

With Exuberant and Sincere *Hearts*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42

I am beginning to think that doctor Luke was a cardiologist because of his repeated use of the “heart” as a metaphor for our deepest commitments and joys. When the disciples prayed for guidance in the selection of the twelfth apostle, they prayed to the Lord, “everybody’s heart-knower” (1:24) and when the people heard Peter’s Pentecost message they were “cut to the heart.” In this third instance, Luke uses the “heart” to describe **how** the believers met together, ate together, worshiped together, and praised God together. They did all of this “with glad and sincere hearts.” The word for “glad” might be better translated “exuberant.” It has its roots in the word that was used to describe the anointing of the priest or king with oil, as in Psalm 133. Luke’s word for joy refers us to Psalm 133:

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s head, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”

[Anointing a priest and announcing a new day are two positive images. “The oil flowing down Aaron’s beard communicates a sense of warm, priestly relationship. The dew descending down Hermon’s slopes communicates a sense of fresh and expectant newness. Oil and dew. The two things that make life together delightful” (Peterson, Long Obedience, 176)].

The second word used to describe their heart’s attitude literally means “simple.” It is a simplicity that makes us think of Jesus’ sixth beatitude, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Their hearts were said to be *simple* or *sincere* because they were *undivided*, *single-minded*, and *pure*. The question is this: How is this emotion reflected in you? How is it evident in our fellowship together?

Before the church can be experienced, the Gospel must be preached. Peter’s message appealed to the mind. He launched into an *explanation* of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, requesting that his audience *listen carefully*. He began by quoting heavily from familiar Old Testament prophecy to affirm the truth of Jesus. Then he presented a convicting message which credited each and every one with the death of Jesus.

“This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked people, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (Acts 2:23-24).

After Peter announced, “...Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ,” Luke tells us that the people were “cut to the heart.” His

presentation was clear and his invitation was without manipulation. When the people said to Peter and the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter drew a straight line between belief and unbelief. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38-39). The difference between the crowd and the community of believers was expressed in three ways, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. A person was either in or out on the basis of their confession and baptism. Those who doubted, debated, despised, or just remained indifferent to the Gospel, were not included in the number of those who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The power of personal transformation through repentance and the gift of the Holy Spirit preceded the fellowship of believers. Luke begins by describing a crowd that has been “cut to the heart” and ends by describing a fellowship that is doing everything that counts “with exuberant and sincere hearts.”

“Whether we like it or not, the moment we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. . . we are at the same time a member of the Christian church. . . even if we do not permit our name to be placed on a church roll, even if we refuse to identify ourselves with a particular congregation and share responsibilities with them, even if we absent ourselves from the worship of a congregation. Our membership in the church is a corollary of our faith in Christ. . . For God never makes private, secret salvation deals with people. His relationships with us are personal, true: intimate, yes; but private, no. We are a family in Christ. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child” (Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 169).

“Cut to the heart” captures the *meaning of repentance*. “With exuberant and sincere hearts” captures the *method of fellowship*. It is absolutely crucial that both expressions characterize the believer’s experience. The action plan for church growth in Acts 2 boiled down to a character description of their life together. They did everything important “with exuberant and sincere hearts.”

Most every church’s denominational distinctives appear represented in the description of the early church, but few churches seem to have what they had! How do we account for that? What are we missing?

Roman Catholics see the history of apostolic succession commencing with Peter. *Baptists* point to the baptism of new converts and *Pentecostals* to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The *Reformed* tradition resonates with Peter’s proclamation of the Word and the believers’ devotion to the apostles’ teaching. *Anglicans* and *Episcopalians* focus on the breaking of the bread, the Eucharist, and *Methodists* on small group fellowships. *Mennonites* see themselves in the early church’s social concern and simple lifestyle. Certain *Brethren* fellowships emphasize prayer and the *Nazarenes* see themselves in the quest for personal holiness. *Megachurches* identify with the early church’s explosive growth.

The thrust of this message is that we take Luke's description seriously and that we not write it off as empty rhetoric. He is not waxing eloquent when he characterizes their attitude as exuberant and sincere, he is offering an explanation for their success. Luke describes not only *what* the early church did, but *how* they did it. In our concentration on what they did we often miss the importance of how they did it. *Going through the motions without the emotion eliminates the devotion!* Is not the God of truth also the God of emotions?

