

21 February 2010

The DNA of a Vibrant Church

Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Imagine if every week someone came to the Lord in our church. This would be a very exciting place. It would transform the way we think and the way we operate. You may be tempted to tune me out at this point. Ellis is dreaming. You may be so convinced that this cannot happen that you politely conceal your skepticism but start thinking about something more realistic. “Not going to happen, so why waste time thinking about it.”

You may even feel like the elder at a church at which I was a guest preacher about thirty-five years ago. In the vestry before the service I asked him how things were going in the church. He looked wistfully at me and said: “Well, on the Day of Pentecost it took one sermon to get 3,000 converts. Nowadays it takes 3,000 sermons to get one convert.”

Let’s imagine what would happen if we saw people coming to the Lord on a regular basis. It would be like a breath of fresh air as we sensed the joy of their newfound faith. As they filtered into the small groups, and asked some basic questions, we’d gain a fresh appreciation for what we’ve tended to take for granted. Trivial issues would slide into their rightful place. Molehills would remain molehills. I remember the sense of discovery in one young Christian when he realized that there were actually four Gospels that recounted the ministry of Jesus from different points of view.

Let me tell you briefly about an exciting period in the 1970’s. Many of you will remember the hippie counterculture. Long, unkempt hair, dropouts and drugs, issues, communes, and psychedelic colors. You may also remember the impact of the Jesus Movement. Well, the little church I was pastoring was a beneficiary of that movement. We did nothing to deserve it. A crowd of hippies who has come to the Lord decided to rent a large house less than a kilometer from our church. They described themselves as “Happies” and dubbed their rented home, “One Way House.” They came unannounced to our church. I can still remember the first Sunday morning when they arrived *en bloc*. The expressions on the faces of several of the established members were something to behold.

But they became part of us and I spent many happy hours at “One Way House” sitting on the floor (the bedrooms were furnished but the living room wasn’t). There were questions, all sorts of questions, and some amazing stories of deliverance. I remember talking about it at a ministerial and having an older colleague warn me that they would lower the social

tone of the entire church, driving decent people away, then the “Happies” would move on and we would be left with a depleted membership.

That comment disturbed me. But guess what? The next Sunday night the residents of “One Way House” were there in full force, and they brought two young adults with them. Both accepted the Lord. We discovered afterwards that Heather was the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the country and the guy, whose first name I have forgotten, was the son of the national Minister of Justice. So much for lowering the church’s social tone! All I can say is that it was a thrilling period in my life and in the life of our church. There is nothing quite like seeing people coming to the Lord and taking their first spiritual steps.

We are about to examine a passage that concludes with a telling statement: *“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”* This is by no means an isolated statement. There are similar statements dotted throughout the Acts.

For example: “But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand” (4:4). “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5:14). “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7). “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (9:31). “All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (19:10).

At the conclusion of his third missionary journey, “Paul greeted the leaders of the church at Jerusalem and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law . . .” (21:19-20).

As we travel through the Book of Acts, I can promise you that I will not succumb to a false idealization of the early church. Nor will I fail to distinguish between what is *descriptive* and what is *prescriptive*. In many respects, this *was* an exceptional period. But some important truths are recorded here for our instruction, and there is one I want to highlight today: **It is the relationship between the quality of the church’s spiritual life and the effectiveness of its witness.**

“When a church is spiritually healthy, it grows!” As the title suggests, we are looking at “The DNA of a Vibrant Church.” You see, Luke gives us a beautiful little cameo of a Spirit-filled church. He identifies some essential characteristics of Christian discipleship. If we

get these things right, spiritual *and* numerical growth will inevitably follow. We are not to be obsessed with statistics or to measure success by counting heads. But let's not succumb to the cop-out of saying we prefer quality to quantity. Let's avoid the pseudo-spirituality of saying numbers don't matter. They do! They did to Luke. They do to God, and they should to us as well!

I first encountered this passage in the King James Version. There it says, "They continued steadfastly . . ." The version we are using translates the clause, "they devoted themselves to . . ." Literally, the word means, "*They were strong towards.*" In other words, we could say that these were the church's strong points. Luke highlights five features, five areas in which the church was particularly strong. And if we are going to be the kind of church God wants us to be, these need to be our strong points too. Let's look at them.

In the first place,

I. WE NEED A HEALTHY SPIRITUAL APPETITE.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ."

- A. I can see their eager faces as they gather and I can almost hear their questions.
 1. The apostles had spent many hours with Jesus. They would have recounted his teaching. No doubt the new disciples would have asked, "What did the Master say about . . .?"
 2. In particular, they would have wanted to know what he had taught them after his resurrection, when he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. Jesus had explained how all three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of the way he would suffer and then enter his glory (Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). It all made such sense to them, and now they could explain it to the others.
- B. It is significant that their experience of God never inclined them to treat teaching as unnecessary or even counterproductive. Occasionally one encounters Christians who disdain doctrinal teaching. You know, "the letter kills, brother . . ." (a misapplication). John Stott makes an important point when he says: "Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth."¹

¹John R. W. Stott, *the Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth* (Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1990), 82.

