

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Led by the Spirit, Learning to be Church

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They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:41-47).

Continuing his "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Lk, 1:1), in the Acts of the Apostles Luke turns his attention to the birth and spread of the church. Yet the story of the church must be interpreted within the context of all that has been told about Jesus within the Gospel According to Luke. It is because the Gospel shows that in the event of Jesus Christ God's promises to the people of Israel have been fulfilled, that God's blessings are now being extended to all the peoples of the world (Jewish and Gentile). God's new creation—the Messianic age—has begun. Thus Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost declares the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17). The time of Jesus and the time of the church are united into one era of the Holy Spirit. Within this unity, the shape and purpose of Jesus' life and witness provides the pattern for the church's life and witness.

The Book of Acts recounts the formation of a community quite different from modern definitions and presuppositions. Not a voluntary society formed by individual needs or commitments, the Christian community described in Acts results from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. While the Gospel of Luke "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), the Acts of the Apostles describes a new reality—the new community of the Spirit. Jesus' earthly ministry has ended, he has been "taken up," and "the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:2) are instructed to wait for the presence of the Spirit which has been promised for their inspiration and guidance (Acts 1:8). This promise is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2): a community gathered and empowered by the Holy Spirit is formed to witness to God's economy of salvation accomplished in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here is found the unique identity and the distinctive purpose of the Christian church.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit the missional church continually is learning, un-learning, and learning anew what it means to be church. Actively embracing the Spirit's leading, the church lives in expectation of continual transformation in its beliefs, its communal structures and practices, and its engagement with the world. In coming months *The Center Letter* will explore the implications of Luke's description of the church within Acts for the church today. The goal is not to replicate the early church, but to be open to the power and possibilities which may emerge as Luke's account is brought into conversation with the challenges of the current missional context. Engaging in a reflective and creative interpretation of Scripture is in accord with Luke's approach, since he "is concerned to shape a community that discerns, embraces, and serves the divine purpose more than he is to outline in detail the precise beliefs and habits of that community."¹

God as the Creator and Sustainer of Community.

What Luke proclaimed to a Gentile audience was not so much that there was only one God, but that this God had a strikingly different character from all the other divine powers known to them. "Luke sought to persuade non-Jewish converts to the Christian movement to conform their behavior to an understanding of God that had been largely unknown to them: to an understanding of God as a community-forming and community-sustaining power."²

The communities formed by the inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit were to reflect this God's character and purpose as revealed through the ministry of Jesus Christ. It was because of Jesus' teachings and actions that the early Christians were to gather in radically inclusive communities. All human beings are called to honor the Christian God through the practices of forgiveness, justice, and mercy. Living as brothers and sisters—"of one heart and soul"—the behavior of Christian communities was to confirm their new belief by demonstrating the character of their new God. Thus Luke's description of the church in Acts is not to be

viewed as simply an idealized picture, but rather "as his use of traditionally loaded terms to present what he regarded as the social reality practiced by these early believers and a practice that he desired to stimulate among his readers."³

Rather than the church as an institution with large buildings, multiple staff, and varied programs, Acts 2 describes the life of communities of believers living simply in communion with God and with one another and focused upon key practices.

Apostle's Teaching. The church today is enriched by the heritage of others who have discerned and participated in God's redemptive activity. "The affirmation of apostolicity is the church's acknowledgement that it lives by what it has received and is accountable to what it has received."⁴ Living in basic continuity with "the saints" who have gone before, the message, life, and witness of the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). Yet being faithful to the living God who is actively present in the midst of changing historical situations—"Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19)—means that the church itself

must grow and change. Thus the truths of the Christian heritage are to be explored and tested in conversation with the challenges and opportunities of the current context.

This means that the church is to be a learning community where people are expanding their capacity to discern their purpose, where new patterns of thinking are nurtured, where behavior is modified to reflect new knowledge and insights, and where collective aspiration is set free. In other words, a community where people are continually learning how to learn together. Learning communities are intentional in providing the space, time, and resources for people to unlearn old patterns and learn new ways of living which participate in and witness to God's transforming power.

