

Life in the Early Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 2:42–46; Acts 4:34, 35; Acts 3:1–26; Acts 4:1–18; Acts 5:1–11; Acts 5:34–39.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Acts 2:46, 47, NIV*).

The early church's sense of urgency could not have been stronger. The way that Jesus had answered the question concerning the establishment of the Messianic kingdom, leaving the issue of time open (*Acts 1:6–8*), could be understood to mean that everything depended on the coming of the Spirit and the completion of the apostolic mission. So, when Pentecost came, early believers thought that everything was fulfilled: they had received the Spirit and shared the gospel with the whole world. Not that the apostles had left Jerusalem and had gone out to the world, but the world had come to them (*Acts 2:5–11*).

What happened next was the church's detachment from material goods. Sensing that the time was short, they sold all they had and devoted themselves to learning and to fellowship while continuing to witness about Jesus, but only in Jerusalem. The communal life they developed, though effective in helping the poor, soon became a problem, and God had to intervene to keep the church united. This was also the time when they began to find themselves facing opposition. Yet amid it all, their faith remained unshakeable.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 21.

Teaching and Fellowship

After Pentecost, Luke shifts the narrative to a general description of the inner life of the church in Jerusalem. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). The four items noted appear to be basically teaching and fellowship. According to verse 46, the teaching was carried out in the temple, while the fellowship was in private homes.

The temple court was surrounded by roofed porches that were frequently used for rabbinic instruction. That the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching shows that the gift of the Spirit did not lead them to a contemplative religion but to an intense learning process under the apostles, whose authoritative teaching was authenticated by wonders and signs (*Acts 2:43*).

Spiritual fellowship was another distinctive mark of early Christian piety. The believers were constantly together, not only in the temple but also in their homes, where they shared meals, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and prayed (*Acts 2:42, 46*). By having such daily celebrations, the early Christians expressed their hope in Jesus’ soon return, when His fellowship with them would be restored in the Messianic kingdom (*Matt. 26:29*).

Private homes played a key role in the early church’s life. The believers still attended the temple’s daily ceremonies (*Acts 3:1*), and on Sabbaths they presumably were in the synagogues with their fellow Jews (*James 2:2*), but the distinctive elements of Christian devotion were performed in homes.

Read Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35. What was an important aspect of early Christian fellowship?

Believing that the end was near, they decided that their material possessions, “private property” (to use a more up-to-date term), was not that important anymore. A common use of their material resources, therefore, seemed appropriate. There was no reason to worry about tomorrow, as the Messiah Himself would provide for their needs in the Messianic kingdom (*Luke 22:29, 30*). This sharing allowed them to experience a deeper sense of unity, besides becoming an extraordinary example of Christian generosity.

How generous are you with what you have been given from the Lord?

The Healing of a Lame Man

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John went to the temple for the three o'clock prayer service. This indicates the essentially Jewish character of the church's faith at this early period. That is, the apostles did not go to the temple only to instruct or make new converts but because Peter and John were still Jews and, as such, were still committed to Jewish religious traditions (*Acts 20:16, 21:17–26*), at least up to this point. There they performed an astounding miracle (*Acts 3:1–10*), which gave Peter the opportunity to preach another sermon.

Read Acts 3:12–26. What are some of Peter's main emphases in his sermon?

Five main points characterized early Christian preaching: Jesus was the suffering Messiah (*Acts 3:18*); God resurrected Him (*Acts 3:15*); Jesus was exalted in heaven (*Acts 3:13*); He will come again (*Acts 3:20*); and repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins (*Acts 3:19*).

In many ways, this is the same message we are taking to the world, even if the context has changed. The apostles were still in a Jewish setting, when instead of changing religions the people basically just had to “migrate” from the old covenant to the new one. As part of God's people, they had to accept the Messiah and experience the new birth that follows a true acceptance of Jesus.

Now, though the situation is different, the message is still essentially the same: Christ died for our sins, was resurrected, and He will return. This means, then, that we can find salvation in Him. Even in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, Jesus Christ crucified, Jesus Christ risen, and Jesus Christ returning must be the center of how we proclaim those messages.

“Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. The proclamation of the third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath truth. This truth, with others included in the message, is to be proclaimed; but the great center of attraction, Christ Jesus, must not be left out. It is at the cross of Christ that mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. The sinner must be led to look to Calvary; with the simple faith of a little child he must trust in the merits of the Saviour, accepting His righteousness, believing in His mercy.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 156, 157.

The Rise of Opposition

It was not long until the church's success aroused opposition from some Jerusalem leaders. The Jerusalem temple was run by the high priest and his associates, most of whom were Sadducees. The high priest was also the president of the Sanhedrin council, which in those days was composed mostly of Sadducees and Pharisees. Because the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, they were greatly disturbed that Peter and John were teaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Arrested by the temple guards, the apostles were put in custody until the following day, when they were brought before the council (*Acts 4:1–7*).

Read Acts 4:1–18. When asked by what authority they had been acting, how did Peter reply? What was the underlying message in what Peter said that the leaders would have found so threatening?

The challenge about authority posed by the Jewish leaders suggests a concern for power. Peter, however, declared not only that the miracle had been performed in the name of Jesus but also that salvation comes from Him only. The apostles were before the highest Jewish body; yet, they were in the service of a much higher authority. These men were simple, unschooled Galilean fishermen; thus, their courage and eloquence struck those who were there. Although the leaders did not realize it, the point was that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, exactly as Jesus had foretold (*Matt. 10:16–20*).

Without being able to deny the miracle—the healed man was also present so that all could see him—the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles to stop preaching. They feared the message as much as the increasing popularity of the movement. Failing to evaluate the evidence properly, they allowed prejudice and desire for self-protection to dictate their actions.

Peter's final words are among the most precious gems of the book of Acts: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (*Acts 4:19, 20, NKJV*).

Think about the desire for power and how potentially dangerous it can be, at any level and in any context. As Christians called to be servants, why must we be careful about the lure of power?

Ananias and Sapphira

The pooling of goods in the early church was not compulsory; that is, it was not a formal condition of membership. Yet, there certainly were several examples of voluntary generosity that inspired the whole community. One such example was Barnabas (*Acts 4:36, 37*), who will play an important role later in the book.

However, there were also negative examples that threatened the unity of the church from within, right at a time when attacks from without had just begun.

Read Acts 5:1–11. What are the lessons of this story?

Though Luke has not given us all the details, there is no question that the fundamental problem of Ananias and Sapphira was not the attempt to keep the money, but the practice of deceit within the community. Their sin was not the result of an impulsive act but of a carefully laid plan, a deliberate attempt “to test the Spirit of the Lord” (*Acts 5:9, ESV*). They were not under the obligation to sell their property and give the money to the church. Thus, when they committed themselves to doing so, perhaps they were acting in their own interest only, maybe even trying to gain influence among the brethren with what appeared to be a commendable act of charity.

This possibility may help to explain why God punished them so severely. Even if the church’s communal life resulted from the conviction that Jesus was just about to come, an act like that of Ananias and Sapphira at such an early stage could disparage the importance of loyalty to God and become a bad influence among the believers. The fact that there is no mention of Ananias’s being given the chance to repent, as in the case of Sapphira (*Acts 5:8*), may be due only to the shortness of the account.

The bottom line is that, from the beginning to the end, they had acted sinfully, and sin is a serious matter in God’s eyes (*Ezek. 18:20, Rom. 6:23*), even if He does not always punish it immediately. In fact, that punishment is often deferred should constantly remind us of how gracious God is (*2 Pet. 3:9*).

Why must we be careful about pushing the limits of grace, as these two early members of the church did?

The Second Arrest

If the apostles could be used to bring God’s judgment on sin, as in Ananias and Sapphira’s case, they could also be used to bring God’s grace on sinners. Their powerful healing ministry (*Acts 5:12–16*) was tangible evidence that God’s Spirit was working through them. That even Peter’s shadow, it was believed, could heal people is striking. The closest parallel in the Gospels is that of a woman who was healed by touching Jesus’ garment (*Luke 8:43, 44*). Luke, however, does not say that Peter’s shadow actually had healing power but that the people thought so. Yet, even if popular superstition was involved, God would still dispense His grace.

Notwithstanding, the more the apostles were filled with the Spirit, and signs and wonders multiplied, the more the religious leaders were filled with jealousy. This led them to arrest the apostles a second time (*Acts 5:17, 18*). It was only after their miraculous escape (*Acts 5:19–24*) and another bold speech by Peter, stressing that they should “obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*), that some of the authorities began to consider the possibility that supernatural influences could be at work.

