

Church and Fellowship

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you open to the passage Sarah just read, Acts chapter 2 on page 114. And we're going to begin at verse 42. I have a number of Stephen Covey's books, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.

I've read the first half of that book a number of times. I've read the first half of First Things First, which is a better book I think, where he asks, what is fundamental to human fulfilment? What are the first things in life? And all of you, we could probably say this in unison, it's to live, to love, to learn and to leave a legacy. Is that new to some?

Good. I don't think Covey probably had Acts 2 in mind when he was writing, but there is a similar pattern of first things in the first Christian church.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out from heaven bringing fire and life to his people, we come to the end of Peter's sermon in verse 41 and we read, 3,000 people received the word and were baptised.

[1 : 20] And then in verse 42 to 47, Luke, the author, stops and steps back and with amazement tells us what the church looks like filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's a picture of great beauty as the church is new and fresh. In the original, all the verbs change in 42 to 47.

And Luke is trying to give us a summary of the internal life of the early church. You'll find this as we work through Acts. There are a number of these summaries and all of them are about the interior life.

Luke wants us to know, he's not just telling us events. What he is describing is the ongoing pattern for life of God's people. He's saying to us, look, I could tell you a dozen other stories that would illustrate this, but here in a nutshell is the pattern and model of what a church looks like when it's functioning normally and spiritually.

This is a picture of who we should be. And in case you think it's a romantic, sentimental look at the good old days, we're only going to have to wait a couple of chapters until we see some deep flaws in the church.

[2 : 42] But here is the first and fullest description of the daily life of a spirit-filled church. That the repentance and faith that took place there on the day of Pentecost created a community where they learn and love and leave a legacy.

So what is the church all about? What does a church look like that is pleasing to Christ? Now what are we trying to aim at being a Christian community here in Vancouver in 2003?

What are the first things, the essential marks of the church filled with the Spirit? And Luke tells us there are three marks of the church and the first is the first phrase in verse 42 and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

Now I wonder if you were going to describe the first characteristic of a church filled with the Spirit, whether you would have chosen that one. A church that is filled with the Spirit is devoted to the apostles' teaching.

It was through the preaching and teaching of the apostle Peter that this church was created and it's natural that the doctrine of the apostles becomes the centre and soul of the church.

[4 : 07] And that's why the first evidence of spiritual reality in a church is a passionate, persistent and dedication to the teaching of the apostles.

That's what the word devoted means. It's a word that involves effort and choices. It means working at something with deliberate intensity even though it may cause you difficulties.

And I wonder whether you think that's a characteristic mark of St. John's. I wonder if you think that that describes your decisions over the last year.

Is your life giving evidence that you are devoted to the apostles' teaching? I think we probably have a reasonable taste for good preaching.

I think we enjoy good preaching. But that's a million miles from being devoted to the apostles' teaching and forming our lives around God's word.

[5 : 05] It took one sermon from the apostle Peter. Three thousand people turned from their sins and gave themselves to the word of God. One of my pet fears is that we can hear dozens and hundreds of half-decent sermons and remain uninvolved and unchanged.

I think some of us are probably waiting for a special experience to happen to us where we will be swept away and everything after that will become effortless for us spiritually.

But the first mark of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives is a deep hunger for spiritual truth and a willingness to work at it.

And the teaching of the apostles comes down to us today in the New Testament letters. And our devotion to the apostles' teaching will demonstrate itself in a devotion to the New Testament and a submission to its authority.

That is true apostolic succession. Apostolic succession is not the laying on of hands being traced back to the apostle Peter. It is the ongoing devotion to the apostles' teaching.

[6 : 21] And when the church disregards or corrupts or denies the apostles' teaching, it creates a deformed church. And if the church continues to depart from the apostles' teaching, the Holy Spirit will leave.

That's why you can't tell a true church by the labels and titles it has, but by whether it teaches the apostles' doctrine. When I first came to St. John's, I had a conversation with a woman who'd been here for a number of years.

