

The Apostolic Call

The Call to Prayer - To Equip - To Send

8.2.26

The Call to Equip (Part 2)

Two Models for Equipping the Biblical Apostolic Church

Model One - Jerusalem

Acts 2:42-47

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Historical and Biblical Context

One - Equipped for Learning

The very first evidence Luke mentions of the Spirit's presence in the church is that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. One might perhaps say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day; its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed; and there were 3,000 pupils in the kindergarten! We note that those new converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology. Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Nor did those early disciples imagine that, because they had received the Spirit, He was the only teacher they needed and they could dispense with human teachers. On the contrary, they sat at the apostles' feet, hungry to receive instruction, and they persevered in it. Moreover, the teaching authority of the apostles, to which they submitted, was authenticated by miracles: many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles (verse 43). The two references to the apostles, in verse 42 (their teaching) and in verse 43 (their miracles), can hardly be an accident. Since the teaching of the apostles has come down to us in its definitive form in the New Testament, contemporary devotion to the apostles' teaching means submission to the authority of the New Testament. A Spirit-filled church is a New Testament church, in the sense that it studies and submits to New Testament instruction. **The Spirit of God leads the people of God to submit to the Word of God.**

Two - Equipped for Loving

They devoted themselves ... to the fellowship (*koinōnia*). *Koinōnia* (from *koinos*, ‘common’) bears witness to the common life of the church in two clear aspects. First, it expresses what we share in common together. This is God himself, for ‘*our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*’, and of course there is ‘*the fellowship of the Holy Spirit*’. So, in that context *koinōnia* is a Trinitarian experience; in that it is what we hold and share in common with not only one another but with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, *koinōnia* also expresses what we share together, what we give as well as what we receive. *Koinōnia* is the word Paul used for the collection he was organizing among the Greek churches, and *koinonikos* is the Greek word for ‘*generous*’. This is what the author Luke refers to as he describes the way in which these first Christians shared their possessions with one another: all the believers were together and had everything in common (*koina*). Selling their possessions and goods (probably meaning their real estate and their valuables respectively), they gave to anyone as he had need (verses 44–45). In our present-day culture and mindset, these are disturbing verses. Do they mean that every Spirit-filled believer and community will follow their example literally?

A few miles east of Jerusalem, the Essene leaders of the Qumran community were committed to the common ownership of property. According to its Damascus Rule, all members of ‘the covenant’, wherever

they lived, were obliged to *'succour (aid and assist) the poor, the needy, and the stranger'*, but the candidate for initiation into membership of the monastic community accepted a stricter discipline: *'his property and earnings will be handed over to the Bursar of the Congregation ...; his property will be merged ...'*. This arrangement carries a close resemblance to the practice adopted by the primitive Church of Jerusalem.

So did the early Christians imitate them, and should we do so today? At different times in church history, some have thought yes. And I do not doubt that Jesus still calls some of his disciples, as he did the rich young ruler, to a life of total, voluntary poverty. Yet neither Jesus nor his apostles restricted private property from all Christians. Even the sixteenth-century Anabaptists in the so-called 'radical reformation', who wanted fellowship and brotherly love to be added to the Reformers' definition of the Church (in terms of word, sacraments and discipline), and who talked much about Acts 2 and 4 and 'the community of goods', recognized that this was not mandatory to the faith and the Christian Church.

It is important to note that even in Jerusalem the sharing of property and possessions **was voluntary**. According to verse 46, they broke bread in their homes. So evidently many still had homes; not all had sold them. It is also noteworthy that the tense of both verbs (verse 45) is imperfect, which indicates that the selling and the giving were occasional, in response to particular needs, not once and for all. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira, to which we shall come in Acts 5, was not greed or materialism but deceit; it was not that they had retained part of the proceeds of their sale, but that they had done so while pretending to give it all. Peter made this plain

when he said to them: *“Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?”* (v. 5:4).

