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What lessons does Acts 2:42-47 provide for the contemporary movement to resource and develop fresh expressions of church?

Introduction.

The Acts of the Apostles has long been a favourite New Testament text for missiologists. It is no surprise to find Acts being mined for wisdom as the fresh expressions movement gains momentum.

Mission-shaped Church? Fresh expressions of church? Yes, they're both there in the Acts of the Apostles – in fact, you could say Acts provides the original biblical template for both. But the book of Acts raises some hard questions too.¹

In this essay I will weave together a detailed exegesis of Acts 2:42-47 with reflections on fresh expressions and lessons the text provides, both supportive and challenging, to those developing new forms of church. There are many valuable lessons elsewhere in Acts particularly concerning cross cultural mission, the place of proclamation in evangelism and the challenges to mission of setbacks and suffering, but this essay will concentrate on the 'beautiful cameo of the Spirit filled church'² that Luke presents.

By fresh expressions I mean.

A form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church which comes into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples and has the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.³

Overview.

In six succinct verses Luke paints a vivid portrait of the effects of the Pentecost events as seen in the life of the community of believers in Jerusalem. The picture comes after the account of the outpouring

¹ Alexander L, *What patterns of church and mission are found in the Acts of the Apostles?* in Croft S (ed), *Mission-shaped Questions* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p133.

² Stott Stott JRW, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 81.

³ Fresh Expressions Prospectus Volume 2. Fresh Expressions (upper case denotes the joint initiative of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York together with the Methodist Council).

of the Spirit, Peter's explanation of the Pentecost events and the response of the people who welcomed the apostle's message. It was a very fruitful day with these people being baptized and around three thousand persons added to the community of believers. The community that is formed is the fruit of the outpouring of the Spirit and the teaching of the apostles. The mood is one of excitement and the atmosphere is eschatological with the outpouring of the Spirit being seen as a sign of the last days⁴ and the imminence of the kingdom.⁵

The portrait is one of a number of summary passages in Acts⁶ that are used as islands in the narrative, creating space for reflection. Witherington⁷ suggests that Luke uses summary *statements*, such as Acts 2:41, to chronicle the progress of his central theme, 'the irresistible spread of the word of God.'⁸ The summary *passages* deal in particular with the interior life of the community.

After this summary Luke moves on to further stories that depict the relationship between the community of believers and the Jewish authorities.

Luke's motivation.

Community is important for Luke and in this passage he presents an exemplary model. Barrett comments;

Luke wished his readers to see what the life of the Christians was like in the apostolic period in order that they might imitate it His story is not simply a series of biographies but the story of a community.⁹

The community is presented as the renewed Israel, the true people of God.

The role of the Spirit.

The Spirit is not mentioned in this passage but the placing of the summary after the Pentecost stories and the words of Peter in 2:38 support Dunn's argument that;

It was Pentecost which saw the beginning of this fundamental character of Christian community as growing out of the shared experience of the Spirit.¹⁰

⁴ Acts 2:17

⁵ Acts 1:6-8

⁶ Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 8:1b-4.

⁷ Witherington B, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 157-160.

⁸ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 160.

⁹ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 160.

¹⁰ Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 35.

As Dioceses and Districts pour thousands of pounds into fresh expressions, Pioneer Ministers are trained and Fresh Expressions promotes its' training materials, Acts serves as a reminder of the critical place of the Spirit in forming and growing new Christian communities and spreading the gospel. Peter and John were 'uneducated and ordinary men' (Acts3:13) but they and the other apostles, filled with the Spirit, started a movement that saw the Gospel spread across, engage with and transform cultures and communities from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. A study of pneumatology in fresh expressions would be very welcome.

An ideal picture.

The commentaries consulted for this essay all agree that Luke presents an idealised picture of the life, values and practices that defined, characterised and held together the first community of Christian believers. It is clear he knew of problems that arose (see Ananias and Sapphira or Simon Magus for example) but there is no doubt that Luke accentuates the positive. Witherington argues that;

The summaries are Lukan creations, but grounded in the best things Luke could find to say in good conscience about the early church.¹¹

For more on the internal tensions and difficulties in the early Church one needs to read Paul. Fresh expressions need to know that community life will not always be sweetness and light!

