

Acts 2.42: A PENTECOSTAL OR SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

(Central Baptist Church 10 June 2007)

Just over a year ago I returned all-fired up from a sabbatical in Australia and NZ – and in the light of that sabbatical I preached a dream-sermon. Some of you will no doubt never forget it – the sermon seemed to go on and on and on.

My dream was all about the church – I dream of worshipping church, a multicultural church, a non-sexist church, a community church, a praying church, a multi-aged, church; a church full of children, reaching out to young adults, growing with seniors; a n empowering, stress-free, ministry led church; a vibrant town-centre church, welcoming, evangelising, and growing; a church made up of small groups, served by an ever-expanding staff, a generous church, a visionary church, a church where faith dreams and where faith dares.

Although that was some 12 months ago, the dream still continues.

I still remain passionate about church.

For me there is nothing more exciting or more worthwhile than to gather together with God's people on a Sunday and to be touched afresh by God's Spirit.

Yes, I know that church is not always exciting – it is not always fulfilling – there have been times when I have been downright bored by church.

On those occasions I am tempted to agree with Soren Kirkegaard, the Danish philosopher: *“Whereas Christ turned water into wine, the church has succeeded in doing something more difficult, it has turned wine into water”*.

But the good news is that church can also be a place of joy and inspiration – for time and again church is a place where we meet with God.

Last time I preached to you was on Pentecost Sunday

I preached about the day when the wind blew, when the fire fell, when God enabled men & women to proclaim the good news in every language of the known world.

- What an exciting day that must have been. A vast crowd gathered together to hear Peter preach – in one day 3000 people responded to Christ and were baptised. What a breath-taking experience it all was.
- It was then that the church came into being. For before you could say ‘Jack Robinson’, they were meeting together for Bible study and fellowship, and for worship and prayer around the Lord's Table. The fact is that church and Jesus go hand in hand.

I'm always amazed by people who say to me: *“You don't have to go to church to be a Christian”*. To which I say “rubbish”.

That makes as much sense as saying: *“Married people don't have to live together”*.

If a married couple don't live together, then there is something wrong with the marriage. The same is true of Christians and their churchgoing. There is something wrong with your relationship with Jesus, if you are not worshipping with God's people Sunday by Sunday – unless, of course, you have two broken legs or the equivalent thereof

I am passionate about church. As I said to you in my sermon of a year ago: *“I have a dream of a worshipping church, where God is at the centre of our life together, where Sunday is a day not to be missed”*.

With this in mind let's turn to Acts 2.42 and see what Luke has to say about the early church. Luke writes "**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**".

Incidentally, this morning I am basing my sermon on the NRSV, which for once is infinitely preferable to the GNB

Here we see five marks of a Spirit-filled or Pentecostal church:

1. A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH IS A DISCIPLINED CHURCH

Luke writes: "**they devoted themselves**" to worshipping together.

I.e. they made the worship of the church their priority.

The GNB says: "**they spent their time in**" being together – & no doubt they did.

But this misses the force of the underlying Greek verb. They didn't simply spend time together – they '*persevered*', they '*persisted*', in coming together.

No doubt initially wild horses wouldn't have kept them away from church – they were so in love with the Lord & with one another, that there was nothing more that they wanted to do than to come together to worship.

But undoubtedly too that enthusiasm waned – there must have been times when the 1st century equivalent of garden centres seemed a more attractive option.

But Luke says "**they devoted themselves**" to worshipping together.

They persisted, they persevered, they made a real effort to meet together - for they were a disciplined church.

Here is a challenge to us.

For although there are times when we want nothing better than to go to church, there are also times when the very last thing we want to do is to sing hymns, say prayers, and listen to a sermon. And what then?

On such occasions we need to discipline ourselves to come to church.

For, '*absence*' does not always '*make the heart grow fonder*'.

My mind goes to the old illustration about a lump of coal falling from the fire onto the hearth – once it is out of the fire, it goes cold and grey – the only way for it to glow again, is for it to be put back into the fire. I.e. For the sake of our spiritual well-being, we need to be regular in our attendance at Sunday worship.

