



RENEW

Luke's Model for Renewal

ANDREW ROBERTS

Methodist Minister and author Andrew Roberts introduces Holy Habits: an approach to discipleship and renewal based on Acts 2:42-47.



In scripture we are blessed with many pictures of what it is to be a Kingdom Community. Jesus' teaching on the vine in John 15, Paul's picture of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 and Peter's discussion of living stones and a chosen people in 1 Peter 2 being three of the most well-known. And then we have Luke's dynamic picture of the community of followers of Jesus in the immediate aftermath of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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 any had need. 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, 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.

Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

The esteemed biblical scholars CK Barrett, and James Dunn both believe that this passage is instructive for those seeking to form healthy, Christ centred, Kingdom communities today. Commenting on the passage Barrett says:

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.

(CK Barrett, Acts 1-14, T&T Clark, 2004, p160)

Dunn meanwhile argues that

[Luke's] 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, desire to come together frequently, eating together and worshipping and including the readiness for unreserved commitment to one another in a shared common life.

(James D.G. Dunn, The Acts of the Apostles, Epworth, 1996, p34)

I spoke with Professor Dunn about this and asked him: was he saying that if we look at significant times of revival in the history of the church we see the Acts picture re-emerging? 'Yes', he replied.

At that time, I was working for the Fresh Expressions agency and was struck by how in fruitful examples of the new forms of church that were emerging, many and often most of the characteristics of the Acts 2 community could be readily identified. The confluence of Jimmy Dunn's comments and what I was seeing in Fresh Expressions got me thinking. What if, prayerfully, we were intentional about shaping, or reshaping, our churches (older and newer) around the practices that Luke describes in Acts 2? Might we see 'enthusiastic spiritual renewal' in our times and places? Spiritual renewal that is not an end in itself but a means of grace to God's needy world.

HOLY HABITS

To encourage this thinking, I began to develop Holy Habits: an approach to discipleship, mission and Christian community based on ten practices that Luke presents in what John Stott described as his 'beautiful cameo of the Spirit filled church' (J.R.W. Stott, The Message of Acts, IVP, 1990), 81). The ten practices are:

- Biblical teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of Bread
- Prayer
- Giving or the sharing of resources
- Service
- Eating Together
- Gladness and Generosity
- Worship
- Making More Disciples

One of the reasons, perhaps the major reason, why Holy Habits has helped both individuals and churches to be fruitful in their missional discipleship is that none of this is new or novel. All of these holy habits are deeply biblical; we see them throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. They are also fundamental to what it is to be wholesome human beings made in the image of God. As such, Holy Habits has attracted the interest of people of other faith communities too.

Whilst to paraphrase Ecclesiastes 1:9 'there is nothing new here', at one and the same time for this, or indeed any approach to renewal to be fruitful, everything needs to be made new by the refreshing life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit.

The holy habits are not complicated. They can be lived out as simply as by providing a chair and a bowl of water. They are a way of life to be lived. Love in action. Embodied grace. To practise them we don't need a PhD, just a willingness to follow Jesus. We don't need a Church building – although practising them there is a good idea! Like a glass of Martini, they can be offered and enjoyed anytime, any place, anywhere. In villages, towns and cities. Any context, culture, community or country. We can be five, ninety-five or any age in between, or either side. So I invite you to give them a fresh go.

DON'T FORGET HOLINESS

As you do so, don't forget the holy part of holy habits. 'Be holy because I am holy' says the Lord (Leviticus 11:45). Being holy involves being close to, intimate with, the divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, keep close to the Father. Let the Father's creativity infuse the habits as you practise them. Let there be colour and variety, freshness and vitality. Let the Father's generous giving of creation, of love, of

salvation, shape you. Let the Father's passion for the poor and thirst for justice and righteousness inform and guide you.

Keep close to the Son, the one who calls you and through you calls others to follow and to serve. Let the mind of the Son 'dwell in you richly' (Colossians 3:16). Let the resolve and self-giving, sacrificial love of the Son be your model for living. Let the incarnate, down to earth, involved, way of life of the Son keep you grounded and immersed in the joys and struggles, laughter and tears of life. And enjoy the parties and banquets, the laughter of children, the tender touches of love and the joys of creation the Son enjoyed when walking this earth.

And keep on being filled with the life giving, God breathing, flame-warming Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Let the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control flavour your practising of the holy habits (Galatians 5:22-23). Pray for the gifts of the Spirit to be released afresh in you and amongst others with whom you live, in the adventure of discipleship. Let the Spirit inspire new dreams and visions of how you can be part of the Kingdom coming in and through your home, church, community, workplace, world.

ALL AROUND THE WORLD

Around the world all sorts of Christians and churches have chosen to work with Luke's model as they seek to be renewed by the Holy Spirit. Their work has been helped by a range of resources first produced by the Birmingham Methodist Circuit and then further developed by BRF (Bible Reading Fellowship).

Commenting on Acts 2, David Watson said this in his seminal book *Discipleship*:

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.'

(David Watson, *Discipleship*, p37, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981).

Whilst it would be fake news to say that all churches that have engaged with Holy Habits have seen people added to their number daily, there are those that have seen significant growth. One such is Romsey Methodist Church. Under the leadership of Rev Gareth Hill, the Church embarked on an intentional journey with Luke's model over a two-year period. To use a significant phrase from Acts 2: 'They devoted themselves to' that journey. When they began, they were a Church of 67 members but no children. Two years on they had grown

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to a community of 100 including 10 children. It would be wrong to credit that entirely to Holy Habits. The resources played their part but the vital ingredients were; the scriptures on which they are founded, excellent local leadership, the devotion of the members and most importantly the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

If you would like to explore Holy Habits more you might like to read the book of the same name written by myself and published by Malcolm Down Publishing.

And for much more, including resources for churches, a series of bible reading notes, small group studies and a Lenten course, please visit

<https://www.brffonline.org.uk/collections/holy-habits>

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Andrew Roberts is a husband, father, Methodist Minister, writer and speaker based in the West Midlands. He is the author of the book Holy Habits and editor of the Holy Habits resource booklets and daily bible reflections (published by BRF). Previously he was Director of Training for Fresh Expressions. He loves all forms of sport and despite that supports Aston Villa!



Holy Habits

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