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| ABC Epiphany Day<br>A 4Easter (Acts 2)<br>B 2Easter (Acts 4) | <b>Biblically Functioning<br/>Community</b><br><br>Ephesians 3.10-11,<br>Acts 2.42-47, 4.32-35<br><br>by Tim Isbell | Preached<br>1/7/2001 |
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Thesis: The church is not designed as a lifestyle enclave, but as a community embodying the characteristics of Acts 2 and 4.

## Eph 3.10-11

From Robert Bella, author of “Habits of the Heart.”

***Genuine community has been replaced by “Lifestyle enclaves.”***

People’s primary concerns are the pursuit of a certain kind of lifestyle.

The focus is on leisure and consumption. We want to make sure we can acquire good things and take fun vacations, to have a life that offers enjoyment and security.

And it’s no fun to pursue these alone, so we look for other people to join us in this pursuit.

We sometimes call our “lifestyle enclave” a community, but it’s not. It is just an exclusive band of individuals pursuing certain lifestyles. The enclave is held together by the weakest of ties.

We spend our lives and energy trying to move into one of these enclaves, and then a few years later, we start saving more money to retire and move into another one with a better climate.

### ***The rise of gated communities***

When we drive up to the gate, do we hear, “We’re so delighted you’re here! We’ll sound the trumpets as you drive in. Do you need any help in finding your way around?” ...  
Nope.

Instead, we get grilled with questions like What’s your name? Do you have the passcode? Who do you want to visit? Are they expecting you? etc.

The gatekeeper’s job is to keep people out.

***Some churches even resemble this.***

I heard of a religious community with a fence all around it to keep the folks on the inside in and the folks on the outside from getting in. The sign on the fence read "Keep out. Beware of dog. Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law." It was signed: "Little Sisters of Mercy."

***God did NOT create his church to be a lifestyle enclave.***

## **Biblically functioning community (Acts 2.42-47 & 4.32-35)**

### **1. They devoted themselves (2.42)**

This kind of community is very different from a "lifestyle enclave" where people essentially say: meet my needs, and I will stay; don't meet my needs, and I will move on.

Devotion has to do with making a promise and sticking with it, even when it is hard.

Have any of you ever woke up on a Sunday morning after a long week and thought it would be nicer to stay home, take a shower, go out to Starbucks, and sit in the sun sipping a latte? But then you remembered the promise you made back when you decided to become a member of this church, so you got out of bed, dressed, and came to worship anyway? Then when you arrived, you encountered God in worship through a song, or an extended hand, or communion, or even the sermon.

There will always be times when spiritual growth requires effort. Community-building is hard work.

The call is not to just keep adding to the list of things you are devoted to. That is legalism: mechanical and unhealthy.

The call is to discern what we're going to devote our lives to that will form Christ in us. God expects his followers to find a local church for this purpose and remain devoted to it.

The passage says, "They devoted themselves..." Are you devoting yourself? Is there some work you need to do to devote yourself more fully this year?

### **2. They were of one heart and soul. (4.32)**

There is a deep commitment to unity in a biblically functioning community and a refusal to tolerate unresolved conflict. We just refuse to say that bitterness or resentment festering day after day or year after year is acceptable. It is not.

It's the same in a biblically functioning marriage. There is a deep commitment to unity and a refusal to tolerate unresolved conflict.

This is different from a lifestyle enclave where it's every person for themselves. There, we can discard relationships.

But unity of heart and soul among believers is something God jealously pursues. It's his dream for the human race. He created us in his image to know oneness as God within the Trinity knows oneness.

"They were of one heart and soul." Are we of one heart and soul? Is there some

restorative work God wants you to do to rebuild some lost unity in our church? How about in your home?

### **3. They shared with one another (2.44-45 and 4.32-35)**

Now understand, a few people sold their homes to spread their wealth around the community. But people still retained some of their stuff. We read in Acts where people who had homes opened them up for meetings.

These Christians were not thinking about how they can get more stuff. They were thinking, "How can I use my stuff to benefit brothers/sisters in need or the community as a whole?"

This is much different than in a lifestyle enclave. There the only thought is, "How can I get more stuff?"