1. If ever someone encourages you to disengage your mind, they are encouraging you to follow a kind of Christianity that is very different from that of the Book of Acts.
 2. Of course, the teaching needs to be applied to life. It should be anything but dry and sterile. But it cannot simply consist of hand to mouth prescriptions, sweet thoughts to pick us up and little rules to live by. All our believing and all our living is based upon what God has done. Teaching is important. It always will be. We will never apologize for it in this church.
- C. Today, the Apostles' teaching is contained in the New Testament. Three of the apostles who recorded accounts of Jesus' ministry were sitting right there. What the apostles taught is contained and expanded on in the New Testament.
- D. If we want to be an effective church, this had better be one of our strong points. It's there at the outset. I have yet to meet a genuine Christian who doesn't have a spiritual appetite (cf. 1 Pet 2:1-2). Why should we deprive ourselves of spiritual food that is both wholesome and delicious? But sometimes eating disorders do set in. They are as crazy as anorexia. Why would we slowly starve ourselves? We need to be devoted to the Apostles' teaching. In other words, we need to be serious about the reading and the teaching of Scripture. It is a privilege, not a chore.

So, we need to maintain a healthy spiritual appetite. Secondly,

II. WE CAN ALSO EXPERIENCE AN EXCEPTIONAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship . . ."

- A. The idea of fellowship is simple enough. The Greek word that you have possibly heard bandied around is *koinōnia*. It actually means "to have things in common."
- B. Like many of you, I took the opportunity on my day off to go downtown and imbibe some of the Olympic atmosphere. I felt Canadian before I boarded the bus, but there's something about supporting Team Canada that creates a sense of solidarity. We feel a shared sense of disappointment when one of our athletes wipes out and a shared sense of pride when we see an Alexandre Bilodeau or a Maelle Ricker or a Christine Nesbitt or a Jon Montgomery take the podium and watch the flag being raised. In a sense, different as we are, we are feeling a sense of *koinōnia*, of commonality.

- C. But there is nothing quite like the fellowship of genuine believers. I would not minimize the sense of togetherness or camaraderie that we can feel when we are united by a common bond, be it loyalty or fear or a shared experience. But there is even more in the community of Christian believers, drawn together by the Holy Spirit and united in the love of Christ.
- D. In fact, this unique *koinōnia* cause amazement among those who looked in on the community of believers. It was the church's inclusiveness that called for an explanation. There was nothing like it, anywhere, and there still isn't. Kenneth Latourette, the great 20th century church historian from Yale University, identified this inclusiveness as one of the main reasons for the church's success against all odds:

It attracted all races and classes . . . (It) gloried in its appeal to Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian One of the charges against Christianity (was) that it drew the lowly and unlettered multitude Yet Christianity also developed a philosophy which commanded the respect of many of the learned Christianity too was for both sexes The Church welcomed both rich and poor No other [religion] . . . took in so many groups and strata of society The query must be raised why this comprehensiveness came to be.²

Where people share a common commitment to Christ, factors such as age, nationality, education, and social standing are secondary. We have more in common with our fellow believers than with blood relatives or with who have a virtually identical social background to ours.

As we proceed through the book, we see just how deep their sense of commitment to one another was.

- E. We have experienced something of that fellowship. That sense of community is so important. We encourage one another; we bear one another's burdens. We bring the best out of one another. And we unite with a common purpose. May this continue to be a strong point here at White Rock Baptist Church! Indeed, may it become stronger by the day!

²Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The First Five Centuries* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), 164-65.

So, we need to maintain a healthy spiritual appetite. And we can experience an exceptional sense of community. What's more . . .

III. WE CAN LIVE IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF GENUINE WORSHIP.

⁴² *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* ⁴⁶ *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God”*

- A. The picture we have here is of a community that really enjoyed worship.
1. They broke bread regularly. This means more than that they ate together. As part of the *agapē* (*the love feast; a kind of potluck*), they would celebrate the Lord's Supper. How often, we don't know. I think they lost count.
 2. They gathered for worship in the temple courts as well in their homes.
 3. And prayer was second nature to them. We see them at prayer often. Prior to the Day of Pentecost (1:14, “They joined together constantly in prayer.”) No doubt they were praying together on the Day of Pentecost. It was as Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer that they healed a cripple (3:1). When Peter and John returned to the others after their arrest, they all raised their voices to God in prayer (4:24).
- B. The important thing to me is that it all seemed so natural, so integrated. It was both formal and informal; it was both joyful and reverent. They worshipped God with glad and sincere hearts.
- C. One of the hallmarks of a spiritually vibrant church is the degree to which life and worship are integrated. When fun is fellowship and fellowship is worship, when we can enjoy a good meal and also celebrate the Lord's Supper, we have cast off the shackles of regulated religion and are experiencing the liberty of spiritual life. May this too become a feature of the way we “do church” here at WRBC.

