

# **The Church of Acts 2**

*Applying the foundational aspects of the primitive church to local congregations today*

A Bible Study Workbook by Matthew Allen

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THE CHURCH OF ACTS 2: Applying the foundational aspects of the primitive church to local congregations today

by Matthew Allen

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# Table of Contents

- WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE EARLY CHURCH? ..... 4
- THEY ASKED THE RIGHT QUESTION ..... 7
- THEY RECEIVED THE PROMISE .....10
- THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE APOSTLES’ TEACHING .....15
- THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO FELLOWSHIP .....21
- THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE BREAKING OF BREAD .....25
- THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO PRAYER .....29
- THEY WERE FILLED WITH AWE .....34
- THEY WERE TOGETHER .....37
- THEY HELD ALL THINGS IN COMMON.....40
- THEY INTEGRATED EVERYONE IN THE BODY .....44
- THEY WERE FILLED WITH PRAISE.....45
- THEY HAD FAVOR WITH ALL THE PEOPLE .....46

## Lesson 1

# What Can we Learn from the Early Church?

## Introduction

Can you imagine being present in Jerusalem for some of the great religious festivals? There were three annual gatherings each year that each Jew was expected to participate in. These were the Feast of Booths, the Passover, and the Day of Pentecost. People came to the Temple to offer sacrifices, encourage each other, and hear the rabbis teaching. Jews from all over the earth came. For many who had moved far away, coming back to Jerusalem would have been like a family reunion. It would have been a happy time with rejoicing ... and reverence for God and His great blessings.

That Sunday morning on the day of Pentecost probably started like any other. People were gathering around the temple for the day's activities when *suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. They saw tongues like flames of fire that separated and rested on each one of them. Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them, 2.2-4.*

The crowds couldn't believe it. *Each one was hearing (the apostles) speak in his own language, 2.6.* People were trying to make it all make sense in their mind. How could this be? Standing in front of them were a bunch of uneducated Galileans ... *telling (us) in our own tongues the mighty works of God, 2.11.* All were *amazed and perplexed, 2.12a.* Some were trying to figure out what it all meant. Others mocked and accused the apostles of being drunk.

## Peter's Sermon

Peter stood up with the other apostles and began to speak. He tells them they were not drunk as it was only around 9 am. Then he begins preaching the gospel. This was the purpose behind all the events they were witnessing. God promised to send the Spirit. Joel testified about it hundreds of years before. When the Spirit came, men and women would be given the opportunity to be saved. *Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved, 2.21.*

Next Peter turns their attention to the author of that salvation: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. For three years Jesus lived among the Jewish people working signs and wonders providing proof of who He was. His coming and subsequent death were all according to the *definite plan and foreknowledge of God, 2.23.*

But the story didn't end at the cross. Beginning in 2.24 Peter asserts Jesus was alive, not dead. He had been resurrected by the Father Himself. This also was according to God's eternal plan and had been foretold hundreds of years before, 2.25-31. Then Peter recounts how *God raised this Jesus up, and of that we are all witnesses, 2.32.* All the powerful scenes they personally witnessed that day were the worked by the exalted Son who sat at the right hand of God, a place of power and authority.

Now comes the dramatic moment when Peter convicts those in the crowd of their complicity and guilt in killing Jesus. It would not be surprising at all if some of the same people standing in the crowd that day were there fifty days earlier calling out for his crucifixion. Now it is Peter crying out, *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified*, Acts 2.36. At this moment, it all came crashing down for so many who heard his words. Reality was sinking in. The prophecies Peter cited, which many of them would have been familiar with, made sense more than they ever had before. Tongues of fire sat upon those who were exhorting them. They knew they were experiencing the supernatural. Their hearts melted. If they remained in their condition, they would be eternally lost. *Brothers, what shall we do*, 2.37. Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sin. When they did that, they would receive the gift of the Spirit, who would come to live within them in the closest possible relationship. Luke records for us that *those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls*, 2.41.

## The Fellowship of the Believers

Acts 2.42-47 presents the first extensive summary in Acts. It details a summary of the activity of the church in Jerusalem in the weeks and months after Pentecost. It also shows us the ideal picture of what God intended for the life of His church where the saved rejoice in the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit. These verses describe a healthy church pursuing the right things. First, the community, in fellowship with the apostles, adhered to **apostolic teaching**, which was seen as authoritative because of its source in the Spirit of God. Second, they engaged in **fellowship** together. In other words, they held all things in common. They were in partnership together. Next, they **broke bread** together, sharing the Lord's Supper and in connection with v. 46, they regularly ate common meals with one another. Finally, they engage in **prayer** together.

All of them were filled with a sense of awe that God was among them. They held all in common and sold their goods to help the needy. There was a spirit of great generosity and praise. They were together *day-by-day*, 2.46. Their numbers continued to expand, and the Christians were well received in the community.

But rather than examining the four activities of verses 42-47 and turning them in to a work list of items to check off, it seems to be more important that we examine *how* and *why* the first century church did these things.

- They were driven by a strong sense of **togetherness**. The new believers enjoyed being around each other and could not imagine being apart. The “me first” spirit that characterized the attitude of the disciples (Mark 9.34, 46; 10.35-40) is long gone. They are moving with the greatest sense of unity.
- The church was characterized by **generosity** and **genuine love**. If someone had a need, there was no hesitation by others to meet it. If meeting the need was great enough, there was no hesitation to sell something of value and donate the proceeds to the church or directly to the person in need. This was done with enthusiasm and genuine care/love/concern.

- The church was driven by a deep sense of **awe**. While the apostolic wonders and signs that characterized this time were obviously on display, the early church operated from the greatest confidence that God was with them. He was powerfully at work transforming their lives and the lives of those around them.
- The church was filled with **joyful celebration**. There was a constant mood of celebration with all that they did. They wanted to celebrate the work of God through praise. This is the type of spirit that should characterize all our activities and gatherings.

Luke's summary of the ideal here at the end of Acts 2 is worthy of our deep consideration and time. Is such an atmosphere even possible today inside a local congregation of believers?

What holds us back from being more effective in emulating the early church?

How committed are you in creating a closer relationship with fellow believers so that you will not become bored or complacent with just the Sunday morning stuff?

What can you do to help push others, keeping them more accountable in the deeper things that are of God?

## Lesson 2

# Asking the Right Question

## Acts 2.36-37

Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into the heavens, but he himself says: The Lord declared to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.' "Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

– Acts 2.33-37

## Introduction

Beginning in Acts 2.14 Peter proclaimed the good news to the great crowd assembled in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The firsthand testimony of the apostles and the weight of the prophets have come together for a bold statement of truth: God has made the crucified Jesus of Nazareth both Lord and Messiah. It really could not be a greater contrast when one compares the treatment Jesus received from those with earthly power verses the One with supreme power. God vindicated Jesus' claim as true, bringing Him back from death and exalting to heaven on high.

Peter says it was Jesus, who was responsible for what they saw and heard that day. It was all a fulfillment of what God told the prophet Joel<sup>1</sup> when He said the coming of the Spirit would kick off the age of salvation. That moment had now come. Jesus was sitting at the right hand of the Father in power and control, in the highest place heaven affords.

For the Jewish audience, this is powerful and overwhelming evidence from the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his death, his resurrection, and exaltation that the man they saw hung on a cross fifty days earlier was the Son of God, the Messiah. They were guilty as charged. They had opposed God and rejected their King.

What is said in 2.36 should not be overlooked. *Jesus is Lord*. Some have identified this as the first apostolic creed.<sup>2</sup> This is not merely a title, Jesus holds the *name that is above every name*, Philippians 2.9. To the Jew there was only one name like this, i.e., Almighty God, the God of Israel. Tying this back to Joel's prophecy quoted earlier in the sermon, "all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved," 2.21. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy in every way.

## The Response of the Crowd

When those in the crowd heard Peter's sweeping conclusion they were *pierced to the heart*, 2.37. Couple that with the scene they were witnessing and his fiery words. What Peter had just said would have been devastating. He made it clear that those in the audience were guilty of executing the Messiah ... the one

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<sup>1</sup> Joel 2.28-29; John 7.39.

<sup>2</sup> See also Romans 10.9; 1 Corinthians 12.3; Philippians 2.11.

God had made Lord and Christ. Some of them may have even been in the crowd fifty days before calling out for His execution. Many others, no doubt had heard about Jesus but had never cared enough to investigate for themselves. Still others may have believed but due to pressure for the religious establishment refused to follow, John 12.42-43. But now in this moment they suddenly understood. They were stunned. To be *pierced in the heart* is a figure of speech that describes their great emotional distress. To put it lightly, they were deeply troubled in their heart.<sup>3</sup> Someone has rightly said, they were deeply convicted, with their conscience in tatters.<sup>4</sup>

But there is more. They were filled with alarm. At that moment everything came crashing down with the realization they had killed the Messiah, the one promised to them for centuries. They were complicit in the crime. They were in danger of judgment. The Messiah was now alive, at the right hand of God, and Lord. Would they now be vanquished? They were in a helpless situation. Totally guilty and no way to get out of it. They needed to be saved from the wrath to come and they needed to be saved *now!*

### ***The Question of a Convicted Heart***

In their greatest and deepest despair, remorse, and guilt those in the crowd cried out *Brothers, what should we do?* Is there a way out of this? How can we escape our fate? This is the picture of a convicted sinner. The only thing they see in front of them is their own personal guilt and the only feeling in their heart is a deep sense of fear over the pending wrath of God. There is the greatest urgency to remedy the situation. There is a desperation for deliverance, i.e., *salvation*. There is a strong desire to do the will of God. At that moment nothing else matters.