Fellowship. The events of Acts 2 describe the coming of the Spirit as an event of new communication among people long separated from each other in faith, culture, and language. By receiving the Holy Spirit those present were freed from the principalities and powers that had kept them in bondage and isolation, fearful and suspicious of one another. Within the community created by Pentecost—a community of reconciliation—the barriers of language were overcome by the experience of a new unity and a mutual understanding in Christ amid great diversity. Thus authentic communication does not depend upon all participants in the community speaking the same language (whether ethnic, professional, or cultural), but upon their openness to the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit active and present in their midst.

Shaped by the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit, the church socializes people into particular "habits of the heart." As a reconciling community the purpose of the church is to teach people how to talk, how to act, how to fight, how to love, how to see the world in a peculiar—namely, a Christian—way. It is the social practice of one anothering which forms the church as a community of companions filled "with all humility, gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-2).

Breaking of Bread. A learning community whose identity is shaped by the biblical witness to Jesus Christ and whose lifestyle is formed by the *koinonia* of the Spirit, the church is to be a stewarding community. As "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10), Christian communities will be open and inviting to the stranger within and beyond the community. The practices of breaking bread and sharing food, of open homes and shared tables, indicate a profound and intimate sharing of life and faith.

The practice of breaking bread together is a protest against and an alternative to the way the world deals with hunger, food, and community. The story of the forming of Christian

community at Pentecost ends with: "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). The economy of God includes the meeting of all basic and bodily needs: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore" (Rev. 7:16). As a community of people who eat and live in a new way, the church is called to a sharing in and advocacy for the physical well being of all those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Prayers. Christians gather with "glad and generous hearts" to offer praise to God. Quite often prayer is contrasted with liturgy or corporate worship: prayer is understood as individual and private and liturgy as communal and public. While prayer is indeed personal, it is never individual. The language used in the Lord's Prayer is not "mine" and "me," but "our" and "us." In giving advice on prayer, Martin Luther counseled: "Remember that you are not kneeling or standing there alone...all devout Christians are standing there with you and you with them in one unanimous, united prayer which God cannot ignore."⁵

Prayer does not come naturally, Christians must learn how, when, and for what to pray. It is through participation in a worshiping community that Christians learn how to pray. As the prayer of the church, the Lord's Prayer provides the pattern for the life and practice of the community. As a community praying "in his name" and "for his sake," Christians join in the prayer of the church, the prayer given by Jesus to all those who would be his disciples.

Whether in the presence of others or physically alone, when Christians pray they are united with all those who through faith in Jesus Christ have become the adopted children of God. The whole of the Lord's Prayer is public and communal, the prayer not of isolated individuals, but of the entire "household of God." As Christians journey in relationship with their beloved parent, their brothers and sisters serve as guides and supports, mentors and teachers. When they pray "Our Father," they "are naming the way we are saved—as a group, praying together, correcting one another, forgiving one another, stumbling along after Jesus together, memorizing the moves until his way has become our way."⁶

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Acts 2. How does this fit your image of church?
2. What does it mean to speak of the "leading of the Spirit"?
3. What's the connection between God and community?
4. Why does the church need to be a learning community?
5. How does Pentecost create a reconciling community?
6. What is the connection between breaking bread and Christian stewardship?
7. What is the relationship between prayer and worship?

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¹ Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 132.

² S. Scott Bartchy, "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*, Richard Longenecker, ed. (Hendrickson, 2002), p. 91

³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴ Philip Hefner, "The Church," in *Christian Dogmatics*, Carl Braaten & Robert Jenson, eds. (Fortress Press, 1984), p. 116.

⁵ Martin Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," quoted in *Minister's Prayer Book*, John W. Doberstein, ed. (Fortress Press, 1986), p. 443.

⁶ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Abingdon, 1996), p. 29.

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