Utopian ideas are usually signs that people have never properly experienced community.¹²

2.42 *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

The community is characterised by commitment. Barrett¹³ suggests that the use of devoted is a Lukan idealisation but it is not unreasonable to expect a high level of commitment or devotion at such a momentous time. Such devotion is apparent amongst fresh expressions. Cris Acher who leads *Nexus* in Manchester has said he would do what he does even if it meant going without his stipend. Chris Heseltine-James gave up his job as a teacher to work for peanuts in helping to establish *Church 18-30* in Wolverhampton.¹⁴

¹¹ Witherington B, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 157.

¹² Chris Russell a Reading based pioneer minister quoted in Encounters on the Edge no. 38: *The Cost of Community: Issues of Maturity* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2008), 23.

¹³ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 163.

¹⁴ Both Cris and Chris do have wives who bring home a teachers salaries.

In verse 42 Luke highlights four activities that were at the heart of the community. Could these be four parts of a liturgical act? Not according to Conzelmann who argues that

the character of the summary, the concepts themselves and their sequence all argue against this interpretation.¹⁵

Teaching.

The opening chapters of Acts present a continuum of ministry from Jesus through the apostles. Luke is not explicit about the content of the apostles' teaching in verse 42. Dunn argues that

The apostles are the medium and the guarantors of the teaching focussed on fresh interpretations of the scriptures and beginning to order the memories of Jesus' teaching and ministry into forms suitable for instruction, worship and proclamation.¹⁶

Yao suggests that the believers were committed to both 'the pedagogical activity of the apostles and the instructions being taught'.¹⁷ He agrees that Luke does not specify the content of the teaching but argues that this 'must have included the kerygma concerning the work, words and promises of Jesus'.¹⁸ Acts 4:32 highlights the importance of the resurrection of Jesus in the kerygma of the apostles. Alexander noting the coupling of the apostles teaching and fellowship argues that 'students learn from each other just as much as from their teachers'.¹⁹

The place of teaching in fresh expressions is a key area for further research and development. Many practitioners share the post modern preference for a language of learning, being deeply wary of anything that hints at hierarchy. Leaders such as Ben Edson of *Sanctus1* in Manchester place a great deal of emphasis on learning in community and from contemporary culture. The challenge of Acts 2 for Ben and others is to ensure that communal learning is rooted in the teaching of Jesus, the apostles and the biblical traditions from which they drew.

Fellowship.

Whilst accepting that the content of the apostles teaching within the community of believers is not made explicit by Luke, Barrett suggests that the fellowship, *koinonia*, was 'based upon common acceptance of the apostolic message [and] came into action in charitable use of its material

¹⁵ Conzelmann H, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 23

¹⁶ Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 35.

¹⁷ Yao S, *Dismantling Social Barriers through Table Fellowship* in Gallagher RL and Hertig P, *Mission in Acts* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 31.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 31.

¹⁹ Alexander L, *Acts: The People's Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006), 36.

resources'.²⁰ The word *koinonia* is only used here in the whole of Luke-Acts and denotes an activity. Witherington suggests that the term means

a participation or sharing in common with someone else.....fellowship is not a very helpful translation, for fellowship is the result of *koinonia*, of sharing in common; it is not the *koinonia* itself.²¹

Watson points out that

koinonia in the New Testament occurs more frequently in the context of the sharing of money or possessions than in any other.²²

The *koinonia* in this passage is seen in believers eating, praying and sharing goods together. In short, sharing their lives together. Such fellowship was a powerful engine of mission in the first century and remains so today. Claire Dalpa interviewed several fresh expressions about the fellowship they shared. She writes

The communities ... see the way they live together as the most valuable witness they can make in our individualist and anxiety-ridden society. They offer a counter-cultural lifestyle of hope and purpose to the lonely through living more intentionally in community.²³

Many fresh expressions including Moot (Westminster)²⁴, Maybe (Oxford)²⁵, Safe Space (Telford)²⁶ and groups affiliated to Contemplative Fire²⁷ have embraced the strong *koinonia* values of new monasticism. In an increasingly detached society the creation of authentic *koinonia* is a key missional task for fresh expressions.

