

6-SESSION BIBLE STUDY
WITH VIDEO ACCESS



**BEN
MANDRELL**

TOGETHER

**COMMUNITY
THAT MARKED THE
ACTS 2 CHURCH**

TOGETHER

COMMUNITY THAT MARKED
THE ACTS 2 CHURCH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ben Mandrell is the president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources. Prior to coming to Lifeway, he pastored churches in Tennessee and Colorado. His pastor's heart and immense love for the church continue to be the clear motivations by which he leads. Ben preaches all over the United States and serves as a speaker at conferences and leadership/training events. With his wife, Lynley, he co-hosts *The Glass House* podcast—conversations that help cultivate healthy emotions and relationships for ministry leaders and their families.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to experience the uniquely necessary and uncommon togetherness of Christian community. Six sessions of study work through the applications of life together in Christ. The prayer for this study is that God will set new relational expectations among believers in local churches and foster a desire in individual believers to personally engage in Christian community according to those expectations.

GROUP STUDY

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with God's Word.

START

The group session will begin with a few questions designed to help you introduce the session's topic of study and encourage everyone to engage with the study.

WATCH

This section provides key statements from the video teaching, as well as blank space for you to take notes. Codes to access the teaching videos are included with your purchase of this book and can be found on the insert located at the back of the book.

DISCUSS

This section is the main component of the group session. The questions provided are designed to facilitate the group study of the session's topic. The goal is to help you better understand the community that marked the Acts 2 church and begin to personally relate to others that way in your local church context.

PERSONAL STUDY

Each group study is followed by the opportunity to reflect on the personal context you bring to the session's topic, two days of personal Bible study to help you think biblically about the topic, and a follow-up opportunity to help you personally respond to the topic. With biblical teaching and introspective questions, these segments work together to challenge you to grow in your understanding of God's Word and respond in faith and obedience.

PERSONAL CONTEXT

The personal study section begins with an opportunity to identify certain life lessons that have impacted your current views and relational practices in the community of faith. This will help you identify ways you struggle with the truth and approach the biblical text understanding your personal need.

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY 1 AND 2

The group and personal studies are complementary. These studies are meant to deepen your understanding of togetherness among believers and help you reflect upon and apply what you learn in the group session.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

The personal study section ends with questions that call attention to areas of focus for changes you need to make going forward.

TIPS FOR LEADING A SMALL GROUP

Follow these guidelines to prepare for each group session.

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE

Review the weekly material and group questions ahead of time. Be intentional about praying for each person in the group. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point your small group to Jesus each week through God's Word.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Create a comfortable environment. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and, therefore, not engaged in the group experience. Plan ahead by considering details like seating, temperature, lighting, food and drink, surrounding noise, and general cleanliness.

Thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. Some people may not notice your effort, but your preparation will help eliminate distractions. Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

INCLUDE OTHERS

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to invite new people to join your group and to include any visitors in the discussion. An inexpensive way to invite someone to get involved or to make first-time guests feel welcome is to give them their own copies of this Bible study book.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure that your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half of your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP WITH ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they are afraid you don't actually want to hear their answers or think you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending. When possible, build deeper friendships outside your regularly scheduled group time by planning a gathering or spontaneously inviting group members to join you for meals, fun activities, or projects around your home, church, or community.



SESSION 1

SEEING

GOD'S

VISION



Community is a
defining marker
of New Testament
Christianity.

GROUP STUDY

START

Welcome to session 1 of Together, "Seeing God's Vision."

Before you dive into the group study, introduce yourselves and share one reason why you decided to join this study on togetherness in the church.

In each week of our study, we'll see God's vision for our lives together in the church through the example of the very first church in Acts 2. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit would come, but before that happened, these believers were a pretty dysfunctional group. They had trust issues. They had anxiety and fear. They didn't really know how to do life together. But then, the Holy Spirit came like Jesus promised, and everything changed. Peter boldly preached the gospel to people from all over the world who had come to Jerusalem for Passover. The Spirit was at work in, through, and around them all.

READ ACTS 2:41-47. What do you see in the experience and example of the very first church that you want to see in the context of church life today?



Community
is a defining
marker
of New
Testament
Christianity.

Is there anything from their experience and example that, if it happened in your local church, would make you a little uncomfortable? Why?

Obviously, we live in a different time and a different culture than we read about in Acts 2. We're *together* in different circumstances. But God's vision for His church today is the same as it was for the early church in its very first days. As He was then, the Holy Spirit is at work now—in us, through us, and around us. The question is, will we open ourselves up to Him as He does that work?

To prepare for the video teaching, pray together and ask God to help each person understand and apply this truth.



WATCH

Use these statements to follow along as you watch the video teaching for session 1, and use the blank space to take additional notes.

There are four very clear pillars—the vision—that God put forth for the church: teaching, fellowship, forgiveness, and prayer.