Although it is involved, genuine repentance is more than a simple fear of the consequences for sin. Repentance sees sin for what it is (an affront to God) and comes to regard it in the same way God does . . . thus turning in total commitment and dependence on Christ.<sup>5</sup> Earnest and sincere repentance will always result in two things: turning from sin and turning to God.

Conviction of sin is an essential part of any conversion. People need to understand the breadth and depth of their sin before they will see the need for a savior. No matter how moral a person believes themselves to be, they are still guilty of sin, Romans 3.10-23. A person is brought to conviction via the Spirit who uses the Word of God to pierce the heart:

For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart, Hebrews 4.12.

The Word of God is the great tool of conviction. It will do its work if we will use it.

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<sup>3</sup> Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, definition 25.281, Volume 1, p. 318.

<sup>4</sup> Osborne, Grant R. *Acts: Verse by Verse*. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Acts*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 73.



## What About Us?

Have we gotten away from powerful and convicting preaching and teaching? Ours is a time where the world demands the message to be soft coated and palatable. We hear how important it is not to offend someone. Yet, Scripture goes out of its way to describe sin as a vile and polluted thing. It is pure rebellion against God. Those who are not with God are against God, Luke 11.23. There is enmity. There is no peaceful co-existence. The life of rebellion must be walked away from and surrendered to God. We need to preach and teach the word of God, without apology.

When we preach with conviction, there will be a reaction. Certainly, there will be some who respond like those did in Acts 2.37-41 ... positively. But there is another passage in Acts that mentions a crowd being pierced in the heart. Only on that occasion they gnashed at Stephen with their teeth, carried out out of town, and stoned him to death, Acts 7.54-60. The bottom line is that we must preach no matter the reaction.

As time goes by and our culture gets farther away from God ... the message will be met enthusiastically ... with some who have been mired in sin rejoicing that finally there is the hope of deliverance. Others will be just as enthusiastic ... only in a negative way and resort to slander, malice, and maybe even violence to impede the message. Our job is to teach ... moving in faith ... and trusting in the work of God who has promised that His word will never return void.

For just as rain and snow fall from heaven and do not return there without saturating the earth and making it germinate and sprout, and providing seed to sow and food to eat, so my word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do."

– Isaiah 55.10-11

Thinking back to the time of your conversion, what did it feel like to be pierced in the heart?

In those moments, what was the most important thing?

What is repentance? Why is the conviction of sin connected so tightly to it?

What happens when we preach the gospel with conviction?

What can we do to bolster our faith and boldness as we allow the word of God to do its work?

## Lesson 3

# Receiving the Promise

## *Acts 2.38-41*

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying, “Be saved from this corrupt generation!” So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them.

## Introduction

In Acts 2.37 we discover the results of Peter’s sermon. The bold and amazing display of spiritual gifts coupled with Peter’s powerful preaching had its effect, driving many in the crowd to great and deep despair, remorse, and guilt. They were *pierced to the heart*. What Peter preached was true and could not be denied. There was nothing they could do to change what they had done. There was nothing they could do themselves to remove their guilt.

*Brothers, what should we do?*

Is there a way out of this? How can we escape our fate? How do we get forgiveness for these awful sins? Desperate for deliverance, at that moment, nothing else mattered. They wanted to turn from their sin and turn to God. This is repentance.

What Peter says next reveals the conditions of salvation. Scripture clearly connects a person’s reception of salvation with his meeting of certain basic conditions.

## What Peter Told Them to Do

### ***Repent***

Repentance is an essential part to any person’s salvation. Jesus said one will not be saved without it: *unless you repent, you will all perish...*, Luke 13.3. Repentance involves a change of purpose, where one turns the direction of his or her life around from the walk in darkness to the walk in light. It is a forsaking of sin because it is offensive to God. Repentance is primarily an attitude toward sin. It is the determination to be rid of sin as soon as possible.

### ***Be Baptized***

Peter’s call for baptism should not be that surprising, especially considering Jesus’ teaching in Mark 16.16; John 3.3-5; and in the great commission of Matthew 28.19-20. Here Peter couples it with repentance as conditions for receiving forgiveness of sin and receiving the gift of the Spirit.

## The Mode of Baptism

Peter's call for baptism would have involved water baptism. There is no other viable option to understand otherwise. His calling for baptism would have sounded very familiar to the audience as it closely resembled that of John the Baptist:

John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Mark 1.4.

John's baptism was clearly understood as water baptism, as he baptized people at the Jordan, Matthew 3.13. "Baptism," means *immersion* and involves a going under water to signify being cleansed from sin by God. It is not the action of dipping or pouring. Words associated with it are "plunging,"<sup>6</sup> "submerged," "flooded, like a submerged boat,"<sup>7</sup> "overwhelmed," and "to sink."<sup>8</sup>

## Don't Switch the Order

Many of our religious friends have been taught that baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. They believe that it is a good thing to do, but the urgency with it is gone because they were saved and forgiven of sin at the point of faith. This belief has them thinking they are saved before baptism, which is not the way the New Testament describes salvation. Romans 6.4 however, makes it very clear that the burial in baptism happens *before* a person's resurrection to newness of life. *Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life*, Romans 6.4.

If a person believes they were saved before baptism ... they have placed the resurrection before the burial. *How can they have obeyed the gospel?*

The order is significant. Before a person is buried, he must be dead. This happens through repentance and renunciation of self. Then and only then, is a person ready to be buried in baptism. It is only after the burial takes place that the resurrection to newness of life occurs.

## What Repentance and Baptism Bring

### *Eis* or "for"

Among evangelicals there is much controversy regarding the usage of "for" in Acts 2.38. Some insist that "for" means *because of*, i.e., a person is baptized because his or her sins have *already* been forgiven. Such a position missed the context, which must play a role in determining the meaning of the word.

The question of Acts 2.37, *brothers, what must we do?*, must not be forgotten. At that moment, their sins are unforgiven, and they are asking what they must do to receive forgiveness. What must we do to get rid of this guilt? Any answer Peter gives would have been understood as an answer to that question. To receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, one must repent and be baptized. If one does not

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG, p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Moulton, James Hope, and George Milligan. *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Abbott-Smith, G. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922, p. 74.

repent or is not baptized, we may properly conclude that one has not received forgiveness of sin or the gift of the Spirit.

The proper translation the word *eis* is “for,” not “because of.” It is translated in various ways including: “unto,” “in order to,” “in order to have,” “so that,” “with a view to,” and “in relation to.”<sup>9</sup> The word involves a direction or motion toward something. Repentance and baptism have a purpose<sup>10</sup> or goal.

Let’s talk about these in greater detail:

## **Forgiveness**

It is sometimes understood from this verse that the forgiveness here related only to past sin. The idea is that one’s baptism brings forgiveness for every sin committed up to that point in time, and that person remains in a forgiven situation until he or she sins again. After sin is committed again, the person returns to a state of being lost until repentance or confession is made. This “in and out” of salvation model is not biblical.

Forgiveness and justification go hand in hand, Romans 3.28; 4.6-8. When one is forgiven during the act of baptism, he enters a state of justification and remains therein by continuing faith<sup>11</sup> in Jesus’ power to save. Even though a person is not free from the human propensity to sin, he remains free from guilt and condemnation, Romans 8.1.

Jack Cottrell has aptly written:

Baptism is not for the forgiveness of past sins only, but for the forgiveness of sin, *period*. As long as one remains in the relationship to Christ begun at baptism, he is justified or forgiven as the result of what happened in his baptism. Thus all our lives we should remember our baptism, and be encouraged by that memory when we begin to feel discouraged in our Christian living or to doubt the validity of our hope in Christ Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

## **Receipt of the Gift of the Holy Spirit**

The gift of the Spirit Peter refers to is the gift of the Spirit Himself.

### **For the Purpose of Indwelling and Regeneration**

#### *Indwelling*

The Spirit’s dwelling inside the Christian is clear to see as we read the New Testament:

- Acts 5.32, *God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him.*
- Romans 8.9-11: *the Spirit of God lives in you.*
- 1 Corinthians 6.19: *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.*

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<sup>9</sup> Cottrell, Jack. *Baptism: A Biblical Study*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1989, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> BDAG defines the word as denoting the purpose of a thing: “to denote purpose *in order to* . . .” See Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 290.

<sup>11</sup> A person can be lost when he or she determines to no longer walk according to the Spirit, reject Christ, and live for oneself.

<sup>12</sup> Cottrell, Jack, *Baptism . . .*, p. 58.

