

Acts 2:42-47: The Whirlpool Effect

"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v47)

I once listened to a cassette by the geneticist David Suzuki. He was talking about how minute an atom is. He invited his hearers to think of an orange which is expanded in size till it becomes as big as the Earth, the planet we live on. How big would one atom in that orange be? *Answer:* About the size of a cherry and the nucleus of an atom would still be invisible to the naked eye.

The challenge of bringing all people on the face of the earth to a knowledge of Christ is as huge as the world itself. Any local church is like an atom within that world. How can we who are so small and insignificant expect to make any major contribution to the winning of people for Christ from every tribe and tongue and people and nation?

Acts 2 describes what happened at Pentecost. Following his ascension the Lord took his first decisive step, through the Holy Spirit, to reach all people from all nations. The first great step was to form a united community of Jewish people regardless of which country they came from or what language they spoke. Acts 2:41 informs us that after Peter preached his great sermon *"about 3000 were added to their number that day."* The last verse of the chapter tells us that the church represented by Peter was not a one-day wonder. The effectiveness of the early church community continued so that we read in verse 47: *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Drawing-Power of the Early Christian Community

Acts 2:42-47 describes a winsome, attractive, magnetic Christian community. In many parts of the world people wash clothes by repeatedly bashing them against a rock. A modern washing machine uses centrifugal force to press your clothes against the outside of the washing machine. That's what we call centrifugal force - a force which causes things to spin away from the centre. Have you ever swatted a pesky fly into the sink? You quickly run the tap then pull out the plug. The water spins round and round the plug hole and the fly is sucked into the centre. This is using the opposite of centrifugal force. We call this whirlpool effect centripetal force. New Testament mission involves both of these forces. Jesus commands, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." What kind of force is this? Centrifugal force. Over the centuries, in obedience to the Great Commission, Christians have spun out from the centre all over the world to bring people under Christ's lordship.

Look at the end of verse 47: the church community was *"praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* What kind of force is described here? Centripetal force. Here we see people being pulled into the centre, into the Christian community. Note this very carefully. It was a community which enjoyed the favour of all the people to which the Lord daily added new Christians.

Acts 2 does not say, "The pastor had favour with all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Who was praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people? The church community. God doesn't use the force of a

vacuum, as with a vacuum cleaner, to bring people into his kingdom; he uses his people in community.

Dynamics of the Early Christian Community

What was it that made the early Christian community such an irresistible whirlpool? Verses 42-47a explain this for us. It is important to understand the structure of these verses (*see chart at end*). Verse 42 is the summary verse: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Verses 43-47a unpack what verse 42 is saying. The end of verse 47 tells us the consequence. In verse 42 Luke describes 4 areas of commitment: (1) to the teaching of the apostles; (2) to Christian fellowship; (3) to having meals together; (4) to prayer.

In 1118 nine young men formed a monastic community in Jerusalem which they saw as being the centre of the world. They called themselves an order of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Jesus Christ. The king, the bishop, everyone in Jerusalem contributed money to them, offered these knights lodging, and finally set them up in a cloister of the old Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. They became known as the Knights of the Temple. These men were willing to take up arms to kill people in order that Jerusalem should continue to be the world-centre of Christianity.

Compare these Knights of the Temple with the early Christian community which also met each day in the temple courts (v46). The Knights had four areas of commitment: (1) a commitment to poverty, (2) a commitment to chastity, (3) a commitment to obedience, (4) a commitment to defend pilgrims who came to Jerusalem.

There are some interesting points of similarity. As we have just noted the early Christian community also had four areas of commitment as summarized in verse 42. There are other similarities. In verse 46 we read: "*Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts*"; 3:1. To the Knights and the early Christian community the temple in Jerusalem had enormous importance. Why was it so important to the early Christians? There is a long answer to this question and a short answer. The long answer concerns the importance of Jerusalem in Old Testament prophecy. The short answer is that these early Christians were all Jews and the temple had always had central importance in their lives. A Jew who becomes a Christian does not cease to be a Jew. A Tanzanian who becomes a Christian does not cease to be a Tanzanian. A Chinese who becomes a Christian does not cease to be Chinese. Christians are one in Christ but this does not mean that our cultural identity is wiped out.

The Knights of the Temple had got their needle stuck. The record was spinning round and round but no progress was being made. The Knights of the Temple had as much cement above the ears as the Jews who listened to Stephen's speech in Acts 7 when Stephen made it clear that God builds his own temple and doesn't need the Temple which was situated in Jerusalem. That first community in Jerusalem was itself the New Temple which God has built. The world-centre is wherever a devoted community of God's people is to be found.

Now compare the devotion of the early Christians with the devotion of the Knights of the Temple. Both were committed to 4 basic things. In 2:42-47 Luke indicates that this fourfold devotion of the early Christians explained why they "enjoyed the favour of all the people" (verse 47) and why they exerted such a strong gravitational pull.

