

Crazy Lifestyles in Response to Christ

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Acts 4:32-35

“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...”

Movement 1 – The Ideal Community

Are you looking for the ideal, perfect church? I remember when I was searching for a new position one of the questions that always lingered in the back of my mind was, “what is wrong with this church?” I was looking for the neurosis, the psychosis, or the fault with which each church was grappling. I decided that I was not going to look for the ideal church, because I did not think one existed. Some churches had issues with leadership, others had money problems, and others were in denial. Now I should let you rest easy and tell you that I did end up finding the perfect church: this one. That aside, I do not think that there is a church which is truly perfect.

Are you looking for the ideal, the perfect church? This week I have been studying and praying through this passage in Acts which seems to paint a vivid picture of the perfect church. Everyone shares, life is idyllic, and the apostles offer great preaching, lives out this ideal which we find in Acts. This picture isn't fair. It isn't fair for the preacher today or for the congregation today. I read this scripture and I asked myself, “What do I need to do to find or develop that kind of church?” It is the perfect church where everyone has something, no one is in want, and all experience great power of the Holy Spirit. It is that community so many of us strive to experience – the utopia of here and now. Maybe the followers have read Plato's *Republic*, yet Plato was just offering a dream and idea, they haven't been brought up with a strict understanding of the nature of the holy community, they haven't been trained in the cave. Maybe the followers are familiar with Aristotle's phrase, “for friends, all things are in common,” but how can they live it? We wonder from where is found their security and peace of mind to make this community happen? Those followers don't have an iron gate to offer the peace and security that a gated community promises to offer. Those followers don't have the social code or structure of Stepford which dictated and directed the customs and codes of the Stepford wives. Those followers don't have the comrades or alcoholic influence which causes them to shout out “Norm” demonstrating the unity of the community that the gang at *Cheers* had. Like looking into a different world, we read this passage in Acts and I wonder how they did it. How did the early Christians manage to share, manage to trust, and manage to take care of each other so well. It is like that moment when you have taken your children to get the family picture taken, and one is running around the studio, the other is crying in the corner, the third is taking off his shirt, and the fourth is playing with the cameras. While trying to control the craziness, you look over your shoulder and notice a family behind you waiting patiently, the father and mother standing calmly, and the three children sitting in their chairs with their hair neatly combed, clothes clean and on, and not a peep of sound. You look at them, you look at your own family and you wonder, “How do they do it?”

In the same way, we read of the early church in Acts, we read of their sharing, we read of that perfect community and we wonder how they have obtained the ideal perfect church. The bar is set so high that I wonder if we could ever find this perfect church.

Movement 2 – The Real Church

You see, I have seen the “real church.” I have seen what the real church is, and my experiences fuel my skepticism. How many times has a church been moving in two directions at once? I know of a church that was trying to spruce up their parlor. One group of people was arguing over the color of the carpet, while the other group of people was arguing over the texture of the floor tile. I thought the room would look odd with the mixture of carpet and linoleum, but it was not my place to say anything. I have seen the real church.

I know of a church that was so bogged down in process and procedures that it took seven months just to invite the church right next door to join them for a fellowship lunch. I imagine it took four more months to formally accept the invitation. I have seen the real church.

I know of a church that found people were hanging out at the front doors so they put up gates to keep them out. I have seen the real church.

I know of churches that have split, churches that have fought, and churches that aren't speaking to other churches. Our global history is one of persecution, one of theft, one of perjury, one of greed, one of lying, one of deception, and one of hypocrisy. I know about the real church.

I have seen churches withhold possessions and share only hate. I have seen churches offer judgment without mercy. I have seen churches turn their backs on the needy with actions based upon theological righteousness. I have seen churches run pastors out of town because the pastor does not meet the pious expectations of sinlessness thrust upon him. I have seen churches turn from other churches and turn against other churches all in the name of the one Christ in whose name we have all been baptized.

