

The Healthy Church

Acts 2:41-47 ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Many years ago, I did a first aid course, where one of the first things we were taught was ABC – Airways, Breathing, Circulation. That is, if you were called to help someone, you would first check to make sure the airways were not obstructed, you would then check to see if she was breathing, and then you would check for a pulse – the circulation. ABC was a quick and emergency way of establishing the health of someone after an accident.

I sometimes feel the church of Jesus Christ in many places seems like it has been in an accident. We have an endlessly proliferating amount of groups and denominations. There seems to be nothing too bizarre, too extreme, or too ridiculous for some churches to include in their worship services. Mainline denominations continue to embrace liberal teachings, and give in to the homosexual agenda. False teachers are a dime a dozen, and confusion about right doctrine is widespread. The Internet has only multiplied self-appointed pastors, exploded the amount of false teaching available, and added to the scattering of God's sheep. Disillusioned believers stay at home and listen to mp3s, or try to start a study group in their homes. It's a difficult time for the average Christian to wade through it all.

Is there any kind of ABC that a Christian can use to try to judge if a local church is healthy and biblical? Fortunately, there is. God has made it very clear in His Word what the church is, what the church is for, and how the church must operate. Regardless of what the wider culture does, regardless of what the so-called Christian world does, we can align ourselves with the Word of God.

We find an example of a thriving, healthy church in the first chapters of Acts. It's here that we will find a kind of Airway-Breathing-Circulation test to apply to local churches to make sure they are conscious and thriving. Now let me caution us all: when we read a narrative, a historical account like the book of Acts, we have to be very careful to judge what is something that is for all believers of all times, and what was something peculiar to the church in the book of Acts. A lot of doctrinal error comes from taking experiences from the book of Acts and making them normative for all believers of all times. However, if we find some practices in the book of Acts that are repeated and commanded in the epistles, we know we are dealing with some timeless principles.

We find three such timeless principles in Acts 2:41-47. You could call these 'the three symptoms of a healthy church'. The Airways-Breathing-Circulation of the church are three 'ships' – discipleship, fellowship, and worship.

I. The Healthy Church Practises Devoted Discipleship

⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

This church at Jerusalem practised devoted discipleship. How do we know that? Well, firstly, verse

41 tells us that the ones who received the Word were baptised. Throughout the New Testament, baptism is the symbol of discipleship. When the Jews, who were already circumcised and part of the Mosaic covenant, were baptised by John, they were identifying with his message of repentance. When Jesus gives the Great Commission in Matthew 28, He says, “Go and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

In Romans 6, Paul says that baptism pictures death and resurrection – death to the old life, and resurrection to the new.

When three thousand Jews were baptised that day, you can be sure it was not small scandal. Baptism was something that Gentiles did to become Jews. So when all these Jews are being baptised, they are saying, we have truly embraced Jesus as Messiah, and we fully identify with Him. He is our new life.

Baptism is the symbol of discipleship. What is a disciple? A disciple is a deeply devoted follower of Christ. How deep is his devotion? He has died to his old life, and lives to his new life. That's why he gets baptised – to publicly proclaim, I have trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and my life belongs to Him. I am leaving the old life, and pursuing the new.

A healthy church practises devoted discipleship. Those that receive the Word, as was done here, profess Christ as disciples and will be baptised. But then notice another part of this discipleship.

It says – *and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.*

This church did not merely baptise these people and then send them off on their merry way, they added them to their midst. These people who had identified with Christ, were now identified with a visible local church – the church at Jerusalem. Evidently, someone at that church was keeping a list, counting who was being added. There was some kind of inclusion here. These were not merely free-floating disciples with no allegiance anywhere, not wandering sheep without a shepherd that graze anywhere and everywhere, but disciples who identified themselves with a particular local church.

