

West Valley Church  
1/22/12

**Awkward Family Photos, Part One**  
**The Picture of Learning**  
**Acts 2:42-47**

We've all seen them, and many of us have them hanging in our homes or our parents' homes: awkward family photos. The photographer arranged us by height, tilted our heads, placed our hand on someone's shoulder, and made us stare into blinding lights. Too often the result was an awkward staged photo that looked anything but natural, but most of us have had the family photo at some time.

I want to show you some examples of family photos that didn't quite come out right. These are from a website called [awkwardfamilyphotos.com](http://awkwardfamilyphotos.com), whose authors have also published a book. Before I show these, it might be good to articulate what qualifies for an awkward family photo. One would be being forced into an awkward pose. It can be caused by something in the background, or by an outrageous style of clothes, or an unusual taste in décor. It can be caused by snapping the photo at just the wrong moment. A common example is the ugly Christmas sweater. We've all had those – but sometimes we can take it to an extreme: . Often we send out a family photo as a Christmas card. What better way to promote peace and harmony (hint – look closely at the stuffed wildlife they are posing behind). Not exactly reflective of a “silent night.” Sometimes the snap of the photo is at the wrong moment, like when this mom is caught in the nap: . Any mom can relate to that, I think. It's exhausting to get your whole family dressed up and to the studio in one piece! Although, it might be good to make sure you actually want to be together for the photo . I can hear the photographer saying, “a little closer, please....” Here's an example of a fashion statement that must have come from the 80's . Could those shoulders get any larger? Did the dress come with an air pump? Instead of saying she put on that dress, it might be more accurate to say she “installed” it. And finally, here's a picture of one family's children, and the little girl in this photo seems to have something to really smile about. There's a sampling – we'll share more with you on another Sunday.

We've all had them done at some time or another, right? My parents have one hanging in their house from when my brother and I were teenagers. That was in the seventies, because we've both got on our polyester shirts with the really big collars on them, and we're wearing bell bottomed jeans. My mom is sitting in the middle with my brother and I placing our hands on her shoulders with our heads tilted awkwardly toward her. And then, hovering in the background behind us, is a large, semi-transparent ghost of my father's head. Have you seen those? Pretty

creepy. If you behave, I might see if I can get a copy of it and show it to you before this series is over.

We can all relate; these photos, intended to display our families, end up feeling more awkward than natural. But I wonder if sometimes, to those outside the church, the picture they see of us is similar. Instead of a natural image of a healthy family of God, they see people posing. How can we move from being posed in an awkward photo to the real thing? What would that “look” like? Are we presenting a natural picture of the church as a family, or are we trying to look like something we’re really not?

The Bible gives us a family portrait of the church that is anything but awkward – it is very natural. It is in Acts, chapter two, verse 42-47. We’re going to use this series to challenge ourselves to avoid posing. We want the picture of our church to be natural and not awkward. This is what the passage says:

“All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything - they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47, nlt)

This is the Biblical example of a healthy church. Now, there were circumstances that were completely different than we face today—no one had ever heard of a Christian before. There were no Christian churches in existence yet—there were Jewish synagogues and the Jewish Temple, and then a whole bunch of pagan religions and mythology. In just a short time, the Christians were going to be hunted down and killed for being Christians. We certainly don’t face that in this country. But while the circumstances were different, the principals and practices of the Christian church are the model for us even today. That’s what we are going to learn in this series.

Typically, when people have family photos, they are in one of two places: either a formal setting like a studio or an informal setting, like the home. Well, this portrait of the church in that passage is taken in two different places as well, and it’s very important that we see this. One is taken at the Temple – which was the formal place for worship to happen. The other was in their homes. “Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread together in different homes...” (vs. 46, cev)

That's important to notice—they worshipped together as a large group in the Temple, and then they met together in small groups in each other's homes. And that's what we need to keep in mind throughout this entire series: As West Valley Church, it's important that we practice being the church in our formal place of worship: here at this building, but also that we gather together smaller groups in homes, which is why our Growth Groups are so important. Our Growth Group information is at the ministry station, it's on our web page, and in the weekly information guide. I'd strongly encourage you to pick a group and sign up. So everything that we talk about should be happening in both of those settings, okay? That is our biblical portrait, and that's what we want to look like, too.

What we want to look at today is the first thing we see in this portrait of the church: “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...” (Acts 2:42a, nlt)

There are three characteristics of the church that we want to have if we want to avoid having an awkward family photo. The first is

### 1. Unified

They were unified. That verse says “all the believers.” It doesn't say “most of the believers,” or “some of the believers,” it says “all.” They were unified in their commitment.

We're talking about biblical unity—and that's different than just union—you know, just being together. You can be together in the same place and still not have unity. There can be union *without* unity: tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline. You will have union, but I promise there won't be unity!

Unity is vital to the church. Disunity is the devil's playground. You get believers mad at each other, or selfishly looking out for their own interests and the church will have her legs cut out from under her.

We talked about this last week, but it's worth noting again—the Bible says, “Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.” (Ephesians 4:3, nlt) We have a responsibility to be unity-keepers. We are told to make EVERY EFFORT to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. To sow disunity, or to nurse it in your heart, grieves the Holy Spirit. Unity doesn't mean we will always agree, but we love and respect each other and seek the best for others instead of ourselves. In another place, the Bible says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Romans 14:19, niv). I honestly believe that if we worked as hard at this as Scripture tells us to, then we would do everything we could for the success of this church. Especially if you are a member of this church, you are committed

to being a part of this church and loving each other, no matter how hard it might be (and believe me, sometimes it's really hard to love each other). Hebrews says, "Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14, nlt) The unity that should characterize us is all encompassing—it permeates all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do. In a healthy church, the believers are all committed to each other because they have the most important things in common: "For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all." (Ephesians 4:4-6, nlt)

There's a story of a man who went to an asylum for the criminally insane. He was a bit surprised to find that there were three guards to take care of a hundred inmates. He said to one of the guards, "Aren't you afraid that the inmates will unite, overcome you, and escape?" The guard said "Lunatics never unite." So we have a choice—be Christians—be the church, or be lunatics. Christians unite. Lunatics don't. Don't be a lunatic!

