

Sunday 14th July 2024. Spread the Word, Catch the fire.

Authentic Christianity

Acts 2:42-47. The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This is a bit of a landmark day for All Saints because for months and months the Rock project has been building towards today 14th July as the first key target date for the Rock project church refurbishment. At 1.30pm the doors will be opened for you to go inside and have a look round at the progress. We probably need to arrange ourselves into sensible groupings, but you will be able to get a good idea of the new look and feel of the building. It is amazing to think that so far we are on target, on budget and on time and although there is still a way to go before everything is commissioned and operational, it is looking great and I am so grateful to God for his faithfulness to us and the wonderful team who have made it happen.

This weekend is also the deadline for the next edition of the What's on magazine and we wanted to put a picture of the church on the front page. So on Thursday I went and took this pic which I think looks pretty good, as you can see. However, I have also been pondering and praying about the passage for today's talk, which is all about what church really means and I ended up calling Tali in a panic requesting an extension to the deadline.

Why? Well beautiful as it is, this photo is not the whole picture. I just felt that showing the church without people in it is just a shell, a temporary shelter from the elements. God has made us to be wired for community and the Greek word for Church is Ecclesia which means gathering. Church is primarily a gathering of people. Just look at any newspaper – they always feature pictures of people. John Wimber said 'people come to church for many reasons but they stay for only one – relationships', it is our relationships with God and each other that sustain and grow a church. So I am going to replace this picture with one showing at least a few joyful people!

Our passage from Acts is a joyful picture of the church in its delightful infancy, full of life, vitality, growth and people experiencing the abundant life that Jesus promised.

The day of Pentecost had come, the Holy Spirit had fallen on the disciples and catapulted them out into the city of Jerusalem to declare the wonders of God to everyone around. Peter explained that they weren't mad or drunk, they were simply full of the Holy Spirit and sharing the good news that Jesus' love and forgiveness is on offer for everyone, everywhere. All we need to do is respond by turning to God and following his commands instead of our own selfish ways.

And 3000 responded to his message. Loads were baptised. The church was going ballistic - wouldn't you just have loved to be there?

It would have been amazing. Acts 2v42-47 is like an idyllic snapshot of a brief season of rapid acceleration fuelled by raw Holy Spirit power.

Now I am an idealist. I want perfection. And Acts 2 is up there in my list of favourite passages because I want our church to be like this. In fact, my understanding of Ecclesiology in other words my understanding of what church is and how it should work is hugely influenced by this passage.

Sometimes I have heard people say they are Christian but don't go to church, or they do church by listening to Youtube or by surfing with friends or discussing the bible with a friend at the pub. Well these things are great but this passage gives us 10 marks of authentic church so let me go through these really briefly with you:

The first verse alone is stuffed full of the core ingredients of Authentic Christianity and church life together:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and to **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**.

Authentic churches devote themselves to four basic practices. *Devoted* here means that the early Christians continued steadfastly together. Church is not a just casual commitment, it is a *Covenant community*, a family centred around Christ, with four baseline activities:

1) Godly Teaching - literally the *didactics* of the Apostles. Thankfully we have the Apostles' teaching written down for us in the New Testament, and they would have expounded the Hebrew scriptures that pointed the way to the coming of Christ. Ephesians 2:20 says The church is built on the Apostles (New Testament) and Prophets (Old Testament), with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Recently I have been reading the Apostolic Fathers which contains a book called 'The teaching of the Apostles' known as the Didache. It is surprising that it didn't make it into the New Testament really as it was widely circulated before Revelation and was commended by many of the early church Fathers. I do wonder if Luke was thinking of the Didache when he wrote that the early church devoted themselves to the Apostles Teaching. It gives practical and ethical pointers to how to live as a Christian and how we come together as a church to give thanks, share communion and pray the Lord's prayer three times a day. The Didache also gives guidance about church leaders and warns about false prophets and teachers who are just in it for the money. But verse 42 is clear that the early church has **appointed leadership** (v42) - the church was clearly organised and led by recognised leaders who are both called by God and affirmed by the church. The Apostles were the first layer of leader, then the prophets and teachers. Later in the New Testament we find the Apostles delegating their authority to Bishops, Deacons and Presbyters.

2) The fellowship (Koinonia) of believers *together* with one another, sharing resources, (and discipline when necessary).

3) The **Breaking of bread** (Communion). In the CofE Communion and Baptism are the 2 key sacraments where God's grace is demonstrated through physical signs.

