

Acts 2

Preached 2003

Who passed on the gospel message to you? Who did God use in your life to tell you about Jesus?

Now there are probably many people who God placed along the road in your life who pointed you to Christ, you can probably think about them now. For me perhaps the most significant person was my mother. The countless hours (years !) she spent praying for me I believe had more impact on me than anything else in life. I thank God for a praying mother like mine. When I ask my mother who it was who introduced her to Jesus, she tells the story of waiting in line in a post office queue in country New South Wales. My mother was 8 years old and the woman behind her began talking to her about Jesus. My mother was very interested and this woman suggested my mother listen on the radio on a Sunday Afternoon to Sunday School of the air. Pretty soon my mother was hooked. On her own initiative she sent away for the Sunday School activities which she completed and mailed back. Her parents wouldn't let her go to church, so for ten years she was upheld in her Christian life by these radio broadcasts. And all because God placed this woman at the Post Office in my mother's way. One of the first things I'd like to do in the New Creation is to find this woman and to thank her. I'd ask her who introduced her to Christ and how that happened. I could spend years in the new creation tracing my spiritual family tree. I think that's going to be fascinating.

The more I've thought about Acts chapter 2 this week (the passage Rachel read for us) the more I've been captivated by the thought that pretty much all our family trees here, and pretty much all the spiritual family trees in the world would trace their roots back to this sermon and this gathering. Acts chapter 2 is very concretely a part of our spiritual heritage.

So what can we learn from Acts chapter 2 about our existence as this family of belief. Given that we are family and these are our ancestors, what do they teach us about the family of God?

Well I think the primary thing you could write across the top of Acts chapter 2 is 'The many become One.'

[SLIDE – Family Gathering: The many become One]

Acts 2 takes place on the day of Pentecost which was an Old Testament festival which gathered together all the Israelites to Jerusalem. Chapter 2:5 tells us:

"Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven."

At this particular Pentecost which occurred just after Jesus ascended to Heaven, God chooses to pour out His Holy Spirit in a special way to His disciples. One of the effects of this was that all these nations with their different languages, heard the disciples in their native tongue.

In verse 9 we read:

“Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Lybia near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongue.

On this Pentecost many people are drawn together. By the end of the chapter, a great number of these multitudes are transformed into the fellowship of believers.

In verse 42 we see their common devotion, in v44 Luke writes:

“All the believers were together and had everything in common.”

Verse 46 again highlights their unity, telling us of their many public and private meetings. Acts chapter 2 is the birth of the New Testament Church and the chapter takes us from great diversity to devoted unity.

As we consider this morning the foundation of Church as a Family Gathering – how can we learn to emulate this unity?

[SLIDE – How?]

Well I’m going to mention three things from the chapter.

The first thing we ought to note is that this early church is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

[SLIDE – The Spirit empowers it]

Acts 2 occurs in the context of Pentecost. This was the day Jesus promised would occur when the Holy Spirit would come in a special way. It would not simply be a gift to individual believers on an individual basis. The Day of Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit was given to the Church as a whole.

In Acts 1:8 (just back a page), Jesus promises Pentecost. He says to His disciples:

“You [plural] will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you [plural] ; and you [plural] will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This Day of Pentecost was to be a Day when the Spirit was given to the Church as a whole to do its work. And what is that work? Well Jesus links the gift of the Spirit very closely to the work of witnessing to Jesus throughout the world – from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria in ever increasing circles until the church had witnessed to the whole world (even a young girl in a

post office in rural Australia – surely the ends of the earth!).

Pentecost was the public launch of this Spirit empowered corporate mission. God had this mission long before Pentecost. And people had the Holy Spirit long before Pentecost. But Pentecost was the time when the Spirit would indwell the **Church** as a **whole** without any distinction of race, age or gender. And the Spirit would empower the Church's mission to reach the ends of the earth.

Let me illustrate the difference: Imagine a city in which the electricity company gives everyone their own individual electricity generator. Every household had power but it was their own individual source. Then imagine a day comes when the electricity company changes their policy and opens up a generator for the whole city. The source of power now is a communal source of power. To receive it now I have to tap into the grid and make sure that the whole grid is working properly. Now I am related not just to the power source, but I am necessarily related to every other recipient of that power.

That's something like the difference that Pentecost makes to the Church. The Holy Spirit personally in-dwelt people before Pentecost. But at Pentecost He comes as a gift to the Church so that the Church as a whole works together in the power of the Spirit.

So when, in verse 38, Peter preaches his Pentecost sermon to these many different people from many different places. He says:

“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the LORD our God will call.”

When a person becomes a Christian they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And Pentecost has taught us that the Holy Spirit is a unifier. He is committed to binding together the church. Whoever takes up this offer of the Holy Spirit is deciding to plug themselves into the church (which is like the national grid) and to therefore be related to other believers.