ACTS 2:42

Authentic community is only going to happen if you bring the real you.

Every one of these four foundations requires an enormous amount of courage.

To access the video teaching sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.



GROUP STUDY

DISCUSS

Use these questions and prompts to discuss the video teaching.

What stood out to you personally in Ben's teaching?

What has been your attitude or perspective about the future of the local church lately? What hopes do you have for the future of the local church?

Would you say you're relating to others in the church in a way that aligns with God's vision for those relationships? Why?

Whatever lesser realities the local church has accepted instead of the greater reality God envisions are important to identify. But those lesser realities do not need to define the future of our faith communities. God's vision for the church today is the same as it was for the first church that came on the scene after Jesus died, rose, ascended to heaven, and sent His Spirit to indwell all who believe in Him. And that vision is realized through our devotion to the four pillars He set before us in the example of the early church in Acts 2:42—teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread (forgiveness), and prayer.

Which of the four pillars of the church—teaching, fellowship, forgiveness, and prayer—is your heart most drawn to? Why?

Which one do you struggle with most? How so?

There were numerous good pursuits the first church could have chosen to devote themselves to. The needs of this overnight megachurch were certainly many. What worship songs would they sing now that they knew salvation had come in Jesus Christ? Who would lead kids' ministry? And many of those pursuits would have surely been easier. But prioritizing those pursuits over devotion to teaching, fellowship, forgiveness, and prayer would have neglected what was *best*.

Why is devotion to biblical teaching critical to the health of the church body?
What about fellowship? Forgiveness? Prayer?

Ben said, “Authentic community is only going to happen if you bring the real you.” How does our willingness to be real with each other in the church impact the effectiveness of the four pillars of the church?

Ben’s story about pastoring churches and then realizing that very few people, if any, really knew him illuminates the lack of authenticity many of us experience and accept in the context of the local church. It’s easier to do church activities than it is to *be* the church in relational vulnerability. God’s vision, though, is that we each bring our real selves every time we gather.

Why do you think we often struggle to be real about our needs—whether we need wisdom, support, provision, or help facing temptation or overcoming sin—as we gather together in the community of faith?

Ben said it takes enormous courage to see past the fear and awkwardness to walk in the clarity of God’s vision for the church. In regard to the four pillars lived out as our model in Acts 2:42, where do you need courage?

Name a few steps we each can take to help the local fellowship of believers see God’s vision for the church and walk in it.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

PERSONAL CONTEXT

Where I Am

Every church attendee carries their own unique history, present circumstances, and future expectations that impact the way they understand the church and their role in it. Identifying those factors makes space for God to address, affirm, and correct them according to His Word. In *Together: Community That Marked the Acts 2 Church*, each week's personal study will give you the opportunity to identify how these factors impact your perspective.

Consider and respond to the prompts below in light of the question, "What is God's vision for the church?"

The view I inherited:

How my view has changed over time:

Factors that have shaped my view:

Reasons I have sometimes been discouraged:

Questions I have:

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my concerns.
See if there is any offensive way in me;
lead me in the everlasting way.*

PSALM 139:23-24

PERSONAL STUDY 1

What Scripture Teaches

*“May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.
May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.”*

JOHN 17:21

While our personal histories might at times cloud our view of the local church, God’s vision remains crystal clear. Jesus prayed that all believers would be together, as one, in Him. His vision is that our unity would be palpable in every generation and culture, like stars shining brightly in the darkest night sky.

What are some groups or places in your life where there is a strong sense of community?

How did that unity develop?

How is God’s vision for unity in the church different than the unity you find in your neighborhood, work, or civic organizations?

The unity experienced in the church is unique. It isn't built on a political ideology, a career path, a favorite football team, or a love of Mexican food or pickle ball! It doesn't depend on our agreement on every matter. No one is excluded because of their background, personality, culture, or race.

And that incredible bond of unity will be the eternal reality for every person who trusts in Jesus Christ. The innumerable multitude of believers "from every nation, tribe, people, and language" will stand together "before the throne and before the Lamb," crying out praises to Him in perfect unity (Revelation 7:9-10).

If unity among believers is an ultimate, eternal reality, then why was Jesus concerned enough to pray about it in John 17?

Togetherness in Christ is an inevitable eternal outcome. Yet it has no earthly guarantee.

Our human nature conflicts with life in the Spirit. We live in a world filled with loneliness, isolation, unrest, and individualism. Even the most faithful believers struggle to reflect eternal realities in relationships here on earth. That is as true today as it was when Jesus prayed for unity in John 17.

So how can God's vision for His church be carried out by sinful people here on this sin-cursed earth? No perfect church exists. Yet God equipped and empowered the first church, in part, to provide a working model for the rest of us to follow. Their example is God's design for our churches.