The Devoted Church or Action with an Attitude

Luke describes now only *what* happened in the First Church of Acts, but *how* it happened. The early believers "*devoted* themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." These four practices constitute the basic needs which are universal to the church at all times, in every age, everywhere. The early church was *devoted* to these four spiritual disciplines. The word *devoted* deserves some explanation, so that we don't pass over it too quickly and miss its significance. I imagine most churches include these four disciplines somewhere in the life of the church, but in the early church they were the priority. By devoting themselves "to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer," the early church gave themselves with great purpose and consistency to these practices. They persisted in and held fast to this basic method for spiritual and evangelistic growth. To be devoted to the apostle's teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer implied both *discipline* and *delight*. The believers practiced these spiritual disciplines, not only consistently but enthusiastically.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. All the believers became students of the Word of God, not for the sake of acquiring a head knowledge or satisfying intellectual curiosity, but for the purpose of being transformed by the truth of God's Word. The teaching ministry of the apostles was confirmed by "many wonders and miraculous signs done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43). But the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit did not in any way lessen the importance of listening intently and learning personally the truth of God's Word.

The early church affirmed what the apostle Paul later emphasized to Timothy, when he said, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Our church affirms the complete reliability and total trustworthiness of the Old and New Testaments. We believe in the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture and its entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. We do so, not in theory, but in practice. We seek to submit our personal lives, as well as the life and ministry of our church to the authority of God's Word. We believe that we have no other message than the message revealed in God's Word, the Bible. It is our goal to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). To that end, "**We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ**" (Col. 1:28).

This is why we proclaim God's Word every Sunday morning in worship. It is the key to my ministry (Stay in the Story, The Living Word). We make the Bible the subject of study in our education hour and in small groups. This is why we value a music ministry that reflects the truth of God's Word and a children's ministry that encourages Bible memorization and seeks to teach and apply the Word of God. Last Sunday's presentation of Sticky Notes and Bible Quotes was a special illustration of how we seek to encourage our children to hold God's Word in their hearts. This is why we preach the Word of God at our weekly Ladle Ministry to the poor and support ministries that translate the Bible in indigenous languages and missionaries who faithfully proclaim the Word of God throughout the world. We have accepted the admonition to "Let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly as [we] teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as [we] sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

We teach our children at a young age to use their minds. A few weeks ago Ginny asked her first grade Sunday school class whether Acts was in the Old Testament or the New Testament. Hanna Jones spoke up right away, "You don't understand, we only have little brains."

Almost all of us are devoted to the apostles' teaching because of someone who helped us to see their importance.

I remember my fourth and fifth grade Sunday School teacher, Mr. Knuen. Monday through Friday he was a milkman, but on Sunday, he patiently and methodically delivered the "pure milk of the Word" without fail. I don't remember him as a fun, exciting teacher, but I do remember that he was very sincere about the Word of God. He taught us to memorize verses, and he genuinely seemed to want us to understand the Bible and apply it to our lives. I can't remember a single sermon I heard during my adolescence, but the Word of God had a profound influence on me. The preached Word, the parented Word, the devotional Word, slowly shaped me. No preacher had as profound an effect on me as much as Grace Baird. She was one of my grandmother's friends, a large woman in her late seventies at the time, who commanded respect and taught the Word with authority. She came to church on a mission and that was to teach children how to worship God for real. The hymns I sing on key I learned in Grace Baird's primary church, and I'm glad Grace Baird came to our church and served as my pastor in our primary church. These are a few of the practical ways that the church is devoted to the whole counsel of God and seeks to apply the Word of God in every area of life.

When the Church is devoted to the apostle's teaching, theology and doxology meet. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it, "Mission is acted out doxology. That is [the Church's] deepest secret. Its purpose is that God may be glorified" (127). This saves the apostle's teaching from becoming only so much information about God.

They devoted themselves to fellowship (koinonia). The word *koinonia* means "sharing in" or "causing to share in" and is interpreted in two profound ways in the New Testament description of the church.

