

Notes for the Ones Called–Out to Meet

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Breaking Bread Together

by Dan Trygg

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now *all the ones believing were being upon the same thing* and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ And they began selling their property and possessions and were distributing them to all, as anyone was having a need. ⁴⁶ And every day they were devoting themselves with one purpose in the temple complex, and breaking bread from house to house, eating food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding the ones being saved daily *upon the same thing*.” Acts 2:42-47

“On the first day of the week, we assembled to break bread. Paul spoke to them, and since he was about to depart the next day, he extended his message until midnight. ...But going upstairs, breaking the bread, and eating, he conversed a considerable time until dawn. Then he left.” Acts 20:7,11

As we look back on the NT church, it is clear that they had a strategy for ministry. They funneled new converts into small groups, where they were all focused “upon the same thing”. New Christians were devoting themselves to the doctrine of the apostles, the honest sharing with one another, taking meals together, and interceding for one another in prayer. These excited, new believers fed off one another’s passion and zeal, and quickly discovered the reality of God’s activity in their lives. **The Holy Spirit was sought and received by them, because they desperately wanted to be filled with the life of God.** They understood *this* to be the core of what new life in Christ was all about. **As they experienced Him, their lives and motivations were radically changed.** They began to love each other, support each other, help each other, sacrifice for each other. Their zeal and love spilled out beyond the confines of their groups to their friends and neighbors. They helped the lost and needy, the weak and despised. **It didn’t take long for people to take notice. This led to opportunities to share the gospel, and it also gave credibility to the message.** Outsiders saw their joy, ...the *practical service*, ...the amazing *answers to prayer*, as God responded to His people, ...and they were drawn to find out more. **It was easy to preach the word in such an environment.** People responded to God, and new converts were directed into groups, focused “upon the same thing”.

We looked at the first two aspects of the discipleship curriculum of the early church: devotion to learning the teaching of the apostles, and developing the sharing with one another. **Let’s take a look at the next ingredient listed in Acts 2:42, the “breaking of bread”.** *What does this phrase mean?* Why was it such an important part of the success of the early church discipleship dynamic? **The phrase “breaking of bread” was not equivalent to “taking communion”,** as we might tend to read back from our religious traditions of centuries later. **“Breaking bread” was a common idiom for sharing a meal.** For example, the phrase occurs in Jeremiah 16:7, in reference to providing a meal for mourners after a funeral. In both the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000, scripture records that Jesus was “breaking” the bread and the fishes (Matt. 14:19; 15:36). The same language is used in Luke 22:19, when, during supper, Jesus “took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it” to His apostles at the last meal before His betrayal. When the resurrected Jesus “took bread, blessed it, and, breaking it, was distributing it to them”, the Emmaus road travelers recognized Him (Lk. 24:30). Acts 20:7,11 clearly describes the gathering together of believers on a Sunday evening “to break bread”. It is clear from verse 11 that this included “eating a meal”. Acts 27:35 uses the same language to describe Paul initiating a meal with the other passengers on the storm-tossed ship. “Taking bread, he gave thanks to God before them all, and breaking it he began to eat.” Most of the others were *pagans*, not Christians, so this was a *meal*, not a *religious rite*. Thus, we should not be surprised to see that **Acts 2:46 reinforces this meaning by saying the early church Christians at Jerusalem “were taking meals together”.**

Why was it so important for the NT Christians to “devote themselves” or “continue unremittingly” to taking meals together? **Table fellowship can be a significant tool in opening up relationships.** By observing this discipline, **they regularly designated time to spend with one another in an informal and unhurried setting.** *Meals also can engender a positive emotional experience,* creating an atmosphere of thanksgiving and enjoyment, even merriment. **This devotion of time together in this kind of setting allowed people to open up their hearts to one another,** another key reason for this exercise. *Healthy body-life grows best out of intimacy and sharing,* and cannot easily happen without time spent together. **It is a general principle that quality time is a function of quantity time.** It is difficult to open up with people you barely know. Typically, we feel more comfortable to share the deeper things of our hearts with those we have invested time with. Extended “face time” eases the discomfort, and we are more willing to take the risk of sharing our inner thoughts. The intimacy of honest sharing then would reveal areas of concern or need, bringing up opportunities to serve in practical ways (e.g., sharing of goods), or to instruct, or to pray for

the person. Verse 46 adds, “they were taking meals together *in gladness and easily-accessible hearts*”. **The meal provided a time where people would relax.** The festive atmosphere of a meal provided a joyful occasion where it was easy to celebrate the Lord’s provision, and the bounty of their meal. Thus, they would eat with “celebration”. The Greek word translated as “easily-accessible” is an interesting word picture. It is a negated form of a word meaning, “difficult terrain to travel”, hence **the dynamic of table fellowship helped produce hearts that were “easy to travel”, or openly accessible.** Even the secular Romans understood the power of table fellowship to forge relationships. Our English word, “companion” is from the Latin *cum* (‘with’) and *panis* (‘bread’). Thus, your “companion” was someone you “broke bread with”.

