

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Importance of “Fellowship”

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

There was a follow-up strategy for new believers in the early church. Obviously, **they were devoted to the “doctrine of the apostles”**, i.e., the *content* of what the apostles *taught*. We get that. That was a fundamental part of getting people established and growing in their faith. **The apostolic doctrine included passing along the teachings of Jesus, as well as expounding on the scriptures** that they possessed at that time. The NT writings did not yet exist, so the apostles taught from what we call the Old Testament, ...the Law, Prophets and Writings of the Jewish canon. **Much of their teaching would have focused on how Jesus' life and work fulfilled the teachings of the recognized prophets of God from the past. All of these first converts were Jews, so they would have been taught the scriptures from their youth. They would have known them well enough to recognize the words of the prophets, and to carry on informed discussions.** They would have been able to recite portions that they had memorized, because scripture memory was important to the Jewish community. Children were taught the scriptures in synagogue schools, and scripture memory was a common feature of most devout Jewish family life. **Written copies of the scriptures were hand-copied, and were very expensive. Memorization, therefore, was emphasized, as the most practical and realistic way most people could know and live by the inspired Word of God.**

Preaching, studying or discussing the Word was not the only aspect of the “curriculum” the apostles had in mind for the new converts, however. In Acts 2:42, we find that **the apostles immediately directed new believers into a dynamic of activities that formed the basis for developing their spiritual lives.** This recipe for spiritual development also **set the stage for very natural outward ministry expressions in their lives.** There is an interesting phrase in the original Greek, which does not come out very well in our English translations. It occurs in verses 44 and 47. Literally, it means “upon the same thing”. Often, it is translated as “together” in verse 44, but that is clearly *not* the case. The disciples were *not* together. They were meeting in private homes all over the city. They were *not* hanging out “together” in one location. And, in verse 47, most translations *don't even attempt to translate it*, at all! They simply *skip* it! Yet, the sentence clearly *ends* with the *same phrase*, “upon the same thing”, *that introduced the paragraph* that began in verse 44. It seems to me to be written very purposefully to “bookend” the dynamics of the early church community. In other words, **the phrase, “upon the same thing”, is meant to describe the discipleship activity of the early church! This is what everyone was doing, that produced the life-filled, joyful, powerful, radical church in Jerusalem in those earliest days.** Once you recognize this, you can easily see that this *remained* the discipleship strategy of the first century church, as it spread across the Roman Empire.

What comprised the discipleship dynamic of the early church? It is summarized in verse 42, and explained in more detail in verses 44-47. **The new followers of Jesus Christ were devoting themselves to (1.) the doctrine of the apostles; (2.) fellowship or “sharing”; (3.) “breaking bread” together; and (4.) the prayers.** In addition to the importance of studying the scriptures, let's take a closer look at the second aspect of a disciple's curriculum in the early church.

The word, “fellowship”, has become a somewhat antiquated word. I don't think it is so commonly used in everyday parlance as it was even a generation or two ago. **It was a common word that, over time, has become more associated with the religious culture.** Where else would you see a sign for “Fellowship Hall”? Images of coffee and cookies, and people mingling come to my mind when I think of a “fellowship time” at church, or other gatherings. **It is a time for social interaction.** The other common area where the term is used in today's culture has to do with an academic position or grant to pursue graduate work at a college or university, or a short-term job with pay to study in a particular area. Merriam Webster defines fellowship as: “a friendly relationship between people; a community of interest, activity, feeling or experience; a company of equals or friends; the quality or state of being comradely.” **Older English definitions referred to friendly interactions between compatriots, people joined together by circumstances or common interests.** This certainly has some relevance to the original Greek word used

in Acts 2:42, but *these definitions do not go deep enough!* They are only a *watered-down version* of what was originally meant by this word. **In our notions of “fellowship”, we are mostly thinking about social chit-chat.** We talk about family, work, sports, current events, etc., but we rarely, truly open up and share the deeper things of our hearts, or even talk about our problems, faith-challenges, or even the growth edges of our spiritual journey. **We are like “fellows in the same ship” trying to find something to talk about.** We are strangers or acquaintances, who engage in innocuous small talk, but who never get to the meaty issues of life.