She said to me, I am not a Bible student. I leave that to others. And that, it seemed to her, settled the issue. In her mind there were two categories of Christians.

Those who are Bible students and the rest of us. But I was pleased to point out to her that the Bible is not a hobby for the super-spiritual, but a love for God's Word is the natural mark of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in your life.

The Holy Spirit's work is not to make you and me interested in the Bible, it's to make us devoted to the Bible. It's one of the reasons why at St. John's we encourage every person to be part of a small group Bible study.

[7 : 48] I know some of you think you may be above that. Some of you may think you're not good enough. It doesn't really matter. If you want to know God's Spirit at work in you, you have to give yourself to loving His Word and to studying His Word.

That's the first mark of the Spirit-filled Church, devoted to His Word. The second mark, which is by far the most prominent mark in this passage, is the very next phrase.

Not only did they devote themselves to the Apostles' teaching, but they devoted themselves to the fellowship. And fellowship, I'm afraid, is a bit of a feeble translation of this Greek word, which we've talked about before.

It's the Greek word *koinonia*. It speaks about the magnificent reality that we share, participate in the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is a spiritual communion that binds us together because of our participation in the Trinity. And fellowship is much more than a nice spiritual attitude.

[8 : 59] Luke points out it has to do with what we do with our homes and what we do with our families and even what we do with our money. It's about actions in the concreteness of everyday life.

And it lies at the heart of the portrait of the Spirit-filled Church. And as we go through it, I wonder if you will see whether it describes our Church. As we go through the book of Acts, every time we come to one of these summary passages, by far the largest focus is on this issue of fellowship, life together.

And here in chapter 2, this fellowship spreads its umbrella over everything from verse 42 to halfway through verse 47. Let me remind you, this is what fellowship looks like in verse 42.

It looks like the breaking of bread and the prayers. Fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need, day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes. They partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people.

[10:22] That's what it means to be devoted to the fellowship. See, belonging to a Church is more than listening to preaching and trying to be a Christian during the week.

It means being devoted to the other Christians in the fellowship. And this is so foreign to the way in which we have put our lives together here in Vancouver.

Because it requires a focus not on us, but on others and on Christ. It requires our best energies to be given to the fellowship.

And it will impinge on our rights and our freedoms and our families. And yet, being devoted to the fellowship is what we deeply desire and want because it undermines our individualism, it erodes our arrogance, it gives us that true spiritual connection that we so deeply desire.

And Luke gives us a picture here that shows that the fellowship and being devoted to the fellowship affects every part of life. publicly they gather in the temple day by day for the prayers.

[11:40] And it affects the tenor of their family lives. In verse 42, they devote themselves to the breaking of bread. I need to say to you, that is not the communion service, that is not the Lord's Supper.

Luke is speaking about meals in their homes. Every time this phrase is used in the book of Acts, it refers to meals, sometimes with Christians, sometimes with non-Christians.

And in verse 46, the same phrase is used describing ordinary meals in homes. They broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts.

That's what fellowship looks like. They were inviting one another into their homes. They were welcoming other people, strangers, into their family space.

And they must have been very interesting meals. I mean, you think of the group that became Christians there on the day of Pentecost. Parthians, Medes, people from Mesopotamia and Cappadocia and Egypt and Rome and Pontus and Phrygia, all with different eating customs and different foods.

[12:51] And yet, what the picture here is, they're not gathering for feasts. They're not trying to show off the latest cooking technique. They are simply breaking bread together.

They're not having dinner parties to make a splash or impress someone important or climb the social ladder or put someone in their debt. They're sharing their families with one another.

It's a very different thing, isn't it, from turning up every now and again at church and expecting others to care for you. But we live in a culture where it is bred into us that the decisions we have to make, we must make for the good of our own family so that the members of our family will get ahead.

There's a frantic desperation among many parents to get their children ahead. They have maths tutors and sports tutors and chess tutors and music tutors and exam tutors.

And our lives are so overscheduled with dubious priorities because of our fear of missing out that we just don't have time for simple hospitality and we wonder why we're lonely and we wonder why we don't have the experience of deep fellowship.

