

## Essentials of the Church (Acts 2:42-47)

The major focus of the book of Acts is the expansion of the Word of God as the Gospel was carried from the place of Jesus' death and resurrection to the ends of the earth. This is clearly set forward in the outline that Luke emphasizes in the Great Commission of our Lord in Acts 1:8. Therefore this book does not spend a great deal of time describing the character of church life or the internal workings of the church. However Luke does make some rather compact statements concerning this issue that are full of theological content. As G. Campbell Morgan points out, Luke knew how to put a great deal into a verse. He does this in the Gospel of Luke when he summarized years of Jesus' early life in two verses (Luke 2:40, 52) (Morgan, 158-159). He used the same style when he summarized the character of the early Jerusalem church in Acts 2: 42-47 and Acts 4:33-35. Verse 42 of Acts two is especially significant as we consider the essentials of Church Life. The following theological concepts were distilled by Luke from all of his research, which spanned years of history into these brief summary statements. Thus they become very weighty passages as we think about how the Body of Christ today should resemble the early Church to be truly biblical and pleasing to God.

According to these passages there are five distinct essentials of Church Life that should characterize the body of Christ. They include 1) Authoritative teaching, 2) Caring fellowship, 3) Prayer and worship, 4) Effective witness, 5) Evidence of God's approval.

### 1) Authoritative Teaching

Acts 2:42 begins by saying that "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching . . .". By studying the use of the words translated "teaching" or "to teach" (didach ; didaskow) in Luke-Acts one gets a clearer picture of the author's meaning behind this short phrase. The placement of this word in the texts of both Luke and Acts is significant. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry full of the power of the Spirit and he is teaching and being praised by all (4:14-15). He ends his ministry being accused by the religious leaders and the multitudes that he stirs up the people with his teaching (23:4-5). Teaching is the central purpose and noteworthy characteristic of Jesus' ministry. Acts picks up right there by beginning with the words that the former volume was a record of all that Jesus began to do and to teach (1:1). The book ends with Paul in Rome teaching freely (28:31) For Luke the Apostle's teaching is an obvious continuation of the teaching ministry of Christ.

The one doing the teaching in Luke-Acts points to the authority of that teaching. In almost all of the uses of this word the person doing the teaching is Jesus Christ or one of his apostles or Paul and his missionary band. The content of the teaching is the authoritative gospel. It is used once of false teachers who are teaching something that is not the true gospel (Acts 15:1), and once to refer to Apollos who was teaching something that was a pre-gospel message (Acts 18:25). Morgan emphasizes the two-fold characteristic of apostolic teaching as is especially seen in the epistles, which is Doctrine and Duty. He points out that they are never separate but interrelated. Both elements can be seen clearly in the writings of Paul who usually transitions from doctrine to duty or application with a great, central THEREFORE as seen in Eph. 4:1 or Rom. 12:1 (Morgan, 160). Larkin would appropriately add as components of apostolic teaching accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, warnings about persecution and false teaching, and the christocentric Old Testament hermeneutic (Luke 42:27). (Larkin, 61)

Acts 2:42 is a summary, and each theme mentioned in the verse is revisited and expanded in the following verses. Appealing to this pattern, the mention of the signs and wonders being done through the apostles (2:43) is related to the teaching of the apostles. Stott emphasizes that the miracles authenticated the authority of the teaching of the apostles (Stott, 82). The fact that miracles and authoritative teaching are closely related in Luke's theology is born out by his description of the first public miracle, that he records of Jesus' ministry (Luke 31-37). The people are amazed at his teaching and its authority, and after he casts out a demon they say to one another "What is this message?" because even the demons obey him.

Therefore the first essential of church life is teaching that is based on the Word of God (Especially the New Testament which is apostolic). It is authoritative and should establish the doctrine of Christ and apply it to daily life.

### 2) Caring Fellowship

The word which appears in Acts 2:42 translated fellowship is *koinonia* and it is related to the word for common (*koinow*). This word (*koinow*) is used in the book of Acts only five times and three of those times it is used in the context of the conversion of Cornelius to Acts on unclean animals or Gentiles. The other two times are the two summary passages that deal with church life (2:44 and 4:32). This clearly points to the importance of fellowship as an identifying characteristic of the early church. Carver

sees this concept of sharing in common as the central issue in church life. He says apostolic teaching is really a sharing of creed and common belief and that God used especially Peter's preaching to create one organic whole out of diverse groups. (Carver, 476).