- 2 Timothy 1.14: *the Holy Spirit... lives in us.*

Acts 2.38 explains that it is at the time of a person's baptism when the Spirit enters into one's life.

#### *Regeneration*

The Spirit brings us from death to life. In the moment of our baptism, He directly applies the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection to us. Titus 3.4-6 helps us understand *why* we were saved:

We needed to be cleansed. The *washing* of Titus 3.5 connects this activity with the time of baptism.<sup>13</sup> The only human action taking place is our personal decision, moved by repentance and sorrow for sin, to make ourselves available to God in baptism, where He performs the saving work by the Spirit. It is never *because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy.*

This passage also helps us understand *how* we were saved:

Paul says we are saved by *the washing of regeneration and renewal.* This explains what happens during your baptism. *Regeneration* comes from a word that can be translated into English as our "re-birthday." During Paul's day the word was used to talk about "coming back from death to life," or "the restoration of life of individuals."

#### *Who Saved You?*

It is not the water that saves, but the Spirit. It is the Spirit **who** gave you new life. Titus 3.6 connects to Acts 2.38b, where Paul says that those who repent and are baptized receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

## **What is the Promise of Acts 2.39?**

For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The *promise* Peter refers to is the promise of salvation to all who believe.

The promise was to the Jews and their descendants first because they were the firstborn in the family, with special privileges. The promise was also to those who are far off, i.e., Gentiles who had not been part of God's family, but now had been brought near by the blood of Christ, Ephesians 2.11-13.

The most important thing about the day of Pentecost was not so much the miraculous signs that appeared, but the fact that the Holy Spirit was bringing salvation to all who would receive. This is the main point of Joel's prophecy Peter quotes at the beginning of his sermon:

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, Acts 2.21. (Joel 2.32)

This also seems to be the point behind Jesus' statement of Luke 11.13 and His *living water* promises in John 4 and 7.

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<sup>13</sup> "Washing," *loutron*, refers to baptism. See also Ephesians 5.26, where it specifically refers to the washing of water. The verb form of the word is also used in Hebrews 10.22 where the writer speaks of our *bodies washed with pure water*. See Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, p. Vol. 1, p. 537.

All who believe receive the Spirit, who brings life, cleansing, and His presence. This is understood more clearly by a reading from Young's Literal Translation:

for **to you** is the promise, and to your children, and to all those afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.<sup>14</sup>

The emphatic in the verse is to you. The wording is out of order for emphasis. **You** will receive the Spirit. You will receive the promise. This is the promise of Luke 24.49a and Acts 1.5. This is the promise of salvation ... for every person who chooses to receive it. This is conditioned upon:

- Luke 11.13 - our *asking* for it.
- Acts 22.16 - our *calling upon the name of the Lord*.
- John 7.37-38 - our *belief*.
- Acts 2.38 - our *repentance and baptism*.

## The People's Response

Luke did not provide us with an entire transcript of Peter's preaching, but we do have an excellent summary of what he said. Peter continued to plead with those in his audience as it was not easy for them to get their minds around what God was calling for. It was a major thing for them to change their beliefs, walk away from family traditions and customs, and admit they had been wrong about Jesus. Peter continued to remind them of the urgency of the situation. *Be saved from this corrupt generation*. If they were ambivalent about the need to change or simply refused to do so, they would be lost.

Most likely the majority of those present did not receive him favorably, but those who did so immediately. On that day, around 3000 people were saved.

What is so important about the mode of baptism?

How would you refute the charge that you believe in "baptismal regeneration?"

Who saves you in baptism?

Who enters your life upon your baptism?

What is the promise of Acts 2.39?

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<sup>14</sup> Young, Robert. *Young's Literal Translation*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997. The emphasis in the verse is mine.

## Lesson 4

# Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

## Acts 2.42a

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

## Introduction

Acts 2.42 begins a paragraph that summarizes the ideal picture of what God intended the church to be. The newly saved Christians rejoiced in the forgiveness they had received as well as the receiving of the gift of the Spirit. Everything in these verses suggests a level of devotion to the Lord that seemed to be missed in the generations to come. These verses tell us what made up the most important aspects of the life and worship of the early church and provides a very important model for us to follow.

Their life consisted of:

- a sense of awe and heartfelt unity.
- selling their belongings and taking care of the needs of others.
- assembling daily.
- breaking bread together at home, with glad and generous hearts.
- praising God.
- having favor with all the people.

For them, Christianity was much more than a once-a-week occurrence. It enveloped every aspect of life. It *was* life!

This is seen in the use of the word devotion at the beginning of verse 42. The CSB and ESV renditions of the verse may not express it as clearly as the NASB:

They were **continually** devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.<sup>15</sup>

*Devoted* as used here is defined as to “persist obstinately in,”<sup>16</sup> “to hold fast to, continue in, or persevere in.”<sup>17</sup> The idea conveyed is a steadfast and single-minded focus to a certain course of action. Over the course of the previous college basketball season, my favorite team, the Arkansas Razorbacks, led the SEC in the percentage of free-throws made. It wasn't even close as the next team in the conference was almost 40 places behind in the rankings. When Arkansas comes to the line, you can almost always count on the

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<sup>15</sup> *New American Standard Bible*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie. (LSJ). *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p.1515.

<sup>17</sup> Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 881.

player making the basket. How do they make it look so easy? By being *continually devoted* to their practice.

Christians must adopt the same principle as they engage in their day-to-day practice or spiritual lifestyle. Each of us should ask if our focus on these areas (teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer) is as critical to us today as they were when the church began. Are we as *devoted* as they were?

## Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

The teaching given out by the Apostles' served as the basis of their fellowship together. Apostolic teaching was considered authoritative because it was given through the Holy Spirit. Subsequent generations came to depend on the written words of the Apostles' that were circulated among the churches. A strong commitment to the Apostles' teaching is essential for the spiritual growth and long-term health of every congregation.

Their teaching was considered the standard. As the gospel spread into Gentile areas, Paul told the Corinthians he had sent Timothy to them for the purpose of being a reminder of *my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church*, 1 Corinthians 4.17. The Apostles' teaching set the basis for doctrinal unity: the same thing was taught among all the churches. Anything other than the apostles' teaching was to be rejected. *We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception*, 1 John 4.6.

There is truth. There is deception. One way is right. Any other way is wrong. Erroneous ways and teachings are to be strictly avoided, Galatians 1.6-9; 2 Thessalonians 3.6. Paul instructed the Romans: *watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned*, Romans 16.17.

The Apostles' teaching serves as the God-given standard by which everything else must be measured. We are to:

- *Hold fast to it*, 2 Timothy 1.13; 1 Corinthians 11.2; 2 Thessalonians 2.15.
- *Guard it*, 2 Timothy 1.14.
- *Contend for it*, Jude 3.

## Apostolic Teaching is to be Followed

The Apostles' teaching was designed to serve as a prototype, sketch, outline, example, or standard.<sup>18</sup> Paul calls it a "pattern" in 2 Timothy 1.13. This word describes "a blow," which was used to describe the impression left by a horse's hoof, a sea, or an engraved mark. It conveyed the image of a model by which one could "maintain the sameness of a thing."<sup>19</sup> Once we have followed the great commission and made disciples, Matthew 28.19, there is more to do. *Teaching*, Matthew 28.20, is the second half of the great

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<sup>18</sup> Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 1042.

<sup>19</sup> Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. 8, p. 125.



commission. Newly converted saints are to be instructed to *observe everything* Jesus commanded. his great thanks that the Roman Christians had *obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over*, Romans 6.17-18. The gospel message impacted the Roman Christians to the core of their being. *From the heart* describes a very personal decision one makes, by his own volition, to surrender to God. But Paul's words go farther. He is not speaking of superficial or coerced obedience, but rather something deeply felt and deeply motivated from deep inside someone.<sup>20</sup> The Christian reality is a matter of the heart.

### ***A Heartfelt Response to Doctrine***

In the Romans 6 passage quoted above, Paul said when a person becomes a Christian he or she is *handed over* or "placed under the authority of" Christian teaching ... the expression of God's will for believers. It is not that the teaching has been handed over to us ... we have been handed over to it. *The teaching* serves as the standard to follow. Biblical doctrine molds and forms those who have been handed over to it.

In this way, apostolic teachings can be likened to a mold, like a form for concrete.<sup>21</sup> When concrete is poured, it sets up around the form created for it. The form holds it in place and makes it distinctive. When we do what the apostles did to form churches in the first century, we will plant the same type of churches today. Thinking doctrinally, when we follow the New Testament, we will teach the same form of teaching the apostles used. Following the apostles' teaching facilitates our spiritual stability and growth. *Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit*, Ephesians 4.14. Christians are rooted in the apostles' teachings, which is stable, secure, and unchanging.

### ***What are some of the specific doctrines taught by the apostles?***

- The inspiration and authority of Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 2.13.
- The deity and humanity of Christ, Philippians 2.6-7; Colossians 1.15-16.
- Atonement, Romans 3.25-28; 1 Peter 1.18-21.
- Justification by grace through faith, Romans 4-5.
- Baptism for the remission of sin, Acts 2.38; Colossians 2.11-14; 1 Peter 3.21.
- The organization of the church, i.e., elders, deacons, and saints, Philippians 1.1.
- The Christian lifestyle, Philippians 2.15-16a.
- Worship, *in spirit and truth*, John 4.24.
- The Lord's Supper, Matthew 26.26-30.

