

## **Acts – A Shared Life in the Holy Spirit** Red figures link to power point

**1** I am starting today a new series, unpacking themes from the Acts of the Apostles. I have sensed the Lord drawing me to this part of Scripture, mainly because it is the charter of our being together as a community today. No Acts – no Church, simple as that. If we only had the Gospels and no clue what happened next, we would not have a clue about so much that is key to how we do what we do today.

**2** Acts is written by Luke – it's volume two of his account of the revelation of God through Jesus and the Church after Jesus' departure in His ascension. Luke is not a Jew, as far as we know. He is a Gentile physician, from Asia Minor, a man of science, a man with an eye for detail, which is why his account is the longest and most detailed. He opens the Acts by referring back to his gospel, 'In the first account I dealt, Theophilos (Theophilos could be one person, or a generic 'friend of God') with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day He was taken up...'

Without too much messing about with the text, we can see that Luke considered Jesus' ministry until the day he was taken into heaven *the beginning* of His work on the earth. This is part two, the sequel, of what Jesus was continuing to do *after* He was taken up into heaven, through the person and power of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Shared life in the Spirit**

**3** Having given that brief introduction to what Luke is doing here, I want to jump straight to the end of chapter 2, with a view next time to rewinding to the start again. There's a reason for that. I am calling this first talk, 'Shared life in the Spirit', and under that heading, I am going to home in on three factors –

- 1) The Spirit as indispensable to the life of the Church
- 2) Shared life as we before I, the priority of the communal over the individual
- 3) The nature of 'shared' in shared life, and what it means for us today.

So, first of all, let's move along to point one; the Holy Spirit as indispensable to the life of the Church.

## The Holy Spirit as the Church's Breath

**4** When a Greek of Luke's time heard the word *pnévma* (I'm using modern Greek pronunciation, since that's what our friends across the Meadows in St Andrew's Orthodox Church still use in their worship today), they heard different things – they heard breath, wind, spirit. Like the Hebrew word, *ru'ach*, there is more than one meaning to the word.

**5** Right from the start of Luke's account in Acts, in Acts 1.2, Jesus and the Holy Spirit interact after Jesus' resurrection; Jesus is giving directions to His team in conjunction with the *pnévma*, the unique breath-wind of God Himself. And the whole of the Acts is pervaded by that sense of interaction between the risen Jesus and the breath-wind of God the Spirit. Jesus is no longer physically present, although He does appear to Paul a couple of times; the means of experiencing God in the Acts is no longer the physical Jesus, but the invisible breath-wind of God.

**6** Many of you here have been on Alpha, and if you have done the full course, you will have been on the Holy Spirit day, when we focus on the person and work of this third person of the threeness of God, the Trinity of God. The reason Alpha includes that so unapologetically is that because without an encounter with the Holy Spirit we are incomplete.

Philip Walker in an article called 'the Spirit, Mission and Alpha' in Andrew Brookes' book, 'The Alpha Phenomenon', defends the necessity of this section of the course, as 'an essential part of the gospel', asserting that 'Spirit-baptism must be a definite and dramatic experience. Anything else is a contradiction in terms, like saying water baptism can be valid without water.'

**7** A former Durham theology professor, James Dunn, wrote a book called *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* in 1970. His whole thesis is that whatever journey we are with God as we come to Him, without a deep and ongoing encounter with His Holy Spirit, we are not fully initiated as believers. He points out, as we shall see later in the book of Acts, that it is even possible to have repented, trusted, been baptised in water and still have missed the transforming, life-giving infusion of power which the Holy Spirit brings.

**8** So, moving to the end of chapter 2 of Acts, I want to ask a question. At the end of his preaching, before anyone else was baptised, in

2.38,39, Peter promises this same gift which they see in the 120 for anyone who calls on him. Do you think those three thousand who were baptised that day settled for any less than the full blessing they had seen in the one hundred and twenty? How do you picture that scene? This is awesome, this is the church being filled for the first time with the breath-wind of God, en masse, as a whole.

And those first days of the church's life must have been incredible. But if we don't reckon with the full presence and power of the Holy Spirit with them from the word go, we will miss the point. **9** They immediately got stuck in – the Greek word is literally that, they got stuck in – to shared life together.

I just want to make one very important point from this story we are looking at here, where three thousand are added, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and get stuck into shared life together. Time and time again in the Acts – in chapter 2.4, in chapter 4.31, in 8.17, 10.44, and 19.6, the Holy Spirit comes to the believers together – they are not hidden away in quiet side-rooms, they are gathered, and Luke's witness is '*they* received, *they* were filled, *they* spoke in tongues and prophesied.' There is no privatisation of the Holy Spirit, and when He comes, He does not just touch one person, but several, many or thousands! The reason I am making this point is that we often give way to a privatisation of spirituality, making it an individualistic experience which is mine, and not for others to share or see. This is not the witness of the Acts – when the Holy Spirit fills believers, it is not to give them personal goose-bumps, or assurance of salvation, but to immerse them into a shared baptism in living water, which leads to a new, corporate man, the body of Christ, full of God's breath-wind. We are in danger of so tying up the Holy Spirit to our personal preferences that we miss this reality from the book of Acts which echoes throughout. After all, this is a power so dynamic, so uniting, so awesome that Simon the Samaritan offers Peter and John money to buy their power over people in Acts 6!