Breaking of bread.

The breaking of bread *is* a term that Luke uses elsewhere, most powerfully in Luke 24:34 when Cleopas and his companion describe how Jesus had been made known to them 'in the breaking of the bread'. It is not clear from the text of Acts 2:42 how Luke is using the term here and the commentators

²⁰ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 164.

²¹ Witherington B, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 160.

²² Watson D, *Discipleship*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 43.

²³ Encounters on the Edge no. 38: *The Cost of Community: Issues of Maturity* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2008), 23.

²⁴ www.moot.uk.net

²⁵ www.maybe.org.uk

²⁶ www.safespace.me.uk

²⁷ www.contemplativefire.org

are cagey about its use.²⁸ Is it describing the act which opened a common Jewish meal? Is it a specific sacramental act? Barrett argues that

the “breaking of bread” was not a Jewish term for a meal and in this sense must have been a Christian development.²⁹

Dunn is more circumspect;

We may assume that on some occasions at least the meal included a shared commemoration of the Last Supper. But Luke has not gone out of his way to make this plain.³⁰

Could Luke be fusing together both meanings? Does Acts 2:42 remind us that at heart, the Lord’s Supper is actually very simple and very flexible? An everyday event infused with sacred significance. Whenever believers meet together they can break bread as part of a meal and not just remember, but experience, the risen Jesus in the midst of their *koiononia*. Conzelmann points out that Luke makes no attempt to distinguish between an ordinary meal and the ‘Eucharist’ and suggests that ‘the unity of the two is part of the ideal picture of the earliest church.’³¹ The unity of the two is seen particularly powerfully in the Eucharistic meal that Paul shared with his fellow sailors in Acts 27:35.

The breaking of bread is at the heart of the shared life of many fresh expressions³² but the sharing of the sacrament is often a challenging issue. Lamenting over regulations which restrict the sharing of communion Lucy Moore, the founder of the *Messy Church* movement, asked ‘why have we made something that Jesus made so simple and flexible, so complicated and rigid?’

Lesley Urwin reflecting on the role of sacramental ministry in fresh expressions calls for a ‘lively doctrine of exceptions’³³. The exceptions he cites concern, style, liturgy and open access³⁴. The greatest challenge for many³⁵ lies in the issue of authorisation to preside. Understandably, with their strong ethos of *koinonia*, many nascent communities are resistant to the idea of an ‘outsider’ being brought in to share the sacrament. Ecclesiology is often elastic and there are ways around having to

²⁸ although Haenchen argues that Catholic exegesis finds here the *communio sub una*. Haenchen E, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 191.

²⁹ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 165. Emphasis added.

³⁰ Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 35.

³¹ Conzelmann H, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 23

³² See my essay *Making disciple in fresh expressions* which is to be published in the forthcoming SPCK book *Real God, real world*.

³³ Urwin L, *What is the role of sacramental ministry in fresh expressions of church?* in Croft S (ed), *Mission-shaped Questions* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p35.

³⁴ i.e. not making baptism/confirmation a pre-requisite of receiving communion.

³⁵ Especially Anglican and Methodist fresh expressions.

wheel in the priest (extended communion being one 'solution' which also helps to place fresh expressions within the wider church). Some are doing this very well. Trish Calvert, an Anglican lay woman working for the Methodist Church has been given a dispensation to share communion with the members of the *Church of the Good Shepherd*, a network church for the housebound in Shrewsbury.

If fresh expressions continue to proliferate, the need for a lively doctrine of exceptions which includes the issue of presiding at communion will only grow. In Acts the emerging church is regulation light (no mention is made of the apostles presiding at the breaking of bread) and blessed with nimbleness conducive to growth. There is much to learn from this.

Prayer.