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<sup>20</sup> Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 1-8*. Vol. 38A. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988, p. 343.

<sup>21</sup> Wharton, Edward. *The Church of Christ: The Distinctive Nature of the New Testament Church*. Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1997, p. 14-15. Wharton uses the analogy of a mold, cast, or form for Christians to follow so that they can "identify the saved from the lost, and consequently give the church its distinct identity as the saved body of Christ."

- Jesus' return, 2 Peter 3.8-10; 1 Thessalonians 4.11-16.
- The resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15.
- The judgment to come, Hebrews 9.27.
- Eternal life or eternal condemnation, Matthew 25.46.

## "One Faith"

In Ephesians 4.3 Paul makes a call for unity. The desire for *peace*, driven by our love for Christ and one another keeps us together. Beginning with verse 4, Paul lists several areas where Christians are to hold common conviction: *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*, Ephesians 4.4-6.

A few verses later Paul says that we can come to a knowledge and unity of *the faith*, 4.13. In this case, we are referring to faith in a noun sense, i.e., a system or thing to be identified and contrasted to other things. The term is singular. A search of the New Testament where *the faith* is used reveals that it is to be:

- *Preached*, Galatians 1.23.
- *Obedied*, Acts 6.7.
- *Continued in*, Acts 14.22.
- *Strengthened in*, Acts 16.5.
- *Contended for* together, Philippians 1.27.
- *Be grounded and steadfast in*, Colossians 1.23.
- *Established in*, Colossians 2.7.
- *Nourished by the words of*, 1 Timothy 4.6.
- *Fought for*, 1 Timothy 6.12.
- *Contended for*, Jude 3.

It can be *departed from*, 1 Timothy 4.1; *denied*, 1 Timothy 5.8; and a person can go *astray* from it, 1 Timothy 6.21.

The New Testament knows of only one faith. *The faith* is something objective and absolute. We are expected to unite around it. Where we do not agree, we must apply the principles of Ephesians 4.2-3, i.e., we practice *patience* and *humility*, and we *bear with one another in love* for the purpose of maintaining the unity God has given. A divisive spirit is foreign to New Testament Christianity.

## How We Follow

### *With Gratitude*

Paul's teaching in Colossians also emphasizes the need to become established firmly. But also, he does not neglect to mention the motivation of the heart: *So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught*,

*and overflowing with gratitude*, Colossians 2.6-7. The thought of what has been done on our behalf should never be too far from our minds.

This naturally follows to our possession of a spirit of gentleness, humility, and love. In 2 Timothy 1.13b, Paul told Timothy to hand off what he received in the same way he had received it: *in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*.

How one holds on to the sound words is also of vital importance.

### ***With Humility***

When we communicate these concepts, speaking with clarity, certainty, and exclusivity, we must check our attitude. We must never give off an impression that the churches of Christ are perfect, have arrived, and have no more work to do in study and practice. Our work and understanding of Biblical teaching is never finished. We must always teach and exhort with the strongest sense of humility: *For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*, Romans 12.3.

We can, in the spirit of humility and love, make the distinction between what has been divinely revealed as truth and that which is of human origin. We have not been called to compromise or negotiate with beliefs that set themselves up against what has been revealed. Instead, we are to, as Paul taught in Romans 6.17, *submit ourselves to the form of teaching to which we have been handed over*. God's revealed truth is that by which we are molded. We should unashamedly call upon our religious friends to unite with us in the pursuit of God's truth as revealed by Christ and His apostles.

### ***In Faith***

We are to hold on to it *in faith*, i.e., earnestly believing that what we have received is in accordance with God's will and revealed word. *The faith*, or the teachings we have received have power. It has changed our life, and we want it to change others.

### ***With Love, Optimism, and Joy***

As *the faith* was given to us *in love*, so we transmit it in the same way to others. As we teach, we must never be dismissive of or disregard someone's heart, implying that they are a bad person. Instead, we teach *in love*, optimism, and joy, highlighting how these teachings have the power to truly transform a person into the image of Christ.

Now, think of each of the points just mentioned: gratitude, humility, faith, love, optimism, and joy as you reread Acts 2.42-47. Does this not describe how the early church operated?

What does it mean to be devoted? How strong is yours? How can you improve from where you are today?

What sets the basis for doctrinal unity?

Is the Apostles' teaching intended to be as a mere suggestion? Or something else? Explain.

What does Paul mean when he says we have been handed over to a form of teaching?

How many faiths are there?

Why is it so important to understand *how* we follow the Apostles' teaching?

## Lesson 5

# Devoted to Fellowship

*Acts 2.42b*

## Introduction

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

One of the greatest challenges facing the church of our time is increasing involvement in the life of the local church. We are busy, rich, overworked, and often distracted, which can make us push our spiritual pursuits down the priority list to a mere subsection of life, rather than them *being our life*. More than ever our families are overloaded. Many professionals bring their work home with them (or work from home) and work outside of normal business hours. Years ago, we left our work at work. Now, we seem very comfortable mixing the two together. For those with children still at home, school and recreational sports, music, and school club activities dominate evenings and weekends. Add in Wednesday evening Bible study and many families have something to do every night of the week. With all these pressures, it is not surprising to see brothers and sisters disconnected from and relating superficially to the rest of their spiritual family.

Over the course of my lifetime, it feels as if life with the church has become optional. It is as if we say we have our life, and *if we can, we'll fit the church in too*. More and more have become comfortable missing any service or church activity outside of the Sunday morning worship. The other services and gatherings are seen as suggestions. The impact of this is far reaching. Many Christians only have superficial relationships with fellow believers and church leaders. This makes things awkward when life's troubles and difficulties mount as it is often uncomfortable sharing things with people we don't know well. Disconnected members also impact the growth of the church, being content to leave the work of making disciples to a minority of paid experts and leaders who serve the congregation.

There are many reasons the churches of Christ find themselves in stagnation and decline. But certainly, the idea that one can live his or her spiritual life without the church and still thrive is one of them. If the church of the twenty-first century is to reverse the trend-line, individual church members must come to follow the early church in its *devotion to fellowship*.

## What is Fellowship?

Simply put, fellowship is spiritual togetherness. It is the experience of oneness. It is a yearning to be together. Each member of the local church is to have a personal and emotional connection with the work that is being conducted and with others inside the congregation who are participating in its various works.

In Acts 2.42, *fellowship* comes from a word that means “communion,” “association,” or “partnership.”<sup>22</sup> When a person becomes a Christian, he or she enters a partnership with Jesus, as well as every other Christian. Another dictionary describes it as a “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, close relationship.”<sup>23</sup> Practically speaking, it is the interaction of believers with each other in the exercising of their spiritual gifts. It is the spiritual responsibility of the individual believer to *provoke* one another to *love and good works*, Hebrews 10.24. This responsibility is not optional.

## What Does It Mean to be Part of the Church?

Through the salvation He provides, God has called us to the very special relationship, purpose, and place of His church. We are not part of some cold, strictly organized, and mechanical organization . . . we are part of the living and dynamic family of God, who has called us out of darkness to be His special people . . . His sons and daughters. We are the “called out body” of people who belong to the Lord. We need to make it personal and feel the warmth of God’s love and desire for having *a people* that is His very own.

The common term Paul used that we use in English today as “church,” *ekklēsia*, comes from a Greek compound word that means “out of a calling.” Secularly, it described gatherings of people comprised of religious, political, or other types of assemblies. Paul took the secular word and used it in a spiritual sense to refer to God’s people. The church is not an organization or institution . . . it is a living and dynamic *body*, people. It is important that we come to think of the church in this manner.

## How Paul Used the Word:

### *To Refer to Christians in a Universal Way*

The “church” can refer to belong to “the totality of God’s people under the New Covenant.”<sup>24</sup> Paul used it to refer to the church this way in:

- Ephesians 1.22-23: God has *appointed him as head over everything for the church*.
- Ephesians 5.23: *Christ is the head of the church*.
- 1 Timothy 3.15: Paul wrote to Timothy so that he would know how *people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God*.

All Christians are part of the church in a spiritual sense. We are the called-out body. But it is important to understand that the same word is used to speak of the local assembly. Not only does the church mean all believers, it also can refer to a group of believers in each area.<sup>25</sup>

### *A Local Group of Believers*

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<sup>22</sup> LSJ, p. 970.

<sup>23</sup> BDAG, p. 552.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, Jack P. *Basic Beliefs*: Nashville: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian, 2013, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> MacArthur, John. “The First Fellowship, Acts 2.42-47.” *John MacArthur Sermon Archive*. Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 2014.

Thinking chronologically, Paul's first usage of *ekklēsia* appears in 1 Thessalonians 1.1 as he greets the saints in Thessalonica:<sup>26</sup> *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace.*

Note here how Paul describes the unique identity of *assembly* or *gathering* in Thessalonica. They are *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. They belong to God. Not only that, but they are also in Christ. Those in the *ekklēsia* wear His name. They have been called from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ, Colossians 1.13.