So I want to say that, the reason these people get stuck in, in Acts 2.42 is not because it seems like a good idea, but because the Holy Spirit in them together is blowing the ship of the church along with His breath in shared life, which is evidenced by four things – the apostles' teaching or formation, shared life, bread-breaking which includes reliving the Passover of Jesus, and prayer, and since they devoted themselves to it,

we can safely assume that they did it together; the whole emphasis of this passage is shared, together life – there is no hint of me, my or I – it is all our, we, us in Him. How exciting it must have been!

So that's point 1 – the Holy Spirit's breath is not an optional extra.

**9.1**The church is called not just to be a charismatic community, which focusses on the grace of His gifts, but a completely Christo-pneumatic community – a place where the breath-wind of Jesus empowers and encounters us in all we do, and brings life and brings us together. A Christo-pneumatic community.

So that's point one!

### **Shared Life, 'I' After 'We' is Community'**

**10**One of the things which they got stuck into as a body was what our Greek-speaking brothers and sisters across the Meadows would know as *koinonía* (pronounced *kinonía*) The word comes from the word *koiné*, meaning 'common'. But that has unhelpful connotations in English. Often things that are common are not cared for, but this is not so of the Church. That's why I want to major on the *shared* aspect of life – you can't share and be alone, it is a contradiction in terms.

For the early Church this meant that 'We' came before 'I'; in a sense, the individual believer only has meaning as he or she is part of the 'together' of the corporate. Now that is an assault on our Western humanist sensibilities, where 'me' and 'my' are sacred, are always to be put first. But that isn't what the Acts shows us. The Holy Spirit pulls them together, grows them together, finds them together, impacts them together. If that disagrees with our twenty-first century worldview, it's because it wasn't written to please our sensibilities, it was written as Luke's record of the Spirit of Christ's action.

John Wesley, famously said 'the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion.' That doesn't mean it's wrong to be alone, but it's suspect if we never see our need of others in this journey. God has put us together to shape us by one another – and remember, you can't crucify yourself.

## The Nature of Shared in Shared Life

**11** Acts 2.44, they who believed were together, and shared all things. And they sold their property and their possessions and shared out the proceeds as need arose.

I have been looking at communities in history who took this as a call to live in common-purse communities, where they owned nothing and drew from a central fund. There are many who argue that this could be a good model for Christian community. If we go forward to the end of Acts 4, we see this modelled, so that the community in Jerusalem benefits greatly from the proceeds of properties sold and distributed, such as Barnabas the Levite does in 4.36-37.

But there is another factor in this, which lets us see the freewill aspect to our response. In Acts 5, Ananias and his wife Sapphira sell a property and bring part of the proceeds to the Apostles for the Church. But they lie about the amount they got for it, so they are seen to be more generous than they are being. Terrifyingly, this leads to their deaths, but in the process, Peter says to Ananias, in 5.4 – ‘It was your property to dispose of as you wished’, in other words, they didn’t have to bring it all to the Apostles. The sin was, that they pretended part was all.

And we know people still lived in and maintained homes and houses, otherwise, they and their households would have had nowhere to live, nowhere to meet. This is the key, that what they had stopped being ‘mine’ and became ‘ours’. And where there was need, as the need arose, the assets of the community were monetarised to alleviate need.

**12** Something else very clear comes out of this; the believers did not dispose of the proceeds themselves, giving where they felt like it, but they brought the proceeds and presented them to the Apostles. (Acts 4.37 and 5.2) This again reflects their value of shared life. They did not do their own thing but worked together with the body for the resourcing of the whole body.

## Our Giving

I want to say something very simple and direct here; what we witness here in Acts is the model and pattern for the life of disciples in every believing community. **13** Here in CCE, our practice is together to take responsibility to resource what God has called ‘us’ to do – we teach,

encourage and practice (though as in Acts, we don't enforce) shared-life giving which is consistent, regular, sacrificial but proportionate, modelled for us in the life of Israel under the laws of tithing, but opened up by grace to encompass all we have as the property of Christ the Lord.

**14** Taking seriously the call of Christ in the Spirit to shared life entails material giving, and giving to ensure our shared needs are resourced. We may discuss those needs together, we may assess and re-assess what God is calling us to, but the principle clearly modelled in the Acts here is sacrificial, joyful giving of the disciples received and co-ordinated by the apostolic leadership of the community, to ensure what God has called us to as a shared-life people is resourced.

**15** Many of us here already practice this, (**testimony**) and would offer it as an example to all who want to share life here in the Holy Spirit.

**16** Because of that simple obedience to the Scriptural call to shared life, to which we have responded, we have seen great blessing as a church,

**17** we have seen God provide and resource others also through us. So the call to shared life is a call to shared resources, and to take our part in the local body into which the Holy Spirit has fused us by His breath-wind. It's worth noting, lastly, that while later there are plenty of examples of giving beyond the community, to bless the poor of other places and nations, **18** Acts 2 and 4 make clear that shared life means the resourcing of the local, as testimony to the undisciplined, echoed again in Acts 6 in the provision for the widows.

I must finish; but I want to present these three calls to us this morning for our reflection and response

- 1) **19.1** Have we been and are we being filled with the Holy Spirit and by Him infused into the company of those that believe and the shared life He calls us to? Without Him, it is all slog, and we won't maintain.
- 2) **19.2** How are we learning to prioritise the 'we' over the 'I', the 'I' over the 'my', especially when we have been disciplined by a world where self is king?
- 3) **19.3** Will we just dismiss the call to renounce our possessiveness as 'Col going on' or will we see that by following the breath-wind of the Spirit, we can see our shared life in this community resourced fully and our lives blessed by the God who cannot be outgiven?