At the same time, although the selling and the sharing were and are voluntary, and every Christian has to make conscientious decisions before God in this matter. We are all called to generosity, especially towards the poor and needy. Already in the Old Testament there was a strong tradition of care for the poor, and the Israelites were to give a tenth of their produce to *‘the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow’*. How can Spirit-filled believers possibly give less? The principle is stated twice in Acts: they gave to anyone as he had need (verse 45), and “there were no needy persons among them ... the money ... was distributed to anyone as he had need (v. 4:34–35). As John was to write later, if we have material possessions and see a brother or sister in need, but do not share what we have with him or her, how can we claim that God’s love dwells in us? Christian fellowship is Christian caring, and Christian caring is Christian sharing. St. John Chrysostom gave a beautiful description of it:

“This was an angelic commonwealth, not to call anything of theirs their own. Forthwith the root of evils was cut out.... None reproached, none envied, none grudged; no pride, no contempt was there.... The poor man knew no shame, the rich no haughtiness.”

So we must not ignore or avoid the challenge of these verses. That we have hundreds of thousands of destitute brothers and sisters is a standing appeal to those who have abundant means. It is part of the responsibility of Spirit-filled believers to acknowledge and address the need and abolish destitution in the new community of Jesus.

Three - Equipped for Worshipping

They devoted themselves ... to the breaking of bread and to prayer (verse 42). That is, their fellowship was expressed not only in caring for each other, but in corporate (gathered) worship too. The point being that in both expressions (literally, *'the breaking of the bread and the prayers'*) suggests a reference to the Lord's Supper on the one hand (although almost certainly at that early stage as part of a larger meal) and prayer services or meetings (rather than Private prayer) on the other. There are two aspects of the early church's worship which model its spiritual balance.

First, it was both formal and informal, for it took place both in the Temple courts and in their homes (verse 46), which is an interesting combination. It is perhaps surprising that they continued for a while in the Temple, but they did. They did not immediately abandon what might be called the institutional church. I do not believe they still participated in the sacrifices of the Temple, for already they had begun to grasp that these had been fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, but they do seem to have attended the prayer services of the Temple (chapter 3:1), unless, as has been suggested, they went up to the Temple to preach, rather than to pray. At the same time, they supplemented the Temple services with more informal and spontaneous meetings (including the breaking of bread) in their homes. Perhaps we, who get understandably impatient with the inherited structures of the church, can learn a lesson from them.

For myself, I believe that the Holy Spirit's way with the institutional church, which we long to see reformed according to the gospel, is more the way of patient reform than of impatient rejection. And certainly it is always healthy

when the more formal and dignified services of the local church are complemented with the informality and exuberance of home meetings. There is no need to polarize between the structured and the unstructured, the traditional and the spontaneous. The church needs both.

The second example of the balance of the early church's worship is that it was both joyful and reverent. There can be no doubt of their joy, for they are described as having glad and sincere hearts (verse 46), which literally means 'in exultation [*agalliasis*] and sincerity of heart'. The NEB unites the two words by translating '*with unaffected joy*'. Since God had sent his son into the world, and had now sent them his Spirit, they had plenty of reason to be joyful. Besides, '*the fruit of the Spirit is ... joy*', and sometimes a more uninhibited joy than is customary (or even acceptable) within the staid traditions of the historic churches. Yet every worship service should be a joyful celebration of the mighty acts of God through Jesus Christ. It is right in public worship to be dignified; it is unforgivable to be dull. At the same time, their joy was never irreverent.

If joy in God is an authentic work of the Spirit, so is the fear of God. Everyone was filled with awe (43), which seems to include the Christians as well as the non-Christians. God had visited their city. He was in their midst, and they knew it. They bowed down before him in humility and wonder. It is a mistake, therefore, to imagine that in public worship reverence and rejoicing are mutually exclusive. The combination of joy and awe, as of formality and informality, is a healthy balance in worship.

