



BODY LIFE

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

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Acts 2:41-47

Fifth Message

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In the second chapter of the Book of Acts, the writer, Luke, gives a picture of how the church in Jerusalem functioned following the ascension of Jesus. The verb tenses that Luke uses throughout the passage refer to something that used to be. He is looking back on the experience of these early Christians and describing the functioning of the church and its results upon society.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit of God descended and indwelt the 120 followers of Jesus who were gathered in the upper room. Immediately they went into the streets of Jerusalem and began to evangelize in the languages of the Roman Empire. Peter preached to the great crowd that assembled over the commotion, and as a result of his powerful presentation of the truth, three thousand people were gathered in as charter members of the church.

So we come to Luke's description of how this body functioned. He is not describing the activities of the church. The church is a body, a living organism, and a body doesn't merely act, it functions. A church is not a church because of what it does. A church does what it does because it is a church. Some people think that if they simply do the things that a church is supposed to do, then they have a church. They buy a building and hire a preacher. They sing hymns and have classes for children. They form committees and everybody gets busy. But that isn't a church.

In this passage Luke says that a church functions as a body because it is a living organism, not a human organization. A baby doesn't have to be told how to function. Its organs and members start functioning as a natural outgrowth of life. What is recorded here in Acts 2 is the evidence of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. How do Spirit-filled believers act? What are the marks of a church that is alive? Today we will take a fresh look at the first church in history, the church in Jerusalem.

There is no need to idealize or romanticize the early church. It was made up of real people, ordinary sinners like you and me. They too struggled with hypocrisy, immorality, rivalry, and heresy. But, for all its failures and problems, the early church was powerfully stirred by the Holy Spirit. So we will focus on the evidence that the early church gave of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and the four marks in particular which Luke highlights. In the process we will take an honest look at our church and our own lives.

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47, NASB)

The first mark of a Spirit-filled church is that people hunger for and submit to truth.

The first evidence that Luke mentions of the Spirit's presence in the church is that "they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching." They hungered for truth; they were eager to learn. They acknowledged that Jesus had appointed the apostles to be the authoritative teachers of the church. In Ephesians, Paul says that the church is built upon the preaching of the apostles and prophets. Our Lord passed on his authority to these men. He did not pass it on to succeeding generations. The apostles had the same authority as our Lord Jesus. That is why the apostle Paul could write to the Thessalonians: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13).

God's people everywhere have this attitude toward the Scriptures. When Christ becomes their Lord, then the word of the apostles becomes God's word to them. They will start listening to it and obeying it. They will not argue and quibble over it. They will not resist it. That doesn't mean they won't struggle at obeying it. But deep down they hunger to obey; they will not keep on resisting.

Being filled with the Spirit involves our minds as well as our emotions. Jesus called the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. So wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, truth matters. Many who have grown up in the postmodern

world say there is no such thing as truth. But there is. The Scriptures are new to some of you. You are new to Christ, or perhaps you are in the process of becoming a Christian, and you are still trying to figure out how everything fits. The notion that God's word is revealed through the word of men may be difficult to grasp, but throughout history, God has always communicated through human beings who look, speak, and behave just like we do.

Moses was the first of a long list of prophets to whom God spoke. To use the Hebrew idiom, God spoke "mouth-to-mouth" with him — face to face, in direct revelation. From Moses, Israel derived the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. When Israel went into Canaan, they wondered how they would discern God's voice from the plethora of pagan voices around when Moses was no longer with them. The Canaanites, the Syrians, everyone had their own prophets. How would the Israelites discern the voice of God?

God gave them three marks to guide them. First, the prophet must be a Jew. God would speak through a Jew. Second, God would speak face to face with him, in direct revelation. His word would not come through divination. And third, the prophet would have to predict the future with 100% accuracy. That was the bottom-line test. Prophets proclaimed the will of God, and one of the ways people could know whether a prophet speaking for God or for himself or some other source was whether or not his predictions came true. That is why a prophet had to give a short-range prophecy by which his proclamations could be tested. If his predictions came true, he was a prophet of God. If not, Moses told the Israelites not to be afraid of the supposed prophet, not to be in awe of him.

