
Life among the believers

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 5th July

John 17:17-23 Acts 2:41-47

Part 2 in Acts series



The point I want to take from the Gospel reading we just heard is the reflective oneness that we have as the people of God. In other words, just as God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, so too are the people of God one, as we are incorporated into the body of Christ, and Christ is said to dwell within us.

“May we be one that the world might believe” is the kind unity we see in the early church and in the passage from Acts we are now going to look at.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as we look, at the influence your Word and your Spirit had on the early church, help us to see, and believe, that we too can be equipped and empowered to be your witnessing people wherever we find ourselves, amen.

As I have been working through Acts with the fine folks at Prebbleton one of the encouragements I keep coming back to, and if you remember nothing else from what I say this morning, remember this, “when the Word of God is working, and the Spirit of God is working, and the people of God are working, things will happen.”

Ponder for a moment what would have happened, if on the day of Pentecost, the 120 had stayed in the house and not gone out to where the thousands were gathered. Would 3000 have been saved that first Pentecost?

So what of the 3000+ now? Vs 42, They devote themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Then follows a very compelling description of “life among the believers.” vs 42-47.

Before we go there, it's important we understand the significance of vs 42. Notice the order of the things mentioned. “Apostolic teaching” is mentioned first on the list. Why is that significant? Because without adequate understanding we are not going to do the other things on the list well. The fellowship, the breaking of bread, the prayers.

Would it be too naughty of me to say that without adequate teaching and understanding the church in Acts might have looked like many of today's churches.

Imagine if the reading from Acts today was along this line. “No one new came to church today.” “No one was saved.” “We're a bit worried how to keep things going beyond our current generation. Thankfully that is not what we read. To the passage then.

Let's look first at one of the things that often trouble folk, vs 44-45 “All who believed were together and having all things in common. “They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need”.

What often troubles folk is the question, is this normative behaviour for all Christians for all time? Or is it something that was specific to the setting of the early church? In other words, is it “the model” or “a model?”

In the late 80s I knew two very prayerful women. Both were elegant and fashionable. One especially so. She loved beautiful clothes and brought from a high end shop in Hereford st called the “Clothes Horse”.

She did worry sometimes that God might one day say, “stop buying nice clothes.” That is until someone said to her “don't worry about it.” “If God ever requires that of you, you will wake up one day with no greater desire than to give your lovely clothes away.”

She stopped worrying and kept wearing. She also kept helping street kids and glue sniffers. From time to time I would see a street kid wearing a beautiful coat, and it would always make me smile.

The point of that story is don't worry about what God hasn't asked you to do. If God does ask, more likely than not he will also give you the desire to carry out the request.

Let me set the context of Pentecost. The population of Jerusalem could swell tenfold. Visitors could potentially outnumber locals 9 to one.

Why is that significant?

- Because of 3000 people converted 2,500 could've been visitors.

Why is that significant?

- Because verse 42 tells us they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Vs 46 tells us day by day they spent much time together in the temple and broke bread together at home, or from house to house.

Those two vs taken together give a clue that a good number of these newly Spirit filled visitors stuck around and stayed in Jerusalem to learn from the Apostles and experience Christian worship and community?

Let's be conservative and say just half of them did. That would mean that each of the 120, and potentially the 400 or so local converts would be looking after 5 or so visitors.

If the visitors who decided to stay had families they may have sent for them, because it looks like this goes on for at least a year, or three, until Stephen is martyred, and Saul sets to persecuting the church, with the effect that all but the Apostles flee Jerusalem.

Let's translate the immediate effect of Pentecost to our day. A couple hundred of out of town non believers turn up at our service here this morning. There is a great move of the Holy Spirit, hundreds are converted, and they want to stay so they can grow in their faith. We as the locals are now responsible for the material needs of these new converts. It was a extraordinary situation, and it called for extraordinary sharing and generosity.

I have already emphasised the importance of Apostolic teaching and authority. That is further reinforced in vs 43, the fact that the wonders and signs at this stage are only being done by the Apostles.

It is true to say that when dealing with power you need to be grounded. Any electrician knows that. Just so, when we are dealing with the power of the Holy Spirit. When we are seeking to be faithful witnesses to the glory of God, we better be earthed by faithful, biblical, apostolic teaching.

Having said that, not everything was reliant on the Apostles doing everything. 12 Apostles, 3000 + converts 500 or so probably locals. Vs 46 day by day as they spent much time together in the temple they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.

A Question in the interests of showing that Christianity in the early days was not so much of a spectator sport as it is today for many.

Would it be possible for the 12 apostles to daily get around the homes were several thousand people are breaking break together, a direct allusion to the Lords Supper. If not the Apostles then who?

At this stage in the churches life, deacons, presbyters and bishops haven't been invented. It's not till Ch 6 we get deacons being appointed for administrative and pastoral duties in order "that the Word of God not be neglected."

There may well be a message there to churches that do great and needed social work, food banks, community gardens, after school programme's whatever. But where that becomes the focus and there is no clear articulation of the Gospel, how are people going to join the dots between the loving acts, and the saving gospel.

