

Title: All in
Text: Acts 2.41- 42
Theme: The formation of the church
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: An actual church is people, changed by the gospel and devoted to being a people who belong together.

Read text:

I answered my phone and a very cheery guy said, “Hey, is this Bob?” I said, “Yea.” He said he was from the Pistons and wondered what he could do to get me to come to a game. I said that I find it difficult to pay obscene ticket prices to watch overpaid players consistently lose because they act like they don’t care. I figured that was the end of the conversation, but he persisted and said, yea, but you got to admit that you can’t beat the NBA experience. Now, BAM, right there, we had a definition problem, didn’t we? When I think of NBA basketball, I think of a game, played by highly skilled, motivated athletes who consistently execute their abilities at the highest level. He was talking about an experience of laser lights, t-shirt cannons, skimpy-dressed cheerleaders, dance teams, thumping music, crowd games, the kiss cam all interrupted from time to time by 10 guys who keep trying to put a ball in a hoop. He wanted me to believe that the experience was worth the ticket cost. I wanted him to understand that the game, as it is currently being played by the Pistons is not worth the price. He and I had two different perspectives. He placed value on the entertainment experience as a whole. I placed value on the actual game. It wasn’t a matter of who was right or wrong, but opinion. No harm, no foul, right?

But, when it comes to understanding what a church is and what exactly she is supposed to do and not do, it really isn’t up to us to come up with that on our own. But, when you listen to certain authorities address the issue of planting new churches, you can expect to be told that in order to have a successful church plant, you need: 1) a great name (usually something to do with a tree or water) 2) a great website and social media presence 3) a cool logo 4) an eye-catching graphic design theme on all of your stuff 5) a central location 6) great technology including great sound, media, lighting and special effects 7) a killer band with a bearded leader who looks cool in skinny jeans 8) comfortable seating and 9) great coffee. The idea that drives this thinking is that before people will buy into the message of the church, they have to feel good about the experience. If they like the experience they might come back and over time, they might feel like they belong. You have to attract them with things that will draw them in and then work to keep them coming back. Give them a job to do. Get them to volunteer and be responsible, that way they are committed and will keep coming and perhaps over time they will come to believe in the message of the church. In summary, belong, then maybe you will believe.

Does it work? If you are trying to attract a crowd, then it can work. But, if you are trying to establish or build a healthy church, then, no, it doesn’t. The book of Acts is so important to our understanding of what a church is and how she is supposed to operate. And when you read about how the church was started, it defies all of our cultural expectations. It had no name, no website, no attractive building, etc. What it had was the unmistakable presence of God. The initial gathering of people experienced something that technology cannot duplicate and the church gets into trouble when she acts like it can. What happened? Peter preached the gospel. People were

convicted of their sin, their rebellion against God, and their need of Christ and 3,000 people repented, were baptized and were added. Added to what? Added to the initial group of 120 (1.15). What was this group? It didn't even have a name, yet. It was the disciples and other followers of Jesus. They would become known as what Jesus had named them back in Matthew 18. They would be the church. Look at 2.41. What you read in 2.41 is the pattern for the church. You have the preaching of the gospel. Then you have people who receive the word. That means they believe the gospel. They embrace the gospel. They repented of their sin and they turned to Christ. How do we know they believed the gospel? Because they publicly professed their belief in the gospel by identifying themselves as followers of Christ through baptism. And they were added to the group. They were added to the church. Do you see what I see? Do you see what the text says? Here is the pattern that we witness through the rest of the book of Acts and the NT.

I. **Believe, then belong.** (41)

Luke tells us that “those who received his word” (does not mean that all who heard Peter believed), but that a portion of the crowd that had gathered received, that is, they accepted as being true and true for themselves, the message that Peter preached about their sin, about Christ's identity and accomplishment, about their need to repent, etc. They embraced this! Then, they were immersed into water. That is what the word baptism (baptizo) means. How and where did this happen?

Near the Temple Mount, there were large immersion pools. This means that the apostles witnessed (and no doubt helped with) immersing every person who professed faith in Christ. This would have taken a long time. It would have been very public and it would have been very risky. You see, baptism by immersion was understood by the Jews as an initiation ritual that identified you as a member of a group. John the Baptizer was an example of this. The large immersion pools near the Temple Mount, were for the pilgrims who came to the Temple for the Festivals and Holy Days. They would go either to the Pool of Siloam or the Pool of Bethesda and be immersed as a means of being ceremonially cleansed in order to go to the Temple and participate in the holy day. Now, Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize believers, not in order to be clean, but because they have been cleansed by Christ. All of this helps us understand the essential relationship between believing and belonging. Let's look at that in a bit more detail.

