

“They Devoted Themselves”

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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Acts 2:36-47 NIV

[Peter’s conclusion to his message on the Day of Pentecost, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit:]

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

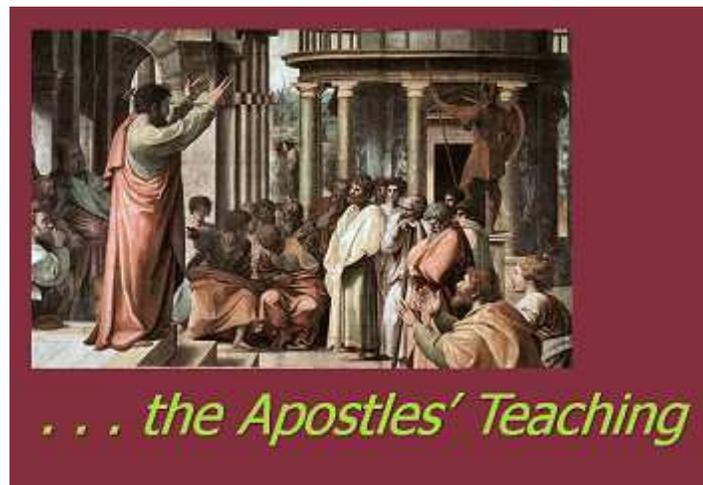
They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.



“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

With these words, in Acts 2:42, the evangelist Luke offers a concise picture of the life of the earliest Christians. I thought it would be appropriate today, as we prepare for our annual meeting, to review these traits of the very earliest Christian church, the church in Jerusalem just after the resurrection of Jesus and the first preaching of his resurrection from the dead. The portrait of the Christian church during these earliest days suggests a foundational pattern for church life that we can follow as we look toward the revitalization of our own local congregation. So let’s look at what the congregation did in First Christian Church, Jerusalem.



The first item Luke mentions is *the apostles’ teaching*. The teaching of the apostles — those who had followed Jesus before his death, resurrection and ascension — was not only what they remembered about the things Jesus did and said, but also how they *now* understood those things in the light of his rising from the dead and vindication as Messiah of Israel. The teaching of the apostles eventually became the basis for our New Testament, but it took several decades before their reminiscences, and their reflection upon the events they had witnessed, were translated from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek and collected in written form by the four Gospel authors,

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Meanwhile, the apostles' teaching circulated in oral form in the early Christian community.

Lest we suppose that information transmitted by word of mouth is less stable than written material, we need to remind ourselves that Jewish culture placed a strong emphasis on memorization, especially of sacred writings. Writing and written materials were not as common in the ancient world as in our world; we have had printing, for example, only since the fifteenth century. When a piece of what scholars call "oral tradition" is transmitted in a community, many people remember and recite it, and this helps to control any errors that creep in. Tell a familiar story to your grandchildren, for example, one they have heard many times before, and then try to change the way the story turns out; you'll find they won't let you get away with that! We can be certain that the stories of what Jesus did and said didn't change much between the time the disciples first related them and the time they began to be written down, perhaps a generation later as the original witnesses were beginning to pass away.

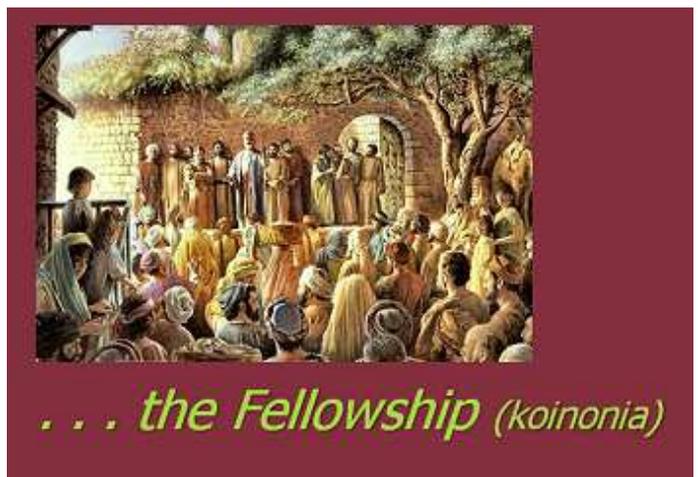
But what, specifically, was "the apostles' teaching" to which those early Jerusalem Christians devoted themselves? Of course, it consisted of portions of the account of Jesus' life and ministry that eventually wound up in the Gospels. But it was more than that. For a clue to what was involved, notice what Luke says the risen Jesus told his disciples on the road to Emmaus: "'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

