

## **“The Common Life”**

**Acts 2:42-47**

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

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I have been carefully acquiring books to help me improve my delivery of God’s Word. I am sure you are not particularly interested in a list of the titles in my library; I just thought you would be pleased to know that when I found the book, *The Three Hour Sermon*, I passed it by. I plan to take a little less time than that exploring this morning’s passage in Acts, which is the earliest description of church behavior. There are subsequent comments that modify or contradict these statements, and other verses that make us think these are ideals rather than actual behavior. How does this paradigm, or original model, compare with what we might think our church should be doing today? We find four areas of emphasis here: Teaching, Praying, Breaking of the Bread and Community. Let’s start with Teaching.

The apostles’ teaching probably included a lot of personal recollections of Jesus and his teaching. It wouldn’t take long to build a comparatively fixed body of such teaching, says *The Interpreter’s Bible*. Romans 6:17 refers to a “standard of teaching” and II Timothy 1:13 speaks of a “standard of sound teaching.” This teaching probably also centered on passages from the Old Testament that seemed to predict the coming of the Messiah, the “testimonia.” When we look at how fast Christianity spread, it is amazing that there was any agreement on New Testament content.

- a. We are looking at an oral society – the first books of the New Testament were written 65 to 95 years after the events they describe. Have you ever played the game called telephone, where someone whispers into the ear of the person next to them and that is repeated until, at the other end of the line some garbled version of the original phrase appears? If such garble happens to a dozen people in a room, what happens among thousands of story-tellers spread across decades and thousands of miles? Where was the quality control?
- b. Some scholars say that eyewitnesses approved the content of these books. That means eleven people – the remaining disciples – approved and corrected the thousands of oral

versions that spread through North Africa and through the Near and Middle East as far as India? That's not very likely.

- c. Another theory says that societies depending on oral traditions have better memories than societies such as ours, which depend on fixed media. That is a nicely-phrased, refutable, and therefore scientific theory which has been tested... and refuted. What the investigators found is that people from oral cultures do not really care about accuracy. It is only among societies where stories can be checked against written versions that there is concern about the accuracy of various versions. If you look at the varying written Gospel accounts, you will find they do not concur in such things as event sequence or exact wording. They do concur in the message about the loving sacrifice of God's son. Why would they match exactly? It makes sense that the Good News would be written to speak to different people.
- d. Now let's consider for a moment the editor. Despite all human effort, God is in charge! So I am content to let literary, historical and source criticism students try to come to a better understanding of scripture; I am comfortable that this Bible is the Word of God for us here today.

A second practice of the Jerusalem community was Prayer. Prayer was and is a standard feature of Jewish worship. Since the community still went to the temple for much of their worship, public prayer was part of their worship life. Remember what had happened before this passage in Acts: Jesus had been executed, and had risen, and had ascended! No wonder they were in awe and gladness. Then there was the Pentecostal visitation of the Holy Spirit. And immediately previous to this passage, they had preached and baptized and added three thousand people to their number. This is a group of people who were in awe of the working of the Holy Spirit among them – “with God, nothing is impossible!” It's real! It's true! We **should** pray in thanks and in supplication. How does that play out in today's world? Philip Yancey, in his book on prayer quotes a Methodist bishop as saying, “When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don't pray, there are fewer coincidences.” God is faithful to us in His response to prayer, even today.

It may be that there was also an increase in private prayer. Although these people worshipped in the temple, they broke bread at home. Breaking of the Bread seemed to be a bridge between worship and eating the meal. This religious meal in the home gave them a chance for fellowship and worship

that was truly Christian. At the same time, the sense of community was emphasized because this bread may have been primary nourishment for the poorer participants. The term for this community was koinonia.