A. **Repenting and believing are two sides of the same coin of conversion.**

Peter preached the gospel to his audience. When they asked what they could do and should do, he told them to repent and be baptized. He told them to save themselves from this crooked generation (meaning get out of the group who rejected Christ and get into the group that trusts him). Those who received his word (true acceptance involves repentance and true repentance involves acceptance) are viewed as being believers. Repenting, receiving his word, and being saved are different ways of describing conversion. But, while following Christ is a decision that an individual has to make (it cannot be made for him/her), and is, in that sense a private decision, if it is legitimate it does not stay private. How does a person become part of the church? Through repentance and faith (conversion).

B. **Believing is publicly declared through baptism.**

Believers do not remain hidden. They identify themselves as believers and they identify themselves with other believers. They were marked off as believers through baptism. This was how the early church knew who was in and who wasn't. (like a truck and trailer) When was your baptism? By asking that, or stating that, does not mean that the act of being immersed washes away sin. Baptism, that is disconnected from belief, is a ceremony that has no place in the Bible. And this is where things get a little tense for some people, and it doesn't need to be. We need to use terms the Bible does and use definitions that the Bible uses as well. For example, there is no such thing as infant baptism in the Bible. It simply does not exist. Do churches practice it? Some do. What is the biblical basis for it? They have none. And they shouldn't do it because it is confusing. What happens in infant baptism? Nothing! It is a man-made ceremony. But, in many cases, the parents are told, at the very least, that the infant is now a member of the church and in some cases, they are told that the infant's sinful nature (original sin) has now been washed away. Do you see what is happening? This is saying you can belong before you believe. Or that you can belong, even though you don't believe, or that someone can believe in your place. It also takes the beautiful ordinance of baptism and makes it something that it isn't.

Infant baptism is a ceremony. It is a ceremony of some churches. It feels like it has meaning and significance from that church and from the aura of the event, but it really doesn't. Baptism in the NT is always this way. Belief first, then baptism. Hear this clearly. Belief first, then baptism. Those who received his word speaks of an event that took place. There was a time and a place where these people received his word. Following that acceptance, that belief, that faith in the message of the gospel, all of those who did that, were baptized. They were baptized publicly as a means of identifying themselves as those who willfully and conscientiously have accepted the message of the gospel and are now following Christ. Then they were baptized. This is called "believer's baptism." If you were baptized as an infant, you have not been baptized as the Bible defines baptism. We practice baptism this way because this is the explicit teaching of the Bible. We will not baptize anyone who does not profess to believe in the gospel and everyone who professes to believe in the gospel, we admonish you to get baptized.

Now, when you are discussing this with others, be charitable. I have dear Presbyterian friends (family members even) that I am not afraid to talk with them about this, but not in a condemning way. In those churches that preach the gospel, but practice infant baptism, they are a bit hard pressed to explain exactly from the Bible what this is. In some cases, it turns into a glorified baby dedication, where the parent is committing to raise the child under the tutelage of the Bible. We can and should applaud the goal even if we disagree with the label.

Here is a typical scenario: A person comes to faith in Christ as an adult. They see from Scripture and hear an explanation of how every example of baptism in the church was always by immersion after a profession of faith. So that person, whose has come to faith wants to get baptized by immersion and they are, rightfully excited about it until they tell momma (or other family members). And momma gets unhinged or offended and says stuff like: Are you telling me that we are all wrong? Are you saying that your baptism was not good enough? Are you saying that you are better than us now? You don't need to get baptized again, you've already been baptized! And all of a sudden, things go from 0 to 80 on the stress meter instantly and there is in many cases more heat than light. Can I give you some counsel? If that is your background and

you are in the middle of this conversation, I would suggest this: Tell your mom and dad how grateful you are than when you were born, they recognized that they had a God-given responsibility to raise you before the Lord. They wanted you to love God and enjoy the favor and protection of God. They wanted you to follow God. And this is what you are doing. You are following God and yes, it looks a little different because it is, but you are convinced this is exactly what God's Word says, and if they want to look at that with you, you would be happy to show them. But, your public profession of faith in Christ through baptism is an answer to their prayers. (back to the text)