The Greek word that is translated as “fellowship” here is “*koinōnia*”. Its fundamental meaning is “sharing”. It occurs 19 times in the NT. Three times it is used of a shared partnership (2 Cor. 6:14; Phil. 1:5; Philem. 1:6). It is used four times to describe sharing goods or money with the poor (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Heb. 13:16). Twice it refers to sharing in the body and blood of Christ, when we observe communion (1 Cor. 10:16 [2x]). Paul uses it to describe sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10). Finally, nine times, it refers to a sharing that could refer to a sharing of hearts or life (Act. 2:42; Gal. 2:9; 1 Jn. 1:7 – with other people; 1 Cor. 1:9 – with Jesus; 2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1 – with the Holy Spirit; 1 Jn. 1:3 [2x],6 – with God). Clearly, the word, *koinōnia*, goes much deeper than making social talk or chit chat. **The root word that it comes from is *koinos*, which means “for common use, shared, ordinary, mutually available”. It is the opposite of “holy”, which means something “set apart” or “made private or special”. ***Koinōnia* signifies opening up some of our private thoughts to one another in the Body of Christ for the purpose of building one another up.** It implies asking questions, sharing struggles, hurts, prayer requests, faith challenges, “God-sightings”, and speaking words of encouragement, hope or instruction to others in the body of Christ whom you trust. ***Under the freedom of the Spirit, and the safety of other believers, things that used to be privately held, ...personal thoughts and feelings, or even practical resources and help..., are freely shared and made available, without judgment or embarrassment.*****

We can see how that was working out in practice by examining the close-up view offered in vs. 44-47. It is very clear that some of those with means began selling their property in order to help people in need. **That was the sharing (*koinōnia*) in practical resources** (cf. 4:32-37). What is *not* so apparent, however, is the *koinōnia* of personal communication. It is very clearly stated in the Greek, however. The last part of verse 46 says that “they were taking their meals together in gladness and sincerity of heart.” The Greek word translated as “sincerity” occurs only here in the NT. It offers a very vivid word picture. It is a negated form of a word meaning “difficult, rocky terrain”. In other words, it means “ease of travel”. **Their hearts were also open and easily accessible to one another for sharing.**

It seems to me, as I have pondered these passages, that **the regular, daily time these new Christians spent together, and their newfound joy in the Lord, gave them the freedom to share openly with one another**, to ask for prayer and counsel. **As they did this, certain practical needs came up, and some of those who had the ability to help sold some of their property to assist those in need. This response was *personal, spontaneous* and *Spirit-led*.** There was no human authority *telling* people they *had to* sell their possessions and give to the church.

So often, the discussions and studies of this passage get bogged down in the radical financial response of those who chose to give, that we lose sight of the purpose of “fellowship”. **Interactive sharing between believers was part of the “discipleship curriculum” of the early church**, and it did not end with the scattering of the Jerusalem church. **It was an important, ...no, a central ingredient for spiritual development that was *emphasized and diligently practiced in the early church*.** When you look carefully at the practical sections of Paul’s letters, it is quite clear that he was encouraging and expecting interactive sharing among believers. It is central to his ideal description of church meetings (Eph. 4:15,16), and he specifically gave practical instructions to give everyone a chance to share (1 Cor. 14:26-40). It is quite clear that interactive church meetings were one of the key components of the discipleship process. Furthermore, **virtually every epistle in the NT includes instructions about the relationships and interactions between believers.** We are specifically told to think about one another for the purpose of stirring each other up to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24,25). We are to encourage and build up one another (1 Thess. 5:11). We are to confess our faults to/with one another, and pray for one another (Jas. 5:16).

In church history, whenever the church rediscovers the power of small interactive groups, the ministry becomes much more effective, and spreads out beyond the local church gathering. In the 1700’s, when Wesley’s revival began to take root and spread, he organized new converts into classes and societies. These groups offered accountability, Bible study, confession of sin and prayer. As long as people attended and utilized these groups with open hearts, the movement continued to produce strong disciples, and spread. When these groups began to fall into disfavor, and attendance dropped off, the number of maturing Christians began to wane, and the movement slowed and eventually all but died. **If we want God’s results, we must follow His way of doing things. The early Christians devoted themselves to “fellowship”.** They continued unremittently in interactive, personal sharing, in groups small enough to promote openness and serious enough to insist on depth. **May we rediscover Biblical fellowship!**