

The Holy Spirit: Creator of Community | Acts 2:42-47

O God, the Holy Spirit, come to us, and among us; come as the wind, and cleanse us; come as the fire, and burn; come as the dew, and refresh; convict, convert, and consecrate our hearts and lives to our great good and to your even greater glory; this we ask for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Let me read the passage again:

“Occasionally they spent some time listening to the apostles' teaching and, when they could, they met together for fellowship, for the breaking of bread and for prayer. Awe came upon some of them. But there were no signs and wonders. All who believed were separated into groups and kept themselves apart in all they did; they would hoard their possessions and goods and show indifference to those in need. Day by day, they went about their lives as individuals, only meeting weekly or fortnightly in the temple. They broke bread at home alone and ate their food with cold and empty hearts, giving token thanks to God. They were held in contempt by all the people. And day by day their numbers dwindled and it seemed that few were being saved.”

Did you spot the difference? The picture Luke paints of the Church at the end of Acts 2 is a picture of a Christian community, which only the Holy Spirit can create. What we've got to remember is that this passage is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. Luke isn't saying that if we do certain things (read the Bible, have fellowship, break bread and pray), you'll automatically have the perfect church. Don't get me wrong, doing these things won't hurt! But, what Luke is saying is that these things are signs, proofs, pieces of evidence pointing to the reality of a Spirit-created community. It's perfectly possible for a church to have the form of godliness without the inner power of it. *Our* efforts and *our* vision can't create a Christian community. All we can do is work with God, praying, “Come, Holy Spirit!”

It's easy to idealise the early Church in Acts. We often forget that it had its struggles like all churches do. There was greed (cf. 5:1-11). There was complaining (cf. 6:1). There were controversies (cf. 15:1-2). There were arguments (cf. 15:36-41). All that to say, then, that the Church has always been messy because it's always been made up of messy people like you and me. What these verses from Acts 2 offer us is a tantalising glimpse of what is possible for the Church with the Spirit in charge. Therefore, in the time left, I want to draw out from this passage seven marks of a Spirit-created community—seven things that Luke says we should expect to see from a church in which the Holy Spirit occupies the driver's seat.

1) Devotion

"They *devoted* themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The Greek word is *proskartereō*, which means to persist steadfastly in something or to constantly attend to something. It's more than an initial burst of enthusiasm. It's not about trying to whip up a new Pentecost every week; it's about a long obedience in the same direction by holding to practices, which will sustain us for the journey. It's a picture of *total* commitment, a *complete* giving of oneself to God and to God's family. There's no room for half-heartedness in devotion. As the 15th Century mystic, Thomas à Kempis observed, the alternative to not being a *whole* Christian is not being a Christian at all.

The Spirit-filled Church is a devoted Church—a Church that gives itself to her Lord with reckless abandon, a Church that is 'all-in' on Jesus.

2) Attention to Scripture

The Church is a story-formed community. As such, her ongoing life and vitality are sustained as she rehearses God's story. On the day of Pentecost, immediately before our passage begins, Peter tells the story of what God has done, is doing, and will yet do through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit opens hearts of over 3,000 people to hear and respond to the message, and the Church is born. The Church is constituted by the Word of God being spoken and received. She is established by the witness of those who have testified to God's saving acts in Jesus Christ—anticipated in the writings of the Old Testament and declared to be fulfilled through the teaching of the apostles that now makes up the New Testament.

Being a Christian is hard work. When we're scattered on our various frontlines—whether in home or hospital, school or sports club, we are surrounded by competing narratives—stories that tell us that we've got to earn our approval, that it's the strong and self-assured who get ahead in life, that we can do anything if only we believe in *ourselves*. It is through teaching and rehearsing *God's* Story that the Church keeps itself straight about who she is and what she is to be about. It is through teaching and rehearsing *God's* story that the Church seeks to work out the implications and applications of the gospel to everyday life, so that each and every person who makes up the whole can be faithful to their calling in Christ.

The Spirit-filled Church is a Church, which is continually learning and re-learning its part in God's story in order to build her life upon the vision and values of the Kingdom made flesh-and-blood in Jesus Christ and witnessed in the Scriptures.

3) Shared Living

The word 'fellowship' is a rather weak word in English. It's not a word we tend to use in everyday life. Even within the Church, it is often limited to socialising over coffee at the end of a service. That's *not* what Luke has in mind. If you're collecting Greek words from my talks, here's another one for you: *koinonia*. It's related to a verb, which means to hold things in common. It's about a shared life. Just as there can be nothing half-hearted about devotion, so there can be nothing arm's-length about *koinonia*. You can't have real *koinonia* if you hold yourself back from others. To give you an idea of the kind of closeness it's talking about, it's the word Paul uses to describe how God the Spirit relates to God the Father and God the Son.

What happened at Pentecost wasn't just the conversion of some 3,000 *individuals*, but the creation of Christian *community*. It has been said, "Christianity which does not begin with the individual does not begin. But Christianity which ends with the individual ends." Being Church is about so much more than a jumbled collection of churchgoers coming together every now and then. Church is what we are when we're together. Take a look at Acts 16:30. Luke says, "they gathered the church together." The Church isn't the Church unless it's *together*. And one of the primary ways this togetherness is expressed is through generosity: "All the believers were together and had *everything* in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." They were a family. They didn't say, "That's *my* field!" No. It was the family's field.

The Spirit-filled Church is a united and generous Church—a Church, which doesn't just call itself God's family because it's 'on-trend', but actually *acts* like God's family in which sharing life is driven by love, not law.

