

Part 6 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Model. By definition, a model is a representation of something that serves as an example to imitate and replicate, for better or for worse. For instance, the model of communism as a political theory leading to a society where all property is publicly owned, everyone works and all are paid equitably looks great on paper. Unfortunately, this system of government only works when implemented by force, which results in repression. That's a bad model. Conversely, the model of the early church found in the book of Acts is an example of a society where all property was shared and all needs were met, not through force, but through individuals transformed by the love of God working in and through them. To appreciate and learn from this model, let's give attention what was happening.

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47, NAS). Imagine a sudden gathering of "about 3000 souls" (Acts 2:41) "continually devoting themselves" to all that it takes to grow as one body in Christ. This is clearly God's work, but it is a work effected through faith, initially expressed when those convicted by the gospel declared, "What must we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Four essential components to spiritual growth were practiced by the infant church: (1) "Teaching" (*didache*) is the message Jesus taught His apostles, and commanded them to disciple others in the context of *The Great Commission* (Matthew 28:19-20). (2) "Fellowship" (*koinonia*) is the close, personal relationship Jesus enjoyed with His apostles, and they enjoyed with Him (Mark 3:13-15). (3) "Breaking of bread" refers to daily meals shared in the homes of believers, and likely included communion, which Jesus instituted at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20). (4) "Prayer" is at the heart of personal relationships, which we see expressed in Scripture of the Father and the Son (Luke 6:12), Jesus with His apostles (Matthew 6:9-13), and believers with God (Acts 1:14). Divine examples of teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer started with Christ, continued through Him in the lives of His apostles, and through them in the lives of those responding to the gospel they proclaimed.

The intimacy of this new community (Acts 2:42), and the occurrence of "many wonders and signs" produced a sense of "fear" (i.e. reverence, respect) and "awe" upon a growing community of 3000+ new believers. Just as the healing ministry of Jesus was a "wonder" to behold and a "sign" pointing to the Father, so also is His ministry, now conferred on some believers in the early church for the same purpose. The power of God working through the apostles gave credibility to the early church.

Proof of God's presence in the life of His church is evident in their love for one another. The communal nature of these new believers is most impressive; not only are they "together," but they "had all things in common." This form of communalism was not imposed against their will, but it was a free expression of love motivated by the Holy Spirit living within (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and a powerful testimony of faith in action. Jesus preached a simple lifestyle that ministered to personal needs (Luke 18:22), and He led a simple life (Luke 9:57-58). The simple, personal life of Christ is evident in the lives of these new believers.

“They began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:45) describes the early church as communal in nature, which is radically different from the attitude and actions of most churches in the Western world today. They sold all they owned (e.g. homes, lands, goods), and claimed nothing as their own (Acts 4:32-35). Consequently, “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34).

While devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2:42), the early church is also worshipping corporately by “continuing with one mind in the temple” (Acts 2:46). The consistent practice of these new believers is evident in their daily activities. While “praising God in the temple,” they are also gathering regularly in homes with “gladness” (exuberant joy) and “simplicity (sincerity) of heart. There is no mention in this passage of hostility or competition among them, but only unity and love in action.

The example of the early church is especially impressive, because they are “having favor” (i.e. acceptance) with all the people” (i.e. believers and unbelievers) not just their own kind. Even as Jesus had “favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52), these new converts also have favor with God and all people. This is because their behavior is both loving and winsome. Consequently, “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” This was God’s work, not their work, for God is the one who fills, unifies and adds to His church day-by-day. Their example is the model God has given us to follow, not in our power, but His power.