So there's no such thing as a solitary Christian. You cannot carry out an authentic spiritual life on your own. The Spirit of God automatically and organically relates the believer to other believers. Are you seeking an authentic spirituality? Church, the people of God, must be the place you look. Are you a Spirit-filled Christian seeking to live obediently? Church, the people of God, must be at the centre.

This point about the Holy Spirit also means that the cause for unity in the Church is the super-natural power of God. To be a Church here at St James, we don't just advertise our service times and then wait for people to gather. True family gathering happens when the omnipotent power of God the Spirit breathes life into the people of God and relates us all super-naturally to one another. That's what unites us. St James is not fundamentally united by

the quality of the coffee or the singing or the preaching or the social life. It's not even that our common beliefs and practice are the cause of unity. The fundamental cause of unity is the Holy Spirit who super-naturally relates each member of the family of belief to one another. Everything we have in the Christian life is a gift of God and church unity is no different – it is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And therefore, we must ask for this gift if we want it.

[SLIDE - è Pray]

We must pray that the Holy Spirit will breathe His life into us and ever animate and re-animate us as the Divine Family we were intended to be. The unity of the true church is a super-natural unity. We must beg for God's super-natural unifier to bind us together.

That's the first point. The second is that the unity of our family gathering is created by the gospel.

[SLIDE – The Gospel creates it]

Peter's sermon addressed to this Pentecost crowd pulls no punches. His basic message is: You killed Jesus. Yet God raised Him from the dead to prove that He is the LORD of all. Peter lays on Scripture after Scripture, to present His case that these ordinary folks, going about their day, were guilty of murdering the LORD of all creation. It is a very serious allegation. And verse 37 shows the reaction :

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other Apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

These hearers did not doubt the allegation that they were guilty for the death of Jesus. The Holy Spirit had convicted them and they were cut to the heart – knowing their own guilt.

When a person comes to see the cross in its true light, they see that nails and ropes didn't hold Jesus to the cross. Jesus chose the cross because on it He willingly took the punishment that our sins deserve. Once we understand that our sin (my sin) necessitated the death of the LORD, then we are cut to the heart and we ask, like these people, “what shall we do?” Peter gives the answer – v38:

“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the LORD our God will call.”

Once a person is cut to the heart, they must turn from their sins and turn towards Jesus,

because in Him is the free gift of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. This is the gospel that was preached and that created the fellowship of Acts chapter 2. Verse 41 tells us:

“Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

Before this sermon there were 120 believers gathered together in Jerusalem. Now an extra three thousand people believe the gospel – that’s a growth of 2500% in one day. Notice from the verse that when you believe the gospel – you are added to the fellowship. You can’t believe the gospel and not be added to the fellowship. Again, the point is made, there are no solo-Christians.

So we see that this community has been established by the gospel. Why does this fact make for a unified family gathering?

Well think about it – what causes disunity? Disunity comes when some people call themselves insiders but label others as outsiders. That’s what factions are. People decide who’s in and who’s out, and if you’re out then there can be no unity.

But what is the gospel? The gospel is that Jesus Christ – the ultimate insider (the Bible describes Him as the Man from Heaven, the Only Begotten Son who was in the bosom of His Father, the Beloved, Chosen, Obedient Son) – He became the ultimate outsider. Jesus was despised and rejected by men, He came to a people who were His own but His own rejected Him. Jesus is sentenced to the criminal’s death, executed outside the city gates and most importantly of all, He dies the God-forsaken death, the death of the most cursed spiritual outsider. And He did it so that we, the sinners and spiritual outsiders that we are, can be accepted into the fellowship of God and become spiritual insiders. Jesus, the true insider became the cursed outsider, so that we, the true outsiders can become the blessed insiders.

That’s the gospel, and once we know these truths and when they cut us to the heart, the way it happened to this Pentecost audience – how can we treat anyone else like an outsider? When we see that we have been invited inside the one community that really matters and it’s all been a gift of grace, then we can never be exclusive again.

At the heart of the family gathering of Acts chapter 2 is a people who know in their hearts they deserve to be outsiders to the love of God. Yet they’ve been accepted and welcomed inside. When a whole community of people understand this and live by it, then you’ll have a truly united family gathering.

Finally , the third thing that brings unity to the family gathering is that fellowship sustains it.

[SLIDE – The fellowship sustains it]

Verses 42-47 are a favourite with church leaders for laying out the core elements of a thriving church. In Acts 2 we've seen the power of the Holy Spirit and some amazing experiences of the Spirit. We've seen the power of the preached gospel and the experience of the hearers as they are cut to the heart. Here in verses 42-47, the believers settle down to some sustained and steadfast devotion. In verse 42 we see what it is they devote themselves to:

the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.

