

And They Devoted Themselves

Acts 2.42-47

June 2021

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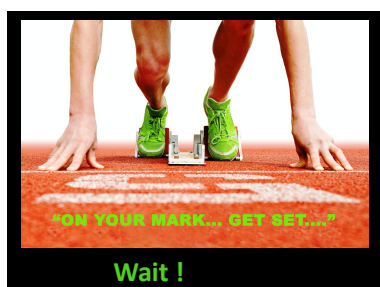
⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Introduction



The last two months have seen us trace some big Gospel moments. Before Barbara and I arrived you marked the Cross on Good Friday and Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Then a few weeks ago we walked together through Ascension and Pentecost.

I spoke about how the risen Jesus told his disciples to go and wait in Jerusalem which they did as active preparation until they 'were all together and in one place' on Pentecost Sunday.

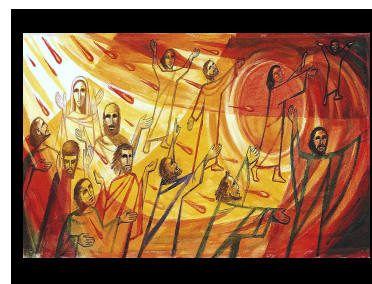


My message was that to apply this we too need to actively prepare ourselves for God's next thing and avoid temptation to try and make it happen in our own energies.

My Ascension Sunday summary was: "To your marks, Get Set, WAIT!"

Then on Pentecost Sunday we invoked the Holy Spirit afresh to come among us and up on us.

Towards that condition of being prepared we sought to be all together and in one place which brought us to this seating in-the-round.



I saw some of you glowing with joy that day and have since heard how encouraging it was to be refreshed by the Holy Spirit.

Today we begin the green growing season of the Church year after Pentecost so I want to go back to Pentecost Monday – or the day after Pentecost to look at what new born churches might do.

Q1. Having the full Gospel in hand and being empowered by the Holy Spirit, what might a church do?

Where might you invest its first and best energies?

That is the question I want to turn to.

Before we go to the answer, we may need to assure you about something.

From the first contact Barbara and I had with the Parish Nominators we were told:

“People are tired, tired yet eager.”

Since arriving we recognise that. It has been a tough few years for this little flock and some wounds heal slowly. There is a tiredness so it would be unwise to roll out an ambitious plan and get you all busy.

So please hear this: God does not overload his children.

Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light which is what St Matthew’s needs: an easy yoke and a light burden.

For Barbara and I we also don’t want to run ourselves ragged in performance mode.

So please hear what I say in terms of focus and smart application rather than as more to take on or be busy with. As my American friends might say: “It’s about keeping the main thing the main thing and being free to let the rest go.”

So, with that reassurance let’s pick up the question:

Q1. Having the full Gospel in hand and being empowered by the Holy Spirit, what might a church do?

Where might you invest its limited first and best energies?

A1. The answer comes in a single sentence: (Verse 42)

Acts 2

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and the *koinonia* -fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the **prayers**.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

From the start they ‘devoted’ themselves to four things.

In my reading of the New Testament the Church was soon doing more than this but for the new born body of Christ, these four were what they gave their best to.

I suggest that for tired people eager to grow this is very helpful.

Let’s consider:

#1 The Apostle’s Teaching.

Immediately we have a word that meant one thing when written and means something else today so let’s get that clear.

In the language of the Bible, ‘teaching’ involved some authority. It can still do but not so explicitly.

Biblical teaching was largely about instruction, training and even disciplining.

Church teachers were there to tell people how to live their lives as disciples and as church.

We see this in a typical Pauline epistle. He taught by first setting out the Gospel of what God had done in Christ. In modern terms he defined reality. Then he would say: “Therefore” and flow into instruction.

On the basis of what we believe and experience of God I instruct to live in this Christ shaped reflection of the Cross and Resurrection as the Holy Spirit empowers you.

My point is that the Apostle's teaching was the Apostle's instruction for individual life and church life. It was comparable to the Law or 'Instruction' of Moses in the Torah thus of the first order.

Meanwhile we moderns are more interested in information and inspiration so we might make our own decisions. Our idea of teaching is conveying information to empower good practice and decision making. I wonder how many people even look to the Church leaders for life instruction? Consequently, the church can be somewhat woolly about how to live the faith.

2000 years on we Anglicans consider Bishops as successors of the first Apostles. I don't need to tell that some bishops are in line with first century apostolic teaching and others are obviously not. There are wheat and tares to discern among the purple shirts and blouses!

At its best, preaching in church today is in line with Apostolic preaching as is being described here on Pentecost Monday. Good Apostolic teaching today is like gold, rare, bright and valuable.

#2 The Fellowship

Next on the list of what the new church devoted itself to was something translated 'Fellowship'. I wonder what that suggests to our modern ears? Some feminists note that this is about 'fellows' so not inclusive. OK Point!

Meanwhile Church people use this to describe social time with cups of tea. That is so inadequate!

κοινωνία / *koinonia*

=

'Fellowship'

=

a shared participation,
association or communion.

