to "the breaking of bread and to prayer." When he says the breaking of bread he's talking about what we call Communion. They celebrated this in the context of a meal, called a love feast. When he talks about "the prayers" he's not talking about private prayer but the prayers of God's people together. These two things were part of their worship. Notice also down in verse 46 they did these things both in the temple courts and in their homes. So they continued to attend the formal worship services in the temple, but they also met informally in homes. In both places they were praising God. They'd do that in their singing and their praying.

In the same way, we worship together both when we gather on Sunday morning and when we gather informally in our small group meetings in homes. We sing, pray and break bread. I love

how it says "they ate together with glad and sincere hearts." They were both joyful and genuine in their worship. At the heart of worship is the simple fact we're incredibly impressed by God and grateful for all he's done for us. When you're incredibly impressed by someone, you can't help but show it. When you're incredibly grateful, you have to express it. Not only are we impressed by him and grateful to him, but we're also dependent on him. So in our worship we praise him and give thanks, but we also express our needs to him in prayer. That's what worship is all about.

I have a dog named Daisy. What I love about Daisy is she worships me. Every morning when I wake up she has a cow. She's all over me. When I come home from work it's the same thing. She jumps up and down and wants to lick my face. There are other times when I'm sitting down and reading or watching TV. I look down and she's just sitting there, staring at me. It's like she just wants to be with me. I'm an object of tremendous fascination to Daisy. Does God fascinate you? Do you jump up and down at his presence in your life? Do you enjoy those quiet moments when you can just be with him and stare at his face? That's what worship is all about, whether it takes place here or in your own home.

They Were a Growing Church

They were a learning church, a loving church, and a worshipping church. The next thing shows up in v. 47. It says *"...they were enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily."* So they were also a growing church. While numbers aren't the only indication of a church's health, it's important that a church grow. That's why we have an aggressive vision. We want to be a church of 5,000 Christ-followers by 2020. Right now we think we're at about 3,500 so we have a ways to go.

It's worth asking the question, How does a church grow? Part of it is what Luke says right here—a church grows by "enjoying the favor of all the people." That means the early believers still rubbed shoulders with people in their community. They didn't sever relationships with unbelievers. I'm sure they tried to meet the needs of those outside the church as well as within it. That's why we do this thing called LoveWorks, where we go out to serve the community in the name of Jesus. People today view Christians as judgmental, hypocritical, intolerant and narrow minded. We don't have a lot of favor with the people. Some of that's inevitable because of the truth we believe, but when we go out, asking for nothing and simply serving, that goes a long way.

But notice there's something else at work here. Luke is careful to say "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Who did it? The Lord! It's the Lord's job to save people. We can do all kinds of things to draw a crowd here. We can have great music and a cool vibe but that's not enough. We need God to act. We need the Lord to work in people's hearts.

Remember how the people who heard Peter's message were cut to the heart? Only the Lord can do that.

I had a man come see me a few weeks ago. He's come to our church off and on for several years, but never really bought in. He'd finally come to a place where he felt it made sense to him and wanted to know what to do about it. We talked and it was obvious God was at work in his heart. So I asked him, "What would keep you from making the decision right now to trust Jesus as your Savior?" He said, "I can't think of anything." So we bowed our heads and he prayed to receive Christ. It was beautiful! But, it wasn't me. Giving credit to me would be like giving credit to a grape picker for the grapes. We don't make the grapes. We just wait until they're ready to fall off the vine.

That's how the church grows. People like us are out in the community meeting needs and sharing Christ. When God works in someone's heart they ask, What shall I do? We tell them. They repent and believe and the Lord adds to our number those who are being saved. It doesn't say the Lord added their number daily those who were **attending** church. Any church can put on a show and get people to attend. The Lord added to their number those who were being saved, and only God can do that.

One of the things we learn from the whole description of the church is the church isn't a place you just "go to" once a week. We talk about going to church like we talk about going to the mall or the market. The early Christians didn't talk about going to church. They **lived** the church. They **were** the church. Church

wasn't a weekly snack to boost their spiritual energy; it was an intravenous flow of spiritual life. And it certainly wasn't optional; it was an integral part of being saved.

God uses this odd thing called the church to show the world his power, love and grace. But how's that possible? How is it God's great humiliation, the church, can be used to storm the gates of hell? Believe it or not, the answer isn't to just mimic the things the early church did. This isn't just a prescription for a successful church. Remember, these are just people. Even when broken and sinful people do the right things they mess things up. The answer is the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God came at Pentecost, and he's never left his church. The Spirit of God cut the hearts of those who heard Peter's sermon, and he's been piercing hearts ever since. The Spirit of God came into their lives when they believed, causing self absorbed people to want to learn, love, worship and bear witness. That's what we need today. We need more of the Spirit of God. He's here but I want him to have more of us; to fill us, rule us and lead us. Invite him to do that, will you? Determine not to quench him or grieve him. Be filled with the Spirit. Walk by the Spirit. Depend on the Spirit. If we do that, nothing can stop us, not even the gates of hell!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.