There's four things there. The apostles' teaching is exactly what had given these people their spiritual birth. They'd been converted as the Apostle Peter taught them about Christ and so they continue to make this teaching a priority in their lives. For us we have the Apostle's teaching written down in the Bible. The Old Testament, from which Peter taught, and the New Testament which contains his and the other Apostle's writings.

The fellowship is a special word in the Greek – *Koinonia* – that evokes a total sharing of common life. It's the word used in the Bible to describe Jesus' sharing of His life with us – which was a complete sharing. It's the word used to describe our fellowship with the Father – that fellowship that means we can call Him our Father. And it's primarily used to describe the fellowship that we have with one another as brothers and sisters in the same family. This fellowship is a fact of our being saved and called into the family of God. It's not about a feeling. I can't say – I don't feel like being brotherly today and so neglect my fellowship with others. You can't choose your family – your family is given. In the same way, we can never choose NOT to devote ourselves to the fellowship we have in Jesus. Our devotion to the fellowship is to be constant and sincere. In verses 44 and 45 we see the test of whether we truly wish to share a common life. Will we share our possessions, our houses, our money. That is a real bottom line issue for true fellowship. Yet if we are willing to devote ourselves to this kind of fellowship, we will uphold our unity even when our sinful natures tell us to be selfish and fractious.

The fellowship of believers is something we will be sorely tempted to neglect because it is so costly. The Bible knows this. In Hebrews chapter 10 we are reminded of some good reasons to stick with it:

[SLIDE – Hebrews 10]

“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 to 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.”

Encouragement happens when we meet together. Literally the word encourage means to inspire courage – and there's nothing that inspires courage more than meeting up with other faithful believers who are going through the same trials we are. The very act of standing shoulder to

shoulder with other Christians on a Sunday morning who I know are making costly decisions to follow Christ and devote themselves to the fellowship – that inspires courage in me. And I can be of service to others simply by meeting together with them and sharing the trials and the joys of the Christian life.

Why do groups like weight watchers exist? Because they know that making the tough decisions, being sacrificial in your diet, is hard to do on your own. You need the fellowship of others. How much more difficult is it to be sacrificial in your service of others, in giving your time, your money, your energy. We need help with this, and the great news is that in simply turning up to Christian meetings we can spur one another on! When I see other Christians turning up to the Powerpoint prayer meeting every month I know that many of them have made great sacrifices to be there. It encourages me greatly. I see living proof in another's life that God's work is more important than anything and I take courage.

So devotion to the fellowship sustains the unity we have in our family gathering. And back in Acts 2:42, there's the breaking of bread. This is very probably a reference to the Lord's supper (or communion) which Jesus commanded his followers to re-enact on a regular basis. So regular worship is a fact of this early church's life. And in verse 43 we see that this whole community is shot through with a sense of awe. There is no shallowness to this gathering – they are aware at all times of the nearness of the LORD and they are in awe. Yet it is not a joyless gathering either – far from it. In verse 46 we see that breaking bread also has a very social dimension. It's something done in people's houses and it's eaten with gladness and gratitude. Awe-struck spirituality is not about staring at a candle, it is about sharing life with others and having a deep and anchored joy in our awesome and gracious God.

Finally, Prayer is mentioned and this is really the outworking of everything else that has happened in Acts chapter 2. Everything we are and everything we have has been given to us in the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is a gift, forgiveness is a gift, the family gathering of Church is a gift. And so we thank God for all these gifts and we ask Him to keep giving us His grace. When we don't pray as a church we show that we don't believe the Spirit makes us who we are, we don't believe that all we have is a gift and we go from being a divine family gathering to being a human club powered by human effort.

A true, united family gathering devotes itself to the Bible, to sincere and sacrificial fellowship, to worship and to prayer.

And you'll notice that not a lot else is mentioned! No format for the services. No real mention of *services*. No hierarchy of church government set up. No plans laid out for the shape of the buildings – in fact there aren't any special buildings. This is about the family of God living out their calling as brothers and sisters saved by grace. And verse 47:

The LORD added to their number daily those who were being saved

We saw at the beginning that this was Jesus' great wish for the church. He promised the gift of the Spirit to the church so that it could reach the ends of the earth with the gospel of salvation. And here we see it happening, a thriving, Spirit-filled church is blessed with seeing many people saved and joining its community.

What a family to belong to! If you belong to Jesus you *do* belong to this community. We who are many *are one* in Jesus -

The Spirit empowers this community
The Gospel creates this community
The fellowship sustains this community
Jesus grows this community

What does that mean for our walk with Christ? What does it mean for our walk with one another?

Let's be quiet, and then I'll pray.