Again, let's look at that first part of the picture of the church: "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." (Acts 2:42a, nlt)

That tells me that not only were they unified, they were

## 2. *Passionately committed*

They devoted themselves. That means that they were not only committed to it, there was a devotion to their commitment. It wasn't just a duty; it was something they were passionately committed to. There's a couple of things about the original language that are worth pointing out here, because it doesn't quite make it through in translation. The words mean that they were constantly diligent with all their strength to being committed without wavering or giving up. It is written with what is called an "imperfect tense," which means that it never stops. They weren't committed part of the time. It was a characteristic that was constant and was ongoing. It wasn't occasional or on and off. It was a continual, passionate, commitment. Are you getting the point here? And what's interesting is that the imperfect tense is used for *all of the verbs* in this passage—eight times in these five verses: the people continued to be in awe; God continued to work wonders among them, they continued to be committed to the apostles' teachings, they continued to give to those in need, they continued to meet together, they continued to be filled with joy and to worship God and they continued to see new people coming to faith in Christ.

Our commitment to Christ and to each other in the church isn't just something we do once a week, and it's not just something we *do*—it's something we *are*. This

commitment means to do and be, to be and to do, do-be-do-be-do.

Seriously, my question to you is, how is your commitment? Are you *devoted* to Christ and the church? And by “church” I don’t mean the institution, I mean this body, this group of followers of Jesus? Jesus Himself said, “Staying with it--that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; you'll be saved.” (Luke 21:19, the message) Are you?

If you were to take a picture of the church, that’s what you would see—a passionate commitment to stand firm. It wouldn’t matter when you took the picture—you could sneak up on them when they weren’t watching—you’d still get that picture. They would be doing what the Apostle Paul told us to do: “Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong.” (1 Corinthians 16:13, nlt)

What would be the picture of your life? When it comes to your faith, would there be a different picture on Sunday than there is on Monday? Does your commitment shift and fade in and out, or are you devoted to it? That’s what the Bible expects us to be, devoted: “With all these things in mind, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter.” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, nlt)

So every week, part of what we do here is remind ourselves of this, and we’ll continue to: “Therefore, I will always remind you about these things—even though you already know them and are standing firm in the truth you have been taught. And it is only right that I should keep on reminding you as long as I live.” (2 Peter 1:12-13, nlt)

The picture of the church is one that is unified, passionately committed to

### **3. The Word of God**

Let’s look at that verse again: “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...” (Acts 2:42a, nlt)

The “apostles’ teaching” is the Word of God. There wasn’t a New Testament yet—it hadn’t been written down—at least not for another ten years or more. But we know without a doubt that the Apostles were teaching what had been communicated to them first by Jesus when they walked with him and he taught them, and then by the Holy Spirit as he reminded them. That’s what Jesus said would happen: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,

will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”  
(John 14:23-26, nlt)

So the Apostle’s teaching is the Bible, the Word of God. That is what the church is to be devoted herself to.

It was the Word of God that was at work when you became a Christian. The Bible says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23, niv) The moment you believed in Christ (meaning that you confessed your sin and accepted Christ’s sacrifice on the cross in your place), at that moment the Word of God came alive in you because of the new life you have in Christ. So God’s Word was at work in you when you became a Christian, and it is still at work in you now. That’s why the Bible says, “. . .you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, niv)

If it were the words of people, simply written words on a page, it would be nothing more than a representation of man’s thoughts. They might even be good thoughts, but you would merely be exchanging some of your thinking for some of someone else’s, right? What you need is God’s Word—God’s thoughts—because they have the power to transform. God’s Word will work in you and then through you to the lives of those around you. God’s Word will go to that place where your mind and God’s spirit meet. In describing itself, the Bible says, “The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12, gnb)

Do you see that? It takes the thoughts of God and places them in the soul of man. When you were dead in your spirit, the words in this book were no better than words in any other book. They weren’t alive in you; that’s because these words are Spirit-driven and you were dead in your spirit. But when you are alive in Christ, those same words are suddenly empowered by the Spirit and translated into your thinking. They’ve always been alive, but now they are alive *in you*. And those words will continue to keep you on the right track and making right choices. The Psalmist says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.” (Psalm 119:9, NIV) And in the New Testament we are told that Christ keeps us clean by the word: “. . . Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” (Ephesians 5:25-26, NIV) That’s why Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (Luke 11:28, NIV)

So if you are a believer in Jesus, *you must be devoted to God’s Word*. That’s the picture of a Christian, and together we must be devoted to the Word of God—that’s

the picture of the Church. That all of us are devoted to the Apostle's teaching, the Word of God.

If we say we are committed to that, but we don't continually practice it, then the picture that the world will see of us is pretty awkward—in a pose trying to look natural when we are the furthest thing from it.

The world doesn't need any more reasons to say we are not real. Instead of an awkward family photo, let's show the real thing. Let's all—together all of us in unity—be devoted—passionately committed—to the Apostle's teaching, the Word of God.

*Pray*

That's why we have community groups going on during each service—so you can attend one and worship the other. That's why we offer you the Foundations classes on Sunday afternoon. That's we have the Growth Groups for you, that you can sign up for according to your interest and your schedule. To help all of us be united in our passionate commitment to the Word of God. Take advantage of it and sign up for something!