Koinonia, that is Christian fellowship or community, started first with the apostles but grew to include converts, “the body of believers.” The equivalent Aramaic word Habhura was commonly used to indicate a group of companions who shared a common life, especially in the sense of celebrating a common Passover meal. We have records of this in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Qumrain, the community where the scrolls were used, was a tightly knit fellowship. It appears there might have been a lot of Persian influence in that community leading to even closer fellowship than what the Jews normally practiced.

The reference to table fellowship becomes more explicit in the breaking of the bread. In John 13:29 for example, we see that the habhura – the companions – of Jesus shared a common life, and the experimental communalism of Jerusalem continued that practice. Koinonia sometimes implies almsgiving or relief (Rom 15:26 - to make some contribution to the poor). The bottom line is that this is not communism, per se, but sharing to supply for those in need. The motivation here is suspected to be not just charity, but a belief that the claims of the needs of the Christian family exceed those of the individual. People get their shares not because they are needy, but because they are our brothers and sisters.

Now the scene described here, with all things in common, and the selling to provide for each other, may be more ideal than real, for we soon read of Barnabas, who notably sells his property for the community good, and of Ananias and Sapphira, who die for their greediness. This sense of community, though, is faithfully witnessed in many places in the Bible. Here are just a few (NASB):

- Accept one another (Rom 15:7)
- Have concern for one another (1 Cor 12:25)
- Be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10)
- Encourage one another (Heb 3:13; 10:24-25)
- Build up one another (Rom 14:19; 1 Thess 5:11)
- Be kind to one another (1 Thess 5:15)
- Serve one another (Gal 5:13)
- Confess your sins to one another (Jm 5:16)

- Don't judge one another (Rom 14:13)
- Forgive one another (Eph 4:32)
- Pray for one another (Jm 5:16)
- Teach and admonish one another (Col 5:16)
- Don't slander one another (Jm 4:11)
- Love one another (Jn 13:34-35, Gal 5:14)

Some people use the acronym ACTS to build a prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Here is another memory hook based on ACTS when you think of building community:

Assist - be selfless, pass the ball to others, and set them up to succeed

Challenge - keep each other accountable to continually strive for God's best in our lives

Teach - share from God's Word and what He has placed on our hearts

Support - build up each other with prayer and encouragement

Denbigh Church combines these acts in much of the work we already do; we have fellowship down to a fine art. We support the poor with money and work. We teach the youth. But let's look outside our walls a little. Kids are being shot in the streets of Denbigh and in their homes. Violence seems to be at an all time high. What are we doing to fix that?

Newport News is taking action on youth violence. Recently a survey of 1,400 local teenagers was completed to provide a picture of violence in the 6,000 or so eighth through twelfth grade aged children in the city. Members of the Denbigh Community Action Team, or D-CAT met last week to start analyzing those responses. Most striking is that "religiosity" is the highest scoring factor in combating risky behaviors, such as alcohol and marijuana use and gang behavior. Other D-CAT members, including members of our Outreach Committee, met to work on implementing support for faith-based initiatives – transporting youth from high risk communities, setting up activities in churches, supporting churches that are serving as activity sites, and providing food for these events.

The City Manager, Randy Hildebrandt is the executive leading this program, and it is high on Mayor Joe Frank's priorities. If this sounds like it is getting political, forgive me. This is the environment we live in, and these are just the community leaders who are involved. Mayor Frank spoke to our

Presbyterian Men recently, and to a group of faith leaders previous to that. He firmly believes we – the area churches – can make a difference in our community by approaching kids on a one-to-one basis. The survey results back up that belief. Providing children with the idea that they mean something to someone has a powerful effect on their behavior – creating not baseless self-esteem, but a real sense of self-worth. Doesn't this sound like a koinonia for our time – Prayer, teaching, bread and fellowship in community?

As we look at the early disciples coming together into a church in community, and as we look at ourselves here in a church emerging into community, we can only thank God for His faithfulness in empowering us in mission to build the Kingdom of God on earth, and praise Christ for His sacrifice that assures us and strengthens us to that purpose. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.