In the first place, we read in verse 42 that the early Christians were **devoted to the apostles' teaching**. The Knights of the Temple were also committed to obedience. Were they like the early Christians in this respect? No! The Knights of the Temple followed a detailed and rigorous list of requirements which told them how to order their lives and what religious rites they must observe. But this was not the kind of obedience which the apostles were promoting through their teaching. The apostles were witnesses of the resurrection. They therefore emphasised above all, as you can easily see by reading Acts 2, that Jesus' resurrection means that he is now the Lord of all. The apostles' teaching involved helping God's people to understand Jesus' Lordship and it involved urging God's people to acknowledge Jesus as Lord in every area of their lives. This was not just theory, as we are reminded in verse 43. The apostles demonstrated that they were in vital contact with Jesus as Lord by the signs and wonders they performed. The early Christians could see the reality of Christ's Kingly power in the miracles performed by the apostles and this motivated them all the more to take the teaching of the apostles seriously.

How about your relationship to the apostles' teaching? Could we describe it as devotion? Or is it merely lip-service? What is the difference?

Secondly, we read that the early Christians were **devoted to fellowship**. Just as Luke mentions devotion to the apostles' teaching and then develops this point by speaking of the signs and wonders performed by the apostles, so in the same way he takes devotion to fellowship and develops this in verse 44 when he says: *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts."*

Here fellowship involved a genuine love for each other as expressed in a willingness to put one's hand in one's pocket for the sake of others. We are urged to follow suit in 1 John 3:16-18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

The Knights of the Temple committed themselves to a life of poverty. Is that what we see in Acts 2:44? No!

1. This is not a commune. The temple was just a meeting place.
2. This very passage tells us that the early Christians still kept their homes (verse 46). They didn't sell everything they had.
3. But they put the needs of other Christians first and if it was necessary to sell property to meet needs then they were prepared to do so. Contrast this with the wealthy Christian who once asked Charles Spurgeon to come to his church which had a large debt. He wanted Spurgeon to challenge the Christians in the church to dig deep into their pockets and give generously to expunge the debt. This man owned three houses and asked Spurgeon which one he wanted to stay in when he came. Spurgeon wrote back to the man and said, "Sell one of your houses and pay off the debt yourself."

Thirdly, we learn from verse 42 that the early Christians were **devoted to the breaking of bread**. Many take this to refer to the Lord's Supper. But in verse 46b Luke says more about this: "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Breaking bread was what people did at the beginning of a meal. Luke describes Christians opening up their homes to each other and sharing meals with each other. Here 'breaking bread' does not seem to be another way of talking about Communion. The elaboration in verse 46 indicates that it simply means having meals together. Many read the idea of the Lord's Supper into these words not adequately appreciating that in most other cultures it is crucial to have meals together by way of expressing friendship and acceptance. The Knights missed this by a mile. Remember they were a monastic group who believed in keeping their distance from others.

Who are we most like? The early Christians or the Knights of the Temple? We might mock the monks but we're often not so far from being monks and nuns ourselves, the way we minimise our relationships with each other. Do we have such a sense of community that just being together in church is simply not enough, we want to spend time with one another in each other's homes? Do you want to invite people from church to come to your home for a meal? Don't you think there is something unhealthy about a church where Christians are not enthusiastic about inviting others to their homes for meals?

Fourthly, we learn from verse 42 that the early Christians were **devoted to prayer**. The Knights relied on sword and shield to achieve their purpose. What a contrast with these early Christians! In verse 47 he portrays them "praising God". Look at 3: 1, the verse which immediately follows this passage: "*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer.*" Why were Peter and John going to the temple? To pray. And as verse 47 indicates it was central to the praying of these early Christians to praise God. One of the great marks of a healthy, vibrant church is the desire of Christians to pray together and praise God together.

There you have it then, four marks of a healthy, growing church: (1) devotion to God's Word of Power (apostolic teaching and apostolic power); (2) devotion to fellowship in church; (3) devotion to one another that extends to hospitality, inviting one another home for meals; (4) devotion to prayer and praising God.

If your church is strong in these four areas then it will be an attractive Christian community which creates a whirlpool effect. Because that first Christian community was characterized by these four marks we read that it was "enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved".

We want the Lord to add to our number too. Not so that we can shoulder our financial commitments better and maintain the church buildings. Not so we can feel proud about our community. We want the Lord to add to our number "those who are being saved". One of the things we will do as we respond to apostolic teaching in God's Word, as we fellowship with each other in church and in one another's homes is pray for the lost, plead with God to save people. When we have this kind of commitment then we can expect that the Lord will add people to the numbers in our churches daily of "those who are being saved".

The Structure of Acts 2:42-47

<i>Acts 2:42</i>	<i>Development</i>
The Preconditions for Church Growth: Dynamics of the Early Church	
<i>Devotion to apostle's teaching</i>	"Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles " (v43)
<i>Devotion to fellowship</i>	"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (vv44-46a)
<i>Devotion to the breaking of bread</i>	"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (v46b)
<i>Devotion to prayer</i>	"praising God" (v47a)
The Realisation of Church Growth: Drawing Power of the Early Church	
"and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (vv47b-48)	