

THE SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

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If you were looking for a new home church, what would you look for to tell if you had found a Spirit-filled church?

To get a biblical picture of a Spirit-filled church, we have to build a composite from descriptions found in several places in the New Testament. However, none of those comes closer to describing the *heart* of such a church—what really makes her tick (and grow)—than the first description, found in Acts 2.

It all began with Jesus' predictive instruction to His disciples after they had found Him alive from the dead:

Acts 1:8 "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus soon left them, ascending back to His Father's throne in Heaven, from where, only ten days later, He poured out the Holy Spirit upon those who waited for Him, just as He had promised:

Acts 2:4 Everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

This powerful experience thrust the fledgling church into its wider world to tell the good news of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ:

Acts 2:37 Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God."

The news was welcomed by spiritually hungry hearts. Day after day, people responded to the message and joined the faith of the apostles. Their faith was simple; the structure of that early church was minimal. But the core practices of their fiery belief have survived 2,000 years of opposition from without and abuses from within. The single best glimpse of the Spirit-filled church is found in the final verses of this second chapter of Acts. It is a picture we would do well to hang on the walls of each of our homes and contemplate often. The challenge of our generation is how to put this into practice in a 21st century context:

Acts 2: 41 Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

I note five distinct, timeless elements of the Spirit-filled pattern they have left us:

- They joined the church and devoted themselves to following Christ
- They received teaching from those who knew Christ personally
- They spent time frequently with those who were on the same journey, sharing and helping one another
- They learned to hear God's voice and receive His guidance through prayer and worship
- They continued to reach out and introduce others to the life they had found in Jesus

These elements are timeless in that they are not tied to, answering to, or limited to the cultural condition of that era. These five elements mark any church as a healthy group, through whom the Spirit of God may work powerfully.

Joined and Devoted

They joined the church and devoted themselves to following Christ.

Following Christ, to them, was not merely an intellectual process, but a social journey. They not only believed, they also belonged. Jesus had taught His followers that the rest of the world would recognize they were following Him when they practiced loving one another.

John 13:35 "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

He had made them more than believers; He had made them family.

Ephesians 2:19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.

Members of the same family naturally share a mutual affection and care for one another, one which grows through devoted practice. Such devoted love will be tested, as in every other human relationship, and is prone to temptation by impatience and "greener grass." But this love knows an endless fresh supply:

Romans 5:5 The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

This is clearly the first mark of a Spirit-filled church: joined and devoted people.

Teaching and Learning

They received teaching from those who knew Christ personally.

Believing and following Jesus Christ was new to them, as it is to every convert from self-will and independence. There is much that must be *unlearned* by many of us and some that must be *relearned* by others, but there is always so much to be *discovered* by all of us.

Romans 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.

God's Word opens its treasures to us by stages. Thus we commit ourselves to reading it repeatedly and frequently, in order to mine the true gold for ourselves. Teachers cannot simply give us that gold, but they can give us tips on where to look, and tools and methods for discerning what we find, and guide the process of our discovery.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.

Only those who know Christ can truly show Christ. It is our goal, as followers of Jesus, to learn from Him so that we may share effectively with others.

Acts 4:31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

This, then, is the second mark of a Spirit-filled church: biblical teaching and learning.

Fellowship and Sharing

They spent time frequently with those who were on the same journey, sharing and helping one another.

We sleep about one third of every 24-hour period and five out of seven days we work another third of the time. The final third of our day is shared by household chores and family responsibilities and preparing food and eating.

With whom do you spend the bulk of your waking hours? Allowing an hour each day for getting dressed or getting ready for bed, leaves fifteen hours each day, over 100 waking, active hours each week. How many of those 100 hours do you spend sharing your life with other Christ-followers?

1 Corinthians 15:53 Don't be fooled... for "bad company corrupts good character."

Building and maintaining godly character requires a lot of fellowship. Other believers in your household or workplace can provide some of that, but most of your time together may be focused on other matters.

Acts 2:46 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷ all the while praising God.

Followers in the early church met together frequently in various formats, both formal and informal, not because it was their tradition, but because it was life-giving. It was not about the food; it was about the fellowship!

You, too, can turn many normal events in your lives into fellowship gatherings. Be hospitable and open your home to fellow believers—it doesn't require much space or fine furniture or fancy meals or formal Bible studies. Just get together and talk about your faith while you're together. You may sing a song or pray together, or simply talk; but be sure of this: when you turn your attention together to the Lord, He will visit you and your hearts will be warmed.

That is the third mark of a Spirit-filled church: wholehearted fellowship and sharing.

Prayer and Worship

They learned to hear God's voice and receive His guidance through prayer and worship.

Colossians 4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.

Philippians 4:6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:1 I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them.² Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.³ This is good and pleases God our Savior,⁴ who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Prayer accomplishes many marvelous things, but seldom as powerfully as when it is offered in unity with other believers, according to Jesus' own promise:

Matthew 18:19 "I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."²⁰ For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."

Learning to pray is best done in groups. It is much harder to maintain your focus and persist when you are alone. Worship is more vibrant when offered in groups. He hears each individual's prayer, but it is there, in groups, that Jesus promised to show up.

Even a brief prayer, offered together, works wonders! Invest your life in this practice. Push past whatever resistance you encounter in order to pursue this habit.

Ephesians 6:18 Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

Here is the fourth mark of a Spirit-filled church: frequent and fervent prayer and worship.

Reaching Out

They continued to reach out and introduce others to the life they had found in Jesus.

And it bore fruit!

Acts 6:7 So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

We, too, have been endued with power from Heaven to present this word of life to others. By testimony, by counseling and teaching, by preaching—prepared and unprepared—when motivated by love for God and concern for others, we can have great impact.

Of course, those who hear have a part to play as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.

As long as we are not sharing "mere human ideas," there is great hope for eventual results. Any scantiness of harvest is not due to the seed sown. And though Jesus told us that not all soil receives well the word sown, He did assure us that if we sowed well we would reap a bountiful harvest.

Romans 10:14 But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? ¹⁵ And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"

Are you a bringer of good news? When people get around you do they hear good things? Is your conversation wholesome and encouraging? Are you a good listener and a helpful responder?

This is the fifth mark of a Spirit-filled church: a long, compassionate reach.

When these five elements operate in balance, the Spirit flows freely through our life together. The testimony of that early church will be the testimony of any church that gets this right:

Acts 2:47 Each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

Let's make room for the harvest!