

The Church of Old, the Church Made New

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Acts 2:38-47

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Acts 2:42

There are two sentences that stick out at me initially in today’s reading from Acts. The passage concerns the early church just after the death and resurrection of Jesus and is related to us just after Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem. But there is also something easy to miss in the passage and we will look at that in a few minutes and discover a surprising key about the vitality of the early church.

The first statement that draws our attention is the report that 3000 people¹ became Christians, seemingly on the spot after hearing Peter’s sermon, were baptized and joined the Jesus movement. It has led some scholars to question the veracity of Luke, the one who recorded this metric of early church growth. However, it is important to remember that this event took place only two months following the death and resurrection of Jesus. No doubt many in the city had heard Jesus’ teaching with their own ears. One of the confirmands after reading the Passion with Ms Reynolds asked her what happened to Jesus’ adoring crowds on Palm Sunday by the end of Holy Week? They seemed to have disappeared. Here’s part of the answer. Followers of Jesus still existed in Jerusalem and its environs. At this festival, many of them were in the city. Knowing what happened to Jesus, many followers must have been unsure what would come next. Peter’s sermon answered that: Jesus was still ‘alive’ and his followers were still continuing his movement. They were not shy about asking people to join them. A great number of them did, that day.

The second statement that has drawn much notice is the report that the early church members ‘sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.’² Depending on your economic perspective this was either wonderful or crazy. We do know within ten years the church in Jerusalem was in such need that Paul took up a collection for them in the Greek churches he had founded.³ I suspect the report in Acts is more a statement about the

¹ Acts 2:41.

² Acts 2:45.

³ See Acts 24:17; 1Corinthians 16:1-4; 2Corinthians 8:18-21; and Romans 15:25-28.

generous nature of the first disciples in the early church rather than a description of the economic requirements for membership. It just tell us how much they cared for each other.

This leads us to a less-noticed comment in the passage about that first church of Jesus. Luke related, “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*”⁴ This passage is more hidden amidst the splashier commentary on the economics of First Century Christianity and its explosive numerical growth. But this comment is key to seeing the reasons behind the vitality of the early church. Just in case we miss it, Luke repeated it again, for emphasis.

And day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.⁵

What about that as a description of a church? Let me make a simple and, I hope, a provocative point. Does that sound like our church?

First, let us open up these words to make sure we understand what the words tell us this church was like. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” *The apostles’ teaching* means they dedicated themselves to study of scripture and to the apostle’s understanding of what we now call the Old Testament. Later the apostles’ teaching about Jesus and the Christian way was recorded and became our New Testament. But a careful attention to the Bible was at the center of their life together. *Fellowship* is the usual English translation for *koinonia*. It was typified by the early Christians’ willingness to love one another and to assist one another. Sometimes this word is also translated *communion*, the word we usually think refers to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. To tell you the truth it does mean both and the next phrase, *the breaking of bread* makes that explicit. Their life was formed around the Lord’s Supper. Remember how the two on the road to Emmaus encountered Jesus and recognized him in the breaking of the bread?⁶ It was in the sacrament that Jesus came to them over and over again. For them, the risen Jesus was not just a few ideas or memories of his moral views. Rather, he was spiritually present to them whenever they gathered in his name⁷ and especially when they broke bread together around his table. Luke also says they devoted themselves to the *prayers*. The importance of prayer to the church perhaps need not be commented on. I will only say the church that devotes itself to pray is a church constantly seeking God and God’s presence. And is that not the purpose of the church?

⁴ Acts 2:42.

⁵ Acts 2:46-47.

⁶ Luke 24:30-31.

⁷ Matthew 18:20.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Now, my question: *does this sound like our church?* I suspect to many of us it does not. Why not? Though there is debate in the modern church about what to believe, what strikes me about this description of the First Century Church is not their uniformity of belief, but their unity of behavior. There is an old saying in theology, “As the people pray, so the people believe.” Note that there seems not to be a move in this text to get all people to believe the same thing about Jesus. Instead there is an expression of their commonality. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” They studied together, they loved one another, they made the Lord’s Supper the center of their worship life, and they prayed. Their life together resulted in dynamic spiritual formation of the early disciples. When you live in a community like that, it shapes you and makes you a better disciple of Jesus. The better we are at that, the more people outside the church know it and want to be part of such a life-changing, miracle working *koinonia*.

A second thought about the difference between them and us. If you look around not just at our church but at others today, you see very, very few which really grasp the church’s primary mission. Some churches are great at social work. Some are great at being families or clubs. Some are great at keeping alive an ancient religion. Some are good at moral education. Some are good at calling more Christians. There is a lot of debate about what the church’s primary focus should be and should not be. Congregations fight about politics, worship styles, language, money, sex and anything else we can. How do we get focused on what the church should be? Listen to this again: “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” Institutions that are confused about their purpose need to rediscover their original purpose. If our church doesn’t look like that early church with vibrant fellowship, people concerned about one another, devoting themselves to the study of Scripture, to the sacraments, and to prayer, then perhaps we need to practice what they did. This is the church of old and could be our church made new.... “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*”

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