

Added to the fellowship

Please read Acts 2: 36-47; then pray; “O Lord, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word.”

Within this dramatic final section of **Acts 2**, we come across the phrase “**added to their number**” on two occasions in verses 41 and 47. In Acts 2:41 we are presented with the fact that about 3000 souls were “added to their number” at Pentecost. In Acts 2:47, Luke describes the daily growth of the church fellowship in Jerusalem. It seems that *every day* more people were **added** to the life and witness of the community of believers. This was the work of the Spirit poured out from heaven by the exalted Jesus. Luke states that “**the Lord added**” to their number daily those who were being saved. These significant additions to the fellowship were to continue and cause consternation. (see Acts 5:14, 6:7).

Firstly, **who** were the people that were added to the fellowship, and **what** did they have in common? At this stage all who were added were Jewish. The 3000 added to the fellowship in Jerusalem would have been local residents who could naturally and easily participate in the new community of faith now blossoming in their own city. However, it is likely that more were saved because some Pentecost pilgrims who returned to their homelands would also have been **added**. They took their new faith to the communities where they lived and worked. What we do know is that the Christian community *in Jerusalem itself* grew to more than 3000 individuals according to Luke.

What did these new believers have in common which enabled them to form such a deep and meaningful fellowship under the leadership of the apostles?

- They had *all* **repented** of their sin (v38). They had embraced radical change with Jesus as Lord!
- They had *all* been **baptised** in the name of Jesus (v38) with water, thus identifying themselves with Jesus who died and rose again. They became *part of his body on earth*.
- They had *all* received and experienced the **forgiveness of sins**. (v38)
- They had *all* received and experienced the **gift and filling of the Holy Spirit**. (v38)
- They had *all* fully **accepted the truth of the message** Peter preached on behalf of the apostles. (v41). They had accepted that God had established Jesus as “*both Lord and Christ*.” (v36)

The second important point to note which was not controversial then, was that they were **all** added to the fellowship. Joining the fellowship (the Church) was not optional. Joining the fellowship of believers and participating in its life and witness was a given. There was no such thing as the nonsensical notion of being a believer but not being part of the fellowship. Believing in Christ meant joining the fellowship of believers. Not being part of the community was out of the question. Today, individuals who claim that they can be Christians but do not need to be committed to a local fellowship of believers are deceiving themselves. If you are a *genuine Christian* then you will want to be part of a local gathering and community of faith. To claim to be a believer but at the same time not be committed to a local fellowship – is to be a disobedient or misguided “believer”. Such a person does not understand what a Christian is and what being a Christian involves. As one of the early Church Fathers put it; “*Whoever has God as father must have the Church as mother*.”

The third vital point to note is this. What **type** of fellowship were these new believers being added to? This is where **Acts 2:42** which introduces us to the life and dynamics of the fellowship comes to the fore! The fellowship of believers was first and foremost a deeply committed and spiritual community of faith where Christ was honoured and exalted. We notice the **4** defining spiritual characteristics which Luke highlights. We also notice that everyone was **devoted** to them. They were devoted in the sense of *loving these things and being strongly committed to them*. Those 4 distinctive features of the life and community of the early church to which they were all devoted were;

- Total commitment to the apostle’s authoritative teaching.
- Commitment to prayer and the prayer life of the fellowship.
- Commitment to *the fellowship* itself.
- Participation in the breaking of bread celebrations.

Now each one of the above served as a very important ingredient in the life and growth of the early Church fellowship – and each one merits its own sermon. That’s not my plan right now. **When we resume** our physical gatherings and fellowship at Christchurch from next Sunday, we will be reflecting on some of the contents of a book entitled *Holy Habits* written by Andrew Roberts. In it, Andrew Roberts examines **Acts 2: 42-47** in detail and highlights **ten** habits that made up the life and development of this exciting young Church in Jerusalem. In our shorter services of 40 minutes, we will be considering these habits and their continuing significance for the life and growth of *any church fellowship*. I expect to lead somewhere between 6-8 shorter services using this material as a basis for teaching, prayer and reflection. Here are the ten holy habits Andrew Roberts gleans from this rich text which consists of just six verses;

- Bible teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- Prayer
- Giving
- Service
- Eating together
- Gladness and generosity
- Worship
- Making more disciples

In many ways the key ingredient is **fellowship** (koinonia) or “the fellowship.” Barry Bishop will lead our reflections on this word and idea which was so binding and central to the whole life of the believers. At this point in 2020 when we have been sadly deprived of our fellowship, it is important to emphasise strongly that this was and always will be a distinctly **physical** fellowship but one with hugely significant **spiritual** depth and foundations. The foundations are the 4 features of **Acts 2:42**. Please also note that the word “**together**” is used 3 times in this short passage. Joining *together* physically was crucial. It was part of contemporary synagogue life and learning; it was part of festival gatherings in Jerusalem; it would now be part of church community life; and it will be part of the life to come in heaven.