The Scriptures of the early Christians were not their own writings, of course, but the Hebrew Scriptures — what we call the Old Testament. And what Jesus was explaining to his disciples was how what he had done, in proclaiming the kingdom of God and then embodying God's new creation in his rising from the dead, was exactly what the Hebrew Scriptures had been driving toward for centuries. The emergence of God's kingdom on the human scene, and the working out of the Creator's plan for the renewal of a world he made and called "very good," was the hidden message of Moses and the Prophets of Israel, now revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Messiah Jesus. Luke tells us, also, that during the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension to the Father he appeared to his disciples, teaching them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). The "apostles' teaching" of the early Christian church was this message: In sending Israel's Messiah and raising him from the dead, God has done something to turn *all* human history around — to direct it back toward what he had in mind for the whole world in the first place.

Teaching, in the Christian church, may cover a wide range of important and worthwhile subjects: how we need to personally commit our lives to Jesus and receive God's forgiveness, how we can more faithfully serve the Lord and grow in the faith, how knowing Jesus is the key to a happy and blessed life, and so much more. But in all this we must never stray from "the apostles' teaching" — that the gospel of Messiah Jesus is the working out of God's plan for Israel, and through Israel for the entire world.

Luke tells us, in the second place, that the earliest Christian church devoted itself to *fellowship*. The Greek word here is *koinonia*, and the English word

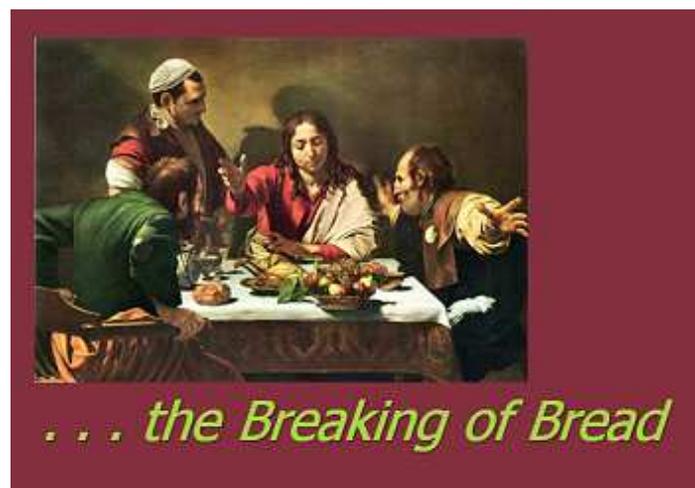
"fellowship" is a weak attempt to translate this important New Testament idea. This "fellowship" is more than just having a friendly little get-together with coffee and doughnuts, or even a carry-in meal. *Koinonia* means a *sharing* of life, a *participation* in a family in which each member knows, and cares about, the needs, the pain,



the joys, the successes of the other members. In our passage from Acts, Luke tells us how the Jerusalem Christians lived out this fellowship, this *koinonia*: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

This idea of the church's shared life is pervasive in the New Testament. We find it in the letters of Paul, where he urges much the same sort of common participation. An example is Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Or, again, in Romans 12:13-16: "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another." If any member suffers, Paul reminds us elsewhere, we all suffer.

For the members of First Christian Church, Jerusalem, it was never a matter of "just me and Jesus, my *personal Savior*." No, Jesus is my Savior *because I belong to his body*, and share in the common life of my fellow believers. In our individualistic American culture it's sometimes hard to get this concept across, but we dare not ignore it if we're going to be the church of the New Testament.