Read Acts 5:34–39. How did Gamaliel try to dissuade the Sanhedrin from killing the apostles?

The Sanhedrin was controlled by the Sadducees, with the Pharisees forming an influential minority. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a doctor of the law. He was so highly regarded among the Jews that he became known as “Rabban” (“our teacher”), rather than simply “Rabbi” (“my teacher”). Paul was one of his disciples (*Acts 22:3*).

Gamaliel recalled two other rebel movements in Israel’s recent history that had also attracted followers and caused turmoil. The leaders, however, were killed and their followers were completely dispersed. The lesson he drew was that if the Christian movement was of human origin, it would soon disappear. On the other hand, if it was a divine movement, as claimed by the apostles, how could they hope to withstand it? Gamaliel’s advice prevailed. The apostles were flogged and once again commanded not to speak in Jesus’ name.

What does this story tell us about how needful and helpful good counsel can often be? How can we learn to be more open to getting counsel even when it may consist of what we don’t necessarily want to hear?

Further Thought: “We are stewards, entrusted by our absent Lord with the care of His household and His interests, which He came to this world to serve. He has returned to heaven, leaving us in charge, and He expects us to watch and wait for His appearing. Let us be faithful to our trust, lest coming suddenly He find us sleeping.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 37.

“The people need to be impressed with the sacredness of their vows and pledges to the cause of God. Such pledges are not generally held to be as obligatory as a promissory note from man to man. But is a promise less sacred and binding because it is made to God? Because it lacks some technical terms, and cannot be enforced by law, will the Christian disregard the obligation to which he has given his word? No legal note or bond is more obligatory than a pledge made to the cause of God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1056.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Among many other things, Jesus left two immediate legacies to the disciples: the expectation of His soon return and a worldwide mission. How should these two factors impact our sense of mission and the call to preach the gospel to the world?
- 2 Someone once said: “We should be ready as if Jesus would come today but continue working [in the mission of the church] as if He would take another hundred years to come.” What wisdom is found in this sentiment, and how can we apply it to our calling in life?
- 3 Why must the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus be central to all that we preach? Or look at it like this: What good is anything we preach without these events?
- 4 What should the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach about just how difficult it is for us to know the hearts of others, either for good or for evil?
- 5 Who are some modern-day Gamaliels whom you know? Or, perhaps, are you in a position to play that role for others? Either way, in class share examples about how the giving or the receiving of wise counsel did some good. What lessons can we learn from these accounts?

Too Scared to Adopt

By SANG SOOK PARK

Since I was a little girl, I wanted to adopt a child. The desire remained strong after I got married and raised a son, but I feared I wasn't qualified.

Finally, I filled out the paperwork. "Send me a child whom I can handle," I prayed. "Give me this sign that the adopted child is from You: Make the first child I meet the one whom You want me to adopt."

This was my prayer for two and a half months. Then the orphanage sent a two-year-old girl, Bomini. But when she arrived, she just glared at me. I wanted to win her heart, so I gave her food and a doll. But she flung down the doll, and she wouldn't allow me to touch her. I sent Bomini back to the orphanage.

"I'm too scared to adopt," I told my husband.

But I sensed God saying, "What happened to all your prayers and request for a sign that the first child would be chosen by Me?" I wept and told God, "I'm too scared to live with this child."

But then I changed my prayer. "If I'm supposed to take this child, give me confidence and the assurance that You will raise her," I prayed. "If I'm not supposed to adopt her, remove this heavy burden that I have to adopt a child."

I prayed this for five days. On the fifth day, I read 2 Samuel 24:14 during my devotions and realized that this was the answer. In this verse, King David says, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great."

I remembered that God always had led me and I knew He would continue to care for my family with great mercy. I decided to fall into the hand of the Lord.

"Let's go get the child," I told my husband.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as we drove to the orphanage. I could still see those glaring eyes. Then I thought, *Wait, I'm going to meet this precious daughter of mine.* I prayed, "God, help us love her."