Prayer is one of the major themes of Luke-Acts. It is no surprise to see prayer as one of the hallmarks of the first Christian communities. The phrase *the prayers* with the use of the plural with the article implies the use of certain specific prayers. The Church began as a movement within second temple Judaism so these would have been mainly Jewish prayers with added Christian flavouring. Bruce suggests that

The community's prayers would follow Jewish models, but their content would be enriched because of the Christ event.³⁶

Barrett follows a similar line to Bruce suggesting that the Lord's Prayer may have been included³⁷ (not unreasonable in the light of Luke 11:2-4 which includes the instruction, 'When you pray, say'). If *the prayers* does include early Christian liturgical prayers, the use of the phrase adds weight to Barrett's thesis that in Acts 2:42-47, Luke was describing Christian activities from his own time and place in the life of the Pentecost community (with the addition of the Temple gatherings).³⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the Pentecost events one might expect to find a description of more spontaneous, unstructured prayer.

Haenchen takes a different view suggesting that the believers may have had distinct times for Jewish and Christian prayers.

the prayers are above all those offered together with the Jewish congregation. This by no means precludes the possibility that the Christians also had their own prayers

³⁶ Bruce FF, *The Book of the Acts Revised* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 73.

³⁷ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 166.

³⁸ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 160.

and set times of devotion.³⁹

Prayer is another hallmark of fresh expressions. The Fresh Expressions team highlight the crucial place of prayer in the formation and development of fresh expressions⁴⁰ with a particular emphasis on listening in prayer. Forms of prayer range widely from spontaneous in charismatic groups, to liturgical in anglo-catholic and new monastic groups, to reflective in contemplative groups.

Sometimes as people listen in prayer, the Spirit leads people across boundaries of style and tradition. Barbara Glasson, leader of the bread making church *Somewhere Else*, spent a year walking the streets of Liverpool and listening before she did anything else, seeking to discern needs and how to form a new Christian community for the city. Then one day ‘a word came straight into my head. The word was bread’⁴¹. For a radical liberal who was unused to ‘God answering prayers directly’⁴² this was a startling but crucial moment. Luke would approve! (c.f. Peter’s vision and the man from Macedonia⁴³).

2:43 *Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

Miracles.

The place of the apostles is emphasised again in another Lukan favourite theme - miracles (a theme also highlighted in the summary at Acts 5:12-16). The apostles continue the miraculous ministry of Jesus as well as his teaching. Signs and wonders are significant for a number of reasons in Luke-Acts. They;

1. Bestow physical benefits on those blessed by them.⁴⁴
2. Authenticate the identity of Jesus ‘as the one to come’ and the one in whom ‘there is salvation’.⁴⁵
3. Provide signs of the immanence of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶
4. Form part of the Christian witness and produce faith.⁴⁷

³⁹ Haenchen E, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 191.

⁴⁰ see for example Croft, Steven and Lings, George: *Starting a Fresh Expression*: (London, Church House Publishing 2006), 4-5.

⁴¹ Glasson B, *Mixed Up Blessings* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2006), p3.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Acts 10:15 and Acts 16:9.

⁴⁴ One such example follows immediately in Acts 3 with the healing of the lame man.

⁴⁵ Lk 7:18-22, Acts 4: 8-14

⁴⁶ Bruce FF, *The Book of the Acts Revised* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 74. Lk 9:1-2 and 11, Lk 10:9,

⁴⁷ Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8, 14:3; 15:12 commented on in Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 30.

The effect of the miracles was to generate *phobos*, godly fear or awe, in the community including the non-Christian community. Luke's inclusion of the word many 'gives the reader the impression that the whole life of the primitive Church was filled with miracles', according to a slightly incredulous Haenchen.⁴⁸ Again if Barrett's thesis is right, that Luke was describing activities from his own time and place, the occurrence of miracles in the life of the early Church was more than a five minute wonder.

I am not aware of much writing about, or testimonies to, the place of miracles in fresh expressions. In the *mission shaped ministry* course⁴⁹ unit on evangelism⁵⁰, 'Power Evangelism'⁵¹ is cited as one the eight key principles of evangelism but no examples from new churches are given.

The key place of the miraculous in Luke's writing is a challenge to both fresh and inherited forms of church. I write this in the Dudley Borough, watching *You Tube* clips of the events at the *Revival Fires* centre five miles away. Some are awe struck, others are deeply sceptical. Luke had no doubt about the importance of wonders and signs in a mission shaped church. What place do they have today?