READ ACTS 2:36-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

ACTS 2:42

The first church to gather after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension is a picture of God's vision for all local churches in every generation. They weren't perfect—they were flawed people just like us. But when they turned to Jesus in faith and the Spirit began to work in them and among them, everything changed. These flawed people, most of whom had previously abandoned or rejected Jesus altogether, experienced a radical reframing of unity and commitment.

In tomorrow's study, we'll zoom in and take a look at the practical applications of their newfound unity and commitment in detail. Today, however, let's take a 30,000-foot view of the early church model.

READ the following passages and describe the level of commitment and unity among Jesus's followers prior to Acts 2.

John 6:60-66

Mark 14:32-40

Mark 14:50-52

Mark 9:33-34

NOW REREAD ACTS 2:36-47. Describe the commitment and unity of Jesus's followers in the first church. What was different now?

Based on the Acts 2 church model, what is possible for your local church?

When the Holy Spirit indwelt the members of the first church, His next act was to reframe their understanding of unity, family, and commitment. Their experience is our example, preserved in God's Word to reframe our expectations some 2,000 years later.

We live in an easy-bake culture where investments of time and commitment are seen as tying us down and limiting our options. This approach to life has bled into the church. The reality, though, is that commitment to the church is the only way we can experience the full benefits of the church.

What is your responsibility in carrying out God's vision for the church?

We learn in Acts 2 that people couldn't stay away. The devotion among believers to God and each other was so compelling that outsiders came to faith and joined their group each and every day. As they did, those new members joined God's people in living out the beautiful, though imperfect, expression of God's vision for His church.

This was not simply a reality God intended to occur one time and one time only. He means for His church to experience it at every moment. He means for *you* to experience it now.

We will find the fullest expression of the Holy Spirit's power when we are most closely aligned to God's design. Then, we will experience community unlike any other.

PERSONAL STUDY 2

What Scripture Teaches

Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.

ACTS 2:43-44

If the first church had a website, the tagline “Together” would have absolutely been on brand. The community of faith in its earliest days would serve as the standard for every additional local church going forward.

REREAD ACTS 2:42. What was the basis of their unity?

When you work on a puzzle, the job becomes 100 times easier if you look at the top of the box. The puzzle maker has given you a picture of what it’s supposed to look like. You are not creating something in the dark.

Similarly, God has not left us without the top of the box when it comes to church. Local churches all look and feel a little different because people are unique and so are their cultures, but God’s design for a healthy church does not change. Acts 2:42 gives us the picture we are to emulate. God’s vision for every body of believers involves commitment from its members to engage together in gospel teaching, fellowship, forgiveness, and prayer. And these four components for church health should be seen in all of the diverse congregations scattered across the globe. Let’s take a look at each aspect of devotion shared by members of the first church in greater depth.

They were a learning community.

The day Jesus announced Himself as the Messiah, He went to the synagogue, which was the place of public learning. There, He unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read aloud the ancient words of God (Luke 4:16-19). Jesus never stopped giving learning opportunities to anyone within earshot. From sermons and stories for large crowds to private tutorials for a select few, Jesus was devoted to teaching—and the church continued to follow His example as they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42).

What do these verses communicate about the priority of teaching and learning gospel truths?

1 Peter 2:2

2 Timothy 4:2-4

Hebrews 4:12

Psalm 19:7-11

Teaching and learning should always hold a prominent place in our churches. When a baby is delivered into the world, the first thing he or she needs is nourishment. When a brand new Christian is born, the first thing he or she needs is teaching. And like the infant’s relationship with milk and nourishment, that need will never end! Even the most mature saints among us devote themselves to continual learning.

The early church was a thoughtful community—and that is God’s design for every local church. As we learn from God’s Word, we grow spiritually as individuals and *together*, unifying the church around His truth and through His love.

How has God energized you lately through the teaching of His Word in your local church?

They were a caring and sharing community.

The commitment the first Christians had to each other is striking. In fact, the direct application of Acts 2:44-45 in church life today feels so mind-boggling that many prefer to dismiss it rather than emulate it.

In the original language of the New Testament, the word for *fellowship* in verse 42 means “close association involving mutual interests and sharing.”¹ In other words, “fellowship” means more than “they liked to hang out” or “they enjoyed grabbing coffee.” The relationships in this community involved willing, voluntary sacrifice (vv. 44-45). Galatians 6 offers us additional insight.

READ GALATIANS 6:10. List any words or phrases that are instructive to you. How does this verse help you understand God’s design for fellowship?

When have you seen the commitment to caring and sharing demonstrated in church life? How does the willingness to share needs and meet needs unify the church?

They were a forgiveness-first community.