Ever since I gave my life to Christ, I’ve longed to be part of a church like the one described in Acts 2. Prior to my conversion, my “church” experience consisted of a weekly Sunday morning event with people I didn’t know (besides immediate family members), dutifully following a fixed program directed by a professional clergyman, who got all the attention. Aside from “passing the peace” by shaking hands, which felt awkward, there was no human interaction. At the end of the hour, everyone got up, walked out the door and drove home. That was it. Since I had no other “church” experience to draw a comparison, that was all I knew, so I didn’t think anything of it. If someone had asked me to describe church, I would have said, “It’s a place you go on Sundays to worship God.” With no biblical knowledge other than the prescribed Scripture readings during Sunday services and short homilies that never captured my attention, the only thing I knew of church was my required weekly experience. For me, church was just a place until I discovered that’s not the case.

On March 12, 1977, I arrived on Guam island, which was my first assignment as a newly minted Coast Guard officer. Early in the morning, the officer I would replace picked me up at the airport and took me to the Bachelor Officer Quarters. As a 23-year-old single guy, the BOQ would be my home for the next 15 months. He parked the car, but before getting out we got acquainted, with me asking lots of questions. Somewhere in the course of that conversation, Joe mentioned something about his faith and his church. For whatever reason, I asked if I could join him, and so I did. The very next day, Sunday, was also the very first time I attended a church different from what I had known before, and it truly was different. Melody Chapel on Guam was an independent charismatic community of what many might call “holy-rollers.” That morning was a eyes-wide-open experience, which felt both weird and warm at the same time. In the midst of all that was different for me, what I remember most was seeing people who really knew one another, cared for one another and cared about what they believed. It was like going to a family reunion. Although I was not yet part of this family of brothers and sisters in Christ, they welcomed me graciously.

Joe gave me a Bible that Sunday, and I began reading it on my own immediately, starting with the Gospel of Matthew. Over the next few weeks, as the Father opened my heart to His Son revealed in the four gospels, the Holy Spirit opened my mind to the church revealed in the book of Acts. It was an experience and an understanding I had never known before. Without any prompting, I compared the church in Acts with the church in Guam. Although there were many appealing similarities, there were also some differences, which I eventually regarded as problems when I got to chapters 12-14 in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. I loved the community of believers on Guam known as Melody Chapel, but I needed to find a better fit for me. What I had in hand then, is what we have in hand now, which is the church of Jesus Christ as it should be and as it can be, depicted in the Bible, especially Acts 2:42-47. His model of the church is our model to emulate.

Over the years that followed, my wife and I joined churches affiliated with various denominations ranging from Evangelical Covenant to Christian Missionary Alliance to Southern Baptist. Our intent was not to find the right denomination, as if we could, but to find the right community for us. We had just 3 prerequisites: (1) They believed the Bible to be God's word, and taught from it; (2) They demonstrated a genuine love for God; (3) They demonstrated a genuine love for people. In my experience, finding a local church that meets the first requisite is not difficult, but finding one that meets the other two is not easy. Actually, if the second requisite is really happening, the third will follow naturally. Someone once said, "If you find the perfect church, don't go, because then it won't be perfect." Therefore, since no human being apart from Jesus has lived a perfect life, we must bear in mind that we're all a work of God in progress. Just as we fall short in the eyes of God, we also fall short in the eyes of one another. Nevertheless, when the Holy Spirit moves in and through His people, the church becomes all that it should be and can be in Christ. Acts 2 gives us an example of what a Spirit-filled church looks like, and offers us a model to imitate.

As indicated earlier, the communal nature of the early church, in which members "had all things in common" and were sharing their property and possessions "with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:44-45), is strange behavior to modern churches in the Western world. The truth is that such behavior was strange back then as well. For a brand-new community of people to suddenly assemble and behave as they did is not a work of man, but a work of God. These early believers were not forced to give so much, but compelled by God's Spirit moving in them and through them into the lives of those in need. As a result, this Spirit-filled church was "having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). What happened then can happen now and should happen now, but won't happen until we stop doing the work on our own, and start letting God do His work in us and through us for His glory, not ours. It began then and begins now with people hearing the gospel and heeding the call to repent. God follows up immediately by cleansing new believers of sin and filling them with His Holy Spirit to become a community of people in love with Him and loving each other. The church of the 1st century is our model for the 21st century.