This shared meal became commonly known as a “love feast”, or “the *agapē*”, and was often a place and time where the Lord’s Supper would be re-enacted, ...before, during or after the meal..., as a reminder of what God had done for them through Christ, ...and who *they* now were, in relation to Him. **There was much more to the meal than just eating food or observing liturgy. The “communion” was “three dimensional”. (1.) It was a sharing of Christ with each individual.** He was the source of their life, the Bread from Heaven (Jn 6:33,35). As they partook of the bread to remember the brokenness of Jesus’ body, and drank the wine in remembrance of His blood, they remembered and reenacted the basis of their faith. *God* loved *them*, and sent Christ to *offer Himself* to redeem *them*. Christ died to give them life, ...His body was broken and His blood was poured out. By faith, they partook of that life when they took Him. The life of Christ offered *for* them became one *with* them. **(2.) It was a sharing of each individual with Christ.** As they partook of the bread and wine, they revisited their own faith commitment. They had believed in and had “taken” Christ as their Savior and Master. Not only had Christ given Himself for them, but they had responded to His grace and love by *giving themselves to Him* to become His people, the “called out ones”. Finally, **(3.) It represented that they were all one with each other in Christ.** Their common union in Christ bound them to each other. As the apostle Paul wrote, “...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually *members one of another*” (Rom. 12:5). Christ in them; they in Christ; and all of them united together with each other. God’s love for them; their love for Him; and their love for each other in Christ.

Virtually all biblical and early church scholars are agreed on this: **If you were to go to a church meeting anywhere in the first centuries of church history, you would be gathering for a meal together.** Church gatherings without a meal were unheard of. Remember, the believers were not meeting in a large building, they were gathering in homes. From the earliest days of the church, the precedent of “taking meals together” was the norm. **As we might expect, ...and as we read about in the NT..., there were excesses and abuses of the common meal and the Lord’s supper.** The people that had “crept in unnoticed” in the book of Jude were arrogant, rebellious, and selfish people, who were affecting others enough that **Jude was prompted to write a letter of correction.** He describes them as “hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you irreverently, caring for themselves, windblown clouds without water, autumn trees without fruit...” (1:12). Basically, they were “clinkers”, people who are not useful or productive in their faith or helpful to the church. They were just coming for the food. **Paul had to address a similar issue in Corinth** (I Cor. 11:17-34). There, some people were coming early, eating the food and drinking the wine (Yes, it was real wine, and they were getting *drunk!*), so that when late comers finally were able to make it to the gathering, there was nothing left for them! To make matters worse, it was usually the slaves and manual laborers who would have to work late, so those who were coming early were probably more wealthy. Not only were they selfish and impolite, but their actions were inconsiderate of and even abusive to the poor and most needy in the group. This is what Paul is referring to when he writes about those who “eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner” and “who do not judge the body rightly” (vss. 27,29). Abuse of the common meal was an offense to God, and *He* was judging the offenders at Corinth!

What happened to the practice of “taking meals together”? From church history, we know that it continued for *centuries*, ...until about 400 AD. I think **there were two factors that contributed to its falling into disfavor. First, some churches began to separate the love feast from the observance of “the Lord’s supper”, or the Eucharist, as it came to be called.** It became common to have a shared meal in the morning, and to observe “communion” in the evening. The separation of the reminder of the Jesus’ death from the context of a meal allowed more magical and superstitious notions about the elements of communion. They came to be exalted as sacrosanct, in and of themselves, instead of seeing them as part of the same bread and wine everyone had been eating at the meal. **But the real death blow was the building of larger meeting places.** Putting on a meal became a much bigger affair than having a few people over for Bible study and fellowship. The larger meetings had already shut out the interactive dynamic of asking questions and discussing scripture. **Eventually the body-life purpose of table fellowship became obscured and lost. The interaction was only on a surface level, ...small talk.** The intentionality of the early church love feasts was no longer explained or encouraged. It was no longer a vital part of the “discipleship curriculum”.