So #2 priority in the list of what the first church devoted itself to is also a problem in English.

The Greek term being translated is *Koinonia* which simply means 'common life'. *Koinonia*/Fellowship is about the way we draw our life from the same source and thereby live the one life.

The common or shared life of the church is our baptism in Jesus Christ. We share his life, his word, his spirit. That is our fellowship.

Again, we Moderns and Westerners in particular are not primed to recognise this.

If I understand Maori culture correctly, they have more chance of seeing this:

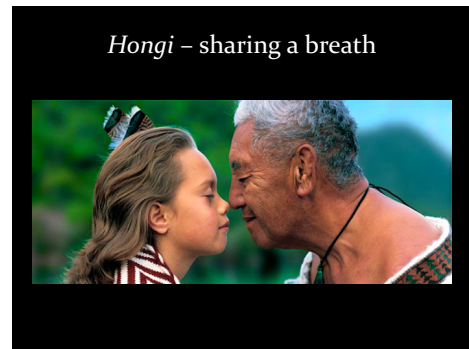
Like other collectivist cultures Maori might say: Because the tribe is, I am.

Their individual identity and being is premised on the whanau, hapu and iwi.

In church terms it becomes, because of God's Church founded in Christ, I am a Child of God.

Maori culture works hard through whakapapa to establish the connectivity to common ancestors so there may be peace and unity. That is like affirming fellowship to assure peace.

That is then celebrated with a hongi which in pre-Covid times was the sharing of a breath or a spiritual linkage.



What that requires of church members is doing what we can to affirm our linkage in Jesus Christ as our Lord and share in his Spirit.

So, to make it practical, being devoted to the Koinonia-Fellowship is not about male bonding or church social time. It is about attending to the things that enable and reinforce a society where everyone is linked together through being rooted and spiritually grounded in Christ as our common life. It involves dealing with any barriers that form between people.

I think every person has at the same time desires for personal freedom and desires for community. We want to make our own choices and, we want to belong and be connected. From about the age of 2 years old these two desires can be in tension!

The way of Christ would prioritise being well connected in Christ over personal freedom or personal entitlement. Mature Christians get this because when we all draw on Christ as our common life God is glorified and the Church shines.

But as you may all know, It is not easy and can be very challenging so it needs to be a conscious priority hence devotion priority #2 attending to the *Koinonia*/fellowship of the church.

Later in this service there will an opportunity to do this with what the Paul referred to as the 'Holy Kiss' but we rename as 'The Peace'.¹

Devotion priorities #1 and #2 are work enough, especially Koinonia/Fellowship.

#3 The Breaking of Bread

Acts 2

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the *koinonia* -fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Third on the list of what the new church devoted itself to was what we would call 'Holy Communion' or the 'Lord's Supper'.

You might know that for many centuries and into the Protestant Reformation Christians worked very hard on teasing this out. Why would breaking bread be such a high priority? Should Christians do this every day, once a month or once a year? And what is it really all about?

I can only give this about 90 seconds here. My answer is:

- Jesus provided this opportunity for us to meet together with him at the cross.

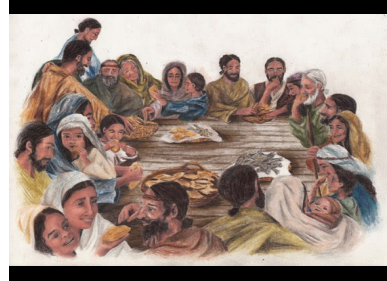
¹ See Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12 & 1 Thessalonians 5:26.

- Our understanding needs to hinge on the word ‘remembering’ as the people of Israel remembered their liberation from Egypt in a way that made it personal, real and corporate.
- Breaking bread is about covenant affirmation binding those involved into the common vine of Jesus and the bread broken as our common life.

When bread is broken in faithful obedience, Christ is with us and we are fed in his image.

One big difference from today was that in the early church bread was broken in the context of a meal just as Jesus had done so in the context of a Passover meal.

This was a real meal with the whole household of faith round the table and not just the symbolic bread and wine received in a house of worship. To imagine this, think of the Hope Centre and the church space being combined for a communal meal involving broken bread and a shared cup.



#4 The Prayers / Prayer

Acts 2

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and the *koinonia* -fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the **prayers**.

The fourth point of devotion was Prayer, or ‘The Prayers’.

Coming together before God in the Spirit of Christ to pray is so important, an essential devotion.

Again, some modern Christians get this, others do not.

Personally, I think St Matthew’s is fortunate to have no option. Unless the Lord builds the house the labourers will work in vain. (Ps. 127)

We need to recognise this need to birth and seal everything in prayer where Jesus is Lord.

Yesterday, 9 people met at 8:00 a.m. round a table and via Zoom to do this. I was very encouraged and God was so clearly with us. Corporate prayer is worthy of our devotion. I think we need to somehow do more of this.

Conclusion

So doing church smart does not involve more activity or programmes but doing the important life determining things well.

I have looked at verse 42. If we devote ourselves as the first church did we may expect to experience what followed which we read in verses.43 and 47.

⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And then down a few verses to v.47

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

I’d love to see that.