4) The **Prayers. Starting with the Lords prayer** but Paul encourages prayer to be done on all occasions (Eph 6:18)

Then the next four verses each contain another hallmark each:

Verse 43 shows that **Holy Spirit ministry** eg *Signs and Wonders* should be a normal part of church life.

Verse 44 talks about **Common purpose** and mutual generosity – thank you for giving to this church as we seek to bless this community with the love of Christ.

Verse 45 is all about **Generous Mission giving** - Demonstrating the Gospel through generosity and social action: they *gave to anyone as they have need*.

Praising God (v47) - Worshipping God the Holy Trinity in Spirit and in truth. Wherever the word is used it does mean singing too!

Growth (v47) - both in depth and number (*The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*)

Although Acts is called the Acts of the Apostles, really it should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit because it is the Lord doing the saving, and as we will see next week, the message spread rapidly when people got healed or delivered or set free.

Although this description of the church in Jerusalem seems wonderful and it sets out the baseline for Authentic church, it faced challenges like any church does. Someone said 'if you find the perfect church, don't join it, you'll only mess it up!'

It's a bit like the trouble of Instagram vs Reality. Have you experienced it? [Pics] The trouble is people are people and they kind of get in the way sometimes.

Neil Cole is a missiologist who has written extensively about the growth of the early church in Acts and his view is that the church in Jerusalem was a great start, which he calls Church 1.0, but it wasn't as outward looking as it should have been. The Jerusalem church experienced ethnic tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish believers and after Stephen was martyred and the church started to be persecuted, the disciples were scattered. Neil Cole points out the irony that Luke tells us that the Apostles remained in Jerusalem when the word Apostle actually means 'sent one'. Some of the scattered believers ended up in Turkey and that's where the next version of Church got started - at Antioch. They were more accepting of outsiders, sent financial gifts to the Jerusalem church and actually sent out their best people (i.e. Paul and Barnabas) on mission. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. Neil Cole thinks this was a good upgrade but actually it was only by the time the church at Ephesus was planted with Priscilla and Aquilla

leading was there a fully functional missional church with small groups throughout the city. Neil Cole's challenge to churches like ours is not to become pot bound by our parish, our buildings, our traditions or our demographics but to be always looking at ways we can break out, plant churches, and connect with people in new ways.

On the day when we are entering our refurbished building for the first time, as you go in, can I encourage you to pray – 'Lord may this building be a tool in your hands, a tabernacle for your glory and a place of refuge for the least the lost and the lonely. A place of encounter with your Holy Spirit, with open doors plenty of people, and freedom to worship!

A couple of years ago Eddie Lyle from Open Doors brought a North Korean Pastor to New Wine. Her testimony was incredible

Hae Woo tried to escape into China because she wanted freedom to practice her Christian faith but she was captured and sent to a North Korean prison camp for re-education. Inside the camp it was a capital offense to speak about Jesus or sing Christian songs, but she had already copied out the whole bible by hand and had memorised lots of scripture. Hae Woo sensed God telling her to share her faith but she was terrified. She prayed and God reminded her of a single verse of scripture: Acts 16v31 'Believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved – you and your whole household.' So she prayed who she should share the scripture with amongst the 200 women who shared the floor of her small dormitory with her every day. One wrong choice could be disastrous. Hae Woo was surprised by the faces God seemed to highlight to her because she would never have picked them out herself. She shared the verse of scripture with 5 women and said that if they wanted to know more they would have to meet her in the toilets. The toilets were disgusting with rats and overflowing sewage – but it was the perfect place to meet because the guards wouldn't come in. So Hae Woo planted a church in that North Korean toilet with 5 women meeting to pray and learn scripture. Hae Woo taught them Psalm 23, The Lord's my Shepherd and the Lord's prayer. She also knew that it was important for believers to worship, but singing Christian songs was forbidden. But Hae Woo noticed that when it rained when they were on parade, the Guards wouldn't come near, so they learned to sing in the rain. In North Korea when food is scarce Christians follow the concept of what they call 'Holy Rice'. They set aside some of their rice to share with others who are even worse off than them and the church is growing.

At New Wine we all sang amazing Grace together, with Hae Woo leading in North Korean. Several things struck me from her testimony. First, a single verse of Scripture, given to the right person at the right time can transform their life. Second, simple prayer and worship can sustain you and feed your soul through the toughest situation. Thirdly, it's possible to plant an authentic church in a toilet, if we would follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. So we have invested in the church building and made it fit for purpose for the next generations. Now we have to go out from here into the community and invite everyone to join in the great Kingdom banquet.