Their assembling was not just something in theoretical terms ... it was something that could be physically identified. *Ekklēsia* applies to "an actual gathering of people, or to a group that gathers when viewed as a regularly constituted meeting."<sup>27</sup> When these people gathered for worship and fellowship, Paul expected his writing to be read *to all the brothers and sisters*, 1 Thessalonians 5.27, and to greet one another *with a holy kiss*, 5.26. Throughout the New Testament we find the apostles specifying local churches in places all over Europe and Asia. For example, we read of churches in Galatia, Judea, Corinth, Thessalonica, etc.

### ***God Designed His Church for Believers to be a Part of a Local Assembly***

There should be no dichotomy between being a Christian and being a part of the local church. If a brother or sister is not involved in the life of the congregation, he or she is being disobedient to the concept of fellowship.

Fellowship is best understood by examining the "one-another" passages in the New Testament:

- Romans 12.10: *honor one another.*
- Romans 12.16: *live in harmony with one another.*
- Romans 13.8: *love one another.*
- Romans 14.19: *build up one another.*
- Romans 15.7: *welcome one another.*
- Romans 15.14: *instruct one another.*
- Romans 16.16: *greet one another.*
- Galatians 5.13: *serve one another through love.*
- Ephesians 4.2: *bearing with one another in love.*
- Ephesians 4.25: *we are members of one another.*
- Ephesians 4.32: *forgiving one another.*
- Ephesians 5.21: *submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.*

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<sup>26</sup> Scholars assert that 1 Thessalonians is the "oldest document in the New Testament," therefore it is the first of Paul's writings to the churches, dating to around 49-51 C.E.

See Ascough, Richard S. *1 & 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Study Guide (Encountering the Christ Group at Thessalonike)*. Edited by Tat-siong Benny Liew. Vol. 13. T&T Clark Study Guides to the New Testament. London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ascough, p. 124.

- Philippians 2.3: *consider one another as more important than yourselves.*
- Colossians 3.9: *do not lie to one another.*
- Colossians 3.13: *bearing with one another and forgiving each other...*
- Colossians 3.16: *teaching and admonishing one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 4.9: *you are taught by God to love one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 4.18: *encourage one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 5.11: *build up one another...*
- Hebrews 3.13: *encourage one another daily...*
- 1 Peter 1.22: *from a pure heart love one another constantly...*
- 1 Peter 4.9: *be hospitable to one another without complaining...*
- 1 Peter 4.10: *use your gift to serve one another...*
- 1 Peter 5.5: *clothe yourselves with humility toward one another...*

The Apostles never envisioned spiritual life apart from other believers. As members of God's church, we are expected to play an active role in the daily life of the local church.

## What Share Do You Have in the Work of Your Congregation?

Is it just being present at worship services, Bible studies, and making your financial contribution? What kind of fellowship do you have with your congregation in its:

- Teaching program (children or adult)
- Evangelistic outreach?
- Encouragement of members?
- Visitation of one another?
- Service to widows and widowers?
- Mentorship and encouragement of its youth?

Fellowship is not just being at church. It is engaging in partnership your brothers and sisters in the church. Are you a **spectator** or **participant**?



## Lesson 6

# Devoted to the Breaking of Bread

## Acts 2.42c

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

## Introduction

One of the most fundamental ways to summarize Acts 2-42-47 might be to see the *togetherness* of the early church. In pointing out the church's devotion to apostolic teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer, Luke wants us to see a church that is functioning together in the way God intended. And as we focus in this lesson on the breaking of bread, there is probably no deeper spiritual connection we have with each other than *the breaking of bread*.

The observance of communion that Christians the world over share together is a symbol of our togetherness and fellowship. On the first day of the week every Christian in the world can meet with other Christians at the foot of the cross as forgiven sons and daughters of God, saved by grace. The common bond that brings us all together is the cross. It brought us peace with God, and peace with one another. The cross has made us one with God, Christ, the Spirit, and each other. Jesus purchased us with His blood, 1 Peter 1.18-19. Every week we get to come together, reorienting our spiritual lives back to the very core of what it means to be a Christian and the significance of the price paid on our behalf.

## On the Breaking of Bread

In the New Testament, the reference to *breaking of bread* in its noun form appears only here and in Luke 24.35.<sup>28</sup> Depending on the context, the term can refer to communion together or the simple sharing of a common meal. Here, in Acts 2.42, it appears that since the word is listed amid other spiritual activities describing their fellowship together, this instance is referring to the church coming together to engage in communion or celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The reference later in the text, Acts 2.46, seems to be in a much broader context and would apply to the sharing of meals together by those inside the early church.

## What Communion Together Proclaims

### *We Personally Celebrate & Proclaim His Death as a Memorial*

Our coming together to partake of the Lord's Supper reminds us in a very personal way of the brutal and vicious death of Jesus on the cross. It is a very solemn, serious occasion where we focus our minds on the events of that day. We can recount the agony in the garden, the sham trials put on by the Jews and Romans, the brutal whipping/beating that left Jesus near death, the crown of thorns driven into His head, and the intense agony He felt throughout His body while hanging on the cross. Although no bone

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<sup>28</sup> As a verb, *breaking of bread*, is found in Luke 22.19; 24.30; Acts 2.46; 20.7, 11; 27.35.

in Jesus' body was broken, His skin and flesh were torn and broken by blows with rods and fists, thorns, nails, and spears. Every Sunday we memorialize this event and focus on it in our minds. By His brokenness we are healed, Isaiah 53.5.

### ***We Celebrate and Proclaim our Unity in Christ***

As we observe the New Testament, we find that the Supper was observed congregationally. Luke points out the practice in Acts 20.7 and uses the church at Troas as an example. They *assembled to break bread*. This took place on Sunday (the first day of the week.) While the form is important and should not be ignored, we must draw equal attention to the significance of the event.

The Lord's Supper is an act of sharing. While there is very much an individual component to the supper, it is an action to be done in conjunction with other Christians. In 1 Corinthians 10.16, Paul writes:

The cup of blessing that **we bless**, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that **we break**, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

I bolded the plural elements in Paul's writing on purpose. Note how Paul includes himself in joint participation with the Corinthians, even though he is in another place. The Lord's Supper is much bigger than one assembly. All Christians *everywhere* share the body and blood:

Because there is one bread, **we who are many** are one body, since **all of us share** the one bread.

The sharing Paul mentions takes place regardless of one's geographical location. By partaking of the Lord's Supper each Sunday, all Christians everywhere demonstrate or affirm how they belong to Jesus and to one another. The Supper is a bonding of the relationship with worshippers universally, affirming the complete solidarity of the redeemed with their Redeemer.

Partaking of the Supper together should remind us that we all stand equal before the cross. It is a time when we lay aside our unique backgrounds and differences so that we may unite with each other and Jesus Christ. No one comes to the cross on a better footing than someone else – we're all equal in our need for the grace of God. While partaking, we unite as one, proclaiming our thankfulness for the sacrifice. It is also a time when we pause to recognize what we share together because of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. What a beautiful thing this is!

These principles apply not just to the local congregation, but to the universal church. If a person is unable to assemble with the local church, in extenuating circumstances, and chooses to partake in their home, they are still sharing. Everyone is involved with the Supper, with God, and with each other.

### ***We Proclaim Our Continued Dependence on Christ***

The Supper is a time for self-examination.

So, then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself; in this way let him eat the bread and drink from the cup. For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself, 1 Corinthians 11.27-29.

One can partake *unworthily* in many ways. For example:

- Have I turned the Supper into a mere ritual, neglecting to engage with God with my mind and heart?
- Have I come to the Supper with bitterness and hatred in my heart toward another believer?
- Have I come to the Supper with unrepented sin?

John MacArthur has aptly written:

Before we partake we are to give ourselves a thorough self-examination, looking honestly at our hearts for anything that should not be there and sifting out all evil. Our motives, our attitudes toward the Lord and His Word, toward His people, and toward the Communion service itself should all come under private scrutiny before the Lord. The table thus becomes a special place for the purifying of the church.<sup>29</sup>

So, when we come to the Supper we are reminded of our sinfulness and great need for the continued deliverance by the Spirit. We should partake with the greatest sense of thankfulness and humility ... in total awe of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and in total love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is a very important word found in verse 29. The CSB translates it as “recognizing the body.” Many of the older translations word it as “discerning the body.” It makes no difference; the meaning is still the same. When we “recognize” the body, we are bringing into our mind a clear view of the Savior and His sacrifice. It is human nature to forget. So, in partaking of the Supper, we strive to keep our memory clear, straight, and focused. As we “recognize the body” in worship, we are connected to the past, bringing meaning to the present, and are inspired with hope for the future.

