

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH SHOULD WE BE? (Acts 2:42-47)

Introduction

A few weeks ago, a visitor to Hope City Church asked me an **interesting question**: “*What sort of church is this?*”

I assumed that she was asking what particular group or Christian denomination (among the many on offer in the UK) Hope City belonged to. I answered that we are part of the FIEC – “*The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches*”, an affiliation (not denomination) of over 600 independent churches that unite around the truths of historic, biblical Christianity.

But her question - “*What sort of church is this?*” – raised a **different question** as I later reflected on it – about the **character** or **characteristics** of Hope City (for those 600 churches in the FIEC are by no means all alike). **What kind of church is Hope City?**

So let me ask **you** to answer the question by posting your answers on the Q & R section on the church app on your phone. Post any **word** or **phrase** that you believe describes Hope City. You can post as many as you like and vote for any posted.

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH IS HOPE CITY?

(Word Cloud on Slido)

So, what are the **core characteristics** of a **church**, of any **authentic church**, regardless of denominational labels or cultural or national background? **What kind of church should we be?**

For an **answer** we need, as always, to turn to the **Bible** and we will find the best description at the end of the second chapter of the New Testament Book of Acts: (page 1094)

Before we read this, let me briefly **set the context** for those who don't know the story.

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After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus spent 40 days with his followers before ascending/returning into heaven. Ten days later, he fulfilled his promise by sending the Holy Spirit to empower his waiting followers (some 120 of them), enabling them to go into the streets of Jerusalem (crowded with pilgrims for the Jewish Festival called Pentecost – think Edinburgh Festival x 100!). The crowds are astonished to hear these largely unsophisticated people speaking about God in their different languages and ask, “*What does this mean?*”

Some people make fun of them saying that they are drunk. But Peter, the spokesmen for the apostles, stands up and addresses the crowd. He explains they aren't drunk (it's too early in the day). Rather, he declares that what is happening is the fulfilment of what God had promised through the ancient Hebrew prophets and is centred on **Jesus of Nazareth** who was crucified outside Jerusalem some seven weeks ago, but has been raised from the dead.

Let's read from the **conclusion of Peter's message** as he tells the watching crowd they have **murdered their Messiah**:

Acts 2:36-41

³⁶ “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

So, let's pause for a moment. In **Hope City**, we have been wrestling with the (pleasant!) **problem of growth** – from 35 people to over 200 in six years – hence the move to two Sunday services. But the growth of the first New Testament, Spirit-filled church on the Day of Pentecost is on a **different scale** altogether – from **120 to over 3000 in one day!**

So, **what did they do?** What were their **priorities?** Let's read on:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 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, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

And now we find the answer to our question:

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH SHOULD WE BE?

(Acts 2:42-47)

We can highlight **four characteristics** of the church in Jerusalem which should be **evident in any and every church**, regardless of any labels.

The first three (or maybe four) are found in the opening sentence:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The word **“devote”** literally means **“to be strong towards something.”** It is defined as **“a steadfast and single-minded commitment to a certain course of action.”** So, **what were they devoted to?**

The first thing listed is **“the apostles teaching”**, from which we see that it was (and we should be)

1. A LEARNING CHURCH

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...

Jesus spent much of the three years of his ministry **with his twelve disciples - teaching and training** them for the task that lay ahead of them. After his resurrection, he gave them what has been called **“The Great Commission”**:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

And now, **empowered by the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost they begin that task.** In his excellent commentary on Acts (for which I am indebted for this message), writer John Stott comments:

One might perhaps say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day; its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed; and there were 3000 pupils in the kindergarten!

And these **new pupils** were **eager to learn** – devoted to finding out how Jesus wanted them to live. They didn't think that they needed nothing else now they had received the Spirit. They were devoted to learning and applying the **truth** – **“to the apostles' teaching”**, received from Jesus and now passed on to them.

This is **foundational for any and every church** – and to any and every **person**, as Jesus reminded his hearers in his famous story about the wise and foolish builders. Only if we hear and then put into practice his teaching will our lives and our churches be built on a rock-firm foundation that will withstand the storms of adversity and the challenges of false teaching and teachers.

I mentioned that Hope City is a member of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. What is it that unites us with the 600+ other churches? It is an affirmation of an evangelical Statement of Faith – of core essential Biblical beliefs (you can download it from the website). But these beliefs are not unique to the FIEC but are shared by many other churches from different denominations in different formats..

So, if you are **looking for a church**, this should be the **first priority**, the first **question** – **is it a learning church** focused on what the apostles taught, now contained in written form in the New Testament?

That's why Hope City we systematically teach and apply the Bible every week and seek to apply it to our lives and our church. That is **foundational** and **everything else** – such as where we meet, what we sing, is **built on it not instead of it**.

So, the first church in Jerusalem was a **learning** church. Secondly, it was

2. A LOVING CHURCH

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

They were devoted to **one another** – literally “*to the fellowship*”. The word “*fellowship*” means “*sharing something in common with others*”. It was a word used of business partners.

So, **what was it** that these people shared in common, that bound them so closely to one another? First of all, a **shared experience** - of the Spirit, In response to Peter's challenge, when they responded in repentance and faith in Jesus - marked by baptism in his name, they received the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Not only had being born again by the Spirit brought them into a new relationship with God as their Father, but they were also **born into a new relationship with others** who were members, brothers and sisters, **of the same family**, who had **received the same Spirit**. They were **committed, devoted to each other**.

They demonstrated what Jesus said would be the **defining mark** of his **followers**: their love for each other.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

And that **love** was **expressed practically in the way they lived their lives**. This new family were so devoted to one another that they **voluntarily and gladly shared their possessions with each other** – especially those family members who were in need. Many of those 3000 converts were pilgrims in Jerusalem who remained for far longer than planned and needed food and accommodation.

