

Book of Acts: All These with One Accord

Acts 1:12-14

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We are continuing in the book of Acts, this morning with verses 12-14 of chapter 1. Here we will see the contours of the community which waits for the ascended Christ to pour out the Spirit. We will make three points. The Personnel, the Purpose, the Prayer.

I. The Personnel

First, then, personnel. After the Ascension of Jesus, the apostles return to Jerusalem, to the upper room. And you'll notice that they are listed. They are named in order. Peter is named first, because he has a certain leadership role. James and John are also pillars of the church, so they are listed next. These three: Peter, James, and John, are the only apostles from this list – from this list – named in the rest of Acts. Of course Paul is an apostle in a unique way, and he will take up a huge portion of the book later. So Acts of the Apostles really means Acts of 3 or 4 apostles. Though its not the number that matters, it's the significance of the Acts (esp. of Peter and Paul, apostles to Jews and Gentiles respectively) for the history that Luke wants to narrate.

Here, notice the list of names adds up to 11. Not 12. Judas Iscariot is missing – he is not the same as Judas the son of James who is listed. And this vacancy is, of course, what drives what happens in the narrative later in this chapter. The apostles are crucial. They head the list. For they are the unique, repeatable foundation of the church. Now, notice that “all these” means the apostles, and we're told, they were together, with the women, in prayer. The unity, the togetherness, includes both genders. They didn't have segregated prayer groups. Men's and women's study Bibles and the like. Pink Bibles and Black Bibles. Part of the unity is that the 11 apostles AND the women were together. Together in one place, one meeting, together in soul and purpose. Together in prayer.

Christianity breaks down (challenges) much of the Greco-Roman distinctions between men and women. In Christ Jesus, Paul says, there is no male and female, for we are all one in Christ. Something eschatological has broken into the patriarchal and hierarchical conceptions of the ancient world. And whatever we

might want to say about this, and there's a lot to say, and its complex.... Here, at the very least, it means women are – even before Pentecost -- received fully into the community, exercising the same prerogatives of prayer, the same access to God, as men. Like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. They are priests if you will, with full, sanctuary access. The togetherness here in the priestly work of prayer, anticipates what will happen in the next chapter, when the Spirit falls at Pentecost. It is poured out on ALL flesh, sons AND daughters, male AND female servants, shall prophesy.

This does not mean the community has no leadership or authority structure, but it does mean – at the very least – a profound, unprecedented, unity and dignity in the Spirit, is conferred upon women. The women here are unnamed. But we are told in Luke's gospel, that when Jesus went about preaching the kingdom of God, the 12 were with him:

And also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out ... and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and MANY others, who provided for them out of their means.

A great company of women attached themselves to Jesus --- and traveled with him as he preached, and supported, and even funded, his ministry --- from the earliest days. Women, of course, are the first witnesses to the resurrection. This, in a culture where they weren't considered dependable enough to give testimony in court. In Luke's account it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. All of this is revolutionary stuff – and women – for good reason-- flocked not just to Jesus, but to the early church.

It's likely, especially since these are mentioned in Luke's gospel, and this is Luke's second part of a two volume work, it's likely that at least some of these women (we just named) are among the women mentioned here as being with the 11. But one woman is set apart, distinguished from the rest, named apart from the others. They were together with the women....and Mary the mother of Jesus. She disappears from the NT after this mention, sort of. She reappears under the figure of the woman clothed with the sun, crying out in agony to give birth to the Messiah in Revelation 12. The woman is Israel, of course, but Mary is surely included in the sign, as its most prominent and luminous member, as the one, through whose womb, the Messiah is born.

So imagine having, not only Peter, James, and John, but also this woman in your prayer meeting. Herself a prophetess and theologian of the highest order, as any reading of her Magnificat would reveal. The questions you might ask! I would love to talk to her. She had treasured all these things in heart, and her heart had been pierced by the sword. Her maternal sorrow has been turned to joy, and now she takes her place as a disciple of her Son and her Savior. She is honored here

in being listed by herself, apart from the other women, (blessed are you among women, the angel had announced to her). She's honored, but let's be clear: she is not turned into a demi-god or a mediatrix. Or a paragon of sinless perfection. She takes her place humbly, under the apostolic leadership.

And finally, in this crew, which when Peter addresses it in v.15, numbers about 120 people, are Jesus' brothers. There is a longstanding debate on who these brothers are. Are they relatives, or blood brothers, or maybe sons of Joseph from a previous marriage. The burden of proof lies with those who take the term in anything but its ordinary sense. We are told that Jesus' brothers (plural, there was more than one) did not believe in him during his earthly ministry. Well, they are believers now. Among them, for instance, would be the eminent James, who is called the Lord's brother by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church, and who wrote the book of James.

So this is an illustrious company, including some future martyrs, swelling, apparently, at times, to 120 people, and including the 11, the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. That's the personnel.

II. The Purpose

Our second point is the purpose. We will break this into two pieces: united and devoted. First, united. We have the wonderful description of v.14: All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

What a precious picture of the earliest Christians, praying together and waiting, as Jesus had commanded them, for the arrival of the Spirit. They were united. All these with one accord. United in mind and in purpose. There is one church, and its concrete unity and peace is of inestimable value. This is a picture of that embryonic, pristine, unfractured, radiant unity. Now, I didn't mention this under the personnel, because I wanted to address it here.