So, we need to maintain a healthy spiritual appetite. And we can experience an exceptional sense of community. We can also live in an atmosphere of spiritual worship. And,

IV. WE OUGHT TO BE KNOWN FOR OUR GENEROSITY.

⁴⁴*All the believers were together and had everything in common.* ⁴⁵*They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.*”

Now, here’s an interesting one. We could spend a great deal of time on it. In fact, we could *waste* a great deal of time on it.

- A. Let me cut to the quick: There never was a law to compel believers to pool their property, or even an implicit obligation to do so. From all we can ascertain, this was a spontaneous action. Those who had more than they needed *joyfully* sold their possessions so that those who were particularly needy could be cared for. Mean-spirited Christian should be the greatest oxymoron of all.
- B. Here’s what we can say. A few groups have chosen to live in community, some good, and some bad. If any spiritual leader or religious group *requires* of its members that they sell their property, he is probably a false prophet and the group is probably a cult. I speak with some feeling here. I used to play golf with a man who had fallen prey to such a movement. His wife was a member of our church and she had managed to move on. But he bore deep scars. He’d been taken in and then told that if he was to be a true disciple, he should sell his house, present the proceeds to the impressive leader of the movement, and then live in community with the other believers. When the leader was exposed, my golf partner was not only devastated, but had also lost his equity. Sadly, this kind of thing keeps happening.
- C. We, nevertheless, have to feel the challenge of these statements. A young believer once came to me shortly after his dramatic conversion. He wanted to sell his share in the family business, give it to me to distribute as I believed best, and then he would trust the Lord to provide his needs and those of his family. To make a long story short, I dissuaded him from doing so. We concluded that God had not commanded him to do this. It would have been irresponsible. But, what an attitude! He needed guidance, but he became a man of remarkable generosity. Remember John’s exhortation:

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 one another. If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

- D. I think of a couple I came to know in Cape Town. Jack Klopper was the Professor of Community Medicine at the University of Cape Town and Meryl was an

absolute dynamo in church and charity work. Jack had been awarded the OBE for his service as Director of health in a Commonwealth country. Although they never broadcast it, they had always been hospitable and generous. While they were in England their home was always open to foreign students, many of whom were in no position to pay London rentals. They never spoke about it, but I believe they frequently accommodated cash-strapped students.

When retirement date came, the Kloppers were not penniless, but probably would not have had the resources one might expect a medical practitioner to have. Instead of hoarding or making life decisions on a purely financial basis, they had done what they believed to be best for God's kingdom. A visitor arrived unexpectedly from an eastern country.³ He had been a recipient of the Kloppers' kindness while studying in England, had returned to his homeland, and had done exceptionally well in business. God laid it on his heart to purchase a condominium for the Kloppers, and so he arrived and did just that, despite protestations that it was not necessary. The beautiful condominium is in prime location on the western side of the Cape Peninsula. It's interesting to see two acts of generosity. They were not pooling resources but each showed kindness expecting nothing in return.

- E. And, you know, I have seen evidences of this same kindness right here. I do not wish to embarrass anybody, but I know some of you have quietly contributed to the needs of others. It makes me think of Paul's words to Thessalonians: *"Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other."¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, dear friends, to do so more and more"* (1 Thess 4:9-10).

There is an inevitable outcome. If we maintain a healthy spiritual appetite and we experience an exceptional sense of community; if we live in an atmosphere of spiritual worship and are generous . . .

V. WE WILL MOST CERTAINLY MAKE OUR PRESENCE FELT IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY

³I initially heard the story from a mutual friend and had it confirmed by an unrelated acquaintance, but I cannot remember the specific country from which the visitor came. It was Singapore if I am not mistaken.

⁴³ *“Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles . . . enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

- A. I am not going to avoid the subject of wonders and signs. I will touch on that next week.
- B. I will say this right now: There should be something in our life and witness that causes people to ask: “How can this be?”
- C. Everyone was filled with awe. Clearly, God was with them. You could love them or you could hate them, but you could not ignore them. I find it interesting that they enjoyed the favor of all the people. We know that persecution arose but the church earned the respect of the people.
- D. Most importantly, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Conclusion

We have glanced today at the DNA of a vibrant church. There is a place for strategy and there is a place for organized evangelism. (We should adopt a both/and rather than an either/or approach). But, in the final analysis, there is a direct relationship between the quality of the church’s spiritual life and the effectiveness of its witness. **“When a church is spiritually healthy, it grows!”**