

West Valley Church
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Awkward Family Photos, Part Three **Acts 2:42-47**

I think we all cringed a little at that because it hits too close to home. Of all the things that Christians do, sharing their faith can be one of the most awkward. In fact, often that's the least it is—our attempts to share our faith can go from awkward to downright offensive. From leaving pieces of paper on a diner counter with our bill to shouting at people on street corners to everything in between, we struggle at it and often make a bad impression in the process. That's the part of the awkward family photo that we are going to look at today.

Church directories are chock full of family photos that fit what we're talking about during this series. The photographer arranged us by height, tilted our heads, placed our hand on someone's shoulder, and made us stare into blinding lights and then told us to "look natural" and smile. The result was an awkwardly posed portrait that didn't look natural at all.

Today we are in part three of our series called "Awkward Family Photos." There are all kinds of reasons a photo can be awkward—it can have to do with a pose, or the expressions on faces, or the setting the photo is taken in, or what is being worn, or what's going on in the background. Let me give you some examples of family photos that are awkward. These are from a website called awkwardfamilyphotos.com.

For example, this photo seems like a nice enough couple; I just don't get what they're trying to say about themselves. Really? An M-16 with a bayonet on it, and a parrot?

Sometimes the secret to a picture is like the secret of real estate: location, location, location. At least that's what this photographer thought when he located these people into this pose. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that sometimes families go a little overboard when they prepare their family Christmas photo. I think that might be the case here. And here... Wait—look at the guy on the left; isn't that Scott Williams? Some photos show children in all their sweet innocence, while other photos of children can be downright scary. Did you ever see "The Shining"? And finally, all I can say is "this poor boy" because I have no idea what's going on here. A giant rubik's cube, a small globe, and a giant scarfy looking bow? This boy is going to have issues I think.

We've all got these in our family photo albums or on our walls—awkward photos. 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; trying to act like something they're not, leaving an awkward impression. So 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's the very picture of health. It is in Acts, chapter two, verse 42-47. We're using this series to challenge ourselves to avoid posing. We want the picture of West Valley Church to be natural and not awkward. So look at 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)

Now remember that we said that there are two places that these pictures are taken in: 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 see: they worshipped together as a large group in the Temple, and then they met together in small groups in each other's homes. That's why at West Valley Church, it's important that we practice being the church in our formal place of worship in this building, but also that we gather together in smaller groups in homes, which is why we have our Growth Groups. Information for our groups 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. As Pastor Keith said, there are two groups left that have room, so you will want to sign up for those fast.

So far, we've seen that a picture of the church is of believers who are unified, passionately committed together to God's Word. We've seen that the church is worshiping, praying, and sharing together in communion. Today we want to see the next picture. It actually starts earlier in verse 41, and then we see that it's continued in verse 47: “Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.” (Acts 2:41, nlt) “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.” (verse 47)

Healthy churches grow because they continue to reach people with the Good News of God’s Love through Jesus Christ. A healthy picture of the church is a church that is seeing more and more people become a part of the community of God—more and more people whose lives are being transformed by Jesus Christ. Here’s the amazing thing about what we read: As people who were not Christians saw the Christians behaving naturally like they were supposed to, non-Christians wanted to be a part of it. That should still be the case today. Unfortunately, many do not want to be a part because they see us saying one thing and doing another. They see us as judgmental and angry. Yet they *still* want to believe.

According to a recent study, doctrine and church beliefs were found to be the most important reasons why adults switch churches. For those who have regularly attended more than one church as an adult, 89 percent indicated they would select a new church on the basis of what the church says it believes. Next in line of importance is the preaching (87 percent), with the authenticity of the church members and the pastors coming in as a close third (86 percent).

The following factors are also considered when looking for a new church:

Worship style (80 percent)

Care for community (76 percent)

Evidence of God's work and changed lives (74 percent)

Church members with whom to build relationships (73 percent) *Audrey Barrick, "What Church Switchers Look for in a Church," www.christianpost.com (4-10-07)*

Those are all things that were going in Acts 2, and that’s the picture of healthy, growing churches today. The Christians were unified, passionately committed to God’s Word, worshipping, praying, sharing meals together, and taking care of each other. And when they were doing that, some spiritual dynamics were taking place that led folks who didn’t know Jesus to want to know him. As they watched, they wanted what they saw.

Let’s look at what those dynamics were. The first was that as people who were not Christians watched the church,

1. They sensed God’s Presence

God’s promise has always been that his presence would be near his people; he has always wanted to be close to us. Way back in the Old Testament he promised: "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14, niv). He really does want to be near to us: “There you will look for the LORD your God,

and if you search for him with all your heart, you will find him.” (Deuteronomy 4:29, gnb) That’s why, in the New Testament, Jesus’ half-brother James wrote this: “Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Clean up your lives, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you people who can't make up your mind.” (James 4:8, cev)

This is what happens when Christians are committed to Christ, his Word, and to each other, loving God and others—people who are not Christians want to be a part of that; they sense God’s presence among the church and they change their minds and become Christians. Their experience is like the story of Jacob way back in the Old Testament: Jacob woke up and said, "The LORD is here! He is in this place, and I didn't know it!" (Genesis 28:16, gnb)

In fact, that’s how they will hear the message and understand it. The Apostle Paul said, “But if some unbelieving outsiders walk in on a service where people are speaking out God's truth, the plain words will bring them up against the truth and probe their hearts. Before you know it, they're going to be on their faces before God, recognizing that God is among you.” (1 Corinthians 14:24-25, the message)

That’s one reason that a healthy church sees new people entering a relationship with Jesus Christ—because as the church is healthy, people sense God’s Presence among them.