2.44-45 *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 they had need.*

Sharing of Goods.

The term *believers* is used for the first time to describe the Christians. Its use is 'rather striking since belief was not mentioned as a qualification for membership of the Jesus movement'.⁵² Even more striking is the sharing of goods that Luke describes both here and at Acts 4:32-37. Another sign of the deep commitment at the heart of the community. Such commitment was not unique to the first Church. The Qumran community was centred around Torah (cf the apostles teaching) and the obligatory sharing of possessions. According to Josephus the Essenes (with whom the Qumranites are usually identified) were noted for their sharing of possessions,

'Riches they despise, and their community of goods is truly admirable'.⁵³

⁴⁸ Haenchen E, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 192.

⁴⁹ Fresh Expressions' one year course on starting and sustaining fresh expressions.

⁵⁰ A unit modelled on the evangelistic octagon in the *Lifeshapes Course* (Breen M and Kallestad W, *A Passionate Life*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2005).

⁵¹ As defined by John Wimber.

⁵² Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 36.

⁵³ Josephus *Jewish War* 2.122

In contrast to Qumran and the Essenes, the imperfect verb tense used in verse 45 suggests that the selling of goods was not a one off occurrence but rather a recurrent practice, as and when need arose. Bruce sees in these verses echoes of the common purse that Jesus shared with his disciples⁵⁴. Dunn sees more evidence of spontaneity and ‘eschatological enthusiasm’⁵⁵. A not unreasonable perspective but as Barrett points out⁵⁶, not one that can be read directly from the text.

A complementary explanation could be more down to earth. Luke had a particular concern for the poor as seen in the Nazareth manifesto⁵⁷ and the Beatitudes⁵⁸ for example. Yao, commenting on 2:44-45 and 4:34 ventures that ‘the deuteronomic promise is literally fulfilled in their midst, for there was not a needy person among them (Dt 15:4)’.⁵⁹

Strangely though the Greek word for the poor *ptóchos* used by Jesus nine times in Luke’s Gospel does not appear in Acts (and tax collectors and sinners disappear too). Cassidy points out that Luke

has not stated that the members of the community were making contributions to the poor, nor has he stated that they were inviting the poor to share in the community’s activities (two of the teachings that he attributed to Jesus in the Gospel). In contrast, he has simply stated that *within the community*, arrangements were enacted so that no one of the members was in need or in economic want.⁶⁰

Meeks suggests that Jews at the time would be found in ‘virtually every strata of society’.⁶¹

In his critique of *Mission-shaped Church* Hull calls for ‘a prophetic church, a church that refuses to accept the poverty which is till so widespread in our society’.⁶²

As the fresh expressions movement develops so more examples are emerging of radical communities ministering amongst the most poor economically and inviting them to explore Christian discipleship. In North Wales a fresh expression has been established for the homeless. In York a Christian community has been formed for those with profound addictions, especially drug addictions. The *Cable Street* community in Shadwell, East London is bringing the light of the gospel to a soul destroying

⁵⁴ Bruce FF, *The Book of the Acts Revised* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 74.

⁵⁵ Dunn JDG, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), 36.

⁵⁶ Barrett CK, *Acts 1-14* (ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 168.

⁵⁷ Luke 4:18

⁵⁸ Luke 6:20

⁵⁹ Yao S, *Dismantling Social Barriers through Table Fellowship* in Gallagher RL and Hertig P, *Mission in Acts* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 33.

⁶⁰ Cassidy RJ, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 24.

⁶¹ Meeks WA, *The first Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 39.

⁶² Hull J, *Mission-Shaped Church: a Theological Response* (London: SCM, 2006), 36.

tower block estate. In the small ex mining town of Hednesford a new congregation has grown around a free lunch provided by the Methodist Church. The congregation is made up of homeless people, drug addicts, young single mums and their children (a modern day version of Luke 14:12-14).

Elsewhere people are selling possessions and assets to build community and plant new churches. At the *Grace Church* in Hackney, several members have sold their homes in more affluent areas in order to move into the lower income area served by the fresh expression. In Stafford one couple demonstrating the spirit of Barnabas⁶³ have given £250,000 to buy a unit in a local shopping centre in which a café church will be planted.

