

GIVING: STUDY MATERIAL

Giving: Bible Study based on Acts 2:42-47

Read Acts 2:42-47

The passage is fairly easy to understand in terms of the picture it describes of the early Christian community. Its challenge, however, comes in discerning how to apply it.

Is the life of this community to be taken as a model for Christian life today? If so, it would be hard to deny that most Christians are not hitting the mark on some key points. If it this is not how the church community ought to be, then what do we do with the passage?

We need to remind ourselves that the passage follows directly on from the story of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit has been so surprisingly and powerfully experienced not only by the gathered remaining followers of Jesus, but also by many others in who have gathered in Jerusalem for the festival (2:1-13). Peter has given the first Christian evangelistic sermon, explaining that what the people were experiencing was in fact the gift of God's Spirit promised by the prophet Joel for the end-times now poured out on them by the risen and ascended Christ (2:14-36). The response to this sermon is remarkable: we learn that three thousand people repent, are baptized and join the Jerusalem Christian community (2:37-41). So what kind of church have they come into?

Most of the activities described as characterising the community's life are uncontroversial and are what we know we ought to be doing in the 21st century. Verse 42 tells us there's teaching, fellowship, eating together, and prayer – all common Christian practices for ages. The middle two of these may be especially significant - fellowship (the Greek word is the well-known *koinonia*) and eating together, mundane as they seem, are not activities we just happen to do but are essential acts of Christian life.

Which are the most important characteristics of our church life?

The term Luke uses for "fellowship" is a much broader term than our English word. Essentially, "fellowship" means "joint participation" or "sharing something in common." It is, therefore, a kind of partnership. In Philippians 2:1, the term is used of a common sharing in the Holy Spirit. In Philippians 3:10 and 1 Peter 4:13, it is used of sharing in Christ's sufferings. In Galatians 2:9, it appears to be a sharing together in ministry.

What does fellowship mean in your context?

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Teaching and prayer are the more obvious as Christian activities, but do we acknowledge their centrality? What takes up most time at your Church Meeting?

There is some debate about the precise nature of the third and fourth activities: Does “the breaking of bread” refer specifically to the Lord’s Supper or more generally to shared regular meals? The answer is probably both, as 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 suggests that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated as a part of regular meals in the early church. The fourth item says “the prayers,” not simply “prayer” as some translations have it; this probably refers to the set prayers occurring at the temple (see Acts 3:1).

Verses 46-47a provide a similar additional description of the community’s life, repeating the ideas of their fellowship and shared meals, while adding their praising of God and the goodwill experienced by them among the rest of the people.

However, it is verses 43-45 that tend to cause the most debate about this passage. Verse 43 describes the miracles done in the community.

To what extent should miraculous activity ought to characterise Christian life today?

God is the initiator of the miracles - contrary to many of the major translations, including the NRSV, the Greek text says not that they were done “by” the apostles but that they were done “through” (Gk *dia*) them.

The chief challenge of the passage, however, clearly comes in verses 44-45. The members of the community sold their possessions, held all things jointly, and distributed to others as there was need.

Ought all Christians to follow this example?

The most common expression of “fellowship” in the New Testament is that of sharing financial resources – giving:

Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality (Romans 12:13).

Now the one who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with the one who teaches it (Galatians 6:6,).

And as you Philippians know, at the beginning of my gospel ministry, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in this matter of giving and receiving except you alone (Philippians 4:15, emphasis mine).

If Acts 2:44-45 is Luke’s further description of what fellowship looked like in the newly-born church in Jerusalem, then his emphasis would fall on the fellowship of sharing

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one's material goods with others. While the actual term is not used here, we see a further example of this kind of *koinonia* (fellowship) in Acts 4:

34 For there was no one needy among them, because those who were owners of land or houses were selling them and bringing the proceeds from the sales 35 and placing them at the apostles' feet. The proceeds were distributed to each, as anyone had need. 36 So Joseph, a Levite who was a native of Cyprus, called by the apostles Barnabas (which is translated "son of encouragement"), 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and placed it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:34-37).

In this passage (and chapter 4), selling all of one's possessions was clearly the practice of the early church.

17 He said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 "Which ones?" he asked. Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself." 20 The young man said to him, "I have wholeheartedly obeyed all these laws. What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 But when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he was very rich (Matthew 19:17-22).

"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide yourselves purses that do not wear out—a treasure in heaven that never decreases, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys" (Luke 12:33).

"In the same way therefore not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33).

These new believers were like newly-weds – they just couldn't bear to be apart from one another. Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayers are all corporate activities, things the Jerusalem church did together. The competitiveness attitude of the first disciples has gone (Mark 9:34, 46; 10:35-41.) Now these disciples are generous. They are not claiming anything as their own but, instead, are disposing of their personal property to meet the needs of others. This is more than togetherness – this is unity. This is not just human affection – this is Christian love.

While it is not hard to find examples of the early church's other described activities throughout the New Testament, the New Testament as a whole does not indicate that early Christians broadly lived in this radical communal fashion. We do not even find it in Acts outside of the original Jerusalem community. We certainly find concern for the

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poor and concern about economic oppression in places like Paul's letters, James, and Revelation (and the rest of Acts), but all other indications about Christian living, whether direct or implicit, are that Christians retained their homes and basic possessions. That should be a huge relief for us.

However, we are not let off the hook - where God is especially at work and where God's presence is especially experienced, such giving and sharing is the natural Christian response.

What message do we send to the world about God by our own attitudes and deeds concerning our possessions?

How can our own lives better reflect what God has done for us and the living presence of Christ in our midst so that we hold all things in common?

A comment about the Ministry and Mission Fund

In the URC we have got ourselves locked into thinking that what we pay for M&M (Ministry and Mission) entitles us to a portion of a minister. We have forgotten the prophetic hallmark of the early church that they held all things in common. Under the principle of the early Christian Church that all things are held in common (Acts 2 and 4) the Ministry and Mission Fund was set up to provide in partnership with local churches and Synods, financial resources needed to train, equip and remunerate ministry, to support centralised services, and the world-wide work of the Church. It is a fundamental belief of the United Reformed Church that congregations share in the financial cost of the programmes agreed by Assembly by making an annual commitment to the M&M Fund. This is fundamental to whom we are as a denomination together – a small church with a generous heart.

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