From that point on Israel had a number of prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and others communicated the word of God in language, and their predictions authenticated their proclamations. Around the 5th century B.C., the process came to an end. For about 400 years, God was silent in terms of any new revelation. The Old Testament was God's word for that time. But God did not speak any further until he spoke in his Son, Jesus Christ. That is why the writer of Hebrews begins his letter with these words: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2).

Then our Lord passed on his authority to the twelve disciples, whom he commissioned as apostles. Jesus' words to those men on his last night on earth were: "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, 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 14:26). "Teach you all things." This is the apostolic warrant for the New Testament letters. "Remind you of everything I have said to you." This is the apostolic warrant for the writ-

ing of the gospels. That is why the apostles remembered with such fine detail the things that Jesus said and did. The Holy Spirit brought it to their memory.

All of this is simply to say that the apostles had the same authority as the Old Testament prophets. They spoke with the authority of God, specifically with the authority of Jesus Christ. And these Spirit-filled believers in Jerusalem submitted to the apostles' authority which, according to Luke, was authenticated by miracles. One of the major purposes of miracles throughout Scripture was to authenticate each new stage of revelation. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance" (2 Cor 12:12).

Pastors and elders in positions of leadership today do not have that same authority. There are no more apostles. There may be some who have apostolic-type ministries, but the authority was not passed on to succeeding generations. The job of pastors is to simply say again what the apostles have already said. That is why exposition of Scripture is such a powerful means of changing hearts — because preachers are simply repeating what the apostles have already said. Pastors can't control your life and demand that you behave in certain ways. All they can do is exhort you and encourage you to listen to the apostles and what they have to say.

So that is the first mark of a Spirit-filled church. The pastors expound the Scriptures; the members read and reflect on the Scriptures in order to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord. The Spirit of God always leads the people of God to submit to the word of God.

The second mark of a Spirit-filled church is that people love one another sacrificially.

Luke says: "they were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship." "Fellowship" is the word *koinonia*. This is the first time it is used in the New Testament. Its root idea is commonality or sharing. The New Testament was written in *koine* Greek, the common Greek of the day, the language spoken in the streets. So fellowship refers to the common life we share together in Christ. But it not only refers to the common life that we have received, but also to what we give out. *Koinonia* is the word that Paul used for the offering he collected to give to the needy churches in Judea. In fact, the adjective *koinonikos* means "generous." Certainly that is the sense in which Luke is using the word here. He goes on to say, in verse 44, "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common [*koina*]; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need."

These Spirit-filled believers really loved each other. That isn't surprising, because the fruit of the Spirit is love. Love is generous with its money and possessions. One mark of how much we love is our willingness to part with our money and possessions. Jesus put it this

way. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." One mark of the change of attitude that the Spirit of God makes in a believer's life is the change from loving things and using people to loving people and using things. The Spirit changes us from selfish to selfless people. These believers loved each other sacrificially, to the point that they sold their possessions to help meet the needs of others.

Luke isn't advocating a certain economic order here. Selling their homes was a voluntary act that resulted from a changed attitude. Not everyone sold his home. Luke says that they met in homes, which would not be possible if everyone sold them. He is describing how these early believers loved each other in visible and tangible ways. It wasn't love talk that characterized them. They demonstrated their love in visible and tangible ways.

One of the marks of the Spirit's work in a life is an awareness that everything that one possesses belongs to God and there is a willingness, even a desire to share that with others. Jesus put it this way, "He is who is forgiven much loves much, but he is forgiven little loves little." Many may not have possessions or real estate to sell, but all have the ability to give. Some have skills that are needed by others. Certain people in our body need work done on their homes. Single parents need their cars repaired. Those who are laid up need help with meals. They need their lawns mowed or their children cared for.

There was a great measure of togetherness evident in these Spirit-filled believers in Jerusalem. It wasn't that they just met together, they were of one mind. They were always setting aside their own needs to serve the body. They were forgiving, loving, tenderhearted and sympathetic toward one another. They really cared for each other. Reading through this book it is easy to get the impression that they spent a great deal of time eating together. What better way to demonstrate *koinonia*!