That was something of the issue in Acts 6, and the appointment of the deacons who would take care of the distribution of food, so that those who had the teaching and preaching responsibilities would not be sidetracked and the word of God be neglected.

Going back to the fact that the Apostles could not have got around the houses to do the communion bit. Lest I commit a cardinal sin by appearing to suggest that we don't need priests to preside over the Eucharist, let me be clear, I'm not saying that.

I'm just saying there was more lay involvement in more things in the early church. Further, some things were shown to have priority in that only the Apostles were responsible for those things.

As I have been pondering this, I looked again at my ordination vows from our Anglican prayer book. At the ordination of a priest, having talked about building up the church, and pastoring people, it says this as it begins a new section.

"Above all", now to my way of thinking when I see the words "above all" whatever follows these two words would takes precedence over whatever else might be listed.

"Above all, they are to proclaim God's word and take their part in Christ prophetic work, to declare forgiveness through Jesus Christ, to baptise,

to preside at the Eucharist,
to administer Christ's holy sacraments.

Just so, as it was not without significance that Apostolic teaching was the first of on the list of things that the 3000 devoted themselves to, I simply note, that in my ordination vows after the words "above all", it says I am to proclaim God's word, and take my part in Christ's prophetic work. Not that what follows is unimportant.

But again, how do I understand the truth and significance of such things, declaring forgiveness, baptising, administration of the sacraments, how do I understand and serve, unless it is the Word of God that is shaping and fuelling me?

And for all of us, that we are well taught, that we rightly understand is crucial. Right understanding sure helps when it comes to right living. As we believe we behave. And yes we also need the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Very briefly, as we wrap up, what were the characteristics of this Spirit filled group of believers.

Firstly, it was a teachable church and under Apostolic authority.

Characteristic two. It was a church that took God seriously. "Awe came upon everyone because many and signs and wonders were being done by the apostles" I guess "everyone" means not just the believers but all who saw the signs.

Some translations say "fear came upon everyone. Awe and fear are similar in the sense they point to God being taken seriously. Where God is working we should be in awe. Or to turn it around. Maybe in today's church if there was more awe, there might be more signs of God working.

Ch 5 in Acts, why were Ananias and Sapphira judged so harshly, dropping dead on the spot? Why? Because they claimed to be more generous than they were. And they acting more spiritual than they were. They were lying not to the Apostles but to God.

At this stage of the churches formation a message needed to be sent. The story ends vs 11 and great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. I do think there is a link between what happens very early in the early church, and what happens at the giving of the 10 commandments at Mt Sainai.

Everything points to the holiness of God. Only Moses can approach. Any others who approach the mountain will be put to death. So terrifying it is that the people say to Moses, “you speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us or we will die”.

The point. Just as the people of God in the OT needed to take God seriously if they were going to follow him, so to does the early church need to be shaped by a healthy fear and awe of God.

Where God is taken seriously. Where God is held in Awe, we are more like to see God at work. Is that a message for our church today? A church that all too often denies the Gospel, and does much to undermine and discredit then word of God? Very often by those who are charged with upholding the word.

Again the words in my ordination vows. Speaking of priests.

“Above all, they are to proclaim God’s word and take their part in Christ prophetic work.”

Characteristic three: it was a loving church that showed extraordinary generosity. We have looked at that already.

Characteristic four: faith shaped every day of their life. Verse 46.

- Daily in the word.
- Daily in fellowship.
- Daily in worship and prayer.

Is it possible that an hour on Sunday can give us all we need to spiritually sustain and nourish us? Is it possible that Sunday worship gives the unbelieving observer adequate opportunity to say “what these people believe shapes every aspect of their life?”

Characteristic five: worship and winsomeness. First half of Vs 47, praising God and, did you see it, “having the good will of all the people.”

It very much looks like there must’ve been an attractiveness, a winsomeness about these Christians. Good to know also that we don’t have to compromise our faith to be well thought of. In fact quite the opposite. I would argue that compromise leads only to a loss of authenticity and integrity. No one respects that.

There was no compromise in the preaching of Peter or the teaching of the Apostles. And yet the lifestyle of the believers was so authentic, so sincere, so generous, that the general population couldn’t help but like them.

Here's my point. We can uncompromisingly hold to the gospel, but do so in a winsome and attractive way so as to gain goodwill, and through that goodwill get a hearing.

I bet Jesus was the most attractive and inspirational person to be around. As Nikki Gumbel of Alpha fame says.

- Could you imagine going to a wedding with Jesus.
- Could you imagine going to a hospital with Jesus.
- Could you imagine going to a funeral home with Jesus.

It seems from this passage in Acts that a joyful thankful Christian who puts God first, and is well thought of by unbelievers, has the hallmarks of an effective evangelist.

But again, given our shortcomings. The second half of verse 47 helps us by telling us who it is that really grows the church, and brings people to faith. "and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved".

A teachable church.

A loving church.

A worshipping church.

A attractive or winsome church.

A witnessing church.

A growing church.

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, we thank you for your work in our lives, and we pray that day by day we might walk with you, to the glory of your name, and the extension of your kingdom, amen.