

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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The Strategic Power of Koinonia

by Dan Trygg

“They were continually devoting themselves to the doctrine of the apostles and to open-sharing, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers....⁴⁴ And all the ones believing were being upon the same thing and were having all things in shared-availability;⁴⁵ and they were selling their property and possessions and were distributing to all, according-as ever anyone was having need.⁴⁶ According to each day devoting themselves with the same passion both in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were sharing meals together with gladness and openness of heart,⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding the ones being saved according to each day upon the same thing” Acts 2:42,44-47

This passage is one of the few clear glimpses into early church life given to us in the NT. It is rich in the insight that it offers concerning what the apostles were led to do to establish the community of new converts into a true, functioning Body of believers in Christ. The early Jerusalem church is presented to us as a healthy group of Christians, extremely successful, ...both in its relationships with each other, as well as in its evangelistic impact on the unbelievers of the city. **Very few details of their life together are given to us.** However, **the principles were clearly painted in broad brush strokes** for all who are interested. Centuries of religious history and tradition have obscured some of the original clarity and color, but those willing to clean off the dust and grime can rediscover the simplicity, vibrancy, and obvious intent of the original craftsman. **If we will look closely, we will find that Luke's original message remains intact, ...as insightful, pragmatic and challenging to us as ever.**

"they were continually devoting themselves to" -- The word in Greek is from proskartereō, meaning "to give constant care and attention to" something. The root, kartereō, means "to bear with, endure, or persevere". This indicates that the activity may not be easy or pleasurable all of the time. It must have difficult components, or be boring at times. Whatever the activity might be, there are times when it feels like just plain work. The prefix, pro, adds the component "to, towards, or with" to further intensify the verb. They were *really* adhering to the activities which are listed. **They were dedicated unremittingly toward doing these activities. They were showing up and giving themselves to them, even when it was not always fun or convenient.**

"the doctrine of the apostles" -- The people were *hungry* to learn. They wanted to grasp what the apostles were saying about who Jesus was, why He came, and what it meant. They wanted to understand about the Holy Spirit, "the gift" and "promise" that was for them and their children (Acts 2:38,39). The new converts eagerly gave themselves to learn. They asked questions, sat in on groups large and small, attempting to grasp new insights into these matters.

"and to fellowship" -- Literally, "and to the sharing". The word for "sharing" is koinonia in Greek. Koinonia implies a joint participation, a partnership. **It can refer to either the giving or receiving, and was used for sharing anything with someone else, e.g., both material goods, as well as one's inner thoughts.** The root word, koinos, means "common", as in common ownership, common property, or "that which is accessible and available to all". The opposite of koinos is the idea of removing something from common availability, either for private ownership or for a dedicated, holy purpose. In either case, it was no longer "shared". **The idea of koinonia is that you voluntarily share with another that which was yours**, i.e., you take what was privately owned (either of goods or inner thoughts) and you make them openly available to another. It is clear that what happened in the NT community did not undo private ownership. People did *not* live communally. Rather they voluntarily shared what was theirs with those who had need, *when* it was needed. **Among true friends all things are common.**

What is the basis for koinonia? Why would people share in this way with total strangers? The word itself implies some common identity or joint enterprise that underlies the basis for this sharing. **Jesus had challenged the disciples to be willing to put God and His kingdom before everything else.** *Following Christ is a higher calling and duty than all other human connections.* If we are devoted to God, then all that we are and have should be made available to serve Him and His purposes. Beyond that, however, those who have responded to the grace and call of God, and have devoted themselves to Him find that *He partners with them* by giving them His own Spirit. He shares His own life with them! **There is a common identity as children of God, ...even a new, shared life in the Spirit..., that underlies this bond of unity.** People could be total strangers, from entirely different backgrounds and walks of life, yet, in Christ they now share a common oneness that transcends *all* these differences (Jn. 17:20-23). In fact, **this common bond in the Spirit even goes beyond the natural ties of blood, family, or partnership in a common interest. In Christ, they truly have been made one!** Their lives have been filled and intertwined with God, and now they are motivated *by Him* to care for each other. **This is the basis for sharing together.** More than a common devotion to God, His spiritual family and His kingdom, these believers are now members of one another in the Spirit!