First, we share together a common fellowship with the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Paul said, "*God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our*

Lord, is faithful” (1 Cor. 1:9). The blessing of our life together depends exclusively on this fellowship. “*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*” (2 Cor. 13:14; see Phil. 2:1). The fellowship we share is “*our fellowship. . . with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1:3).

Secondly, the New Testament church used the word fellowship (koinonia) to refer to sharing their material resources with each other. In the NIV the word is translated *sharing* (2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13) but it is the same word that is used for *fellowship* with God. It is this second meaning of fellowship that Luke emphasizes here. The reality of Christian conversion was especially evident in the generous sharing that went on among Christians. Luke writes, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”

The author of Hebrews encompassed the full meaning of koinonia when he exhorted the believers, saying, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and have our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:22-25). This fivefold exhortation addresses communion with God and the communion of the saints. The two forms of koinonia are distinct yet inseparable.

“It is far easier to deal with people as problems to be solved,” writes Eugene Peterson, “than to have anything to do with them in community.” It is easier to avoid personal relationships and treat people as impersonal types (seekers, givers, felt-need consumers, the needy). Instead of congregational life involving personal relationships it consists of impersonal goals, institutional structures, political strategies, and organizational planning. “In the process the church becomes less and less community, that is, people who pay attention to each other, (“brothers and sisters living together”), and more and more a collectivism of ‘contributing units’” (Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 174).

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. The third characteristic of the early church was worship. Biblical scholars agree that Luke’s reference to “the breaking of the bread” implies the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This is an especially relational and intimate way of characterizing worship. The early church moved easily from enjoying each other’s fellowship around the table to celebrating Holy Communion. What is important to stress is that they not only experienced the Eucharist but they did so “with glad and sincere hearts.” The believers enjoyed a oneness of fellowship that easily blended and integrated family and home life with the Household of Faith. It was not unusual for them to enjoy table fellowship and naturally move into worship. They regularly concluded their agape meal with the words of institution: “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24-25). If our personal lives and our worship life were so united and conjoined as to be one, we would undoubtedly experience the

strength and encouragement of belonging to the church. The worship experience of the early church was far different from just going through the motions.

They were devoted to prayer or the prayers. Luke's description includes the definite article before prayer as it does with the breaking of the bread. This reference to *the prayers* indicates that the early church met together for prayer services. Personal prayer was followed up by specific times of prayer. These may have corresponded with the regular Jewish times of prayer. This is suggested by the fact that "everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46). It is also suggested by the reference to Peter and John "going up to the temple at the time of prayer" (Acts 3:1). Once again Luke's description implies a range of meaning from personal prayer to corporate prayer; from prayer in the temple courts to prayer in their homes.

The presence of the Holy Spirit was evident not only in a pattern of behavior but in an attitude of heart. If we have the pattern of behavior how can we work on the attitude of heart? *The initiative for pursuing these four spiritual disciplines was found not in creative programming but in the personal desire of each and every believer.*

The Locus of Witness

Leslie Newbigin served for forty years as a missionary in India. He observed, "Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent with such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving. One searches in vain through the letters of St. Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his readers that they ought to be active in mission" (The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 116).

Luke's description of the fellowship of believers is bracketed by two references to church growth (2:41,47). The impact of Peter's message resulted in three thousand baptized individuals "added to their number that day." And the impact of the positive testimony of the church led to a pattern of personal transformation (repentance, baptism and inclusion). "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

"The Church is not the source of witness; rather it is the locus of witness" (Newbigin, 120). It fulfills its mission not by doing special things and promoting certain programs, but by being true to its nature. And when it is true to its end, it is so to the end (127). Mission is accomplished in the context of being the community of God's people rather than setting up a separate enterprise to get things done. "The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ. . . It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power" (Newbigin, 119). John Stott observes, "Those first Jerusalem Christians were *not* so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshiping, that they forgot about witnessing..." It is also important that the "the Lord added to their number

daily those who were being saved.” Stott writes, ”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. *Yet he did it!*” (Stott, 86).