### ***We Proclaim the Lord's Death***

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes, 1 Corinthians 11.26

It has been said that the Lord's Supper is a living sermon. In partaking, we announce our participation in the benefits of Jesus' death. In every generation, from the first century until the Lord returns, Christians declare their belief that Jesus died for the remission of their sins. Participation in the Lord's Supper is an affirmation of our belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*, 1 Corinthians 15.3-4. We tell the world that our faith in the power of Jesus is alive and secure. And we declare our faith in His return. Christians will partake of the Lord's Supper *until He returns*. When we eat the Supper, we look back at the death of Christ on the cross and forward to the time of His return. By partaking and looking forward to His return, we acknowledge the reality of the coming judgment on mankind. Luke recorded, *“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead,* Acts 17.30-31.

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<sup>29</sup> MacArthur, John F., Jr. *1 Corinthians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984, p. 274.

## May We Embrace Every Opportunity to Partake

Going back to the first part of Acts 2.42, we find the early church was devoted to the expression the spiritual actions of being faithful to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. They had a steadfast and single-minded focus on Christ and these things were the natural expression of it. Could our devotion to the Supper and these things be compared to them? How strong is our heart connected to God?

Over the past few years, and especially with the aftermath of the pandemic, it seems as if the importance of the weekly assembly has lessened somewhat. While online services and *virtual assemblies* were a justified reaction to the mandates and restrictions, these should never be seen as a permanent replacement or substitute for the actual assembling together in person with brothers and sisters of like precious faith. God designed the church with joint participation in receiving teaching, communing, and prayer in mind. For this to happen, he intends for us to meet every Sunday to be strengthened individually and congregationally. The early church never viewed these meeting times as optional, and neither should we.

The times of worship and public bible study set forth by the leaders of a local congregation should be viewed as priority items on our calendar. In this we should stand head and shoulders above today's cultural norms ... which deemphasize the need for the church and its assemblies. What a great opportunity we have each week to carry out the expectations of the Hebrew writer:

And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching, Hebrews 10.24-25.

## Lesson 7

# Devoted to Prayer

## Acts 2.42d

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

## Introduction

The final characteristic that marked the spiritual activity of the first Christians is prayer. And while prayer might be the last thing Luke mentions in his summary, it is by no means least. The prayer of the early Christians is denoted by their eagerness, persistence, and how they saw it as critically important to the ongoing life of the congregation.

## *Luke liked to focus on prayer*

### Corporately

One third of all the references to prayer in the New Testament are found in Luke and Acts.<sup>30</sup> And as we observe the early church after the day of Pentecost, we see multiple occasions where it engaged God in prayer:

- Acts 4.31: When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.
- Acts 6.4: But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”
- Acts 6.6: They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.
- Acts 12.5: So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.
- Acts 12.12: As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was called Mark, where many had assembled and were praying.
- Acts 13.3: Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.
- Acts 14.23: When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

### Individually

Luke points out the prayer life of:

- Stephen, 7.59
- Peter, 3.1; 9.40; 10.9; 11.5
- Cornelius, 10.4, 30-31
- Paul, 9.11; 16.25; 20.36; 21.5; 22.17; 28.8

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<sup>30</sup> Osborne, Grant R. *Acts: Verse by Verse*. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019, p. 61.

Luke goes out of his way to point out the active prayer life of the early church in order to demonstrate the dynamic connection between God and the church. They realized they were participants *with God* in the divine mission of the gospel.

### ***Patterned After Jesus***

During his ministry Jesus was often found in prayer:

- Luke 3.21: When all the people were baptized, Jesus also was baptized. As he was praying, heaven opened,
- Luke 5.16: Yet he often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.
- Luke 6.12: During those days he went out to the mountain to pray and spent all night in prayer to God.
- Luke 10.21-22: At that time, he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, because this was your good pleasure. All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal him.”
- Luke 11.1: He was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples.”

See also Luke 9.18, 28-29; 22.31-32; 41-42; 23.34, 46.

## **What about our corporate devotion to prayer?**

On the night before Jesus’ death, our Lord prayed:

Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it, John 14.13-14.

It can be said with certainty that the early church took these words to heart. They trusted that God would meet every need. Therefore, they relentlessly pursued God in prayer seeking divine assistance. The prayer Luke identifies in Acts 2.42 is more than just individual prayer (although it is certainly part of the picture), it is congregational prayer.

The early church most certainly believed in its power. In Acts 4 the apostles were meeting resistance from the religious establishment. Peter and John were strictly admonished not to *speaking or teaching at all in the name of Jesus*, Acts 4.18. After the apostles returned to the Jerusalem church and reported on these things, Acts 4.24-31 details a congregational prayer ... spelling out their problem ... and then praying for boldness to speak the gospel even more, with more signs and wonders and healings. God heard and answered their prayer, 4.31.

Could you identify your congregation as being devoted to prayer? How often are prayer meetings conducted? How well are they attended? Congregational prayer should be devoted to much more frequency than just a prayer of praise on Sunday morning and a traditional closing prayer to end the service. The congregation should be coming together regularly to pray for:

- Widows and widowers
- The sick and elderly
- Evangelism efforts, foreign and domestic
- Unity, boldness, and a willingness to work together
- Needy saints and how to help meet their needs
- Its children and young people growing up; teens and the issues they deal with
- For God to be involved in our work... guiding and directing according to His will

While this list is certainly not designed to be exhaustive, it certainly contains a few items that should be prayed for on a continual basis.

What are some things you could add to the list?

## What about our individual devotion to prayer?

It has been said that prayer is like the air we breathe. Spiritually, we cannot live without it. And yet, many Christians when asked would say that one of their greatest challenges is becoming a more prayerful person. Many of our spiritual struggles may be a result of not praying as we should. Sometimes our lack of prayer results from our tendency to forget about our true need to depend on God.

Ephesians 6.18-19 contains instructions for our prayer life:

Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.

### *How Often Should We Pray?*

Paul says we are to *pray at all times*. This simply means that we can pray at any occasion or time. Jesus told His disciples:

But be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man, Luke 21.36.

This also goes along with the teaching found in:

- Romans 12.12: *be persistent in prayer*. The word we use for “persistent” here has a powerful meaning in the original language, describing the action of being obstinate in our persistence on making time to pray.
- Philippians 4.6: we are instructed to pray about *everything*.
- 2 Timothy 1.3: Paul constantly remembered Timothy in his prayers, *night and day*.

Taking all these passages together, we need to see a God-consciousness, where our entire life is offered to Him in communion and communication. Prayer involves everything we see and experience in life. It also involves our reaction to those things. We go to God during:

- Time of temptation: *Lord, here is what I'm facing. Please help me.*
- Good times: *Father, thank you for this moment. Your love and blessings are truly amazing.*
- Evil times: *Please God, make things right.*
- Times of trouble: *God, please deliver me.*
- Times when we're focused on the lost: *Lord, please draw them to yourself.*

All of life is to become as an ascending prayer. We include all of life's thoughts, deeds, circumstances.

Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving, Colossians 4.2.

This passage carries the idea of steadfastness and constancy. There is also an intensity to Paul's writing. It is as if Paul is saying, *hang in there with constant prayer.*

### ***The Variety of Prayer***

In Ephesians 6.18 Paul uses the term "prayer" to describe communication with God that can happen anywhere at any time. It could be while we are out walking, sitting in the office, or driving into work. It is always applicable, all situations, and under all circumstances.

Paul also mentions "requests." These are specific in nature. The same word is also used in Philippians 4.6. There Paul says these *requests* need to be made with a spirit of thanksgiving. Attitude is an essential in effective prayer.

### ***How to Pray***

#### **In Watchfulness**

Going back to our passage in Ephesians 6.18, Paul says that we must *stay alert with all perseverance*. We *watch and pray*, Luke 21.36.

What are we to watch for:

- Needs for prayer. How can I pray for my spouse? Parents? Kids? Shepherds? Ministers? Brethren?
- Those in your prayer list. Check out your church's prayer list. There is always someone you can be praying for.

#### **In Perseverance**

The idea Paul has in mind in Ephesians 6.18 is that we stick to it, stay at it, and persevere. We are praying, while we are watching. This is why our involvement in the church is so important. We need to be connected for ourselves, but also for the opportunity to comfort and uplift others through prayer. Do you know what is going on in your congregation? The needs people have? You certainly do if you are watching.



## ***The Object of Prayer***

We make *intercession for all the saints*. It is hard to pray for people you don't have a connection with. We need to be serious about getting to know others and thinking about ways we can pray specifically for them.

We also pray for spiritual needs, Ephesians 6.19. Paul specifically asked for help in his ministry. The teaching here is that we are to be persevering, intense, continuing, steadfastly, watching and praying, being alert to the **spiritual** needs of others:

- Those that aren't experiencing spiritual victory or seeing God do His mighty work.
- Those that are struggling ... and being bombarded by Satan.

Offering up:

- Prayers for strength and determination to see the battle through.
- Prayers for them to win in the struggle with temptation.
- Prayers for them not to get discouraged and give up.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Are you:

- God conscious?
- Selfless?
- Watchful?
- Persistent?
- Praying for the spiritual needs of others?

## Lesson 8

# Filled with Awe

## Acts 2.43

Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.

## Introduction

In his book *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kent Hughes has written:

What happens in the church where the Spirit reigns? There is a radically wonderful reorientation of essential relationships.