"to the breaking of the bread" -- Some suppose that this is a reference to the Lord's supper. This idiom was commonly used long before Jesus' last supper with the disciples. **To any Jew or Greek of Luke's day, this phrase would have meant, "eating a meal together"**. In Lk. 24:28-30,35, we have a glimpse into how a meal was taken together, and the significance of "breaking the bread" as the initiation of the meal. **It is very interesting that the first Christians "continued unremittingly" in this endeavor, as well.**

"and to prayer" -- Literally, **"to the prayers"**. Many prayers were being offered. It is likely that *everyone* was praying about *many* things, not that they were "led in prayer" by someone else.

Verses 44-47 are a more detailed description of what Luke had summarized in verse 42.

"all who had believed were together" -- Actually, the Greek puts it a little differently, **"all the ones believing were being upon the same thing"**. This prepositional phrase, "upon the same thing" could refer to their *location* ("together" = upon the same *place*), or it could refer to their *activity* (i.e., they were following the *same pattern*). Luke goes on to describe what *this activity* was. Then, in verse 47, he closes the paragraph by indicating that new converts were added to the group and joined this same activity ("The Lord added daily the ones being saved *upon the same thing*"). It was no accident that Luke used this same phrase. **He intended for us to clearly see the dynamic of follow-up and growth employed by the early church, and used this stylistic means to bracket it off, so we wouldn't miss it.**

"and [they] had all things common" -- "Common" is the Greek word "koinos". **It is obvious from the next verse that this was not a commune. They did not throw everything into a common pot.** Private ownership was still a reality, as it was later on in the NT. Why? Because *you cannot generously give what is not yours. Love and sacrifice can only be fully expressed if you retain the right of ownership.* Communal living *takes something away* from the struggle of *freely choosing* to give to a specific need. In order for expressions of love to stand out as radical in cost, and personal, the individuals who share must have the right of determination over their own goods. **In a commune, individuals leave their goods at the door. Giving over the right of ownership to the community is the requirement for joining the community. The early church had no such requirement.** People retained legal ownership of their own possessions and property. **If people decided to share out of their resources, that was their personal decision.** The phrase, "they had all things common" describes the mindset of the people involved, not some requirement of the community. The verb tenses imply an ongoing state of being, "they were having or holding all things as available to all". This was their *personal perspective*, not a *policy of the leaders*. **The beauty of this is that the Holy Spirit is free to prompt and guide as many, or as few, as necessary to help meet a need.** The decision is left up to the people involved. It does not get bogged down in a committee meeting, or require the consensus of a leadership quorum. The early church functioned primarily relationally, not by policy decisions. **The individual was free to give as the Lord would prompt him or her, and the possibility of diversity was not limited by polity or structure.** Of course, the same freedom exists today, but most of us give our resources to others to decide where they could be best used. Part of that is just practical. We may not know where the needs are, or how to best attend to them, so we appoint or trust others to make better decisions than we believe we could. Part of that can also be a copout. It relieves us from taking responsibility for how we give. **We often are unaware of those who have the real needs, and those in need do not get to know us, either. How did the early church address this problem?**

"breaking bread from house to house, ... taking meals together with gladness and openness of heart" -- Not only did they meet in the temple, but they were meeting in homes. Here, they met for study, sharing, prayer, and then they could get to know one another over a meal, and really share their hearts with one another. The word translated as "sincerity" is a negated form of a word meaning "rocky, uneven, difficult terrain". Hence, the word picture is that *their hearts had become easily accessible to one another*. **There were several ingredients that made this possible. First, they had a common purpose, to grow in Christ. Second they had a common understanding.** They were getting the same instruction, the same content, from the apostles. **Third, they had a relaxed, unhurried atmosphere in which to interact. Fourth, they were at it regularly and repeatedly.** By meeting daily, they kept their focus and also built relationships of trust. They also got accustomed to talking about *their own issues*, and about *applying what they were learning* to life. **Quantity time made possible quality time.**

What came out of these interpersonal home meetings? As people opened up and shared with one another, their struggles, prayer requests and needs would become evident. **As people heard of these needs, those with resources would often be prompted by the Spirit to do what they could to help.** Those who had property and possessions began selling them to raise money for those who were in real need. **This began to happen on a wide scale, enough so that eventually there came to be no poor people among those in the church!** This did not happen overnight. God used the resources and gifts in the Body to make provision for the needy in a *wide variety* of ways.

It is important to recognize the power of sharing. Needs became known, ministry was prompted, God's grace and provision were expressed in radical, dramatic ways that brought praise and glory to God, and the Word went forth with great effect. **We need to rediscover how to develop and effectively utilize this tool for ministry today.**