We waited a short time at the orphanage, and then Bomini entered the room. She quietly walked over to me and put her tiny hands into mine. It felt as if the Lord were holding my hands. I prayed, "I will lead this hand to heaven." And we went home.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Acts 2:41–47, 4:32–37, 5:1–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the importance of the right response to the gospel call.

Feel: Nurture a new relationship with God and the community of faith.

Do: Resolve to live and share his or her faith.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Basic Responses

A What are some of the negative and positive responses expected from new believers?

B How does one reject the negative and affirm the positive responses?

II. Feel: Nurturing New Relationships

A How did the early church nurture new relationships?

B What factors strengthen/weaken community relationships?

C How does sacrificial giving help in the gospel proclamation and community building?

III. Do: Advancing the Cause While Facing Adversity

A How did the early church face adversity, even as it advanced in church growth?

B How do we react to various personalities in the early church: Barnabas, Paul, Ananias, and Sapphira?

► **Summary:** The church is engaged not only in the advancement of the gospel commission but also in overcoming Satan's attempts to thwart the church's mission.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 2:41–47*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brought about two great miracles among the disciples (*Acts 2:40–47*). First, they saw the universal nature of the gospel: Jesus is the Savior not just to “you and to your children” (that is, to Jews only), but “to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (*Acts 2:39, NKJV*). Second, the disciples learned that church growth depends not on what humans can achieve but on what the Spirit can accomplish through the study of the Word, through the fostering of spiritual fellowship, and through living a life of faith and witness.

Just for Teachers: To be baptized in the name of Jesus and to receive the Holy Spirit are just the first steps in becoming members of God’s family. After those initial steps, church members have several experiences to walk through: steadfastness in doctrine, growth in fellowship, “breaking of bread,” personal and public prayer life, house-to-house visitation, simplicity of life, and church growth (*see Acts 2:42–47*). Discuss the importance of such a wholistic church life.

Discussion Question: “Under the training of Christ the disciples had been led to feel their need of the Spirit. Under the Spirit’s teaching they received the final qualification, and went forth to their lifework.” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 45. Note in this quotation two phrases: “under . . . Christ” and “under the Spirit.” What do these phrases mean to you?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: What is the church? Is it that imposing building at the corner of Main Street and Market Avenue? Is it a club of like-minded people getting together to promote common interests and welfare? Is it a center for the prevention of cruelty to human beings? Is it a meeting-house where people meet for worship, study, and prayer each Sabbath? Is it a charitable society to care for the needy, the sick, and the hungry? While there may be something in such statements, consider the following: “Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the

theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 12.

This week’s lesson points to three factors about the church: a fellowship of the saved; a living and Cross-centered body of believers; and a church body of wonder, unity, and troubles.

Bible Commentary

I. The Church: Fellowship of the Saved (*Review Acts 2:42–45; 4:34, 35 with your class.*)

“Be saved” (*Acts 2:40, NKJV*). That was Peter’s final appeal of his Pentecostal sermon. What did Peter mean by this plea? He himself provided the answer: “Be saved from this perverse generation” (*NKJV*). To be saved is a twofold experience. First, it is a rejection of, and escape from, the perversities of life. It is to repent of sin and reject all its allurements. Second, to be saved means to belong wholly and unreservedly to the One who saves—Jesus. Where there is a conscientious and continual rejection of sin and total acceptance of the call of Jesus, salvation becomes a reality. Those who are thus saved constitute the church, the body of Christ. Salvation precedes church membership.

The New Testament uses the word “church” to translate the Greek word *ekklesia*, which literally means “called out.” Most frequently, “the church” is used to describe those who are called out from sin to righteousness, from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, from the fading things of this world to the unshakable realities of the home above. The “called” ones believe in Jesus as the Son of God, accept Him as their Savior and Lord, and come together to study His Word, to worship Him as their Lord, and to share His message with those who do not know Him. Faith, fellowship, study, worship, and witness are some of the essential marks of the church. With that in view, Jesus made His promise: “ ‘I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it’ ” (*Matt. 16:18, NKJV*).

Consider This: “Those who at Pentecost were endued with power from on high, were not thereby freed from further temptation and trial.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 49. To belong to the church is not a guarantee that one shall continue to be in Christ or live a life free from sorrow and suffering. What, then, should we do to remain unshakeable members of the body of Christ, despite adversity and temptation?

