

# Snapshot of the Early Church

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).*

## Devotional

After Peter's great sermon on Pentecost Sunday, 3,000 persons were baptized into the church (Acts 2:41). Immediately, Luke gives us a portrait of these earliest Christians. Here are some further thoughts on several characteristics Dr. Boice discussed on pp. 21–22.<sup>1</sup>

First, they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. They already knew the Old Testament thoroughly, and now it was necessary for the apostles to tell them about the life of Jesus, and to show them how the Christ fulfilled everything in the old covenant. These believers had no disdain for "head knowledge." Today, if the church wants to hear the apostles teach, they need only study the New Testament, with an understanding of the Old Testament as its background and foundation.

Second, they devoted themselves to fellowship. They got together and enjoyed themselves. Sometimes we Christians feel as if we are doing something wrong or substandard if we just get together for a party without also having Bible study and prayer. That is not a biblical attitude. As restored images of God, we minister to one another and build up one another by simply being around one another. God has created good times of play as well as hard times of suffering to help create this sense of community at the core of His kingdom.

Third, the believers devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. This phrase points to the Lord's Supper. (Ordinary eating has already been covered by the statement that they enjoyed fellowship.) Throughout the Old Testament, few people were ever allowed the privilege of eating with God; with the new covenant all believers are invited to do so. The early church prized this privilege and took every opportunity to eat with Jesus.

Fourth, these new Christians devoted themselves to prayer. While this indicates that they prayed individually, it more pointedly indicates that they met together for prayer. Many Christians feel awkward praying in a group, and often the same believers feel awkward praying alone as well. Though it can be slightly difficult at first, drawing near to God in a small group is often the best way to learn how to pray and can greatly help your individual prayer life.

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<sup>1</sup>Acts: An Expository Commentary by James Montgomery Boice

## **CORAM DEO**

Here are four dimensions of the church. The early believers were excited about and practiced all four, and the leaders responded to their excitement. How does your church measure up in these four dimensions? What can you do, without being quarrelsome or cantankerous, to help upgrade your local church in these areas?<sup>2</sup>

# Open it

1. Discuss a time when you were a part of a group that accomplished something you know you would have been unable to do on your own.

# Read it

**Acts 2:42-47**

# Explore it

2. What four things were these early Christians devoted to?
3. How did the church respond to their time together?
4. What did they do with their belongings?
5. How often did they meet together?

# Apply it

## **EXPLOSIVE GROWTH**

Three thousand spiritual newborns! Earlier that day in the Upper Room there had been 120. Now in a flash there were 3,000! Three thousand new children of God—3,000 shepherding responsibilities for the apostles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/snapshot-of-the-early-church/>

<sup>3</sup>Hughes, R. Kent. Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 737-738). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

6. The church went from being quite small to a megachurch in one day. How would this explosive growth have served as an advantage? What obstacles might a church that size need to overcome to continue to stay healthy?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Having people respond to a convicting message is one thing; keeping them plugged in and growing in their love for God and others is quite another. What things should a church be doing to minister to the new people God brings into their fellowship?

What specific things are you doing to aid in this mission?

8. The dynamics of the young church had changed dramatically in a short time. This could have resulted in the 120 feeling like “things aren’t like they used to be.” How can we overcome our nostalgia of the past with God’s growth in the present?

The risen Lord Jesus was central to all that was happening in this new church. The word translated “continually devoting” points to constancy, purpose, or resolve. Out of ten uses of the verb and one use of the noun in the New Testament, six are connected with prayer and two with the ministry of the Word. We see their continual devotion to the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

9. What things keep people from being “continually devoted” to the church and its mission? In what ways can a church help its members with this devotion?

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<sup>4</sup>Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-9-snapshot-healthy-church-acts-242-47>

Luke tells us that the church was devoted to certain activities. At the top of the list is the study of the apostles' teaching, perhaps noted for emphasis since the Word of God informs everything else. Here, then, is the diet of a healthy body of Christ. Based on Peter's sermon in Acts 2 and the rest of the messages and descriptions in the book of Acts, the apostles taught everyone about the Messiah from the Scriptures. In this Spirit-filled congregation the people didn't abandon study of the Word because the Spirit was at work. If you're walking in the fullness of the Spirit, you will be drawn to the Bible. All true spiritual awakenings involve healthy teaching from it.<sup>5</sup>

10. Why is a church's devotion to the Scriptures so important? What happens when it fails to teach the Word of God?

This truth is a great reminder that pastors must lay down any desire to preach opinions and must avoid the temptation to entertain or to play with people's emotions. Each must instead see and embrace his role as God's spokesperson. Each must seek to please an audience of One. Pastors must believe Scripture is sufficient to build up and bless the church. Churches, in turn, must submit to God's Word when it is faithfully taught. The early church here in Acts is demonstrating such humility before the Word.<sup>6</sup>

11. What things can tempt pastors to stray from teaching the Word? How has culture impacted the preaching ministry within the local church?

