

WE

NEEDED EACH OTHER

When thinking about growing and maturing in the faith there is often a tendency to think merely in terms of personal spiritual development, writes Karen E Smith.

But spiritual growth takes place primarily as, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we live and share together in community - something we see clearly in the book of Acts.

Jesus Christ is Lord! How wonderful it is to hear this early confession of faith spoken by those who profess their allegiance to Christ through the waters of baptism.

Such a confession marks a decisive moment of personal encounter with God. It is a public declaration of an individual's intent to surrender heart and life to God. In Baptist life, total immersion symbolises an individual's desire to die to the old self and rise to newness of life in Christ. One new Christian movingly described her experience of baptism by saying that when she came out of the water, her first thought was "a new me now . . . bye-bye Jane, new Jane". It was for her a moment of new beginning.

Yet for her, as for all Christians, baptism was only a step along the pilgrimage of faith.

'BAPTISED INTO' THE BODY OF CHRIST

Understandably, in describing this new life in Christ, our focus is often on an individual's personal experience of God's grace. Yet, strictly speaking, baptism is not simply an individual choice. It is a faithful response to the gracious call of God, which takes place in the context of community. Importantly, the act of baptism marks not only a response to God's call to relationship – the divine initiative to be drawn into the very life of the triune God – but also draws us into new relationship with others. We are¹ 'baptised into' the body of Christ.

“LUKE IS OFFERING INSIGHT INTO THE WAY GOD WORKS CREATIVELY AND REDEMPTIVELY WITHIN COMMUNITY TO SHAPE AND FORM PEOPLE INTO THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST”

¹ For a discussion of baptism see, Paul S Fiddes, 'Believers' Baptism: An Act of Inclusion or Exclusion?' chapter 7 in *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2003), 125-156.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.
I Corinthians 12:12-13)

Using the analogy of parts of a physical body, Paul goes on to suggest that it is not possible for one part to say to another ‘I have no need of you’ because the body does not consist of one member, but of many (I Corinthians 12:14). This Scriptural understanding of living in relationship with God and others has many dimensions, but not least is the idea that those who are ‘in Christ’ (that is, bound together by the love of Christ), have a particular responsibility to and for one another. They are to put away childish ways and live in love. (I Corinthians 13:11). The acknowledgement by believers in fellowship of their bond in Christ and their need to care for one another was expressed in one early Baptist covenant in this way:

We do promise to bear one another's Burdens, to cleave to one another and to have a Fellow-feeling with one another, in all Conditions both outward and inward...²

Although early Baptists emphasised their desire to support one another in their life together, there is no doubt they also faced conflict from within as well as from outside their community. Most Christian communities face tensions and difficulties in relationship and, at times, parts of the body may even want to disown other parts!

Yet, while Baptists at times have differed among themselves over various issues, there is an unwavering acceptance in their Scriptural view that believers are always called to be in relationship with God and others. As John Fawcett (1740-1817), the 18th-century Baptist pastor and hymn writer put it, there is “the tie that binds”; it is, of course, the love and fellowship known in Christ.

Today, when thinking about growing and maturing in the faith – spiritual formation – there is often a tendency to think merely in terms of personal spiritual development. There is no end to books and articles that seem to emphasise an individual path to Christian formation. Christians are often urged to adopt spiritual disciplines including pursuing particular forms of personal devotion.

However, while these may be useful for individual discipleship, spiritual formation is not something a person may achieve. Formation does not come about by individuals seeking to make choices to be better people. Rather, spiritual growth is God’s work within us and it takes place primarily as, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we live and share together in community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY IN ACTS

Exploring the Acts of the Apostles as a guide for spiritual formation, it is striking to see that Luke emphasises again and again the importance of community. A master story-teller, Luke introduces the reader to various scenes of spiritual formation among believers in their life together.