II. The Church: A Living and Cross-Centered Body (*Review Acts 3, 4:1–31 with your class.*)

A living church is a growing church. At Pentecost 3,000 people from some 15 linguistic regions of the world (*Acts 2:9–11, 41*) accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior and were filled with the Spirit. Thus began the church, and “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (*Acts 2:47, NKJV*). From that time on, a new element entered human history, challenging the religious and philosophic systems of the world, and letting the world know “assuredly that God has made this Jesus, [who was] . . . crucified, both Lord and Christ” (*Acts 2:36, NKJV*). Because of that crucified One, all humanity will be called to account as to how they relate to Jesus: accept Him as their Savior and enter into everlasting life; or reject Him and ignore Him as though He does not matter, and face the consequence of eternal death. The Cross thus becomes the great divider between eternal life and eternal death. Those who choose to be identified with the Lord of the Cross become the body of the living Christ.

Consider This: “Every Christian saw in his brother a revelation of divine love and benevolence. . . . The ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ’s character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 48. We, as Christians, must emulate this experience of the early believers. How do we do that?

III. The Church: A Body of Wonders, Community, and Problems (*Review Acts 3; 4; 5:1–11 with your class.*)

The divine initiative and the human participants in the composition of the church make it a body marked by wonder, community, and trouble.

First, observe the wonder of growth: “The Lord added to the church daily” (*Acts 2:47*). The mathematics of the early church growth is staggering: 12, 120, 3,000, other daily additions, 5,000 (*Acts 4:4*), and before the century was over, the whole world had become the parish of faith and the target for evangelism. The wonder moves further, as the gospel is preached into all the world, bringing personal freedom to a man lame from birth. Here was a case of supreme wretchedness. This man was physically burdened, socially scorned, and condemned to beg for coin or a piece of bread from the temple goers. But suddenly he finds a glimmer of hope in what Peter had to say: “ ‘Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: . . . the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth’ ” (*Acts 3:6, NKJV*). In that Name, the apostle commanded the lame man to “ ‘rise up and walk’ ” (*Acts 3:6, NKJV*), and instantly the unseen resurrection power of Jesus made life in all its fullness flow through the dead nerves and tissues of the lame man and set him “walking, leaping, and praising God” (*Acts 3:8, NKJV*). Jesus continues to remain the resource of redemption, renewal, and revitalization.

Second, observe the fellowship of unity in the early church, as well as the tragedy that afflicted it. The church experienced oneness not only “in the

apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*), but also in the community of fellowship (*Acts 4:34, 35*). Loving God and living with fellow believers in shared faith and means became the open symbol of joyful fellowship: "All who believed were together, and had all things in common" (*Acts 2:44, NKJV*). Hence, Barnabas, who "having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" (*Acts 4:36, 37, NKJV*), set a prime example of what it means to live the shared life of Christian communion. Barnabas (*Acts 4:36*) experienced Jesus fully. His gratitude was total and unreserved, his character was clear and clean, his life was transformed and transparent. He knew Jesus, and Jesus knew him. He became the force behind the powerful church of Antioch and behind the making of Paul (*Acts 9:27; 11:25, 26*). But within the church also lay the seeds of tragedy: while the church is the abode of the faithful, it also has the element of the self-centered. While Christian journey embraces the grace and goodness of Barnabas, it also contains the avarice and pretension of Ananias and Sapphira (*Acts 5:1–11*). The truthfulness of Christian community is constantly challenged by the ease with which counterfeit claims and pseudo-experiences can compete for abode.

Consider This: We are given the parables of the wheat and the tares, the goat and the sheep (*Matt. 13:24–30, 25:31–46*), regarding the faithful and unfaithful dwelling within the church. How do we differentiate between the two groups?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: "Follow the light you have. Set your heart to obey what you do know of the word of God. His power, His very life, dwells in His word. . . . You are building on God's word, and your character will be builded after the similitude of the character of Christ."—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessings*, p. 150.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean to be a Christian? How does this affect becoming and being a faithful church member?
- ❷ How does our relationship with the Word of God affect our life within the church?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Consider the differences in character between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira. Discuss the following:

1. Assuming all three individuals were exposed to the truth in the same degree, why did they bear different fruits in life?
2. How can the best of intentions turn into spiritual disasters?