Just as the early church’s devotion to fellowship was about far more than hanging out at a local taco stand, so was their devotion to the “breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42). They gathered in each other’s houses regularly, even daily, to eat “with joyful and sincere hearts” (v. 46). These meals would often end in remembering Jesus’s death and resurrection as they took the Lord’s Supper together. The broken bread and the sip of wine were symbolic of Jesus’s shattered body and spilled blood, poured out for our sins.

In what way does the “breaking of bread” in communion unify the church?

1. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

Breaking bread “from house to house” (v. 46) gives the sense of an intimate, informal practice of recentering life on the gospel through our shared relationship with Jesus and our communal relationship with each other. The conscious act of confessing sin acknowledges the need for sustaining grace. The early Christians took the Lord’s Supper (also called Communion) together—not out of need for ritual but out of a desperate desire for felt forgiveness.

READ JAMES 5:16. Respond to the following idea: No sacrifice you make for the Lord is greater than your readiness to set others free from their offenses.

The first church, which serves as our model of God’s design, took the Lord’s Supper as a meaningful and tangible reminder of the grace they had received from God and the grace they were called to extend to each other. The continual practice of grace and forgiveness solidified their unity—and it will solidify ours today.

They were a praying community.

Have you experienced prayer as a unifying force in your local church? Why does prayer have that effect?

As important as friendships were, the early believers understood the health of their faith community would be determined by the strength of their connection to God—so they devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42). When conversation with God is interrupted, it does not take long for relationships to be interrupted with feelings of apathy or even anger at other people. On the other hand, the stronger your vertical fellowship is, the stronger your horizontal fellowship will be.

Why were the members of the first church devoted in these four ways? They were obedient to the call to be the church. What about you? Will you be devoted to learning, sharing and caring, forgiving, and praying in the context of a local body of believers? Living within God’s design isn’t casual, it is living in the way of Jesus.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Where I'm Going

For the church to be healthy, every single person has to take responsibility for the four areas of devotion the early church demonstrated in Acts 2:42. In other words, the Christian faith, which is lived out in church community, is something to be practiced—you have to continually work at it. Just like an athlete who stops practicing will lose his or her edge, the Christian who neglects one of these four key areas will suffer and hold the church back from operating fully in God's design.

Consider each area of your commitment to the local church, and record steps you can take to move forward as a devoted member.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching,

What are you doing to grow your mind toward God?

What one step can you take to expand your learning this week?

... to the fellowship,

Are you making room in your life for relationships to grow into authentic friendships? Or are you skimming the surface of fellowship?

What one step can you take to develop your spiritual relationships?

... to the breaking of bread,

What one step can you take in your confession with other people?

... and to prayer.

What one step can you take to build your prayer life?

A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.

GALATIANS 5:9

The Glass House

WITH BEN & LYNLEY MANDRELL



Navigating Ministry and Life

Ministry leaders and their families live in a “glass house”—an environment where they are left vulnerable to the stress of ministry and the criticism of others and feel the spotlight on their personal weaknesses.

Lifeway’s *The Glass House* is a space where ministry leaders will shed light on the challenges they often don’t feel permission to talk about. Listeners who work in the trenches of church life will feel seen and gain tools to navigate ministry and life. Those who live outside this “glass house” will better understand what it’s like to dwell there.

Join Ben and Lynley Mandrell for these shockingly confessional—yet redemptive—conversations.

Lifeway podcasts



Discover God's vision for the church.

The church described in Acts 2 is quite different from what most of us experience today. Has God changed? Or are we missing something?



This study of the early church offers some powerful insights on commitment, fellowship, prayer, giving, unity, and more. Observing the common practices of the first believers can inspire us to pursue a deeper connection to God and His mission.

- See yourself as a member of the family of God, where you are known and loved.
- Experience depth within community.
- Learn to give your life away in service to Jesus and others.
- Help your church become a blessing to your city.
- Maintain the unity of the body in shared commitment and mission.

STUDYING ON YOUR OWN?

To enrich your study experience, be sure to access the videos available through a redemption code printed in this *Bible Study Book*.

LEADING A GROUP?

Each group member will need a *Together Bible Study Book*, which includes video access. Because all participants will have access to the video content, you can choose to watch the videos outside of your group meeting if desired. Or, if you're watching together and someone misses a group meeting, they'll have the flexibility to catch up.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bible Study eBook with Video Access

005851134 **\$19.99**

DVD Set

005851573 **\$29.99**

More resources can be found online at lifeway.com/togetherstudy.

Price and availability subject to change without notice.

IS THIS HOW CHURCH IS SUPPOSED TO BE?

The first generation of believers embraced the idea of “church” in a way that impacted every aspect of their lives and empowered the gospel to spread far and wide. Through this six-session Bible study on the foundations and rhythms of the early church, we can learn to follow their example. We can go all in with our faith and commitment to church community. We can live the truly dynamic, impactful life God has always intended for Christians to live. Discover how being deeply connected in a community of believers can transform our lives, our cities, and the world.

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