Fellowship is obviously important to Luke but what did it involve? This is the essential of Church life that he most describes in the two summary passages. Ideas are expressed such as being together (2:44) selling property and holding resources in common (2:44, 45; 4:32, 34), meeting the needs of those who lacked (2:45; 4:34, 35), and having a common purpose (2:46; 4:32). Here we clearly see unity in the midst of diversity and a true concern for those who were in need. This is an application of the teachings of Jesus (Luke 6: 20- 38) and a continuation of the way he cared for those who were in need both physically and spiritually. We see these values played out in Acts 6: 1-7 as there was inequality in the distribution of the daily provisions for the Hellenistic Jewish widows. First we see the resources being shared and when there was inequality then a solution was found that would maintain unity in the middle of the diversity.

Another aspect of fellowship in the early Church was the sharing of meals. Sitting at the table together is the universal symbol for friendship and this characterized the followers of Christ (Carver, 476). Kittel points out that the breaking of bread was a custom of the Jews to initiate any common meal and was usually done by the oldest person around the table (Jer. 16:7 and Lam. 4:4) (Kittel vol 3, 726-732). So here we have the breaking of bread as a universal and Jewish symbol of unity and good will. Luke obviously considered it to be so important that he included it in the four characteristics of the Church found in Acts 2: 42

There is, however, debate over whether this phrase is referring to the cultic celebration of the Lord's supper or simply the sharing of a common meal. A word study of the phrase "to break bread" reveals that some passages in Luke-Acts are referring to The Lord's supper (Luke 22:19; Acts 20:7, 11); whereas other passages are clearly only a common meal (Luke 9:16; Luke 24:30; Acts 27:35). Stott points to the use of the definite article in both expressions ( Literally, 'the breaking of the bread and the prayers') as an indication of a communion service and a formal prayer service as well as a larger, common meal (Stott, 84-85).

I believe that the phrase " the breaking of bread" refers to both a celebration of the Lord's Supper together with a larger meal. This is also supported by the further amplification that Luke gives in Acts 2: 46.

Thus the second essential of church life is a caring fellowship that shares time, food (which could be seen as the essentials of life or ordinary activities), and concern for the needs of others who are part of the body of Christ.

### **3) Prayer and Worship**

Luke concludes his summary statement of Acts 2: 42 with the concept of prayer which we may expand to relating to God through prayer and appropriate worship. This is revisited in the following verses through the breaking of bread (if one takes this as the Lord's supper), continuing in the temple (2:46) (Luke sees the temple as a House of Prayer (Luke 19:41), and praising God (2:47). We see prayer as an important activity of the church in the rest of Acts (3:1; 6:4; 12:5).

The gospel of Luke also emphasizes prayer as an important activity that he modeled for his disciples (5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28, 29; 11:1). Jesus was dedicated to prayer and therefore so should his Church. The Gospel of Luke also emphasizes Jesus' teachings on prayer (11:2 ff; 18:1; 20:47; 22:40). The apostles were faithful to instruct the early Church and they continued faithfully in prayer.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper and the congregating in the temple point to corporate and organized worship of God. This seems to be a central component of the Church's activities. In Luke 22 14-20 the institution of the Lord's supper is established and Jesus tells his disciples to do this in remembrance of him. Acts 20:7-11 seems to point to a celebration of the Eucharist on the first day of the week in Ephesus after the pattern of the church in Jerusalem.

Therefore formal worship of God through the official commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection in the Lord's supper and the meeting together on the Lord's day as well as the diligent communion with God through regular, consistent prayer is the worship that should mark the Church of today.

### **4) Effective Witness**

The next essential of Church life is not found in Acts 2:42 but it is scattered throughout the book especially in the summary passage of chapter 4:33-35. Here we see that the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power. There is also an allusion to this essential characteristic in 2:47 where Luke tells us by way of conclusion that the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Stott contends that to take Acts 2:42 as the only essentials of Church life is pulling the verse out of its context which links it to verse 47 as well as the rest of the book. He says that those first century Jerusalem Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshipping that they forgot about witnessing (Stott, 86).

According to Luke, Just before the ascension, Jesus capsulated the gospel message for his disciples and charged them that they were witnesses of these things (Luke 24:46-48) He then picks up this same theme using the same word in Acts 1:8 where he tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts is proof that the Church must be expanding both geographically and ethnically if it is going to be a Church full of life.

Thus the fourth essential of church life is an effective witness. The church today must be focused outward not on its own blessings but on a world that is dying without the witness of Christ's saving gospel message.