A healthy church includes disciples through baptism and what we call membership. For that matter, a healthy church excludes through church discipline. If a baptised disciple unrepentantly lives a life that brings shame on the name of Christ and refuses to change, the church will at some point remove its recognition of that person's profession. A church that will only include but never exclude is a sick church and not serious about discipleship. If your body only received food and drink but never purged, it would get very sick. A church, fortunately, does not have to do this often. But when it does, if it refuses to, the church becomes ill.

But there is more to this devoted discipleship. Look at verse 42:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The words translated *continued steadfastly* mean to have a steadfast and single minded loyalty to a course of action. These people diligently, perseveringly, gave themselves to several things that enabled them to become better disciples. What were those things? First, and most importantly, the apostles' doctrine - the teaching of the apostles. The apostles taught the Old Testament; they taught the words and works of Jesus; they taught the gospel. Eventually, much of their teaching was recorded, and some of it became the inspired New Testament. So these people became better disciples by being devoted to hearing and learning the Word of God.

A church that is healthy will give prime place to the teaching of God's Word. Not endless discussion

groups, not debates, but to preaching. Where God's Word is the only Word spoken in the room for forty minutes or more. Where God's Word monopolizes the conversation, with all God's people hearing it and allowing it to change them. That's why our church does not sing for fifty minutes and preach for twenty minutes, but reverses it – because what we say to God in song and prayer should always be less, proportionately speaking, than what God says to us. A healthy church practises devoted discipleship by giving prime place to expository preaching – the systematic explanation of the Word of God in context.

There are other secondary ways that disciples can be saturated with the Word of God. In small groups, like we do on Wednesday, again considering the application of the Word. One-on-one discipleship, one Christian, taking good, biblical material, and helping another Christian along in the faith. Bible study groups, receiving biblical counselling from someone, using good books, or other written or audio resources, children and adult Sunday school. All these are auxiliary ways of being devoted to the doctrine of the Word.

For you to be a healthy disciple in a healthy church, you need to follow the same pattern. Identify yourself as a disciple through baptism. Identify with a particular local church. Give yourself wholly to taking in the Word of God every opportunity you get. When disciples do this, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, they become living portrayals of Jesus Christ. People see it, and are drawn. Questions are asked and, inevitably, more people are drawn to the Saviour. Discipleship becomes evangelism.

According to verse 42, they were also devoted to fellowship, which we'll say more about in a moment.

They were devoted to the breaking of bread, which is probably a term for the Lord's Supper, and to prayer, which both speak of corporate worship. There are our two other ships, which discipleship is a part of, they overlap and intertwine.

Let's consider them. A healthy church does not only practise devoted discipleship, but:

II. The Healthy Church Practices Fervent Fellowship

in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

This church at Jerusalem practised fervent fellowship. What did that look like. This church at Jerusalem came together, apparently daily. Apparently, in the early days before persecution they met in a section of the Temple grounds for corporate worship. There they would hear the Word, celebrate the Lord's Supper, and pray together. They also met in each other's houses to eat meals together. From an economic standpoint, they were willing to part with goods and money to meet each others' needs.

Now this does not mean that they practised communism, as some have tried to prove from this passage. In fact, in chapter 5, one of the members of the church, Ananias, sells a property, and Peter later tells him, "Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal?" In other words, people still had private property, they still owned possessions. The point of the passage is that they were willing to part with them if there was a real need in the church. They did not live selfishly. Why? Verse 44 is a good summary statement: All who believed were together, and had all things in common.

That last phrase is a simple definition of fellowship: to have things in common. The Greek word *koinonia* just means partakers together. It is to hold something in common. It is not a strictly religious word. Stamp collectors have fellowship. What is their fellowship around? Stamps. Bird watchers have fellowship. What is their fellowship? What do they hold jointly? The watching of birds. So when we say Christians have fellowship, what do we mean? We mean Christians hold something in common. What is it that we hold in common? We who have believed the gospel have the greatest possible commonality: Jesus Christ Himself. He is our shared Saviour, Lord, King, Head, Shepherd, Bridegroom, Inheritance.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, *once we are truly converted, truly saved, truly born again, we have in common one body and one Spirit, one calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

When a people have this much in common, the outworking is seen in the kinds of things we see here: meeting together as often as they could; praying together; studying the Word together; meeting practical needs together; enjoying meals together; living life together.