Maybe you have seen the movie *Sin City*. In that movie, the Cardinal of the Catholic Church is the center of sin, it is a flawed institution. The church controls the politics, the priests are sleeping with prostitutes, and there is not one sense of reverence. While it may seem harsh, sometime I wonder if that is a real depiction of the church past and present – we'll wait before we judge the future. It is like what the driver said in the movie *Taxi Driver*, “Someday a rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” I have seen the real church; we are a part of the real church. We are a rag-tag group that sometimes gets it right and sometimes gets it very wrong, and we look around at this ship of God, this church and notice that we seem to be working with one oar, we have a sail with holes in it, and the ship leaks.

Lets be honest, this is who we are and what we are. Do we really think it is realistic that we can obtain the level of community that we find in Acts? Do we really believe that we can work through our own issues and shortcomings? I have seen the real church, I know about the real church, and even the best of them seem to be a far cry from this “blessed community” we find in Acts.

Movement 3 – The Search for the Holy ... Church

But we still want to reach over to the other side, we still want to cross the fence, and we still try to find and experience that perfect church. Some of us live with this kind of itch – an itch to be the community we find in Acts. Some of us look for churches that at least have the potential and the possibility. Some of us make churches with that potential and possibility. Like pilgrims looking for that holy grail of the church

community, we sit but we squirm in our pews because we are not the community that is offered in Acts because we know we could be better. We squirm because we do not have that kind of egalitarianism. We squirm because we think, we hope we can reach that ideal, we want that perfect community the apostles and the early Christians had in Acts.

Roger Williams was such a person who squirmed. He squirmed in Massachusetts with the Congregational church and its ideals. He squirmed from Massachusetts to Rhode Island where he joined with the Baptist. He squirmed more, because even the Baptist church was not close enough to the true and real church he desired. He pushed the church structures, he was cast out by the church in MA, and he challenged the Baptists, and eventually left and waited for the perfect church to happen. The Puritans, the very ones who cause Williams to squirm, were squirming in England with a church that they felt was less than perfect. In search of perfection, they left England and went looking for something better.

John Noyes, a fellow Andover Newton graduate, was squirming for the perfect church. He went to upstate New York and founded a new community, the Oneida community that was to be as close to the perfect church as possible. Nathan Hatch writes about movements of churches which became “primitive” churches, attempting to return to the ideals of the very first church. There were churches that read Acts very closely and tried to emulate that model. In doing so, they claimed to be churches formed in 33 A.D.; imagine that anniversary!

Even today, many of us try to reach and obtain that “perfect” church. We tweak our music, we change our board structure, we move the pews, and we consider painting our front doors in hopes that we will be maybe a little closer to this community that we find in Acts. From Catholic reforms in the eleventh century to the Protestant Reformation, to the revivals in America to the challenges to worship today we have seen our church, we have been given a picture of the ideal, and we try to change and reach the idea.

Movement 4 – The Danger of the Search

And in searching and trying to become the “perfect church” we have often gone astray. In trying to reach the perfect church many experiments have gone awry. Remember the Oneida community I mentioned? One of the things the community practiced was joint and shared marriages, assigned marriages, and a basic form of eugenics. That doesn’t seem to me to be the kind of Church we are trying to be. Or some churches become so purpose driven that they lose any sense of the members. Or some churches focus on the new form of worship and lose sense of the community. Some churches work so hard to obtain a doctrinal purity that they lose sense of worship. We lose our focus as our zeal to become the perfect church. We become mired in the by-laws of perfection and lose the community emphasized in Acts. It is possible to go astray when trying to be that perfect church that we hope to become.