Radical generosity was a hallmark of the early church as portrayed by Luke. Such generosity will continue to be necessary if fresh expressions are to continue to form and grow and if in particular they are to reach the most economically poor. Then there is the further challenge from Hull to see more integrated and inclusive churches in which that old church cliché that ‘*all are welcome*’ is fully realised and experienced. Niche churches responding to particular needs demonstrate many Kingdom values but they don’t represent the complete eschatological picture.

2.46 *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*

The Temple and Home meetings – a mixed economy.

The devotion of the believers is again highlighted as Luke describes their *daily* gatherings and sharing of *much* time. This verse in particular makes it clear that the community Luke is describing is still Jewish. It is embedded in Israel’s capital and religious practices.

With one accord the Christians make daily attendance at the Temple thus demonstrating that they have not forsaken the religion of their fathers.⁶⁴

Marshall points out that

Theological questions about the replacement of the temple sacrifices by the spiritual sacrifice by Jesus had probably not yet occurred to them.⁶⁵

⁶³ Acts 4:37

⁶⁴ Haenchen E, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 192.

⁶⁵ Marshall IH, *Acts* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 85.

Commenting on Acts 5:12 Dunn says

...it reinforces one of Luke's primary themes: that from the first the new movement saw itself as in no way at odds with the principal symbol of Israel's religion.

[i.e. the Temple]

The first Christian believers were rediscovering what it meant to be the people of God. They did not forsake Judaism but nor were they content simply to maintain the status quo. Witherington argues,

At this stage the followers of Jesus are being portrayed by Luke as true messianic Jews, attempting to rescue other Jews so they might be part of a righteous remnant of Israel, the eschatological people of God.⁶⁶

In this one verse Luke presents a sophisticated picture of an engaged, mixed economy, community. Here and in verse 47 he is keen to show that the believers were not a withdrawn sect. They met in public as well as in private. They respect the symbols of institutional religion but also develop complementary home based meetings for worship, nurture and support.

Those encouraging the fresh expressions movement have constantly emphasised using the language of a mixed economy introduced by Rowan Williams, affirming the value of inherited church (where this is alive and effective) but stressing the need for new forms of church for those who cannot connect with existing churches. Addressing the 2007 General Synod the Archbishop said that through the fresh expression movement 'We're rediscovering something about what the Church is'. In this rediscovering there is nothing incongruous with holding a Fresh Expression Vision Day exploring new ways of being church in Lincoln Cathedral for example⁶⁷.

The role of the House Church.

The fact that the believers continued to meet in their homes (or from house to house) further indicates that they did not eschew all private possessions. Furthermore the role of the house church was critical in the spread of the Gospel. The church grew by spreading from house to house. New communities could be established very quickly in villages, towns and cities. Blue argues that Acts provides a

consistent pattern of the conversion of individuals who are capable of significant

⁶⁶ Witherington B, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 163.

⁶⁷ 600 people attended the Fresh Expressions Vision Day at Lincoln Cathedral in March 2007.

benefaction including houses in which the community gathered.⁶⁸

He goes on to argue that

Consistently Paul's objective is the conversion of a home owner who is capable of benefaction, including a house which was used as the alternate venue in which the Christians assembled.⁶⁹

He also points out that there were three architectural phases in the early Christian period.⁷⁰

1. c50 – 150. Christians met in private homes, belonging to individual members (a practice that may be another taken from Judaism with many contemporary synagogues being rooms in houses).
2. c150 – 250. Private homes were renovated and expanded with rooms used exclusively for the assembled Christian communities.
3. c250 – 313. Larger buildings and halls (both public and private) were used before the introduction of Constantinian basilicas. Eucharist became separated from agapé.