The third mark of a Spirit-filled church is that there is a dependence that produces genuine worship.

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." There is a definite article on both of those expressions. They should read: "the breaking of the bread and the prayers." The breaking of bread is a reference to the Lord's Supper (although almost certainly at that early stage it was part of a larger meal), and the prayers, i.e. public prayer.

Their fellowship was expressed not only by caring for one another, but in their corporate worship as well. These early Christians believed that Jesus was alive and that he was the head of the church. They knew that apart from him they could do nothing. They were dependent — and prayer is the highest expression of that dependence.

Luke is not saying that they were continually having prayer meetings. There is nothing wrong with prayer meetings, but it's possible to miss the significance of this function. It is not merely an activity, a meeting in which in people pray, but an attitude of dependence upon God that is critical. The Lord himself is the head of his church, not the leaders. We need to trust him in everything. That means that whenever we gather in any sort of circumstance we need express our dependence upon God. We can have a lot of prayer meetings but run the church as if God were not even involved in the operation. Some churches seem to operate on Madison Avenue advertising techniques. They rely on campaigns and drives, on the charisma of the leaders and the size and beauty of the buildings. But these early believers were dependent on the Lord.

Notice that they probably had two different settings for their worship. "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart." There was a more formal time when the whole body gathered together in the Temple to be taught by the apostles. Then they broke up into smaller groups and met in homes. In this more intimate and informal setting they ate together and shared in the Lord's Table. They would sing and share, bear one another's burdens, develop friendships, and love each other in practical ways.

Christians need both of these settings. We need the larger, more formal time, like this morning, but we also need the smaller, more intimate setting of a home where we can worship more spontaneously and pray for each other. This may be one of our greatest needs here at PBCC. We have about twenty home fellowship groups, but for a church our size that number should be at least fifty. We need people to open up their homes, and others who will shepherd those groups.

And notice the spirit of their worship. Luke says they took their meals with "gladness and sincerity of heart." The NEB unites the two words by translating this, "with unaffected joy." How could they not be joyful? God had sent his Son into the world, and had sent his Spirit into their hearts. The fruit of the Spirit is not only love but joy (Gal 5:22). Every worship service should be a joyful celebration of the mighty acts of God through Jesus Christ. Some church services today seem more like a funeral service. Nobody smiles, nobody talks, nobody sings. The whole atmosphere is dirge-like. Not that we should be flippant in our worship. That early church not only was joyful, they had fear and reverence as well. The living and holy God had visited Jerusalem and the people bowed down in humility.

There is one more mark of a Spirit-filled church. Most sermons on this passage stop here. They focus on the interior life of the church that Luke mentions in verse 42, but they leave out the church's compassionate outreach into the community.

The fourth mark of the Spirit-filled church is that it is growing, it is evangelistic.

“...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (2:47).

Notice that evangelism wasn't accomplished by a special campaign. It was a daily occurrence. The secret to evangelism is a healthy body. Healthy bodies grow! The best way to reach our neighbors is to live our lives before them and allow them to see the church in action as Christians love one another. People are hungry for love and acceptance. That is why the best arena for evangelism is home fellowships. Have a meal together and invite some unbelievers in to watch you eat. There are a lot of people who are anti-church, but I don't know of anyone who is anti-food!

It is fitting that we are concluding our service today by celebrating the Lord's Supper. I wish we didn't have to do it with little cups and little pieces of bread. The early church didn't celebrate it that way. They had a feast -- a love feast. They took the common elements that were on the table and shared them together. We should do that regularly in our homes. But today we are expressing our oneness, our commonality, the uniqueness of our relationship with Christ, with each other.

Father, thank you for the privilege of being part of your kingdom. We pray that you will give us high ideals for your church; that our body might be characterized by a serious study of the Scriptures, by loving, generous fellowship; by humble dependence, and genuine worship, and by compassionate outreach and mission. Amen.

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