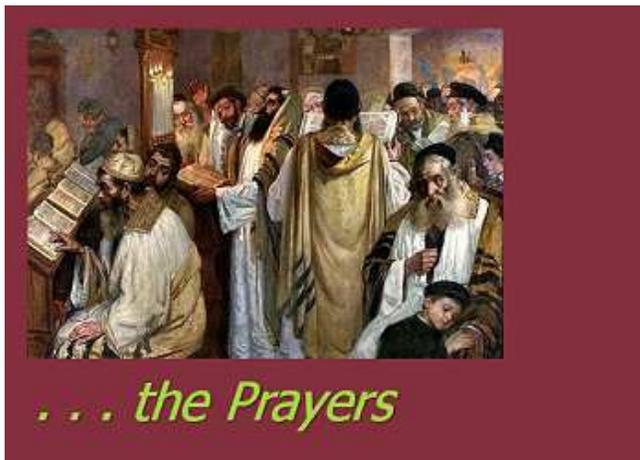
Thirdly, Luke tells us that the first Christians of Jerusalem devoted themselves to *the breaking of bread*. He states, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46). Sharing in a common meal is one way of living out the *koinonia* we've just been describing. It was a central feature of early Christian gatherings, as we learn from Paul's letter to the Galatians; there he makes it clear that refusing to eat together with other believers, for whatever reason, is a denial of the gospel and a violation of the unity we have in Jesus.

The common meal, the "breaking of the loaf" (as the Greek text has it), is the origin of the Lord's

Supper or Holy Communion, when the church gathers around the loaf and the cup as Jesus commanded us to do. The shared meal is the sign of *koinonia* in the church's life. Indeed, Paul uses the word in describing the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (10:16-17). Paul makes it clear, in 1 Corinthians 12, that the Lord's Supper is a shared meal, and that if any worshiper is allowed to go hungry while other stuff themselves that isn't really the Lord's Supper they're observing.

Today, the "breaking of bread" of the first Christians has become just a short ceremony in the worship of many churches. But originally it was a regular meal, where needs were met and everyone present was satisfied with the good things of God. When we come to the Lord's Table during our worship time, we need to remember that it stands for something much greater than a small wafer and a glass of juice. It stands for "breaking bread" together as we remember, and minister to, the needs of every member of our local part of the body of Christ.

Finally, Luke tells us, in our passage from Acts, that those first Christians in Jerusalem devoted themselves "to prayer." The life of prayer was a central feature of their life together. But that didn't just mean that these Christians prayed individually, as they felt led from time to



time. The Greek text reads, literally, “they devoted themselves . . . to *the prayers*.” What prayers were “*the prayers*”? These first Christians were still in Jerusalem, where the Jewish Temple was located. The Temple was not just the place where the priests offered the sacrifices required by the Law of Moses; the Temple site was a large area where many synagogues, or Jewish assemblies, also met for prayer and study. In Acts 3, the very next chapter, Luke tells us that “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer” (3:1). The members of First Christian Church, Jerusalem, had set times for prayer. While the church was in Jerusalem, before heavy persecution set in, they took part in the regular prayer life of the Jewish community of which they were a part. And, I have no doubt, once this was no longer possible the churches established regular prayer times of their own, as they have to this day.

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It's important for each of us to pray daily about the issues we face in life, and to offer thanks to the Lord, in faith, for his answers. But if our church life is to follow the pattern of the earliest Christians we also need to pray “*the prayers*,” the prayers the whole church prays together such as the Psalms, or our Lord's Prayer, and perhaps others. And many of the hymns we sing should also be prayers addressed to God — not just *songs about us*, how *we* feel and how much *we* love the Lord and need him, but hymns praising God and telling of his glory and greatness.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the [common life], to the breaking of bread and to [the

prayers].” We've studied each of these aspects of the life of First Christian Church, Jerusalem. And Luke tells us they *devoted themselves* to them. They didn't just listen to the apostles' teaching once in a while, or share their common life when it was convenient, or break bread together when it suited them, or pray if they felt like it. They devoted themselves to these things, and through that devotion thousands came to faith in Messiah Jesus in those earliest days of the church. I'm suggesting Acts 2:42 as a pattern to guide us, here in First Christian Church, Hamilton, as we ponder the future of this congregation and its ministry in this community.

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