As we will be examining and reflecting on this rich life of Christian fellowship, there is not much more I want to say at this stage, but I will close by lifting up and holding out several characteristics of the Jerusalem fellowship which need to be borne in mind, particularly when anyone wants to consider why it was that this fellowship “was added to day by day.” This is how we began today’s sermon, with the theme – **added to the fellowship**.

It is useful to note that Luke in the early chapters of Acts offers his readers **3 short vignettes** (Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-35, Acts 5:12-16) which describe the life and **growth** of the early church – and as you read them all and *compare them* – you see there are some common themes which rise to the surface. These are;

- A very significant **unity** which is based on common commitments of love to God and to all people who make up the fellowship. The fellowship is familial. The unity is deeply spiritual and based on the truth of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit in the life of all believers. Each one of them is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and **together**

they also form one new temple which God fills with His Spirit and builds up in love (Ephesians 2:19-22). The whole of this human spiritual superstructure has Christ as Cornerstone, and the apostles and prophet's teachings as its foundation. This deep unity through the Trinity then rises to manifest itself in many acts of kindness, pastoral care, compassion, generous and sacrificial giving, and a willingness and readiness to humbly serve and be served.

- You will notice the common theme of **hospitality** coming to the fore again and again. The fellowship of believers believed in and were committed to sharing meals together and sharing their homes and goods for the common good and the blessing of others. Their spiritual unity burst to life through generous hospitality, sharing and caring. The needy were blessed and always included. Their needs mattered. All were valued and fed.
- You also cannot help noticing the **miraculous** at work especially through the apostles (Acts 2:43, Acts 4:33, Acts 5:12-16). The miracles and authenticating signs of the truth of the Kingdom message which had been done through Jesus *were continuing* through the apostles now filled with Holy Spirit. Christ was working his wonders of power, love and compassion through the apostles and others like Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (Acts 8:6-7). This impacted the surge of growth in a big way – and still continues to do in many parts of the world today.
- You notice also that the fellowship comprised of an infectious overflowing **joy** and gladness on the one hand (Acts 2:46-47a) but a deep **fear** and awe of God's power and holiness on the other (Acts 5:13-14). There was both holy joy and reverent fear within the fellowship.
- In it also interesting to observe that ordinary "outsiders" viewed this fellowship of believers with great **respect**. Outsiders could detect a genuine love and goodness that overflowed, and they were impressed and interested by it. No doubt some became believers because they witnessed great demonstrations of God's love at work among the fellowship. (Acts 2:47a). "See how these Christians love one another" became a much-used saying at the time. Many outsiders must also have experienced life changing healings in the name of Jesus. (Acts 5:16)
- Finally, we cannot fail to notice that this was a continually **growing** fellowship. Yes, they grew in spiritual strength, but I am now principally referring to their numerical growth. Their numbers grew which must have been a subject of discussion in Jerusalem and beyond. It was this outstanding growth that began to arouse the jealousy and anger of the authorities who then unleashed different forms of restrictions, punishments and persecution. Ultimately and ironically it was this persecution aimed at stunting the growth of the church, which in fact led to a further explosion of growth in wider parts of the world.

The Holy Spirit had been poured out by the reigning Lord Jesus as promised. The Spirit was not going to be taken back! Rather, the gospel was to be taken to *the ends of the earth* in the Spirit's power (1:8). The huge growth in Jerusalem was going to be followed by growth anywhere and everywhere the gospel was taken by the apostles Peter and Paul and others who were anointed with the fire of the Spirit. And today, this continues! Wherever the **apostolic truths** about Jesus are shared in the power of the Spirit - growth occurs – it cannot be stopped – it cannot be prevented – for it is "*the Lord adding to his Church*" through the power of the Spirit. And those who call upon the name of the Lord are saved (Acts 2:21); those who accept the apostolic message (Acts 2:41) are **added to the Church**; This is the body of Christ - the church militant – at one with the great cloud of witnesses! (Hebrews 12:1) One body. One Spirit. One faith. One baptism. One Lord. (Ephesians 4:4-6) To God's glory! **Amen.**