Where the Spirit reigns, believers relate to the Word—*teaching*. Where the Spirit reigns, believers relate to each other—*fellowship*. Where the Spirit reigns, believers relate to God—*worship*. Where the Spirit reigns, believers relate to the world—*evangelism*.<sup>31</sup>

This is a great summary of the life of the earliest Christians. They were believers in full cooperation with the Spirit. We have just finished a four-lesson study on Acts 2.42 which describes the spiritual life of the first Christians. The entire section (2.42-47) describes the ideal church God designed. This is what God did for them ... it is what He wants to do for us ... as we do what He wants for Him.

The work of the Spirit here is noteworthy. Besides His work of regeneration & transformation, His work on making us one with others who have been transformed is on display as well. This is what makes the church different from any other group. Lloyd Ogilvie in his writing on Acts<sup>32</sup> reminds us that human relationships, apart from the Spirit are based on the barter of mutual needs, interests, causes, or fears. Our earthly relationships are not typically driven by a desire for togetherness, but rather selfishness. Unless there is something we need either to get or provide, we are not drawn into friendship or partnership. Again, at our core, humans are fundamentally selfish. Ogilvie continues, “loneliness drives people into one place, but that does not mean that they are *together*, really.”

What we see among the first Christians is God’s purpose for His people, i.e., that they become one, with Him, and one with each other. The Spirit’s work of transformation inside of us yields the fruit of unselfish love. What we see in Acts 2.42-47 is an unfolding of that love as it was meant to be inside the church. A simple way to define the church is this:

the fellowship of those given by Christ to be to each other what He has been to them, so that together they can be to the world a demonstration of the new humanity He died and lives to make possible.<sup>33</sup>

What happened to cause local churches to lose sight of and experience the ideal? What can we do to get back this *unblemished authenticity* in the fellowship inside our congregations today?

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<sup>31</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Ogilvie, Lloyd J., and Lloyd J. Ogilvie. *Acts*. Vol. 28 of *The Preacher’s Commentary Series*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1983, p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Ogilvie, p. 72.

## Regaining a Sense of Awe

Here the original word refers to a holy fear or reverence for the divine presence. It describes the feeling produced when one realizes God is at hand.<sup>34</sup> Luke liked to use the term to describe how the fear and astonishment generated a positive response. We see it in his gospel:

- Luke 1:65: *Fear came on all those who lived around them, and all these things were being talked about throughout the hill country of Judea.*
- Luke 5:26: *Then everyone was astounded, and they were giving glory to God. And they were filled with awe and said, "We have seen incredible things today."*
- Luke 7:16: *Then fear came over everyone, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us," and "God has visited his people."*

We also see it here in Acts. Besides 2.43 we also have this passage:

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily, Acts 19.20 ESV.

Because of the wonders and signs mentioned in the second half of verse 43, many commentators want to make a distinction that the people filled with awe to which Luke references are those outside of the church, i.e., nonbelievers. They think verse 43 is set up to contrast the actions of the believers in verse 44. Certainly, the power of the miracles the apostles were working would have produced a healthy fear of the Lord for those Jews who had yet to come to Christ. The better view here is to let the wording speak for itself. *Everyone* was filled with awe ... believers and nonbelievers.

There are also some more negative events in the life of the early church that provoked the people to a sense of fear and awe:

- Judgment on Ananias and Sapphira (5.5, 11). It is said that *great fear* came upon the church because of this.
- The demonic overpowering of the seven sons of Sceva. When this became known, it resulted in: *everyone who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, [becoming] afraid, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high esteem (17.17).*

### ***There is more here than just amazement over miracles and wonders***

Modern readers living in an age when supernatural spiritual gifts worked by men have ceased may be quick to read over verse 43. The awe was not only in reaction to the miracles. There was more! Every Christian ... was amazed at how everything was working together to demonstrate that God was with them.

No miracles, signs, or wonders were required to know it. All the people had to do was look around and see the incredible oneness resulting from the Spirit's work of salvation. They all shared a common joy emanating from the forgiveness found in the Messiahs' sacrifice for their sin. They all knew what they deserved. They all knew what they had been given. This moved them all to a deep sense of holiness ...

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<sup>34</sup> MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*, Vol. 1, p. 85.

and awe/reverence of being in the presence of God. The Jewish sect they had come out of didn't matter. Jews from every walk of life, every different social background and class, and every educational level all were one. Togetherness like this wasn't the product of some human scheme ... it was the work of God, and they all knew it!

This is what we need today! What a revival our churches would experience if we rekindled that sense of awe before our holy God, bound together with our own sense of unworthiness. Later this text will describe their *joyful and sincere hearts*, 2.46. It was "unaffected joy." It was "exulting gladness."<sup>35</sup>

Their awe wasn't over the physical. It wasn't about buildings, church programs, or their own ability ... it was over the work of God going on inside of them and outside in their community.

## What are some things we can be in awe about today?

- God's presence in us for the purpose of sanctification and transformation, Acts 5.32; 2 Corinthians 3.18... despite our human frailty and sinfulness, Romans 7.23-25.
- God's work through the Spirit to make us one, Galatians 3.28; Colossians 3.11.
- God's work in fulfilling His purpose of reaching the lost through us, Matthew 28.18-20. We are nothing more than clay pots, 2 Timothy 2.20-21.
- God's sustaining power that helps us through the most severe of trials, 2 Corinthians 4.7-5.7; Ephesians 6.10-18.
- God's endless supply of hope that sustains us as we cope with the loss of our loved ones, and our own impending death, 1 Corinthians 15.51-58.

What are some other things that fill your heart with awe and joy when you think of God's amazing blessings?

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Walker, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 61

## Lesson 9

# They Were Together

## Acts 2.44a

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.

## Introduction

*Together.* What an amazing word! And what a fitting word to describe the interaction of the first *believers*. The Acts 2 church worked at fostering togetherness . . . of which we'll see the evidence of as we study further through the final verses of this chapter. When we think of being *together* – we think of people who have close and meaningful relationships with each other.

The word for *together* in our text is notoriously difficult to translate, occurring five times in Acts (1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 4:26). It seems to depict the gathered community, with a strong emphasis on their unity.<sup>36</sup> They were clearly drawn together in Christian fellowship. Some other translations describe this as their remaining together as a loyal group or being “very much” together.<sup>37</sup>

This was certainly the case for the early church. What can we do to build up our sense of togetherness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## What Threatens Our Togetherness

If we are committed to building up togetherness, first we need to understand the threats against it. In our time, there are so many things threatening our togetherness. First, we need to know that . . .

### *It is hard*

Being a living, functioning part of the body is not about:

- What we like
- What we prefer
- What we would stress
- What we want

We have each grown up in a society that stresses our individual rights. As a right we have been trained to be more concerned about our desires than God's purposes. However, if we come to allow the Spirit to fit us or knit us together inside the body – God can work through the church to achieve His eternal purpose.

We must be committed to doing hard things to fulfill God's expectation.

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<sup>36</sup> Polhill, John B. *Acts*. Vol. 26 of *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Newman, Barclay Moon, and Eugene Albert Nida. *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1972, p. 64.

### ***It requires effort***

Acts 16.21-25 is a great illustration of togetherness. Paul and Silas were beaten, jailed, and put in stocks. The Scripture shows us how in that very difficult situation, these two partners were singing and praying together. This made their peril, labor, and concern much lighter because they were together. It brought them closer together.

But it takes effort. We are not a bunch of independents running around serving God. It requires each of us to invest the effort to in being patient, forbearing, and suffering together. Sometimes it will be difficult to swallow our tongue and work together ... but the fruit of brotherly love will be worth it.

We must be committed to expend the required effort to make togetherness possible.

### ***Blessings***

It may sound ironic, but blessings can be a hindrance to our togetherness. Some congregations are blessed with financial resources. They must keep from growing stingy. Other congregations are blessed with talent. They must fight arrogance back. Some are blessed with song leaders, teachers, elders/deacons, people who really care ... working behind the scenes. Sometimes with an abundance of blessings, we can think we are the only ones who can perform a certain task. Blessings can also lead to satisfaction, where some are content to sit back and exert little effort.

Have we let our blessings impede our togetherness?

## **What Brings Us Together?**

Read 1 Corinthians 12.12-27.

### ***Our start***

For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink, 1 Corinthians 12.12-13.

We are all part of one body. We are members individually, but one. Note here how we all started the same way. We all had the same start – having been baptized into Jesus. Sometimes it is very easy to view each other through the lens of our disagreements and problems. We can look at someone as hardheaded, unlearned, and ignorant. We must remember that the other brother or sister has been washed in the blood – just like we have. We are brethren!

We are together because we share the same start ... going all the way back to baptism. This is a common blessing we share.

### ***Our purpose***

See 1 Corinthians 12.15-19. We are to function as a body – not as a member. There is a purpose for being in the body. It is to supply what is lacking to the other parts. Every part is necessary and important. We each function as an individual part inside a body that exists for the purpose of bringing glory to God and furthering the kingdom of our Lord.