Just as those first Christians devoted themselves to the worship of God, so too we need to devote ourselves to the weekly worship of God. We need to be like Jesus, who Luke once tells us, "**on the Sabbath.. went as usual to the synagogue**" (Lk 4.16).

Jesus was in the habit of going to church – and so too should we.

It takes a good deal of self-discipline to ensure that worship comes first.

There are so many other things which threaten to come in the way – visits from relatives, children's birthday parties, shopping, sporting fixtures, or simply a day out by the sea or wherever.

If we are not careful, we can end up treating church like a convenience store.

But the challenge is here for us to be disciplined in our worshipping together. To make the worship of God an over-riding priority in our lives

2. A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH IS A LEARNING CHURCH

“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching”.

When the first Christians came together, they came together to learn. Incidentally, at that stage, they were not called Christians – they were called ‘disciples’- and the word ‘disciple’ means ‘a learner’.

These 1st Christians learned **“from the apostles”**.

- The apostles will have told them the stories of Jesus. We know that to begin with it was in the context of worship that the stories of Jesus were handed down. The 4 Gospels as we have them today are compilations by 4 different editors of stories that were recited in church services.
- The apostles no doubt expounded the OT Scriptures in the light of the coming of Jesus. For, as Paul wrote in 2 Tim 3.15,16: **“The Holy Scriptures... are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living”**.

When the first Christians met together – they met together to learn.

Just as Jewish synagogues were known as ‘houses of instruction’, so too church was a place for learning.

Here is a challenge is there not to us. When we come together on a Sunday, do we come with the intention to learn from God’s Word?

If so, then why do so many of us come to service without our Bibles?

The Bible is our basic textbook.

It is true, that the first Christians didn’t bring their Bibles to church.

But then the ordinary punter wasn’t able to afford a Bible.

At that stage there was no NT. As far as the OT was concerned, the Jerusalem church may have only had one set of scrolls making up the OT.

By contrast, we all have Bibles – Bibles containing both the OT & the NT..

I sometimes wonder whether we 21st century Christians realise how fortunate we are.

Each one of us has a copy of the Word of God. What an amazing privilege.

So let’s use our Bibles – and in particular let’s bring our Bibles to church.

Come too with a pen or pencil to jot down thought are perhaps new or unfamiliar.

Yes, a Spirit-filled church is a learning church – eager to discover the light & truth that God has to break forth from his word.

3. A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH IS A LOVING CHURCH

“They devoted themselves to the fellowship”.

The word here for **“fellowship”** (*koinonia*) literally means: “the state of having things in common”. When we talk of having a time of fellowship after the service, we mean having a chat over a cup of tea or coffee.

But fellowship in the early church was much more than that.

It involved a very practical sharing of life together.

Luke tells us that at Jerusalem they had “**all things in common**” (2.44): i.e. “**they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need**” (2.45).

We are not told who the ‘needy’ were in Jerusalem, but they probably included widows who had no pensions to live on (see Acts 6), and the twelve apostles, who in coming to Jerusalem from Galilee had cut themselves off from their previous economic roots – there was no opportunity to fish in Jerusalem!

At first sight it might appear that the early church abolished private property altogether. However, the way in which special attention is given to Barnabas for selling a field suggests that there was something unusual about the act (4.36,37)

Likewise in the later incident concerning Ananias and Sapphira, it is made quite clear that the first Christians were under no compulsion to sell their property and give the money to the church (5.1-11).

It would appear to be truer to say that the fellowship was marked by generosity, which was rooted in a renunciation of possessiveness. They loved one another – and because they loved one another, they were happy to share things with one another.

A Spirit-filled church is a loving church – and they showed their love by caring for those less fortunate than themselves

4. A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH IS A CELEBRATING CHURCH

“**They devoted themselves to sharing in the fellowship meals**” – literally: “*they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread*”

Here a reference to the Lord’s Supper, what we sometimes call Communion, what other Christians call ‘the Eucharist’ or even ‘the Mass’.

Why then do both the GNB & the NRSV use the term “**fellowship meals**”?