Notice, that among the 11 is one Simon the Zealot. We are told that he's a Zealot, probably because he was distinguished by this party affiliation if you will. This term does not mean he was zealous for the glory of God, or the things of God. It means he adhered to the political theology of a group known as the zealots. They wanted direct, armed confrontation with, and overthrow of the Roman regime. And would have tended to view everybody else as a weak compromiser.

It's a tad simplistic, but we could name the options on the ground for 1st century Jews as falling into four categories. You had the Sadducees, they would be a tad less conservative, not believing in the resurrection, and more open to compromising with Rome and assimilation to Greco-Roman culture. The

Essences were separatist, living away from society on the Dead Sea, considering the official Israel, and its priesthood, to be hopelessly corrupt, and waiting for the apocalypse to deliver the righteous ones – namely them. The Pharisees were the populist conservatives. They are what almost all of us would be, if we were alive in the first century.

Back to the law. Adhere to the tradition, strict observance. Upholding Jewish distinctives in the face of Roman pressure. Jesus, by the way, identifies with none of these movements. He's an independent. The 11 apostles would have either been Sadducees or Pharisees (perhaps unaffiliated), but Simon – he's noted as a zealot.

Here's what I want you to see: these party affiliations, these political differences, ferocious differences, are transcended in the kingdom of God. They become relativized in the community that is focused, waiting for the gift of the Spirit, who is the power of the age to come, waiting together for the kingdom to come in power. We now live in a time, when, in our circles, politics is incredibly divisive, because it's big, and the kingdom of God is way too small in our vision. In many cases working for American cultural and political transformation is actually identified with (collapsed into) the kingdom of God --- and that is idolatry. Our confessions say the kingdom of God is the visible church. Which, not to put too fine a point on it, means it's not America (holy nation). That kingdom is brought by the Spirit of the ascended Christ, which is soon to fall on this gathering. And it is a kingdom of a different order than the kingdoms of this fallen, evil age.

So here – being a zealot is irrelevant, or not being a zealot is irrelevant. All of these were together in one accord. Jesus is bigger, and more interesting, than all of our petty earthly squabbles. This group knows that now – because they've encountered the risen One. Paul would later pray for the Roman church, the city he is in at the end of this book, for God to grant them to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together they might with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Disunity – between a husband and a wife, within the body of Christ – hinders effective prayer. Which ironically may be precisely a main cause of the church's cultural and political impotence. But here: all of these were of one accord. And they were united in prayer.

Secondly, they were devoted to prayer. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer. Not praying. Devoting themselves to public, communal prayer. It's possible that this was some kind of ordered service because there is an article before the word prayer. So it's literally devoting themselves to THE prayer (that is to the prayer service). In any event, the word "devoting" here means 'attending to with perseverance and constancy.' Romans 12 says be constant in prayer. They were persistent and busy at prayer. Regular and rhythmic. Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving,

Paul writes later to the Colossians. This community, the believing Jewish remnant, the root of the church, is already enacting Paul's apostolic charge.

Later, after Pentecost, they all devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And the apostles would soon arrange the life of the community, so that they could devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. We know from the gospel of Luke that, after the ascension, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. Devotion – and devotion that is rightly ordered --- devotion to the highest things – devotion is a good single word description of the community that waits for Jesus' promised gift. Public worship at the temple. Corporate prayer in the upper room. That is devotion to Jesus in action. This is a community inflamed with Divine love even before the tongues of fire come.

III. The Prayer

Finally, our third point, the prayer itself. What is the grand object of this united devotion to prayer? Jesus had ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you heard from me. And then, he said this: for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. John said One would come after him, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and that One is about to send the fire from heaven.

But we must dig a little deeper here. During the forty days – between resurrection and ascension – Jesus was appearing to the apostles, and what was he speaking about what? The kingdom of God. He preached the kingdom as the central theme of his earthly ministry. He spoke of it, after his resurrection, repeatedly. And thus, in light of this, he promises to send the Spirit. The kingdom and the Spirit belong inseparably together.

We saw last week, the disciples ask: Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? It's a kingdom question. No wonder that's what they ask --- Jesus had spoken about the kingdom for 40 days. And Jesus says you shall receive power when the Spirit comes. The Spirit is the gift of the kingdom. Even in his earthly ministry Jesus associates the Spirit with the Kingdom. If by the Spirit of God I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. By the Spirit, the exalted Christ is coming, to establish and advance his kingdom. And that kingdom is righteousness, peace and joy IN the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the realm, the atmosphere, the place, where the kingdom is.

In his gospel, Luke tells us two related things. When we ask, seek and knock, our good Heavenly Father gives us the Holy Spirit. And he gives us the Spirit, because it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. To wait and

pray for the Spirit is to wait and pray for the kingdom of God. This the community into which we have been grafted. Let us live as worthy of this company. This is the unity and devotion to which we are summoned. Let us heed the example. And this is the Spirit, the kingdom bringer, the promise of the Father, of whom we have drunk, by whom we have been united to Christ, and for whom we also wait and pray. This is the One who comes when we cry: thy kingdom come. Amen.

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