[14:07] You see, what the fellowship of the Holy Spirit does is it changes our families. It demotes our families from being idols which we worship to being an arena and a place where we can serve.

The picture is very radical here. It's almost as though the Holy Spirit takes the boundaries of our families and moves them outwards. And I'm not saying it's easy and I'm not saying it's not messy because when you have people into your home you can't always control what goes on.

They impose on your priorities. You discover that fellowship is costly and deep and frustrating and wonderful. I was going to ask you this morning to raise your hands if you have been invited back to someone's home in this church in the last six months.

Then I was going to ask if you have invited someone from this church who you don't know very well into your home in the last six months or the last six years or gone to coffee with someone or had someone who you know cannot return the compliment.

But I fear the sight of hands or the few of them might be discouraging to you. You see the higher we value our own personal privacy and our freedom from commitment the shallower our grasp of fellowship will be.

[15 : 43] It will be reduced to idle moments of chit chat over coffee. I wonder if there's a doctor who can go to the back please.

We seem to have half a dozen doctors which is a good thing.

The last person who fainted at St John's was highly embarrassed with the attention so let's pray for our sister and then move on with the sermon shall we?

Let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father we're talking about the care and fellowship that we share together here and we know that you care for each of us and we pray that you would demonstrate your care through us to this sister who has fainted.

Pray that you would restore her to health in Jesus name. Amen. She's up.

[17 : 19] Anyone else like to be prayed for? Amen. Now let's turn our attention back to this passage.

I think we fool ourselves to imagine that it was easier for them in the first century.

It wasn't. These brothers and sisters in Jerusalem there were no fewer distractions there were no fewer temptations to be shallow and superficial and selfish.

They had it was even harder for them in a way to put their lives together. there were many more excuses to avoid being involved with each other. You know selfishness did not begin with television but against tremendous odds the Holy Spirit creates a community which he gathers into homes where they rejoice with one another in sharing the life of Christ and even more stunning as it gets just a little bit more private this fellowship turns greedy people into generous people.

Look at verse 44 again and all who believed were together and had all things in common and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need.

[18 : 40] What do you make of this? Treasurer Dick Richards is in church this morning and he should be smiling at this point. What should we do? I mean should we take all our possessions and hand them over to our treasurer Dick Richards to distribute to the needy?

I don't see any agreement. Should we, well let's forget our homes, let's take our RRSPs if you have them and investments and spare properties and spare furniture and cars.

Should we sell those and give the proceeds to Dick to distribute to the congregation? It would make the budget very simple wouldn't it? No, I don't think that's what we are meant to read here because what is taking place is voluntary.

No one is under obligation to do this. In fact, by verse 46 they still have their own private homes to meet in. The New Testament never commands communalism and you may be interested that by the time we get to the end of the New Testament, in one of the last books when Paul is writing to Timothy, he says to this young pastor in his congregation, he says, as for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches, but to do good, be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous.

Clearly there were wealthy people in the congregations who were to use their wealth generously. So that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is not an economic system for the demolition of private property, even though that might be a good idea sometimes.

[20 : 21] It's something actually far more radical. It is voluntary generosity from the heart, which is expressed in genuine care and love.

You know that in the Old Testament God's people were commanded to give 10% to the ministry and to the needy. In the New Testament there is no command because the Holy Spirit has been poured out on his church.

It's hard to imagine God would expect any less. Mandatory communalism would be so much easier, wouldn't it? You wouldn't have to struggle with your conscience.

You wouldn't have to have any hard decisions. You know, how much is enough? How do I weigh my family's second holiday with the needs of others? That's very searching. You see, being filled with the Spirit has the effect of loosening our grasp on wealth and possessions.

And this is not spare change lying around their houses. They sell possessions and they sell goods when they see needs in the church. Because they're gripped by the conviction that in this fellowship of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit they have something far more precious than money and comfort.

[21 : 37] I wonder if you think this describes us well. And again, I realise this is the complete opposite of the messages that we hear day after day and for the rest of the week.