12. Look back to Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-41. What things characterize biblical preaching from Peter's example? Why are these things so important to gospel preaching?

## FELLOWSHIP

The original word for "fellowship" (*koinonia*) means more than a handshake at the church door! New Testament-style fellowship means partnership, interaction, helping one another, sharing, sympathy, mutual communication. The first faith-based community got the crazy-loving notion that fellowship meant giving their own stuff away to meet the needs of others! (Acts 2:44-45).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 1139-1142). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 832-835). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

13. In Acts 2:42 Luke says the disciples were devoted to “fellowship.” In 2:44–47 he includes some details of what fellowship looked like back then. What did this fellowship include?

14. What things keep people from enjoying true and deep fellowship as the early church did?

15. On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate the sense of fellowship at our church? Why do you think you are connected or not connected?

What suggestions do you have for strengthening fellowship in your church or small group?

The believers living in Jerusalem demonstrated a deep commitment to Jesus that overflowed in mutual support for one another. As needs arose, they sold their possessions and property to help other believers. The verb rendered “sold” is in a tense that suggests the believers sold items from time to time. There was no expectation that new believers must immediately relinquish all their possessions upon conversion (as some religious cults in history have practiced). The emphasis in the early church was on compassionate ministry. When Christians discovered that someone was in need, the grace of Christ moved them to help.<sup>8</sup>

16. Why should believers be willing to help other believers even to the point of giving away their money and possessions? How do we know the balance of what we keep for ourselves and what we give to others?

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<sup>8</sup>Lifeway Study of Acts found @ <http://www.fbcplv.org/uploads/acts-lesson-3.pdf>

## **BREAKING OF BREAD**

Jesus gave eating together special significance. Sharing meals was a regular part of early Christian meetings (Acts 2:42) and day-to-day fellowship (2:46). Potluck meals called “love feasts” (Jude 12) served three purposes:

- The hungry got a square meal.
- Sharing with each other strengthened fellowship.
- The Lord’s Supper was celebrated, remembering Jesus and His death (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

There is something about eating together that makes people more open to each other. A shared meal is a context where conversation happens naturally, needs become known, and friends discover how they can serve each other.<sup>9</sup>

17. Lost in our society is the gift of hospitality. While we have the means and space to do it, gathering together to share a meal is happening less and less. What is causing this trend and how can a church begin to reverse it?

## **THE PRAYERS**

Literally, the text reads, “*they were continually devoting themselves to ... the prayers.*” It refers to set times of corporate prayer. Whenever and wherever the church meets, whether in a large meeting (“in the temple”) or from house to house, prayer ought to be woven into the fabric of church life. Our singing can and should be directed to God in prayer. At our elders’ meetings, we often stop to commit a difficult matter to the Lord or seek His mind in prayer. In your personal and family life, prayer ought to be a normal, frequent response when a personal problem arises or when you talk about someone who is facing a problem. Prayer acknowledges our total dependence on the living Lord.<sup>10</sup>

18. Look at our passage again. What types of things might the early church have been praying about?

What is it about praying together that helps to draw people closer to one another and God?

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<sup>9</sup>Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 839-843). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup>Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-9-snapshot-healthy-church-acts-242-47>

## EVANGELISM

How were people added to the number of believers? Ultimately, the Lord added them. He alone converts people. But the Lord uses means, and that means in Acts was faithful evangelism on the part of the people. People were converted daily because believers were evangelizing daily. A healthy church will have a burden for outsiders. They will boldly and compassionately proclaim the gospel to their friends and neighbors and coworkers. The early church enthusiastically communicated the gospel within their own networks, and the Lord worked mightily through their steady witness.<sup>11</sup>

19. The early church seemed to be attractive to those on the outside. How attractive is your church to unbelievers? What makes it attractive? What things can hinder this attractiveness from showing?

20. In the Coram Deo section of our devotional, James Montgomery Boice presents the following thoughts and questions: "Here are four dimensions of the church. The early believers were excited about and practiced all four, and the leaders responded to their excitement."

How does your church measure up in these four dimensions?

What can you do, without being quarrelsome or cantankerous, to help upgrade your local church in these areas?

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<sup>11</sup>Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 1139-1142). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.