You see fellowship is not simply gathering together with people. You can be gathered together with a bunch of people you have no fellowship with at a queue at the supermarket, or a bunch of cars in a traffic jam. Fellowship is not simply being friendly. You can be friendly to the postman, to the guy whose selling newspapers, and to the telemarketer who phones you, that doesn't mean you have fellowship with them. Christian fellowship is the deepest most profound sense of commonality. It is saying, these people are the people I am most like than anyone else. The things they love and believe are the things nearest and dearest to me, and that means that these people are nearest and dearest to me.

You see, if you are a believer, and you regularly attend this church, but there is another group of people that you have more in common with, and would want to be with more, I must ask you, what is it that you and they hold in common? As for me, this group of people regards as precious the things I regard as precious, therefore they are the ones I have deepest fellowship with. Even though we are English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, American, English, Bulgarian, Portuguese, Greek, Argentinian and South African, black, white, and Indian, Jewish and Gentile, relatively rich and relatively poor, in teens, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s, these things hardly matter because we share the cross of Christ.

I am always saddened to see loner Christians. That is, Christians who might come to hear a sermon with others, but then they slip off to live their own lives with very little resembling this passage. No gathering with others to pray (as we are going to do in the 2nd service), no mutual accountability with other believers, no opportunity to serve others and meet their needs, no hospitality. That is a very deformed Christianity. Christianity certainly involves a personal relationship with Christ, but it is not a private relationship with Christ. It is a relationship lived in a community of believers. It is a relationship in which you give and receive; to which you belong.

The church which tolerates that, is encouraging an unhealthy Christianity. A healthy church pursues fervent fellowship. That might not be popular because our world is very individualistic, very privatized and talk of body life, accountability, involvement, loving one another, scares many people half to death. But those of you who have embraced it, have lived to tell the tale. And we can gratefully say, we did not grow half as much when we went it alone as we did when we embraced body life.

Someone says, "I am a private person. I don't go in for all this socialisation." Nothing wrong with

being someone who likes solitude and quiet. But when you are trying to keep people out, that's when you need to ask yourself why. When you fear people getting close, that's when this is no longer simply privacy. It might simply be pride.

1 John 4:20-21 ²⁰ *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?* ²¹ *And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.*

What does it mean for you as an individual? Well, ask yourself, am I devoted to being together with this body for fellowship? Do I pray with (not just for), but with this body of people? Do I break bread with them? Am I available to them? Do I try to attend small groups, Bible studies, prayer groups, church meals, church picnics, when I can? These things are not fellowship in themselves, but they are means towards encouraging and expressing the fellowship that we already have in Christ.

What did the surrounding community say when they saw this fellowship? As early church leader Tertullian would say, the surrounding Roman society said this of Christians, "Behold, how they love one another."

The healthy church practises devoted discipleship. The healthy church practises fervent fellowship. The third, and crowning attribute of the healthy church is this:

III. The Healthy Church Practices Wonder-Filled Worship

⁴² *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

⁴³ *Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.*

⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people.*

Verse 42 not only describes the discipleship and fellowship of the early church, it describes what they did in worship. They preached the Word, they celebrated the Lord's Supper, they prayed, and verse 47 tells us they were praising God. This was a worshipping church.

Don't miss something very important. What was the result of the kind of worship they offered? Verse 43 says, *fear came upon every soul*. Those words *every soul* are not the same as the words in verse 44 – *all the believers*. This seems to mean all the unbelievers in Jerusalem that were observing the church in Jerusalem. What happened to the unbelievers in Jerusalem? It says *fear* came upon them. What does that mean? It means as they observed the church, they were filled with a lingering sense of awe. They were amazed, impressed, and even intrigued.

Now this partly happened because the apostles were doing signs and wonders. The apostles were unique men, with a unique calling, given unique revelation, given unique powers. But it would be saying too much to say that the unbelievers were in awe only because of the miracles. In context, it was because they were observing the church's worship, and fellowship and discipleship.

What kind of worship provokes a kind of silenced reverence from the world? What kind of worship causes unbelievers to stop, pause, and feel even a bit intimidated by it all?

The answer is: worship that is itself filled with reverence. Worship that is different to what the world hears on the radio, or watches on Youtube, or sees on MTV. Worship that treats God as sacred, as different, not as common as singing about a boyfriend, or washing powder, or anything else common. Worship that treats God as majestic, as kingly.

Biblical worship, the kind that the church at Jerusalem offered was God-centred. It was not an exercise in self-gratification. The saints at Jerusalem didn't walk away from their worship and say to each other, "You know, I didn't really get much out of that. Those songs and prayers didn't really appeal to me." No, they didn't do that because they understood that biblical worship is an offering; it is a sacrifice of praise. It is something costly that we offer to God, to please Him. In other words, it's the polar-opposite of entertainment. In entertainment, it's about me. It's about passively tickling my fancies. In worship, it's about God. It's about responding to who He is, speaking to Him like you would to a King; singing to Him like you would to the monarch of the universe.

When a church is serious about worshipping God for who He is, and not for what pleases the crowd, it goes to the Word to see what God has prescribed for worship. It does not do anything that God has not called for. It goes to the Word to see what kind of Being God is, and addresses Him and prays to Him, and preaches about Him, and sings to Him in ways that correspond to the kind of God He is. He is not a pop-star. He is not a boyfriend. He is not a skating rink partner. He is not a cosmic grandfather. He is the thrice-Holy Creator and Redeemer, and so we worship Him in a way He deserves. When we do that, our worship is wonder-filled. There is both gravity and gladness. There is both trembling and joy. It is serious, without being sombre. It is lively, without being flippant. It is reverent without being dull. And because our God is like nothing on earth, when we treat Him that way, our worship sounds nothing like the world - and the world ought to be filled with awe when they see or hear it.

Worship is the highest and greatest purpose of the church. Evangelism and missions are vital and essential, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. Mercy and meeting the needs of the destitute is an obligation, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. Discernment and understanding the truth are vital, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. The greatest purpose of the church is worship. How do I know? Because Jesus was asked what the greatest obligation is, what the first and greatest command is. What did He say in reply?

Mark 12:29-30 ⁹ Jesus answered him, "*The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.*

Loving God – this is worship. Responding to God with ultimate love, which is what He is worth. This is the key reason for the church – to be a people who worship.

1 Peter 2:9 ⁹ *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;*

What was the effect of this church with its devoted discipleship, fervent fellowship, and wonder-filled worship?

Acts 2:47 ⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Here was the result: the surrounding population were impressed, and attracted. They were drawn by the different lives of these disciples; they were drawn by the loving fellowship of these people, and they were drawn by the unique worship of these people. They were drawn, and they heard the message of the gospel, and believed. And so the Lord kept adding to this church.

The church at Jerusalem is not above average Christianity. It's supposed to be normal Christianity. The same Holy Spirit who enabled them will enable us too. When we confess our wrongs, and

depend on Him to obey, He can produce the same fruit amongst us.

What do you need to put off when it comes to discipleship; when it comes to fellowship; when it comes to worship? What do you need to do better this year, what do you need to do more of this year to be a Word-saturated disciple, who lives in loving fellowship with other Christians and offers up holy worship to God?

Healthy things grow. Let's increase our devoted discipleship, our fervent fellowship, our wonder-filled worship, and may the Lord add to us such as are being saved.