The stories, however, are not told by Luke simply to help us see patterns of organisation, models of worship or service, or plans for evangelism. Nor is he attempting to provide an historical narrative as such. Rather, Luke is offering insight into the way God works creatively and redemptively within community to shape and form people into the likeness of Christ. Spiritual formation – this process of growing-up into Christ-likeness – takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in relationship with other believers. As Luke portrays it, in the to and fro of community life, and as believers seek the mind of Christ together, they begin to develop character traits such as, courage, obedience, patience, single-mindedness, which are needed by those who have resolved to ‘take up the cross and follow Christ’.

WAITING WITH OTHERS ON GOD

Contemporary readers of Acts, in considering these traits and others that Luke suggests are important for spiritual formation, will recognise they are counter-cultural to much of present-day life in society. In fact, spiritual formation in this way may seem well-nigh impossible to pursue within church life today.

Consider, for instance, Luke’s emphasis all through Acts, on waiting as a key element of spiritual formation. This emphasis might seem puzzling, especially since the stories of Acts are often read and interpreted with an eye to positive action in terms of evangelism and congregational growth. Yet, a closer look at Scripture reveals that while stepping out to tell others about God’s love is certainly considered to be important, Luke does not begin with the story of Pentecost,

2 ‘The Solemn Covenant of the Church of Christ, meeting in White-street, June 5, 1696’ appended to Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display’d* (London, 1697), 73.

but with a picture of the disciples gathered together waiting and praying.

Numerous other stories in Acts follow this pattern as Luke emphasises those who want to truly follow Jesus must learn to wait with others for God to take the initiative. In this sense, waiting is not a matter of 'doing nothing', but believers are actively waiting on, and with, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. For Luke, it seems, waiting moments are opportunities to remember that those who claim Jesus Christ is Lord, must relinquish control and in trust, surrender to God.

The believers, as Luke describes them, were seeking to live responsively day-by-day, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit. They certainly did not try to force or manipulate the work of the Spirit. They did not plan elaborate programmes or spend time thinking about big budgets. Yet, they increased in number as they gave themselves to practising the virtue of patience or, as Alan Kreider put it, sought to create a 'habitus' (which includes attitudes, skills and dispositions) of patient ferment.³ According to Kreider, there were many different ways that early Christian communities created this habitus, including meeting frequently with other believers, eating and sharing together, and watching over one another. The point, of course, is that it was within this type of community that Christians were focused on being, or perhaps becoming, those who were fashioned more and more into the likeness of Christ.

“THE SCRIPTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIVING IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND OTHERS HAS MANY DIMENSIONS”

THE CHALLENGE OF WALKING TOGETHER TODAY

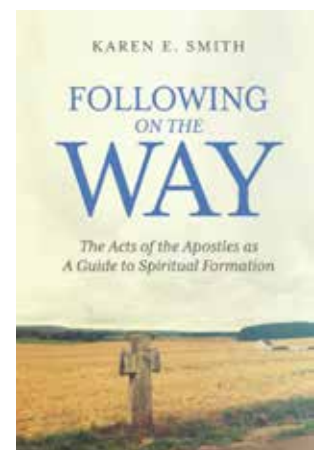
'Walking together' in this type of community might seem idealistic, even far-fetched and impracticable in a contemporary setting. If we are totally honest, even among Christian communities today, an emphasis on consumerism, individual choice and images of success and power have dominated our understanding of life together in Christ. Yet, in reading Acts as a guide for spiritual formation, we are called to consider again what it means to affirm and publicly confess that Christ is Lord, to be baptised into the body of Christ and then within community to be formed together into the likeness of Christ. As Luke reminds us, spiritual formation is always God's work, but it takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and within the life of the fellowship of believers.

The challenge today to those who are bound together in Christ is to discover under the guidance of the Spirit ways in which we, as church communities together, might become places where everyone who professes Jesus as Lord might actually become more like him in thought, word and deed, day by day.



Karen E Smith is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow of the School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University. As a university lecturer and the pastor of a Baptist church in Wales, and now also in retirement, she has focussed on Baptist studies and Christian spiritual formation.

The ideas in this article are explored in her book *Following on the Way: The Acts of the Apostles as a Guide to Spiritual Formation* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2022), available on Amazon.



³ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 122-3.