

The Church Is Born

Scripture: Acts 2: 41-47

At the beginning of the Christian church era it is important to note that the idea of church was not a novel concept. Human history documents well groups of people of all cultures who had banded together to worship their particular god(s). Even among the Jews it is reported that there may have been as many as a four hundred synagogues in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Christian church.¹ This denotes that there were even many Jewish groups worshipping separately.

Then, as Luke records in his *Acts of the Apostles*, Jesus fulfilled his promise of sending a helper to his disciples and thus creating a new and distinctive people. The difference as J.B. Phillips comments was that the believers experienced an invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether. They did not hesitate to describe this difference as Christ living in them. This new church would not only worship together, they would learn to live together bound by an event so profound they would never return to their former lives.

Peter's sermon was a Spirit prompted and empowered response to what he and his fellow believers had experienced. It was not so much that the message about Jesus was new as it was a message with new meaning and hope and power. Jesus had done what he had promised. He had sent a helper, the Spirit of Truth, who not only would help them, but also indwell them.

Acts says that after Peter preached to a crowd that contained Jews from all over the known world. Many were so convicted that they wanted to respond in some way. Luke records that three thousand repented and became followers of Jesus that day. Interestingly we are also told that they were baptized with the impression that their baptism was immediate. Who did the baptizing? Did Peter alone baptize or did his fellow apostles assist? Maybe even many of the hundred and twenty of the original followers of Jesus had a role in baptizing such a mass of people?

No doubt many of those responding were people who did not live in Jerusalem (v.9-11) and they returned to their homes with their experience and a story of their experience that had changed their lives to tell to others. For those who lived in Jerusalem, there was the question of how to include them in a group that had begun as one hundred and twenty, Now one hundred and twenty is no small group, but add hundreds more to that and that is altogether a different scenario. How was the best way to nurture these new believers? How would so many new people affect the koinonia of their group?

Luke tells us what the apostles decided to do, no doubt holding an emergency strategy meeting and praying for direction. It was crucial that they provide the new believers with encouragement and instruction that would result in their nurture. Without understanding what had happened to them and how they should respond, they could quickly fall away. The future of the Christian church hung in the balance.

I believe that the steps that were take by the apostles can provide great insight for us today as we involve new believers in the life of our churches. First, the apostles knew that they had to be intentional in teaching them what they had learned from Jesus. Luke records that these new

¹ W.A. Carleton, *The Growth of the Early Church*, Convention Press, Nashville c.1970, p.42

believers were together eating in different homes. While there was certainly some master teaching occurring, there was deeper understanding gained as they met in small groups over meals and discussed what they had heard. What truth for us can be learned here? It is vitally important that new believers are taught Christian doctrine. What they believe about Christ and his kingdom provide the foundation for the decisions they will make. New believers today must be taught how to express their faith in their lifestyles. Doctrinal understanding is more than cognitive knowledge, but rather it is a holistic framework for living. The best way to impart these truths is in small groups where there can be networking and new relationships formed that will provide encouragement and accountability for the long spiritual journey they have undertaken. Secondly, they worshipped together. That, no doubt was the most instinctive act of the new believers. They may not have fully understood all that had happened to them and they were still learning how to best express their faith, but they had encountered God and worshipping him was easy. The apostles and the other “veteran” believers encouraged and instructed where appropriate. It is important that the church today encourage new believers to be a faithful part of a church fellowship. It is of utmost importance that they be a part of a faith family that can nurture them and help them develop spiritual disciplines that are practiced in the context of the church. Having said that the church must do a better job of structuring herself to practice and teach such spiritual disciplines.

One of these spiritual disciplines is whole life stewardship. The church of course encourages and teaches giving. Over the years she has come to equate tithing with spiritual maturity. We are told that the new church in Jerusalem went beyond tithing. They shared all their possessions with each other and delighted in meeting needs that they became aware of. Clearly, this group of followers of Jesus lived life in a distinctively different manner. Their possessions paled in comparison to their newfound treasure. They took great joy was in using what they had to meet needs. Much could be said here, but let it suffice to say that the church today needs to teach new believers not only to tithe, but to be spiritually responsible for all of their belongings. To do this the church, as we know it, must make major changes in what she models as well as what she teaches. Meeting physical needs of fellow believers and others in their community should not be funded by periodic benevolent offerings, but it should be a major part of church practice. Can you imagine how the community would respond to the church if she began to use her resources more for others and less on herself.

That brings us to the fourth point. Luke says that the early church enjoyed the favor of all the people. (v.47) Listen to a portion of an anonymous letter to a man whom we know nothing about named Diognetus that describes these early believers. “They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens, suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children just like every one else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present “in the flesh” but they do not live “according to the flesh.” They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives.² If the church today wants to indeed be a change agent in the culture in which she has been placed, she must rethink how she is to live and act toward those who are outside the church. Too much of our focus is on our edification and comfort. The church must recapture the favor of

² Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity, Dr. Tim Dowley, Editor, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Co. c. 1977 p.69

the community if she has hope to being a positive influence in its midst. That means developing a network of relationships by discovering what needs exist in the community and then mobilizing church resources to meet those needs thus earning the right to voice a theology that has already been observed in practice. Then the gospel message would have the authority of example to validate it in the eyes of unbelievers. New believers that have an opportunity to be a part of that kind of ministry will find a purpose and meaning for their lives that would help insure their long- term involvement and growth in a local body of Christ.

Because the apostles intentionally taught the new believers and developed relationships with them around the table; because they worshipped with them and together learned how to use their possessions to meet needs in their communities, new believers in Jerusalem experienced a quality of life that they had heard about on the day of Pentecost. As the new believers continued to be nurtured they shared their lives with others and the network grew ever larger. These are lessons that we must learn if we hope to make a significant impact on our culture today and rediscover our calling to be salt and light in the world.