Christians do need places to meet. The very word *ecclesia* means a gathering, but to build or not to build? That is a question facing many fresh expressions. Reading Acts and the Pauline epistles would suggest that considerable thought should be given before investing in bricks and mortar (as would stories from places such as China). Will building help or hinder the mission? Around the country fresh expressions are meeting in homes, schools, coffee shops and pubs. Some have so impressed secular organisations that they have been gifted premises in which to meet. In Kidderminster *Café Nero* is the meeting place for a new congregation. At *The Hothouse* in Walsall a local building firm was so impressed with the community work being done they bought the shop that the churches had been leasing and gave it to them. *The Hothouse* is now a centre for service, evangelism and worship.

For some not having a permanent base has been difficult. In 2003 Gordon Crowther founded *Church Without Walls* in Stoke-on-Trent. In his 2008 Diocesan report Gordon wrote

Church Without Walls started in our home – an excellent place for hospitality, prayer and healing. But entering a private home is not common in the culture and the front door is closed to those who do not know us. We moved into a city

⁶⁸ Blue B, *Acts and the House Church* in Gill DWJ and Gempf C (eds), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 141.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 152.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 124.

centre pub. This was a prophetic statement, but it was difficult to make a place of peace and prayer. And it was not a home in that it was only borrowed for a short time each week. It was not identifiable as the place to access Christ and his people. We lost the pub when the managers were evicted and moved to a bar and then we moved from place to place. The sense of transience made it hard work to access us. We are in need of a base from which we can go out and to which we can welcome others. It's an essential to any community that hopes to grow.

Acts 2 may help here with its portrayal of the complementary usage of both public and private spaces.

Table fellowship.

The early believers met in houses *not by default alone* but deliberately because the house setting provided the facilities which were of paramount importance for the gathering. For example, the culinary appurtenances necessary for the meal.⁷¹

The central place of table fellowship is emphasised again in Acts 2:46 and here we see another continuum from the ministry of Jesus.

The early Christians continued the patterns of table fellowship of Jesus found in the Gospels. Following in their footsteps, they refused to discriminate against the marginalised. Their table fellowship was characterised by acceptance and egalitarianism in which they shared with one another according to their specific needs.⁷²

The atmosphere at the shared meals was one of gladness and the believers were characterised by their sincere hearts. The word *aphelotes* occurs here uniquely in the New Testament and may be used to indicate a purity in the Christian meals that contrasted with the sort of drunkenness of which the Pentecost community was accused in Acts 2:13.

Table fellowship is another hallmark of fresh expressions. It is an effective means of outreach and greatly contributes to the building of community. When first fresh expressions dvd⁷³ is shown at training events and people are asked what they see, the first answer is always *food*. Fresh expressions are not the first to rediscover the importance of table fellowship. Whilst some may deem it heresy, I

⁷¹ Blue B, *Acts and the House Church* in Gill DWJ and Gempf C (eds), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 121.

⁷² Yao S, *Dismantling Social Barriers through Table Fellowship* in Gallagher RL and Hertig P, *Mission in Acts* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 33.

⁷³ *expressions:the dvd* Church House Publishing 2006.

suggest it is not Nicky Gumbel's talks that are the key to the effectiveness of *Alpha* but rather the whole experiential package which has a shared meal at its heart.

According to Dunn, what we are seeing should not surprise us. Commenting on Acts 2: 44-47 he says,

The portrayal may be somewhat idealized..... But anyone who is familiar with movements of enthusiastic spiritual renewal will recognise authentic notes: the enthusiasm of the members of the renewal group, with a sense of overflowing joy (2:46), desire to come together frequently (2:44,46), eating together and worshipping (2:46-47) and including the readiness for unreserved commitment to one another in a shared common life.⁷⁴

When asked how others could start a fresh expression teenager Lucy at *The Bridge* in Hinckley said 'talk together, eat together, pray together'. Luke would like that.

2:47 *praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Praise and Goodwill.

When Luke presents people praising God⁷⁵ he does so when they have experienced God's loving help or saving grace. The first community of believers had much to praise God for. It was also a welcome part of the wider community. The phrase *having the goodwill of all the people* could be used to support the apologetic argument that Acts was written to protect the Church from the accusation that it was a destabilising influence or a threat to Rome.