I think at times the Baptist get lost in this drive to be the perfect and ideal church. We can become so focused that we have cast others out who may disagree with us at one point or another. One church has different feelings about mission and another has different feelings about reading the Bible. A third church feels that only a particular baptism in a particular church is relevant and a fourth church does not emphasize predestination – to the chagrin of church number one and three. The sad thing is that each church is trying to do right by God, but will have nothing to do with the other churches

because the structure and the symbols and the practices are slightly different. We are so far from taking care of each other. We are so far of sharing with each other. It seems that with each attempt to reach this utopia church pushes us farther and farther away. But we still work, we still try to reach and we still attempt to become the ideal church, because when we get there we will feel safe, we will feel secure and our salvation will be assured. Luther said that security is one of the great idols and vices of the church – when we reach it we are farthest from the church. There is no security in giving up possession. There is no security in giving up power. There is not worldly security in the church perfect and ideal. The more we try to reach it, the further away it gets.

Movement 5 – The Resurrected Community

Yet I have a word for you and it is a good word. We are the perfect church. We are the community of Acts through the grace of God and through Christ. Through the actions of Christ and through our faith in Christ we can be the church we want to be. That is the hope and the power which we can find in this passage. Do you see what is in the very center of this passage? “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” You want to be a church, and then offer your testimony to Jesus. You want to be a church, then proclaim the grace and the hope you have through Christ. Remember who it is that brought you here: Christ. Remember why it is that you are here: the life you gained on the cross. It is our beacon, the cross and it calls us to the hill to be the light to the world. It is our hope, the cross, and it gives us the opportunity to be a different kind of community that cannot be created through by-laws, through process, through money, through purpose, through agendas or through piety. Our community is formed on our testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Christ, the stone which has been rejected by the world has become our corner stone, and that is the beginning of the ideal, the perfect Church.

My brothers and sisters, I don’t have any problem working with Episcopalians, Methodists, Catholics, or Presbyterians. I can worship with National Baptists, Conservative Baptists, General Association of Regular Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Southern Baptists, or Progressive Baptists. As long as they can hear my testimony and as long as I can hear theirs then we can, I swear to you we can be the holy, blessed community that we see in Acts.

That is the challenge. Not to obtain doctrinal purity but to listen to each other’s testimony of the resurrected Lord. Imagine a worship where someone shouts out that Christ is risen, and we say, “yes.” Imagine worship where the main focus is to hear and share how the resurrection is changing our own lives. Imagine a service where we hear and respond to the movement of the resurrection. Then the rule of worship would rule our faith. The way we worship will reflect our faith. Then our worship would shape our beliefs. Then we would be getting closer to becoming the blessed community. We can do it, we can reach it, resting on the assurance of the cross and the hope of the resurrection.

Movement 6 – Living the Proclamation

In being this community we witness to the world. I don’t think we can offer any tangible written message that will be as powerful as our actions. I don’t think we can witness to the world in any way with a greater impact than with our action. We don’t have a good history, but the grace of God says we can start again today. Today we can proclaim the resurrection of Christ, today we can share that proclamation and today we can hear that proclamation. The church in Acts lived out this kind of community, and the

result was not communism, nor socialism, nor communal living, but a fulfillment of the two great commandments; love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. In proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, and in offering that praise the first commandment is fulfilled. In listening to each other's testimony and the way that the resurrection is finding flesh in one's life is loving your neighbor. Imagine you are listening to the person next to you, and he says, "Christ is risen, and I am looking for that resurrection with my family; the stress is great now and I need hope." Imagine your neighbor says, "Christ is risen and I am looking for that resurrection with an addiction that has afflicted me." Imagine your neighbor says, "Christ is risen, and I am looking for that resurrection in affordable housing; we just lost our home and steady income." Imagine your neighbor says, "Christ is risen and I need the hope of the resurrection in my life." Now you can respond. Now you can offer something from your own life to your neighbor just as they did in Acts. That is living the resurrection. That is being a resurrection community. It holds an egalitarian nature to it. It holds a leveling nature to it. The scholar, Mislov Volf, talks about the nature of this church as reflecting the Trinity – and what better image for community could we find?

Lets be the ideal, the perfect church. Let's proclaim the resurrection with words and with action. Let's be the ideal, the perfect church based upon the bedrock of our risen Lord. Christ is risen, and we have hope. Christ is risen and we have promise. Christ is risen and we have life. Christ is risen indeed.

AMEN