Because originally the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in the context of a proper meal. The expression “*to break bread*” was another way of saying “*having a meal together*”. In Britain today we tend not to eat bread with our meals - indeed, almost the only time many of us eat bread with a meal is when we go out for a meal, and we tuck into a roll while we wait for our order to be served.

By contrast every 1st century Jewish meal began with the host breaking bread & thanking God for his goodness.

In an early Christian context, this ‘*breaking of bread*’ gained added significance – for as they broke bread they remembered the One whose body was broken. Later as they drank from the cup they remembered the one whose blood was poured out for them.

These early Christian communion services were very different from ours.

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, there is always a great deal of solemnity.

As the bread is passed round, there is an intensity of silence as we shut our eyes and focus on the Cross. When the wine is passed round, the intensity is perhaps lessened as we sing a Jesus-centred song, but we are equally serious.

That's because we have done away with the meal, and with all the jolliness that goes along with eating together.

By contrast Luke tells us that when the first Christians broke bread & drank wine they did so **“with glad and humble hearts, praising God”** (2.46). It was a joyful occasion. Yes, they remembered the Lord who died, but they also remembered that the Lord who had risen and who was present with them in their fellowship meals.

What's more, they celebrated not just God's love for them, but also their love for one another. **“Because there is one loaf of bread, all of us, though many, are one body, for all we share the same loaf”** (1 Cor 10.16).

The Lord's Supper was like a great family celebration.

Here too is a challenge to us. When we come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we come together as brothers and sisters to celebrate not just the death of Jesus, but the difference that Jesus has made to us all. We are one. We are family!

In an increasingly world divided world, we are one.

In an increasingly lonely world, we are family..

Yes, a Spirit-filled Church is a celebrating church

5. A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH IS A PRAYING CHURCH

“They devoted themselves to the prayers”

Notice the definite article. Luke does not say that they devoted themselves to ‘prayer’, but to **“the prayers”**. Luke is not describing a series of informal prayer meetings, but rather has in mind formal worship services in which prayers were offered.

Indeed, he may even have had in mind worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

For the temple was not just a place where sacrifices were offered to God, it was, as Jesus himself said, **“a house of prayer”**.

It is perhaps significant that immediately after Luke has described the life of the early church, he records that Pt & John went up to the temple **“at the hour of prayer”** (3.1).

I.e. there is a place for formal prayers of intercession within a church service, as we remember the needs of God's world.

A Spirit-filled church is a church which prays for others.

Yes, they will also have prayed for themselves too. The difficulties they faced were enormous, but they knew that by praying they were putting themselves in touch with the power of God. Time and again in Acts we find that when the Christian church had its back to the wall, they prayed – and God answered their prayers (12.1-17).

But they also prayed for others. Here too is a challenge to us. A challenge to take praying for others seriously.

Incidentally, the challenge is not to put on extra prayer-meetings, but to ensure that at every main Sunday service we remember to pray for others.

A Spirit-filled church is a praying church

Here then are five marks of a Spirit-filled church: a Spirit-filled church is a disciplined, learning, loving, celebrating and praying church.

How does our church compare with the first church in Jerusalem?

- Are we just as passionate about attending church?
- Are we just as keen to learn?
- Are we just as practical in our loving?
- Are we just as much family when we come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper?
- Are we just as much concerned to pray for others?

I.e. are we too passionate about church?

At our leadership team meeting last Thursday evening we looked at a list of attributes which should characterise a genuine Jesus community.

The first attribute was 'Passion'. *'We aspire to be a dynamic spiritual community, vibrant in our prayer life and worship. We expect God to be present and we speak openly of his actions among us. We are excited about God, passionate about life in the Spirit and aflame with love for Jesus'*

Brothers and sisters – that is the dream that I have for our church.

A church so touched by the Spirit, that it is passionate about it's life together.

Precisely because the first Christians were passionate about church, they proved to be an exceedingly attractive church. For after describing the five marks of the Jerusalem church, Luke goes on to say that “**day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved**” (2.47). This was a group people wanted to join.

Wouldn't it be great if people were to want to join our church because of us?

But for this to happen, we need to become passionate about our life together.

Let's allow the Spirit to do away with our British reserve – and to so fill us that we too become passionate for Jesus, and passionate for one another.