

## Unity around Prayer and Promises

Acts 1:12-26

Most people find the first part of Acts 1 to be fairly easy to understand: Jesus teaches his disciples about the kingdom and the coming of the Holy Spirit (1:1-5), gives them his parting command - “Be my witnesses” (1:6-8), and ascends as the exalted King (1:9-11). But the latter part of Acts 1 seems less straightforward, yielding such questions as: Why did the Holy Spirit not immediately descend upon his followers? Why is there so much detail given about the choosing of a new apostle to replace Judas? Why did they “cast lots” to decide which man would replace Judas?

Many of these questions are cleared up as we see the details of this section as *preparation* for the great event marking the birth of the church—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.<sup>1</sup>

As we consider how this passage applies to us today in the 21st century, we should keep in mind that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marks a unique, unrepeatable time in history—just as Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection are unique as well. Although we do not anticipate a “Second Pentecost,” this passage holds important lessons for us today.

Specifically, a bird’s-eye view of this passage (1:12-26) reveals three priorities of Jesus’ followers during this time of preparation: (1) they were unified, (2) they prayed, and (3) they focused on Scripture (specifically, God’s promises). Therefore, we learn the following main idea from this passage: a prepared church is unified in prayer that God’s promises would be fulfilled.

A prepared church is:

### 1. Unified

“All these [were] with one accord” (1:14). Not only the apostles, but also women (including wives of the apostles) gathered in a large assembly area, an “upper room.” A number of factors could have discouraged their unity at this time: most of the disciples had deserted Jesus before he was crucified, and Jesus’ mother was now present with them. Moreover, Judas’ betrayal of Jesus could have left them wondering who else might turn out to be a betrayer.

However, the overall spirit was one of committed unity. We see this (1) in the strong word rendered “with one accord” (it denotes a harmony on the level of deepest feeling) and (2) in the fact that they were physically present with each other. They were unified not only in heart and mind, but also in physical location.

### 2. In prayer

Jesus’ followers were unified, but *not* because they found themselves outcasts, fearful, and rejected by others; neither was their unity motivated by any feeling of superiority toward other people in Jerusalem. Rather, they were unified around *prayer*. Unity in prayer is an important emphasis throughout the New Testament. It is significant that Jesus teaches us to pray “*Our* Father,” implying that we call upon him along with others who call him Father. Paul also stresses the importance of unity in prayer in 1 Timothy 2:8. Even in the family sphere, Peter exhorts husbands to cultivate a caring relationship with their wives, with the warning, “so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). Surely, there is truth in the statement that “the family that prays together stays together”!

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<sup>1</sup> The question of casting lots (1:26) will be addressed in a later sermon.

Unity in prayer continues to be a major emphasis throughout the book of Acts, and no wonder. When God's people sincerely pray, they can no longer pretend to be god (a common tendency and assured ingredient of disunity!). Humbling themselves, they recognize a common foe and a common Father (1 Peter 5:8-9, Mathew 6:9, 13).

3. That God's promises would be fulfilled.

Luke doesn't tell us directly what Jesus' followers were praying for, and perhaps the reason is because it is so obvious. Jesus had told them to be his witnesses to the corners of the earth, but not to leave Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came on them. What could possibly be the cry of their hearts, but that this promise Holy Spirit would come? Indeed, the Spirit's coming was a sign of the new age, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of heaven, and "the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4).

But this leaves us with a question: if God had promised the Holy Spirit, why did Jesus' followers pray for him to come? The answer is this: God's promises are never intended to make us complacent, but rather to stir us to action. What God promises, we long for. And what we long for, we pray for. And we pray for it, not from a fear that God won't do it (that would be prayer handicapped by doubt), but because we are confident he will. There's a bit of a paradox here, but it's the perfect path through the ditch of apathy on the one side ("God guaranteed it, so why bother?") and anxiety on the other side ("What if God doesn't come through?").

#### Questions for discussion

1. **Togetherness.** The book of Acts presents the early church as being physically together as often as they could. And when they were apart, they longed to see each other. What does physical togetherness provide that other means of communication (paper and ink, livestream, etc) does not? Why is it so important for believers to regularly gather with each other?
2. **Unity.** If Christian unity were easy, perhaps Jesus would not be so concerned to talk about it. Name and discuss factors that militate against Christian unity, as members and attendees of a local church.
3. **Prayer.** The early church often came *together* to pray (Acts 2:42, 4:24). What is true about prayer that unifies us? What are some practical ways we can pray together more often? What sacrifices might this require?
4. **Faith-filled action and prayer.** The prayer and actions of the church were motivated by God's promise to send his Spirit. Now that the promised Spirit has come on all who believe, our faith continues to be motivated and informed by God's promised Holy Spirit. Consider how our prayers might be informed by the following passages that teach us about the Holy Spirit: (1) Romans 8:12-14; (2) Romans 8:15-17; (3) Romans 8:23-25; (4) Ephesians 4:1-6.