In our culture, the way you are encouraged to give is if it makes you look good. If it will help your image with certain people. It will make you loved by other people.

The opposite here. The evidence of the Holy Spirit being filled in us is we give because we love. As an act of love. The Spirit filled church is a church where there should not be a financial deficit certainly in a wealthy place like Vancouver.

So here is the true fellowship of the Spirit. The first mark is being devoted to the Apostles teaching. The second is being devoted to the fellowship and very quickly the third mark is that it is a witnessing church.

All that I have said is lopsided unless we finish verse 47. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

[22 : 45] They weren't so consumed with their learning and their sharing that they forgot their witness to the outsiders. And I hope the words of Jesus are still echoing in your mind from chapter 1 verse 8 where he said that his purpose for the church is that we would be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That the whole reason the church exists is for a purpose larger than ourselves. We are meant to be a missionary church. Our legacy if you will is the transforming and saving grace of Jesus Christ through our witness.

Jesus. But do you notice that the job of saving people and the job of adding them to the church is not ours. It's Jesus. As the church devotes themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, Jesus does two things.

He adds to their number those who are being saved. And John Stott beautifully says he does not add to the church without saving people. There are no nominal Christians.

And he does not save them without adding them. There are no solitary Christians because salvation and church membership belong together. And it is probably appropriate for me to point out with the cantata coming up next week that Jesus did this day by day.

[24 : 09] It's not sporadic and rare but common and expected. So let me finish. Here are the three marks of a spirit-filled church.

And they remain, they should remain. The characteristic marks of St. John's and every Christian church devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to their fellowship, Jesus adding to our number day by day those who are being saved.

But I think we need to be realistic about the culture that we are part of. And if we are going to commit ourselves afresh to these priorities, we need to recognise, brothers and sisters, that we are going to be out of step with our culture.

If you are writing a manual on how to live life in Vancouver today, you would write the opposite of these three priorities. Instead of encouraging people to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, you would advise them to be ambiguous towards any moral or spiritual certainties.

You would advise them to be agnostic about things of religion and not to be too devoted to anything except perhaps their image. If you are writing advice for Vancouver, instead of encouraging people to devote themselves to a fellowship, you would advise them to devote themselves to the good life and to their own personal freedom and to finding themselves and to the need to guard our personal privacy.

[25 : 36] You would advise them that it's a good commitment to get your own family ahead, to be very careful how you spend your money and whatever you do, not be committed to anything more than once a week.

And instead of encouraging witness, you would probably advise that morals and religion are private and subjective and that people who speak publicly about their faith are to be avoided as a social embarrassment.

And that is why verse 40 is so important for us as we leave this. Verse 40, as Peter ends his sermon, we read these words. Peter testified with many other words and exhorted them saying, save yourselves from this crooked generation.

You see, the community that Jesus is creating is marked by its distinctness from the culture. And the first step to being filled with the Spirit is turning our backs on the actions and attitudes which mark our generation.

See, if our love and our knowledge of God's Word is shallow, and if our fellowship is superficial and sketchy, and if we are resistant to being involved with other Christians, or generous, if we are avoiding our place in mission, it must be because we love this world and not the Spirit.

[27 : 07] And we can try and devote ourselves to these things, but unless we decisively break with our world, we will always be being pulled in two directions. So I want to call on you this morning.

Save yourself from this crooked generation. Examine yourself and ask, am I devoted to the Word of God? Is it my weekly, daily passion?

Am I devoted to the fellowship in the regular weekly gatherings, in glad hospitality, in financial generosity?

Am I willing to do what it takes to move from being a spectator to a participant in the fellowship? Am I ready to be a witness of Christ? For this is not only the way that we learn and love and leave a legacy, it is the way that Jesus will reach his world, and it is the way that the Spirit will fill his church. And that is something we deeply desire. Let's bow our heads for a moment. Father, we pray that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon us.

[28 : 27] Fill us with your Spirit that we may be devoted to you in your Word, devoted to one another in the fellowship, and devoted to your world in witness.

Fill us again, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.