4) Eating Together

Rachel Atkinson, when she spoke at the church weekend last November, said that at her church they have adopted the principle that when they meet together, they eat together. I love that. That's exactly what we see here in Acts 2. No doubt, the phrase "the breaking of the bread" is intended to make us think of the Last Supper and the meal Jesus gave us. There's a reason why sharing bread and wine together has been a central part of the Church's worship through the centuries. It reminds us that we are a people who owe their existence to Jesus' sacrificial death on our behalf. More than that, it reminds us that to be Jesus-people is to be trained in the way of Jesus' cross-shaped, sacrificial life. We are to become what we eat.

THE SUNDAY SERVICE

Yet, there is another dimension of the Church's eating together that also comes into view. It is not only about the vertical relationship between us and God, but the horizontal relationships that exist with everyone else Jesus invites to His table (and we get no say in that). The Body of Christ is not the bread itself, but we ourselves who *together* make up the Body of Christ. Just as Jesus did in His earthly ministry, so now also in His Body, the Church, He creates community around a table. When Christians are to be found eating together, it is a visible, tangible sign of the Spirit at work. In that sense, a church bring-and-share lunch is as holy, as sacramental, as when we surround the eating of bread and wine with liturgy.

Eating together is a wonderful means of strengthening the ties between people. The need to eat is part of what makes us human. It's universal. The word companion literally means one with whom you break bread—from the Latin words *cum*, meaning 'with', and *panem*, meaning 'bread'. The Church we see here in Acts 2 is a Church of Jesus' companions. What's more, and it ties in with what we said earlier about devotion, it's more than an occasional token-gesture. Luke says they did it *daily*. Again, the image that comes to mind is one of family, not an assortment of once-a-week, once-a-month, or once-in-a-blue moon acquaintances. Where the Spirit creates the community, there's a sense of deep and real belonging.

Moreover, Luke also says, the first Church ate their food with *glad* and *sincere* hearts. Our word 'glad' is the Greek *agalliasis*, which refers to a kind of wild, crazy joy. If you can imagine the kind of delight that makes you want to burst out singing, that's what the word means. The word 'sincere' (*afelotēs*) is a compound of the prefix *a-*, which means 'without', and *phellos*, which means stony ground. In other words, they met together in an unhindered, unimpaired and uninhibited way. Obstacles to fellowship were removed. The Spirit-filled Church is a Church whose unity in Christ is expressed around a table, and whose mealtimes are characterised by exuberant joyfulness and a complete lack of barriers like pride, resentment and unforgiveness between its members.

5) Prayer and Worship

A Church that doesn't pray thinks it has everything already sown-up by itself. It may not say that in so many words, but that's the message: "We've got this covered, thanks Lord. We don't need your help." A Church that only sings half-heartedly and mutters its responses makes a mockery of God's honour and glory. Luke says the Church *devoted* itself to prayer. "They followed a daily discipline of worship." The glad and sincere hearts with which they ate together translated into songs of praise to God. A Spirit-filled Church sings. It has to. It can't help it.

THE SUNDAY SERVICE

I love how Karl Barth explains the role of singing in the life of the Church: "The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression ... What we can and must say quite confidently is that the church which does not sing is not the church. And where ... it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically, shamefacedly and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation."

The Spirit-filled Church is a praying and worshipping Church—a Church, which knows she exists only by the grace of God and is intent on living as if that is true.

6) Awe

In v. 43, Luke says, "Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles." Last week, I was part of an online conference for those involved with church planting. One of the sessions I attended was about prayer. There was one thing in particular the speaker said that really struck me. She said, we must make prayer essential. What she meant was that, we must push ourselves beyond our natural capacities and live in such a way that what we are attempting is impossible (if not outright ludicrous) *without* prayer. That's something of what I think Luke is getting at here. There was a sense of awe because it was abundantly clear that what was going on wasn't man-made. The signs and wonders could only have come from God being at work in their midst.

The Spirit-filled Church is an awe-struck Church—a Church constantly looking to God and going, "Wow!" And, what's more, it's a Church whose life together is transparently supernatural—a Church, which isn't just kind, but *supernaturally* kind, a Church, which, in its life together, prompts others to look in and say, "Wow!" too.

7) Growth

"The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v. 47). Just as a healthy plant produces seeds by which it seeks to reproduce itself, so a healthy Church is marked by growth. And yet, we would do well to notice two things about this growth. First, the source of it: "*The Lord* added to their number." Conversion is always and everywhere a work of the Spirit, not of any well-intentioned evangelist. Second, and perhaps more controversially, growth is not (primarily) a strategy. What I mean is that the Church's growth here in Acts 2 seems to have been the *outcome* rather than the *goal* of its activity. In other words, by

THE SUNDAY SERVICE

embodying, modelling, demonstrating and exemplifying the Kingdom of God in its life together, they made the gospel real and attractive, and drew people in.

The Spirit-filled Church doesn't *have* a mission; rather, it *is* mission. I put it to you that the Church exists for no other reason than to embody the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Church itself, in its life together, becomes a sign of the good news of Jesus to the world, through which the Lord awakens people to Himself.

Summary

Devotion. Attention to Scripture. Shared living. Eating together. Prayer and worship. Awe. Growth. Wouldn't you want to be part of a Church like that? I know I would! These few verses from Acts 2 point us toward the kind of Christian community that the Holy Spirit seeks to create. We're not there yet. No church is. But that's the direction that the Spirit would take us, if we let Him. The things we've talked about aren't things we can cook up for ourselves. They come from the work of the Spirit among us. What can we do to bridge the gap between where we are now and this incredible picture of where God would like us to be? Well, we can and must work resolutely towards that vision. But we do so with humility, knowing that unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain (Psalm 127:1). Like Elijah, all we can do is set our offering upon the altar in faith, and ask God to light the fire.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.