In Acts we also see that

2. They Understood the Message

You know, it’s important that we as individuals and as a church communicate this great news about God’s love for us in ways in which our culture can understand it. If we use weird jargon or archaic language, things will get lost in translation. Some companies have learned that the hard way. For instance, when Gerber started selling baby food in Africa, they used the same packaging as in the US, with the beautiful baby on the label. Later they learned why sales wouldn’t take off. In Africa, since most people can’t read English, companies usually put pictures on the label of the food that’s inside.

The Coors Beer company took its slogan, “Turn it loose” to Spanish speaking audiences, and it didn’t work so well, the Spanish language translated it, “suffer from diarrhea.”

Clairol introduced the “Mist Stick” - a curling iron—into Germany, only to find out that “mist” is slang for manure. Not too many Germans had use for the “Manure Stick.”

In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name into "Schweppes Toilet Water."

The name Coca-Cola in China was first rendered as Ke-kou-ke-la. Unfortunately, the Coke company did not discover until after thousands of signs had been printed that the phrase means "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax" depending on the dialect.

Also in Chinese, the Kentucky Fried Chicken slogan "finger-lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off."

Pepsi's "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" in China translated into "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave."

Messages can get lost in translation but we can't afford to let the most important message: the Good News of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ—we can't let one word of that get lost. We've got to clearly translate it for this generation in ways they can understand. We have very good news to share; that God loves every single person, forgives their sin, and gives them the power to keep from sinning. He gives us the opportunity and ability to live an abundant life through His Son, Jesus Christ and make a difference in this world. This is great news! We are no longer victims of circumstance. We are no longer left to make the best of this life on our own. We now have a life of purpose in Christ. This is great news! That's what "Gospel" means—"Good News." That is what we are called to share, it is the good news. Too often the picture the church gives is "bad news." We either judge others for their sin, or we live such hypocritical lives that we are an example of bad news. But it's *good news*! We want to live out that message loud and clear. West Valley Church desires to show genuine love and concern for people, especially those who have yet to respond to the Good News of God's love. People matter to God, and therefore matter to us. In order to fulfill the Great Commission, we are committed to cultural relevance, community service and outreach, welcoming all, and advancing missions both locally and throughout the world. (Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 14:23; Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) (That's one of our core values!)

Right before that passage we read in Acts, the Holy Spirit was poured out on believers. Before that happened, Jesus promised his disciples that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to do one thing specifically: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8, niv) Power to do what? So when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, what did they do? They spoke in languages that they had never learned, but that all the crowds in attendance that day understood. God translated the Good News into people's own languages, so that the message would be heard by everyone. And that day over 3000 people joined the church. Do you think the reason that God gives his Spirit has changed since then? We think the Holy Spirit filling us is for

our own comfort and benefit, which is nice to have, but according to what we read that's not the main reason; God gives us His Holy Spirit so we can be witnesses.

And by the way, how many of the disciples were filled with the Spirit? All of them. And then the disciples all sat in their chairs and just let Preacher Peter do all the talking, right? No, they were ALL speaking in these languages, sharing the good news. Peter just addressed the entire crowd, but they were *all* addressing the people. The same thing is true today—while some of us *do* preach, *all of us* are supposed to share the message of God's love in the language the people around us can understand.

In fact, by filling us with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was giving *us* the power to do what he commanded and commissioned us to do. This is what he said to the disciples and to us: "Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: 'God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'" (Matthew 28:18-19, the message) The reason God gives us his Holy Spirit is to give us the power to live like God's people in order to present God's purposes to people! (repeat) The reason we are made holy is not so we can sit back and feel good about ourselves—that's called self-righteousness. Jesus and unchurched people both can't stand self-righteousness. God gives us the Holy Spirit so that we live what we believe; so that we have credibility with people who want to see if it really works.

That leads us to see the last dynamic that drew people to Jesus, and that's that

3. The message was demonstrated

When we as God's people are acting naturally as the Holy Spirit moves in us and among us, doing the things together that we read about, then others can see a difference in us. Why? Because our actions back up our words. We live out what we say we believe, and so our words have credibility. In Ezekiel 36:27 God says, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to keep my laws and decrees." (Ezekiel 36:27, niv) Other people will sense God's presence among us and they will understand the message and see it by the way we live and by the way we love each other and them. Jesus said "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39, nlt)

We love God and we love people, and when we are doing that, other people naturally want to be a part of that. There's nothing awkward about it. That's why Jesus said, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are

my disciples--when they see the love you have for each other." (John 13:34-35, the message)

So whenever we get together, whether in large groups like this or in growth groups in our homes, when people who haven't been introduced to Jesus join us they can sense God's presence and hear the message and see the reality of him in our lives.

We live in a culture that desperately needs to see who Christians really are. If you added up all the non-Christians in America, their total would be the fifth largest populated nation on earth. 42% of Americans under 40 have never participated in a faith community of any kind. That's nearly one of every two! That's approaching the picture of the church in the book of Acts. At that time, 100% of the people had never participated in a faith community. So when they saw the real picture of believers they wanted to be a part of it. That can happen today, too.

That's the appeal of a natural picture of Christians. Too often people see a different picture. Of that group of people in the US that are under 40, 20% of them were once involved in a faith community, but *never* intend to return because they saw an awkward picture. They saw division, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy. They saw posers.

My question is, what do they see in you and me? What do they see in us?

If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian, take a good look at us. But know this: we are doing our best to live out what we believe so you can see what it's really like. We aren't perfect, but that's the point! We are honestly telling you we need Jesus too.

And if you are a Christian, what are you communicating to those who are not? It's time you told them and showed them: Jesus is real and he does transform lives and communities. Like us. Like ours.