For those in fresh expressions seeking to connect with their communities it serves as an encouragement. When the church is seen to be demonstrating genuine loving service the community responds positively. In Howden Clough a dying Chapel ignored by the community was reborn when the chapel was converted into Wesley's Playhouse – a Wacky Warehouse style play centre.⁷⁶ The chapel is now a thriving hub of mission enjoying the good will of the people and the praises of God have been renewed.

Growth.

⁷⁴ Dunn, James: *The Acts of the Apostles*: (Peterborough, Epworth 1996) p34

⁷⁵ Luke 2:13,20; 19:37, Acts 3:8.

⁷⁶ www.thisisit.me.uk

The passage ends with a summary sentence that highlights the core theme of the spread of the word of God. Implicit in the passage is the message that deep and committed Christian community is a powerful witness to the reality of the saving love of God (alongside the proclamation and miracles that permeate Acts).

It is not surprising with such a community of disciples bound together in love, that God added to their number, day by day those who were being saved.⁷⁷

The use of the present participle emphasises that salvation is a *process* of which repentance, initial belief, baptism and the gift of the Spirit are only the start. It is a process that continues in community. There is no solitary Christianity here. Those who are being saved are added by the Lord to the community which guided by the apostles teaching and the Spirit continues his mission and ministry and continues to grow.

Acts 2:47 and the whole of Luke's second volume are a constant challenge to those developing new forms of church. The crunch question goes beyond issues of cultural authenticity. The key question from Acts to fresh expressions is 'are they effectively spreading the Gospel and adding to their number those who are being saved?'

Alexander points out⁷⁸ that growth is constantly highlighted in Acts⁷⁹. There is:

- Numerical growth.⁸⁰
- Geographical expansion.⁸¹
- Growth in ethnic diversity.⁸²

John Howard⁸³ consistently argues that we can have as many fresh expressions as we like but if they do not make new disciples of Jesus Christ they will have failed. John Sentamu argues that fresh expressions are 'all about growth'⁸⁴. Many would agree. Elaine Lindridge who leads *Mind the Gap* in Gateshead says unashamedly 'we expect to grow'.⁸⁵ The Christian community that began life in the

⁷⁷ Watson D, *Discipleship*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 37.

⁷⁸ Alexander L, *What patterns of church and mission are found in the Acts of the Apostles?* in Croft S (ed), *Mission-shaped Questions* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p133.

⁷⁹ (6.7; 12.24; 19.20)

⁸⁰ (2.41; 4.4)

⁸¹ (1.8; 8.25; 9.31; 11.19-20; chapters 13-20, 27-28)

⁸² (8.27; 10.1ff; 11.18; 20; 13.46-48; 14.11; 18.6; 28.4; 28.28)

⁸³ Chair of the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury Methodist District

⁸⁴ *expressions* newspaper Spring 2008

⁸⁵ *Expressions: the dvd-1* (London: Church House Publishing 2006) Ch 15

Kidsgrove coffee shop *Taste and See* grew too large for the shop and moved its main meetings to a pub. They then outgrew the pub and moved to the town hall.

Some pioneers would take issue with Sentamu. Intentionally or otherwise other fresh expressions are plateauing at the size of a large house group. For Mary Berry the focus for *Safe Space* is not growth in numbers but depth of community. A focus strongly supported by Runcorn in the *Road to Growth Less Travelled*⁸⁶. The growth in Acts is a significant challenge to such thinking.

The Lord's work.

Having celebrated the community Luke emphasises that it is *the Lord* who added to the community those who were being saved. It is God in Christ who saves. A good text for pioneer ministers at ordination or commissioning services. It is both assuring and humbling. If, 'mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in'⁸⁷ then the ultimate responsibility for the healthy growth of fresh expressions is God's. We are not called to build empires or testaments to our own giftedness but rather join with God in creating salvific community.

In Conclusion.

Luke paints a vivid, inspiring and challenging portrait of deeply committed Christian community in his presentation of the shared life of the believers in Jerusalem following the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit. A picture to both inspire and challenge those developing fresh expressions.

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⁸⁶ Runcorn D, *The Road to Growth Less Travelled* (Cambridge: Grove books, 2008)

⁸⁷ As Archbishop Rowan and the Fresh Expressions team are fond of saying.

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