

THE CHURCH IN ACTS

A SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY

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Beginnings are important moments. They often set the direction, define the purpose, and lay the foundation for what is to come. In Scripture, we know that the first three chapters of Genesis inform the direction of everything that proceeds from them. In those first chapters we learn of creation, the fall of man, and the promise of redemption. All that follows after those chapters is informed by what is revealed to us at the beginning.

In the book of Acts, we learn of the beginning of the New Testament church. Here we see that God established a pattern for the church at its inception. He led the church into practices that foster its growth and maturity. From these practices we learn about our roots.

In what follows, my aim is to encourage you from the testimony of the church in Acts. I hope that you will be inspired by what God has revealed to us from the birth of the church and will be eager to serve your local church in ways that have been modeled to us in Acts. The church in Acts exemplifies at least four community traits for us to follow: a Spirit-filled community, a doctrinal community, a missional community, and a persevering community.

A Spirit-Filled Community

Acts begins with the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. As the first chapter of Acts continues, we are told of Jesus' ascension. Before departing, Jesus gave his disciples this promise: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Having made this promise, Jesus then ascended to the Father's right hand.

Then, in Acts 2:1-4 we read,

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they

were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The Spirit had descended upon Jesus' people symbolizing that a new day had arrived, the old was yielding to the new. This was the dawn of the era of God's Spirit. The fire of the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, showing that God's presence would not be limited to a bush or a temple, but dwell within all of his people in power. Today the church is characterized as a Spirit-filled community. We live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:13) and are empowered by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11). Without the Spirit we are weak, but by the Spirit we are empowered to testify about Christ, produce fruit that pleases Christ, and crucify the flesh that dishonors Christ.

A Doctrinal Community

John Calvin said that doctrine is "the soul of the Church."³ Doctrine is not secondary to the nature of the church, but at the center. The Book of Acts reveals to us that doctrine is essential to a Spirit-filled community.

In Acts 2:42 we are told that the church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching ..." When Luke describes doctrine here as "the apostles' teaching," he is saying that this church was committed to the teaching that had been delivered to them from Christ, through the apostles. At the core, this teaching centered on Jesus Christ. The doctrine that Peter proclaimed through his sermon was centered on the gospel of Christ. Jesus is the Christ, he was sent from heaven and crucified according to the plan of God, and he was raised by the power of God, now seated at the Father's right hand as Lord.

The core of doctrine is the gospel. The center of a Spirit-filled community is that Jesus is the Christ; he is Lord. And every doctrine and teaching flows either toward this truth or out of this truth. As churches, we must plant our roots in the soil of sound doctrine. We must be devoted to it so that we will be protected by it. And in our devotion, we must become so familiar with it that it governs our very thoughts and actions.⁴

A Missional Community

A noticeable shift happens in Acts 13. Although there is foreshadowing of things to come, the focus of chapters 1-12 is primarily dedicated to one person and one church: Peter and the church in Jerusalem. Then, as chapter 13 begins, a new church and new person become the center of the action. The focus is moved from Jerusalem to Antioch and from Peter to Paul. This new focus remains in place for the remainder of the book.

³ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 127.

⁴ As a denomination, we have been blessed by the recent formation of our new *Statement of Faith*. If you have not read it, I would encourage you to do so. It is a wonderful, God-honoring document. It is the soul of our churches.

In chapter 13 we notice the church in Antioch being devoted to prayer. Seemingly, the church in Antioch sensed the significance of this time so they committed to fasting together. While they were fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to the church saying, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

Think for a moment about the men that the church in Antioch sent out: Paul and Barnabas. They sent their best. It is not hard to imagine someone protesting by saying, “We need them here!” Perhaps someone said, “Let’s send out one, but not both!” Yet this church was willing to send out their best in obedience to the Lord. They had a sense of God’s calling, not only on the lives of Paul and Barnabas, but on their congregation as agents to send out these men. The church in Antioch demonstrates what a humble, gospel-centered community looks like. May we also be willing to send our best for the sake of gospel growth!

From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to Cyprus where they proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews and eventually throughout the whole island. It is important to notice the substance of this mission: these men were devoted to proclaiming the Word. The church is built by the Word, the Word who became flesh to dwell among us, and she advances as we prayerfully proclaim the Word.

A Persevering Community

As the church was established and grew throughout the book of Acts, she encountered tremendous persecution. John and Peter were arrested because they were proclaiming the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:1-2). The apostles were arrested because the high priest and Sadducees were filled with jealousy (Acts 5:17-18). Stephen was stoned because of his proclamation of the gospel (Acts 7:58-60). The entire church was threatened by Saul prior to his conversion (Acts 9:1-2). Herod killed James the brother of John and had Peter arrested, intending to kill him also (Acts 12:1-2). Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:9). In the face of such persecution and attack, the church was not crushed (2 Cor. 4:8-9). No, the church persevered.

Paul told Timothy that everyone who desires to live a godly life in this age will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Our natural inclination, however, is to avoid persecution at all costs. We recoil at the idea of being out of favor with our communities. We shrink back when people revile and slander us. The natural tendency of man is to resist persecution.

Jesus told us to rejoice when people say evil things about us on account of our faithfulness to him (Matt. 5:11-12). If faced with persecution, we should follow the example of the church in Acts by praying for boldness, never relenting from speaking the Word of God (Acts 4:29-31). Like Peter, if we happen to find ourselves chained in prison between two soldiers, may we lay our heads down to sleep peacefully (Acts 12:6). Let us pray that God may choose to bless our boldness with a fruitful harvest.

An Enduring Community

In a day when we are tempted to look for something new and exciting to advance God's kingdom, let us be people who return to our roots. Let's return to our beginning and be inspired by the testimony of the church in Acts. This is the need of the hour: churches that follow an enduring example that has been set before us. Our identity is a Spirit-filled, doctrinally sound, unified, missional, and persevering community. And like the church in Acts, we can trust God to sustain us and use us for his purposes. May our prayer be that we will be faithful, and that, by God's grace, we see multitudes brought into this glorious community by the gospel of Jesus Christ.