So, we read that:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (verses 44-45).

Later in Acts 4 we read:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had... there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

Now this was not, as some have claimed, a kind of enforced rule like communism. It was done gladly and voluntarily. All these first believers were Jews and under the law of Moses they would give a tenth, a tithe of their wealth (Deuteronomy 26:12) but these gifts were in addition to this – “*tithes and offerings*”. I have never understood how Christians, under and new and better covenant, give less.

So, they **spent time with each other**, sharing food in their homes, a sign of acceptance in that culture, and sharing their resources.

Christian fellowship is Christian caring and Christian caring is Christian sharing. So, they were devoted to **one another** – “*to the fellowship*”, a loving church. Linked with this, notice thirdly they were

3. A WORSHIPPING CHURCH

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

“**Breaking of bread**” can simply mean “*eating a meal together*” – as in verse 46 – “*they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts*”. However, in verse 42, the expression is “*they devoted themselves...to the breaking of the bread*” which almost certainly means **more than a normal meal** (though a meal may be included).

Rather, it is the expression used to describe the **special meal which Jesus had instituted** on the night before he was betrayed when he **broke bread** and gave it to them as a **symbol of his body** which he was about to give for them on the cross, along with **a cup of wine**, a symbol, of his blood which was to be shed on the cross for their forgiveness.

Jesus told them to “*do this in remembrance of me*” – as a **sign of their devotion to Christ** as they **recall and give thanks** for the **sacrifice Jesus made** on their behalf. Of course, it is a **shared meal with other believers** which is why we sometimes call it “*communion*”.

And linked in with the breaking of bread is **prayer**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

As you read the record of the early Christians **in the Book of Acts**, there are **numerous references to prayer** – and undoubtedly many more occasions where it is not specifically mentioned, for it is taken for granted.

Just take **a few examples** from the Book of Acts – they prayed

- when an apostle needed to be replaced (1: 24)
- when they were persecuted (4: 24-31)
- when a leader was imprisoned (12: 5)
- when missionaries were sent out (13: 3)
- when elders were appointed (14: 23)
- when they were in prison (16: 25)

So, **where** did they pray? We learn from verse 46 that they met together every day **in the temple courts**. The temple courts were the area surrounding the Temple itself. It has been estimated that this outer Court of the Gentiles (into which non-Jews could enter) could accommodate around 200,000 people. After the Day of Pentecost, the church numbered at least 3120 and so this could easily accommodate the whole church meeting together. The church continued to grow rapidly to 5000 men (plus women) and Acts 5: 12 tells us that “*all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade*” – on the eastern side of the temple precincts.

Such meetings would have been, therefore, **a larger grouping of the whole church**. But prayer together was **not limited to large groups in a more formal setting**. Acts 2: 46 tells us that they also met in their homes. **(image)**

Most people in those days didn't have large homes and so these meetings would be much smaller. Such prayer may **not have been as formal** as in the temple, but it was none the less real and a natural part of their life together.

Belonging to a church means more than meeting for 2 hours on a Sunday in a large group. If you belong to Hope City, then there are all sorts of smaller groups of all sizes, meeting to study God's Word, together, pray together and support one another. This is the time of year to sign up so speak to Andrea after the service.

While we may not know a lot about the forms of their meetings, what is clear is the **character** of their meetings, which combined both **rejoicing** and **reverence** for we read in verse 46 that they met together “*with glad and sincere hearts, praising God*” (verses 45-47).

Some thirty years later, in a letter to the church meeting in the Greek city of Ephesus, they are exhorted to:

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:18-20)

So, these were the three priorities, the three characteristics of the church in Jerusalem – it was a learning, loving and worshipping church. But there was a fourth which flowed from these: it was also

4. A GROWING CHURCH

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

The risen Lord Jesus gave a **promise with a purpose** to his followers before he returned to heaven:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

When the promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, the first thing the Spirit-filled believers did was to go into the streets of Jerusalem “*declaring the wonders of God*” to the astounded crowds. And we have seen that it is in **response to Peter’s message** that 3000 people were added to the church.

Those first century Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshipping that they forgot about witnessing. So maybe we should have listed the fourth characteristic as a **witnessing** church, or an **evangelising** church.

Yes, we **must be a church that witnesses** – in our words and our lives, like that first church in Jerusalem that “*enjoyed the favour of all the people*” (verse 47).

But the final verse of Acts 2 reminds us that **ultimately growth comes** and can **only come, from God:**

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

John Stott comments:

He did not add them to the church without saving them, nor did he save them without adding them to the church. Salvation and church membership belonged together: they still do.

So, the church in Jerusalem was a church that experienced **regular growth** – “*the Lord added to their number daily.*”

So, here’s the answer to our question:

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH SHOULD WE BE?

(Acts 2:42-47)

- a **learning** church
- a **loving** church
- a **worshipping** church
- a **growing** church

Hope City is not a perfect church but is made up of people who are in the process of “*being saved*”. But it is a church where we are striving to be a learning, loving and worshipping church and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to be a growing church.

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Let me conclude a final question:

DO YOU BELONG?

1. Do you belong to Christ? Are you a Christian? Have you turned from your sin and put your faith in Christ? Have you been forgiven and received the gift of the Holy Spirit? If not, today you can do so. The requirements are still the same as on the Day of Pentecost.

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2. Do you belong to a local church, one that is a learning church, a loving church, a worshipping church, a growing church?

If not, come and join us at Hope City.

If Hope City is not the church for you, then find one that is, the one for you.