### **5) Evidence of God's approval**

This essential of Church life is a little harder to define but I believe that it is an important message that Luke wanted to communicate in his two-volume work. This theme is tied to a word study of the word "Grace" or "Favor" (caris) as used in Luke-Acts. This word is very important to Luke who uses it more than any other gospel writer (Only John uses it 3x in chapter one). The most interesting and significant aspect of his use of this word is its placement. It is a common feature of Lukan summary statements. In Luke 2:40 and 2:52, he uses it to summarize the early life of Jesus. In Acts 2:47 and 4:33 he uses it to summarize the early growth of the Church. This seems to indicate the approval of God and the people as being an important confirmation of the work of God. This is supported by the angel's announcement that Mary had found favor with God (Luke 1:30). After the important decision of Acts 6: 1-7 and the formation of the office of deacon, Steven is described as full of grace (or favor) and power (6:8). We also see Paul's missionary journeys receiving the approval of the church as a means of confirmation of the will of God in Acts 14:26; 15:40. Finally Stephen uses this word in his sermon to illustrate God's approval and blessing of Joseph and David in Acts 7: 10, 46.

I believe that according to Luke, an essential element of church life is the approval or favor of God as expressed through his blessing on each and every aspect of the church and its leadership. This grace or favor is also seen in the positive response of the people who are observing the church. Of course there will be persecution and negative feelings against the church, but a person or institution that has the favor of God upon it and is manifesting the other essentials of church life will receive the favor of the people as Christ did growing up into manhood and the early church did growing into maturity.

Therefore Luke's theology affirms the essentials of church life focused inward on the believers themselves and focused outward on the world, which needs the gospel and all under the approval and grace of the Lord

#### **Works Cited**

- Carver, Gary L.. "Acts 2: 42-47". Review and Expositor Summer, vol. 87. 1990
- Kittel, Gerhard, ed. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1978.
- Larkin, William J. Jr. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Acts. (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press) 1995.
- Morgan, G. Campbell. The Birth of the Church. (Old Tappan NJ.: Fleming H. Revell Company) 1968.
- Stott, John. The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts. (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity Press) 1990

## Chapter 3

### **The healing of the Cripple in the Temple (Acts 3:1-26)**

Peter and John enter the temple at the time of the evening sacrifice. Luke highlights that it is a time of prayer. For the church the prayers are important and the worship but the sacrificial aspects of the law are only symbols of what Christ has done once for all. This is a practical application of the essentials of the church that were just enumerated in the previous passage.

The beggar is crippled from birth and had become a permanent fixture at the entrance to the temple. Everyone knew him. Peter and John focus on him and get his attention. They have no money for him but they can offer something even better. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth – Walk. The power is God's and the name/authority is Jesus' but the hand that pulls the man up is Peter's. This is a reality of Christian ministry. He enters the temple walking and leaping and praising God (Is. 35:6). This man becomes a symbol or a sign of the Messianic Age. He is right there in the temple and he is a known person of need. No one can deny the validity of this miracle.

The people are amazed and run together in the court of the temple to see Peter and John and Peter gives his second recorded Sermon to the Jews in Jerusalem. If we see Pentecost as corresponding to the Baptism of Jesus during his earthly ministry, This miracle of healing would parallel the early healing and casting out of demons that Jesus did in Capernaum. The reactions are the same and the effect is similar. The Lord is attesting to the authority of the apostles in the same way that he attested to the authority of Jesus himself while he was on the earth.

Men of Israel – God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of our fathers – Peter is making connection with the covenantal period of the OT. At the beginning and the end of the sermon he refers to Jesus as the Servant. This is a clear messianic title but it would be one that would not immediately offend his hearers. Peter is drawing them in. He increasingly raises the majesty of the titles he uses for Jesus. Holy and Righteous One and the author of life (literally the Prince of life). It is through faith in the name of Jesus that this man was healed. This is the avenue for Salvation from God.

Peter now calls them to repentance. Your sins will be wiped out. This refers to the fact that the ancient ink did not contain acid and therefore did not penetrate the papyrus but laid on top. Therefore with a wet sponge you could wipe out or erase what was written. This is referring to the wiping out of the record of their sins in heaven.

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Deut. 18:19. He is that prophet after Moses who will speak for God. All of the prophets spoke of Christ and now Christ is the fulfillment of all of that all the way back to the Abrahamic Covenant where it is said that all of the families of the earth will be blessed in you. This is being spoken in the temple but in the Court of the Gentiles. This is a harbinger of things to come with the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles.