



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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Characteristics of a Faithful Church of Christ Which Promote Growth

By

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The church of Christ was established on the first Pentecost following the Lord's resurrection (Mt. 16:18-19; Mk. 9:1; Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8 cf. Acts 2:1-41). The church of Christ consisted of those who received the word of God by being baptized (Acts 2:38-41). This original church of Christ was faithful, and as a result, they grew and evangelized their world (Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 8:12, 38; 9:31, 42; 11:21; 12:24; 13:49; 14:1, 21; 16:5, 15; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:8; 19:10 cf. Col. 1:23). What made them grow? Below are some characteristics that the early church possessed which made them grow. When churches of Christ today possess these same characteristics, they also will have an opportunity to grow.

In order to ascertain characteristics which make a church of Christ grow, many passages and principles could be studied. For the purpose of this study, however, attention will be focused on the Jerusalem church in Acts 2. What better place to learn about church growth than from the original church of Christ?

Spiritual Devotion

The early church of Christ was devoted to spiritual matters.

Note Luke's description, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). The term translated "continued steadfastly" means "to devote oneself to, to continue in." This Greek verb is found ten times in the NT. In a non-religious sense, it indicates duration (cf. Acts 8:13; 10:7; Rom. 13:6). Concerning Christian life, it may refer to enduring faith (Heb. 11:27). In the early church, the word denotes their spiritual attitude (Acts 1:14; 2:42). The apostles saw it as their function to "devote themselves" to the ministry of the word and to prayer (Acts 6:4). The construction of this verb in Acts 2:42, connects it with each item in the verse. In other words, they were not merely devoted to the "apostles doctrine," but also to "fellowship," "breaking of bread," and "prayers." Consider these objects of their devotion.

First, they were devoted to "the apostles doctrine" (Acts 2:42b). The definite article "the" indicates a specific body of teaching. The apostles were the teachers at this early stage. They exercised the Great Commission (cf.

Mt. 28:19-20). The apostles' authority was recognized by the church (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18). Eventually, apostolic teaching took written form (cf. 1 Cor. 14:37). It is the duty of all converts (i.e. Christians) to learn and abide in the apostles' doctrine (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-2). The first century church abided in the "apostles' doctrine" (Acts 5:42). If there was a command to assemble "daily" for study of God's word, it is not recorded, but the early church did this because they saw the need to learn (Mt. 5:6). The need is no less today! Today's church of Christ has a great advantage over the first century church in that it has abundant access to God's word (cf. Jas. 1:25). How important is the "apostles' doctrine" to the church of Christ today?

Second, they were devoted to "fellowship" (Acts 2:42c). The word "fellowship" means association, communion, joint-participation; sharing together. The object of this fellowship was God (cf. 1 Jn. 1:3-7) and His kingdom (1 Cor. 1:9). Included in this sense of fellowship was a collection and distribution of monetary gifts (Acts 2:44-45 cf. Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13). Fellowship must also be

important in the life of the church of Christ today. No congregation can follow God without seeking this sense of joint-participation, and no congregation can grow that does not seek to maintain true fellowship (Eph. 4:1-3). Christians should seek the company of other Christians for encouragement and support. This means that assembling is important (Heb. 10:23-25) and the helping of "one another" (Rom. 12:10; 15:7, 14; Gal. 6:2; 1 Thes. 5:11). How important is "fellowship" to the church of Christ today?

Third, they were devoted to "breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42d). This "breaking of bread" refers to the Lord's Supper. In the original language there are definite articles before "breaking" and "bread," which distinguish this "the breaking of the bread" with the "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:46, which, from the context, clearly refers to common meals. The frequency with which the bread was broken is not here given, but is found elsewhere as being every first day of the week (Acts 20:7 cf. 1 Cor. 11:20). The Lord's Supper is communion with Christ (Mt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 10:16-17). Next to a person being baptized, is there any single event in the earthly life of a Christian in which he or she is closer to Christ than in the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper? Spiritual obligations were a matter of devotion for the early church (Acts 20:6). How important is "the breaking of the bread" to the church of Christ today?

Fourth, they were devoted to "prayers" (Acts 2:42e). Prayer was a very integral part of the early church. The definite article in the original language (literally, "the prayers") suggests a particular reference, either to specific prayers or specific subjects. Prayer was not limited to certain times (cf. Acts 3:1; 1 Thes. 5:17). The vitality of the church corresponded to the

reality of their prayers (cf. Acts 1:14-26; 4:23-31; 6:4; 7:55-60; 8:14-17; 9:11, 36-43; 10:1-4, 9; 12:1-11; 13:1-3; 16:13, 25; 20:36; 21:5; 27:35; 28:8). Prayer can, and will, make a difference in the church today: for forgiveness of saints' sins (Acts 8:22-24); for help in time of temptation (Mt. 6:13); for daily needs (Mt. 6:11); for rulers (1 Tim. 2:1-2); for the sick (Jas. 5:14); for laborers to enter the harvest (Mt. 9:38); for God's word to be glorified (2 Thes. 3:1); for God's children (Phil. 1:9-11); for God's will to be done (Mt. 6:10; 26:39). How important are "prayers" to the church of Christ today?

Reverence For God

The early church promoted reverence for God. "And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43). The word "fear" is not that which scares people away (cf. Acts 2:47), but refers to deep reverence and awe (cf. Heb. 12:28). Part of this awe was attributed to the miracles done by the apostles (Acts 2:43b). The apostles were able to perform miracles, and "awe" often resulted from miracles (cf. Acts 3:10; 5:5, 11, 13; 19:17).

While it is true that no person today can perform true miracles, we can still influence respect for God in our homes and communities by our words and deeds (cf. Mt. 5:13-16; 7:15-20). "Every soul" includes non-believers, and lets us know that others are watching us. Are we promoting reverence for God? When people see us, do they have more respect for God or less respect for God? May the Lord help us promote reverence for Him. It will make a difference as shall be seen later.

Benevolence

Not only did the early church show devotion to spiritual

things and promote reverence for God, they were also known as people who would share—even sell—their possessions to help those in need. "And all that believed were together, and had all things common: And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:44-45). Their willingness to sell their possessions was based upon the unity they felt with one another. This fact is stated in Acts 4:32, "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." Their attitude of *what is mine is ours*, which sprang from their "one heart" and "one soul," preached volumes! Note the result, "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33). The reason why the early church sold their possessions was to help those in need (cf. 1 Jn. 3:17). Note that "all...every man" in need was the potential scope of this assistance (Acts 2:45). It seems to this writer that to limit "every man" to "only saints" in Acts 2:45, as some do, would require the same for "every soul" (Acts 2:43) and "all

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the people" (Acts 2:47), but the context surely includes nonbelievers. Who else can be "added" to the church?

Three observations must be made concerning the early church's selling of possessions and giving to those in need. First, this action was completely voluntary. This was *not* a form of communism. Obviously, everyone did not sell everything, for then all would be in need. However, consider Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-5). They were *not* struck dead by God because they failed to give all the money. Peter told Ananias that while the land was his, he had authority to use it as he saw fit, and when he sold it, the money was also in his power to use in accordance with proper stewardship (Acts 5:4). Ananias' sin was lying to God (Acts 5:3)!

Second, the early church's selling of possessions and giving to those in need was done on a limited scale. As mentioned above, *everyone* did not sell *everything*! Rather, opportunity is the limiting factor. Listen to Paul, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). There are two parts to opportunity: (1) there must be a genuine need, and (2) we must have the resources to meet that need. When both of these are present, we are obligated to help—yes, even rejoice at the opportunity! Although members of the church are to take priority, saints are not the *only* ones to whom we can extend benevolence, whether done individually or collectively.

Third, the early church's selling of possessions and giving to those in need was a temporary and expedient way of meeting a permanent obligation. There may be more expedient ways to help in our society. We must not bind any one

method as the *only* way to help those in need. However, Jesus still gives the immortal principle, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

We cannot be the faithful church of Christ unless we are willing to help those in need, even if it means selling our possessions. Since the local church consists of individuals, and to be a faithful congregation, its members must be faithful, each of us must be willing to help those in need. Are we?

Being Together

The early church genuinely enjoyed being with one another. "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). The "temple" area was the meeting place of the early church (cf. Acts 3:11; 5:12, 20, 25, 42). This was a very convenient place to meet since even the Gentiles were allowed access to the outer court, and at this time, Christianity was considered by the masses as a sect of Judaism. The church met *daily* with one another in the temple for the purpose of learning God's word and encouraging one another. The early church had no problem understanding the importance of "the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:24-25), yet many "Christians" today seem to think that the Lord only requires us to meet on Sunday morning!

Not only did they enjoy being with one another at the temple, they also enjoyed one another's company in their homes. "Breaking bread" here refers to common meals as seen in the latter part of the verse, "did eat their meat [food]." Eating together, especially in the first century, has always been an indicator of fellowship (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11). Their eating together in one another's homes was

characterized by "gladness" and "singleness of heart." This latter term suggests sincerity and single-mindedness (cf. Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22). In other words, they *sincerely* enjoyed being with one another whether it was in a worship setting or in each other's homes. Do we sincerely enjoy being with one another?

Attracted Outsiders

When a congregation is devoted to spiritual things, promotes reverence for God in their lives, is willing to help one another, and sincerely enjoys being with one another, they will attract those who are outside of Christ. "Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). Note that they did not attract outsiders by gimmicks (such as classic car shows, concerts, roller coasters, etc.), but by "praising God," which is often used in reference to verbal expressions of God's greatness (Lk. 2:13, 20; 19:37), but would also include their way of life (1 Cor. 10:31). "Favor" is often used of finding favor (grace) in God's sight (Lk. 1:30; Acts 7:46), but in the phrase "favor with all the people," it seems to refer to the natural consequence of their admirable lives. Real Christianity attracts attention, even in this world of religious confusion and skepticism. Daily additions to the church showed that people were daily being saved (Acts 2:47b).

Conclusion

Are we, individually and/or collectively, attracting outsiders to Christ and his church? To answer, let us ask ourselves these questions: Are we devoted to spiritual things? Are we promoting reverence for God? Are we willing to help one another? Do we sincerely enjoy being with one another? If we answer any of these in the negative,

then we are not faithful like the church we read about in Acts 2:42-47. Are we merely the "Church of Christ" on the outside, or do we have the characteristics of a faithful church of Christ on the inside? May God help us to be like the early church and "follow...that which is good" (3 Jn. 11).



Someone Needs to Tell Them

By

Gene Burgett

Around this time of the year I usually participate in several events aimed specifically at young people. One example is the yearly weekend retreat the Orange Street church in Auburndale, Florida sponsors at Weeki Wachee Christian Camp. As I was preparing to speak at this event an interesting thought struck me. Seven men

spoke during this retreat and all of them were graduates of the Florida School of Preacher save one. The one was Daniel Stearsman, who has attended numerous classes over the years and is the son of Jackie Stearsman, the Director of the school. Clearly the Florida School of Preaching is having an impact in the state of Florida.

One might wonder how youth events fit into my work as Director of Public Relations with the School. Actually, I view youth events as a crucial part of my effort to find men who desire to preach the gospel. My message at these events is simple: "Preaching is an option you need to consider for your life's work." Many of these young people will attend various career days at school. At these events their eyes will be opened to many occupational possibilities. Their textbooks will have pictures of

people busy at various jobs. But will their career days and textbooks mention preaching? Of course not. If we don't tell our young men about preaching who will? My appearance at these youth retreats may not bear visible fruit for several years. But I participate in them with the hope that one day someone will walk through our doors and say, "Do you remember me? I attended a youth retreat where you spoke about the need for men to preach the gospel."



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