Do you see what I mean when I say that there is no such thing in the NT as a person who professes to be a follower of Jesus but who has never been baptized. I do not know if you are a follower of Jesus if you do not get baptized. Now, listen to that statement again, carefully. I or we as a church, do not know if you are a follower of Jesus if you do not get baptized. Your baptism marks you off as a believer. Your baptism identifies you as a follower of Christ. Baptism defines the relationship. So, let's say that on this day of Pentecost, that one of those who heard Peter preaching, accepted the message of the gospel and choose to get baptized, but while waiting in line at the pool, had a heart attack and died. Is that person a believer? Are they in heaven? Absolutely!! Baptism does not make you a believer. Baptism marks you as a believer. At the same time, a person who says, I am a follower of Christ, but I'm not getting baptized is trying to hold onto two opposing positions.

A follower of Jesus is one who actually follows Jesus and Jesus commanded us to be baptized and this is how the disciples understood that command and obeyed it. If you refuse to follow Jesus, then you cannot call yourself a follower of Jesus. If you refuse to submit to the authority of Jesus, then you cannot call him your Lord. Baptism is a profession of, a declaration of surrender and obedience. This is the practice of the church because this is what believing in Jesus looks like. When you believe, then you belong, which is why baptism is initiation to membership in the church.

C. Those who believe, belonged to the group. (and there were added)

Believers do not remain hidden. They identify themselves as believers and they identify themselves with other believers. They are marked off as believers through baptism and baptism marks them off with other believers. How did they know that they were about (just shy of) 3,000 people who received the word and were baptized? Because they were counting heads and keeping records. They knew who was in. They knew who was in the group. They knew who a member was, and therefore, who wasn't (as we will see in v.42). If you were with Jesus, you were with his people. Believe, then belong. Point 1 is BELIEVE, Then belong. Point 2 is Believe, THEN BELONG! Commitment to Christ means commitment to the church.

We make a big deal about local church membership. Why? We do not want to add a single thing to the Bible and create an expectation that is not there, but neither do we want to neglect anything from the Bible. What we see in v.42 is an example of membership in the church. There is a lot about the church that we learn from the rest of the NT, but from the beginning, following Christ meant that you belonged to an identifiable group of people who also followed Christ.

II. **Belong means commitment.** (42)

The result of being added meant that those who were added to the church devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching I need to state the obvious, because apparently, the obvious from this text is not obvious to everyone. Following Christ has consequences! Jesus already said this. Count the cost before you say that you are in. Don't put your hand to the plow unless you are going to finish the field. If you are going to follow me, then follow me.

Last year, my daughter and her friend (committed believers) had another friend in Officer Candidate School (who was not a believer). But, this gal was asking a lot of questions and they spent hours and hours with her talking about the gospel. Eventually she started attending church with them. One day she said, "I'm ready to believe." And they said, "hold on. You know what this means don't you? This is for life. This is not something that you try for a while to see if you like it. This is forever. You don't look back and you don't go back. Are you sure?" Why did they say that? Because following Jesus has consequences and expectations and you need to know that. These believers willfully placed themselves under the authority of doctrine of the church.

A. **Commitment to the Word.**

That means that the apostles (leaders of the church) recognized that their primary responsibility was to preach and teach the Word. This also means that followers of Christ continuously, faithfully and regularly place themselves under the teaching of God's Word. And this means that the followers of Christ practiced (obeyed) the Word that was taught. People who follow Jesus make it a priority to hear God's Word preached. They treasure it and submit to it because they want to know how they can follow Jesus better.

B. **Commitment to the Fellowship.**

What was the fellowship? It was the slightly less than 3,000 other believers, all of whom were happy, balanced, capable, gifted, educated, well-mannered, well-dressed, employed, self-sufficient, respected, pretty, sophisticated... Everyone had their act together. No one was high maintenance. This was the cool group, right? Not on your life! Some of them were so needy, they did not have places to live or food to eat. This commitment to fellowship was not just membership in a formal sense to the local church. It certainly was that. But it was a commitment to watch out for one another. It was nothing less than supernatural, because that is what the gospel is and does. We'll pick it up here, next week. (Elders sign doctrinal statement and Covenant)

Conclusion: When we try to improve on how the Bible defines and describes the church, we don't. I want you to catch a vision of the beauty of the church. Oh sure, I want you to understand the biblical rationale for church membership, for believer's baptism and the Lord's Table and even polity when we get there. But all of these are part of a vision of the Bride of Christ and are all designed to function in harmony that causes her to be beautiful. (Church Covenant)