I like the Peanuts cartoon that has Luci asking Charlie Brown, “Are you going to Sunday school tomorrow?” Charlie Brown responds hesitantly, “I guess so, Why?” Luci answers, “The teacher wanted to know why you weren’t there last Sunday.” Sheepishly Charlie Brown says, “The zipper on my Bible was stuck.” “One of the afflictions of pastoral work,” writes Eugene Peterson, “has been to listen, with a straight face, to all the reasons people give for not going to church: ‘My mother made me when I was little.’ ‘There are too many hypocrites in the church.’ ‘It’s the only day I have to sleep in.’ There was a time when I responded to such statements with simple arguments that exposed them as flimsy excuses. Then I noticed that it didn’t make any difference. If I showed the inadequacy of one excuse, three more would pop up in its place. So I didn’t respond anymore. I listen (with a straight face) and go home and pray that the person will one day find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God” (Long Obedience, 45).

If we make these priorities our agenda, the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayer, will we win back those believers who have left the church? I suppose we could study why people have walked away from the church and we could say a lot about our culture’s tendency to privatism, individualism, and cynicism. We could speak at length of how consumerism has infiltrated the Church and how entertainment has become the medium of discourse. Or, we could explore the many ways the church has been a disappointment to us. It is after-all a place of contradictions and distractions, filled with hypocrites, religious fanatics, moralizers, and ego performers. It is often a place of pious sloth and petty agendas, as anyone who has spent any time in church can attest to.

We could spend a lot of time discussing all the cultural and religious reasons that have been given for not being involved in church, but what if instead, we concentrated on *what* the Spirit-filled early church did and *how* they did it? By God’s grace is it possible to study God’s Word, share our resources, worship and pray together “with exuberant and sincere hearts”?

In his meditation on Christian fellowship, entitled *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of the privilege of living in visible fellowship with other Christians. “It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in hostile places stand alone” (18). Bonhoeffer’s perspective, raises an interesting question: would we appreciate the church more if our circumstances were such that fellowship with other believers was denied to us? Or would the prospect of endlessly “free” Sundays, without even the possibility of church services, provide a sense of relief? Bonhoeffer insisted that the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians ought to bring us to our knees in thanksgiving for God’s grace (20). I wonder how the followers of Christ in parts of Indonesia, Nigeria, China, Colombia, and Iraq would relate to our attitudes toward the church?

The fact that the devil may show up at church on Sunday to stalk his prey and work his schemes is hardly an excuse for forfeiting Christian fellowship. Wouldn't even a half-hearted, lukewarm believer show up if Jesus were coming to church *in person*? Well, that is what the Lord Jesus promised. "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20). Christ himself is present by his Spirit in the lives of our redeemed brothers and sisters. "Christ is not seen apart from the gathered, listening, praying, believing, worshiping people to whom he is Lord and Savior. It is not possible to have Christ apart from the church" (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 44).

Churches, like families, are messy, but that's no reason to forfeit Christian fellowship. God's grace shatters our wish dream of community. Thank the Lord that the Church is not made up of perfect people for if it were, we would be left out. If the church "excluded the weak and insignificant people, the seemingly useless people," wouldn't Christ himself be excluded, because Christ often comes to us in our brother or sister in need (Mt 25:45). Thank the Lord that the Church is not subject to our vision casting, because "every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. . . . God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what He has done for us. We thank God for giving us brothers and sisters who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: brothers and sisters, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of His grace?" (Bonhoeffer, 27-28).

What is needed is not some 'purpose-driven' strategy, but balanced and simple devotion to Christ by means of these four aspects of holy living: a devotion characterized by joy and single-mindedness. And rather than saying that this year we will focus on prayer, next year on teaching, etc., it should be that on every occasion we meet we are devoted to these four aspects.

"There is probably no Christian to whom God has not given the uplifting experience of genuine Christian community at least once in his life. But in this world such experiences can be no more than a gracious extra beyond the daily bread of Christian community life. We have no claim on such experiences, and we do not live with other Christians for the sake of acquiring them. It is not the experience of Christian brotherhood, but solid and certain faith in brotherhood that holds us together. That God has acted and wants to act upon us all, this we see in faith as God's greatest gift, this makes us glad and happy, but it also makes us ready to forego all such experiences when God at times does not grant them. We are bound by faith, not by experience" (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 39).