#### ***Oseola McCarty's story***

There was an article in the news a couple of months ago. I don't know if any of you saw it, about a woman by the name of Oseola McCarty-- an eighty-seven-year-old woman who lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, lived there her whole life.

Her whole life, she worked doing laundry for people. She did not have much education; she never got married; she never had children. For most of her life, she lived alone. And this year she wanted to give a gift. She presented to the University of Mississippi \$150,000 to go towards a scholarship fund for needy students.

She never had a car, never even learned how to drive. A year before she died, some officials at the bank where she saved her money convinced her to buy an air-conditioning unit for the room where she sleeps. She lived for eighty-six years in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, with no air-conditioning. Every day she went and did laundry and then set money aside. Every day, every week, every year. You know, never dreaming that she would end up with something like that.

Now just imagine for a moment -- this is a real person, not somebody who lived in the first century -- it's a person in our day who just decided that she wanted her life to enrich somebody else. She just decided with the little bit of stuff that she had that the best she could do with it was to save it up, and then in extravagant generosity, give it to enrich someone else in ways that she never experienced herself.

Now, I'll tell you something. There's not going to be in our society any gated communities, any lifestyle enclaves that advertise like this: "Come here and you can live in a little, one-room place, and you can do the laundry every day for eighty-six years, and you can go without a car, you can go without driving, you can go without air-conditioning so that one day you can give an amazing amount of money to somebody else." There's not going to be advertisements for places like that -- not in our society.

These first-century Christians shared with each other inside the community. Are you sharing with others inside the community? Is there anything the Lord is asking you to do in this area?

### **4. They lived in awe of God's activity among them (2.43)**

In lifestyle enclaves, the main enemy is boredom. It's a game of continual "bigger and better." People sit around the breakfast table, talking about what they'll eat for dinner.

A biblically functioning community is not built on the game "bigger and better." People live in awe of what God is doing among them. A biblically functioning community includes things like

*(list some things from your congregation)*

- *The mixture of cultures in our recent Christmas pageant*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ 's new job as a school teacher*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ getting to share his faith with his teacher*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ 's testimony of how God answering prayer for his dad on the golf course*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ signs up to mow our lawns*
- *God sustains \_\_\_\_\_ in law in loss of long term spouses*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ 's step up to lead our youth*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ 's step in to teach our 5-6 grade .... & Tammy's promotion to VP*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ 's survival of serious medical issues*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ ' & \_\_\_\_\_ join us & immediately join worship team*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ learns to play drums to enhance worship.*
- *The gentle yet tenacious way \_\_\_\_\_ shares her faith with her friends.*
- *The faithfulness of \_\_\_\_\_*
- *How God has raised up \_\_\_\_\_ to direct our preschool*
- *How \_\_\_\_\_ became a Christian a few years ago, married \_\_\_\_\_, and has grown into a key leader here.*
- *How \_\_\_\_\_ handles our church finances*
- *And on and on.*

The book of Acts says that early Christians lived in awe of what God was doing among them. Have you taken time lately to experience the wonder of what God does here?

## **5. They devoted attention to people outside their community (2.47)**

Look close at this verse. They enjoyed the goodwill of all the people, and people were joining Christ's community daily.

Outsiders were welcome. The gates to this community were thrown wide open. People inside the community stayed up nights thinking up new ways to enhance the lives of those outside the community and invite outsiders into the community!

Point Loma Nazarene University has a front gate. But I'm always struck by the greeting I get when I drive up there, "Come on in, can I help you find something?"

God loves these kinds of gatekeepers at his gates: the kind that devotes themselves to enhancing people's lives outside the community.

Are you devoting yourself to this kind of community? Is God asking you to do something new this year?

***There you have it:***

## **5 characteristics of a biblically functioning community**

1. They devote themselves.
2. They are of one heart and soul.
3. They share with one another.
4. They live in awe of God's activity among them.
5. They devote attention to people outside their community.

### ***Want a closer look at how this one works?***

Sit in on the membership class sometime soon.

And, let's keep our hearts open to Lord leading us this year.

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| <b>Other resources:</b>                                      |
| Sorry, no Google Presentation or audio file for this sermon. |