Four - Equipped to Evangelize

So far we have considered the study, the fellowship and the worship of the Jerusalem church, for it is to these three things that Luke says the first believers devoted themselves. Yet these are aspects of the interior life of the Church; they tell us nothing about its compassionate outreach to the world. Tens of thousands of sermons have been preached on Acts 2:42, which well illustrates the danger of isolating a text from its context. On its own, verse 42 presents a very disproportionate picture of the church's life. Verse 47b needs to be added: *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* Those first Jerusalem Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing, and worshipping that they forgot about witnessing and sharing the Good News of the Gospel of Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit carries with it a strong missional essential intended to empower the proliferation of the Gospel. As Harry Boer expressed it in his challenging book *Pentecost and Missions*, the Acts of the Apostles,

“...are governed by one dominant, overriding and all-controlling motif. This motif is the expansion of the faith through missionary witness in the power of the Spirit.... Restlessly the Spirit drives the church to witness, and continually churches rise out of the witness. The church is equipped for mission and purpose.

From these earliest believers in Jerusalem, we can learn three vital lessons about local church evangelism. First, the Lord Himself (that is, Jesus) did it: the Lord added to their number. Doubtless He did it through the

preaching of the apostles, the witness of church members, the impressive love of their common life, and their example as they were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people (verse 47a). Yet He did it. For He is the head of the church. He alone has the prerogative to admit people into its membership and to bestow salvation from His throne. This is a much-needed emphasis, for many people talk about evangelism today with reprehensible self-confidence and even triumphalism, as if they think the evangelization of the world will be the ultimate triumph of human technology. We should attach to the evangelistic mission all the technology God has given us, but only in humble dependence on Him as the principal evangelist.

Secondly, what Jesus did was two things together: “*He added to their number ... those who were being saved*” (the present participle *sōzomenous* either being timeless or emphasizing that salvation is a progressive experience culminating in final glorification). Important to note: this might be tough to hear and then process - Jesus did not add them to the church without saving them (no nominal Christianity at the beginning), nor did He save them without adding them to the church (no solitary Christianity either). Salvation and church community belonged together - and they still do.

Thirdly, *the Lord added people daily*. The verb is an imperfect (‘*kept adding*’), and the adverb (‘*daily*’) eliminates all confusion. The early church’s evangelism was not an occasional or isolated activity. They did not organize quinquennial or decennial missions (missions are fine so long as they are only episodes in an ongoing program). No, just as their worship

was meant to be daily (verse 46a), so was their witness. Praise and proclamation were both the natural overflow of hearts full of the Holy Spirit. And as their outreach was continuous, so converts were continuously being added. We need to recover this expectation of steady and uninterrupted church growth.

Looking back over the noteworthy marks of the first Spirit-filled community, it is evident that their equipping all concerned the church's relationships.

First, they were related to the apostles (in submission). They were eager to receive the apostles' instruction. A Spirit-filled church is an apostolic church, a New Testament church, anxious to believe and obey what Jesus and his apostles taught.

Secondly, they were related to each other (in love). They persevered in the fellowship, supporting each other and relieving the needs of the poor. A Spirit-filled church is a loving, caring, sharing church.

Thirdly, they were related to God (in worship). They worshipped Him in the Temple and in the home, in the Lord's Supper and in the prayers, with joy and with reverence. A Spirit-filled church is a worshipping church. Fourthly, they were related to the world (in outreach). They were engaged in continuous evangelism. No self-centered, self-contained church (absorbed in its own internal affairs) can claim to be filled with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit. So a Spirit-filled church is a missionary church.

There is no need for us to wait, as the hundred and twenty had to wait, for the Spirit to come. For the Holy Spirit did come on the Day of Pentecost, and has never left His church. Our responsibility is to humble ourselves before His sovereign authority, to determine not to quench Him, but to allow Him His freedom. For then our churches will again manifest those marks of the Spirit's presence, which many young people are specially looking for, namely biblical teaching, loving fellowship, living worship, and an ongoing, outgoing evangelism.¹

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 82–87.