### ***Our need***

See 1 Corinthians 12.20-22. To increase our togetherness, we all need to work in the most effective manner. Young people are needed for their energy, fresh ideas, enthusiasm, work, and questions. Older people are needed for their experience and wisdom. Families are needed for their contribution to growth, learning, and maturity. Leaders are needed who will stand up and work for the Lord.

### ***Our result***

See 1 Corinthians 12.25-27. We need to remember the big picture. As we focus on togetherness, taking the emphasis off ourselves, wants, and personal desires – close relationships are the result. If one rejoices, we all rejoice. If one sorrows, we all sorrow. Care for one another is key, Ephesians 4.15-16; Colossians 3.12-14.

## **The Early Church of Acts 2 Got it Right**

The church considered themselves one and acted like it. The extensiveness of their shared lives was evident to all. We all need to ask how true this is of our congregations today. We all have probably heard a story or two where members had been part of a congregation for years and still treated as a visitor by some. In a congregation that is truly committed to togetherness, this will almost never happen.

What happened on Pentecost is what the Lord wants for every person and every congregation.

## Lesson 10

# They Held All Things in Common

## Acts 2.44b-45

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.

## Introduction

Before we proceed very far into this lesson it is very important that we remember the context of the Acts 2 situation. The first 3000 souls in the new church were saved during a major feast event for the Jewish people: Pentecost. Each year during this festival there was a vast influx of Jews from around the world that filled Jerusalem. The inns could not accommodate all the people, so it was not unusual for people to open their homes and share with their guests. After their salvation, many of those people, who lived far from Jerusalem, stayed around to be part of the work of God. Those who lived in the city demonstrated their love by keeping those people as they worked together. It is also thought that by their conversion to Christianity, many Jews lost their jobs and livelihoods, so the rest of the believers would have helped them meet their needs. On top of this would have been poor saints who were always needing help.

Some have taken these verses and have used them to promote communism. To do so is to twist the text into something that did not happen. As individuals had needs, or *from time to time*, people would sell a possession or property to meet those specific needs. We may miss this in English, the Greek verb tenses in the wording of v. 45 are all *imperfect*, meaning that these actions were on occasion and not as part of a permanent practice. It has been suggested that the reason Barnabas is given so much attention with his giving as detailed in chapter 4 is that this was something not everyone in the Christian community was doing. Their *having all things in common*, simply means they shared their belongings. In other words, they brought together what they owned and used them together to meet the individual needs that were coming up.

Property ownership was still a practice, as seen in 2.46. The decision to sell these things was done on a purely voluntary basis – no apostle commanded anyone to sell anything.<sup>38</sup> It is also important to note that there is no other record of these kind of actions being practiced in any other church of the New Testament. The happenings of Acts 2 appear to be a unique occurrence to that church for the unique circumstances occurring when the church began during a Jewish festival in Jerusalem. The practice of Acts 2.44-45 was never intended to be universal or permanent.

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<sup>38</sup> See Acts 5.4. Peter makes it clear to Ananias that no one forced him to sell his property and that all the proceeds were fully under his control as to what to do with them.



The main thing we should pull away from these verses is the amazing generosity practiced by the first Christians. Are we close to being as generous? The new converts of Acts 2 not only sacrificed their present reserves of cash and goods – but also their future – in acts that demonstrated sacrificial love.<sup>39</sup>

## The Practice of Generosity

The ancient writer Chrysostom left us his thoughts on these verses:

Observe the increase of piety. They cast away their riches, and rejoiced, and had great gladness, for greater were the riches they received without labour. None reproached, none envied, none grudged; no pride, no contempt was there. The poor man knew no shame, the rich no haughtiness.<sup>40</sup>

What we have with the practice of the early church is a beautiful expression of sacrificial love, in its purest form. It was really nothing new to the Jews as there was a very strong tradition in the Old Testament of caring for the poor. Deuteronomy 26.12 prescribed:

“When you have finished paying all the tenth of your produce in the third year, the year of the tenth, you are to give it to the Levites, resident aliens, fatherless children, and widows, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

The principle of generosity denoted here remains the same for God’s people of all time. While the New Testament makes this a matter of the heart and never goes into specific amounts that are required to give, we do read of two examples of the church going into action:

- Acts 2.45: *they distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.*
- Acts 4.34-35: *for there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need.*

Later the apostle John would write:

If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God’s love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth, 1 John 3.17-18.

It has been said that “Christian fellowship is Christian caring, and Christian caring is Christian sharing.”<sup>41</sup>

## What is the Purpose of the Church?

Through the saving act of Jesus, God has created a people, a saved people, who have been set aside for the very distinct purpose of displaying the wisdom of God to our world and to all the hosts of heaven.

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<sup>39</sup> MacArthur, Acts, Vol. 1., p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> S. John Chrysostom. *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Acts of the Apostles: Parts I & II, Hom. I–LV.* A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church. Oxford; London: John Henry Parker; F. and J. Rivington, 1851–1852, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World.* The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, p. 84.

This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him, Ephesians 3.8-12.

The job is the church<sup>42</sup> is to live in such a way that people can see that God is real.

What does that look like?

Much of this work is carried out through the exercise of good deeds. Remember Paul’s writing in Ephesians 2.10. Why were you recreated?

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

Your existence as a son or daughter is for the purpose of doing good works or deeds. Ephesians 1.12 says you and I exist spiritually for the purpose of *bringing praise to His glory*. We bring praise to God’s glory by the exercise of good works. It is the good deeds of Jesus’ disciples that convince people that God is glorious.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven, Matthew 5.16.

Paul also speaks to the purpose of our salvation in Titus 2.14:

He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works.

Jesus not only died to redeem and cleanse us from sin, he also died to create a people who are eager, zealous, or hungry to do good unto others. Local churches need to be busy thinking up creative ways to do good to people so that Jesus has not died in vain, and the wisdom of God is being displayed.<sup>43</sup>

When the church is busy doing good deeds, the result will be just like the Acts 2 account where they *enjoyed the favor of all the people*, Acts 2.47.

## What Good Deeds Look Like

Obviously, we see an example of generosity and sharing here in our main text, Acts 2.44-45. But there is more. We look no further than the actions of Tabitha (Dorcas) in Acts 9.36-39:

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<sup>42</sup> By using the term “church” here, let’s direct our thoughts more toward what the individual “people” or members of the local church are doing, rather than the collective actions of the local church as a whole. When we view benevolence primarily through the lens of corporate church action, the individual responsibility for doing good works often seems to be left in the background as many often become content to allow the collective actions of the church seemingly fulfill their obligation for them. The collective efforts of the church of the New Testament appear to be focused solely on assistance to brethren, while the individual work has no limitations placed upon it. Please read the following paragraphs while seeking to make the application to yourself personally. You were recreated by God to do good works. How effective are you in meeting the needs of the poor and destitute.... In the congregation and without?

<sup>43</sup> Piper, John. *Sermons from John Piper (1980–1989)*. Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007.

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which is translated Dorcas). She was always doing good works and acts of charity. About that time she became sick and died. After washing her, they placed her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples heard that Peter was there and sent two men to him who urged him, "Don't delay in coming with us." Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. And all the widows approached him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

It appears Dorcas was part of a group of widowed Christians who spent their time making clothes and distributing them to those in need. Good deeds are actions by which people's needs are met, especially in meeting needs that help those in distressing situations. This goes right along with Paul's admonition in Titus 3.14:

Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works for pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

What should be the source of the time, effort, skill, and money needed to make these things happen?

Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share, 1 Timothy 6.17-18.

### ***Good deeds are not limited to only our people.***

While the actions of the church body as a collective appear to be limited to helping saints from the treasury, no such limitations were placed on the individual. Let us be careful in our stand for what has been called "limited benevolence," that we do not ignore our individual responsibility to all:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work *for the good of all*, especially for those who belong to the household of faith, Galatians 6.10.

See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and *for all*, 1 Thessalonians 5.15.

But If your *enemy* is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head, Romans 12.20.

Christians must never ignore the misery and destitution of the world. To meet the needs, we may need to be prepared to reorient our lifestyles so that we can maximize good deeds for all, as well as those who are part of the faith.

## **Conclusion**

The church of Acts 2 was a generous church. The church of 2022 can and must be characterized by the same type of generosity . . . demonstrated through sacrificial giving, donation of skill, and supply of time. We need to get more out of ourselves and begin looking with a keen eye on how we can serve others. This is the type of church that will produce a credible witness that moves people to glorify our Father in heaven and cause us to have favor with all men.

Lesson 11

# **They Integrated Everyone in the Body**

*Acts 2.45-46a*

## **Introduction**

Our focus in this study has been on the beatitudes found at the beginning of the sermon on the mount in

Lesson 12

# **They Were Filled with Praise**

*Acts 2.47a*

## **Introduction**

There are rich rewards for those who take God at His word and follow Him. The Beatitudes serve as a life that follow us only as far as the grave and come to an end.

Lesson 13

# **They Had Favor with All the People**

*Acts 2.47b*

## **Introduction**

What happened that day on the side of a mountain by the Sea of Galilee changed the world forever.