

BIRTHMARKS
Of
The Infant Church

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"And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" -Acts 2:42

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I published four articles from Acts 2:42: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”, in my monthly publication, *A Pastoral Letter*. After reading them, Elder Freddy Boen encouraged me to put them together in a booklet form for a wider circulation. This is the premise of this little publication with a few additional thoughts added to the original manuscripts.

As I write, I realized more and more, just how dynamic this little verse of scripture, recorded by the beloved physician, Luke, really is. Within this one verse of scripture we find a storehouse of wisdom just as contemporary, and practical, for churches today as the day Luke penned the words. In just one verse of scripture the Holy Ghost has moved Luke to record four identifying marks of the New Testament church in its infancy. All four of these marks identify fundamental areas of practice and worship enjoyed by the infant church as a body of believers in its very awakening. We might call these identifying marks the *birthmarks* of the infant church.

If I were to give a subtitle to this little booklet I would simple call it “Basic Fundamentals of the Christian Church”. You are not going to find anything *new*, or any deep and dark mysteries revealed within. Yet, I believe it is important to keep these simple patterns before us because it is easy for churches to stray from the simple, basic, principles that we find in the church at its very awakening.

Naturally speaking, birthmarks stay with us for life. Many times, people are identified by their special birthmark given to them by God. Just as natural birthmarks identify people, these spiritual birthmarks can be used to identify the Christian church in every age.

One of the most thought-provoking truths of this verse is the *simplicity* we find in Luke’s description of a lively, spiritual, thriving, healthy, loving, evangelical, and worshipful church. Yes, the infant church was all of the above, yet void of the complicated schemes, programs, and methods used in our modern culture to grow churches, and hopefully make people Christians.

Surely, you will know that this verse is not a rigid guideline of the *only* things a church may do. But it definitely tells us that a church can be all of the above by doing only these things!

Think about that for a moment. Consider how astounding that thought is in our pragmatic day when anything goes, just as long as the desired result is obtained. A day when men are using every thought of the imagination to build churches for numbers, for money... for men. It must be by faith that we continue to believe that God can, and I believe will, bless churches by the simple outline given by Luke’s divine hand. In its very awakening, these four areas of Christian participation, and worship, fulfilled the spiritual appetite of the infant church...and it prospered!

The Acts of the Apostles, from which our verse is taken, is one of the most, exciting book in the Bible. This accurate record immediately follows the great outpouring of God's spirit on

the day of Pentecost, the day in which God added to the church about three thousand souls. All of this excitement was caused by a small band of believers doing the four things Luke records, attended with the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. Surely, this is what we want today in our churches. According to Luke, the New Testament church, in its very awakening, continued stedfastly in four things: "the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." First, let us consider the most fundamental principle of the Christian church: The apostles' doctrine.

PART 1: THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

“Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.”-John 7:16

If we are to understand the importance of the apostles' doctrine, we need to understand who the apostles were, and their special purpose and calling. The apostles were the men that Jesus personally chose, and ordained, to be witnesses of His resurrection, as well as the things He taught. This was, to say the least, a monumental task. Among all of the religious professors living in that day, these men were the ones that were the most qualified to testify of the resurrection of Jesus, and spread His doctrine. Their qualification was simple: they had been with Jesus. Jesus called them to the office and gave them power and authority to carry out His bidding.

The apostles were Jesus' most ardent followers during His earthly ministry. They walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, and listened to his sermons. They were with him more than any other people. They personally witnessed His way of life... as well as His way of death. They were the witnesses of His miracles, His sufferings, and His resurrection. They witnessed His ascension into glory. They had eyes to see, and ears to hear, the many things that Jesus taught and preached. Jesus told them *"What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops"* -Mat. 10:27. Therefore, the apostles, by design, became the *revelators* of all that Jesus said, and did.

Their job was to spread the gospel to the uttermost part of the world. They were to evangelize in a very dark and unfriendly world; establish churches where God planted the seeds; and then continue to teach the disciples of Christ. The book of Acts documents the faithfulness of the apostles in this work.

The apostles were chosen men, vested with many special gifts and graces. Among them was the special gift to comprehend, interpret and teach the principles that Jesus taught them. Zodhiates, a Greek scholar, has made several observations concerning the word "doctrine" as found in our text. He wrote "in an absolute sense, it (the word doctrine) denotes the teaching of Jesus". I know I have already made that point, but I want to emphasize this fact. These men were not acting on their own. They were not teaching principles that they came up with themselves. They did not claim any revelation from angels, from other men, or even from God the Father. Everything they taught came from Jesus.

Therefore, the apostles' doctrine did not originate with the apostles themselves. Their doctrine came from Jesus. Jesus taught them, and they taught the church. It was called the "apostles' doctrine" by Luke because Jesus had ascended to glory, and they continued to teach His principles. Thus, their teaching was referred to as "the apostles' doctrine".

A. WE HAVE THE SAME APOSTLES

“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.”-2

When we speak of the apostles' doctrine, it is important for us to remember that we have the same apostles today as they had in the infant church. What does this mean? It means that we have the same ordained teachers, and thus the same doctrine.

Originally, there were twelve apostles. They are commonly referred to in scripture as "the twelve". Sometimes they are referred to as "disciples" because they never ceased to be followers, and learners, even though they were Jesus' most learned men. The Christian church will always have the original apostles' doctrine. This will never change.

Sometimes, other men are referred to as apostles because they personally walked with Christ, and were eyewitnesses of His resurrection. They were not of the original twelve, but they had the same credentials. Thus, they are referred to as "apostles". This is why James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote the book of James, was referred to by Paul as an apostle (Gal. 1:19). Of course, Paul was also an apostle. He referred to himself as one "born out of due time", for he saw Christ personally after His ascension. But these men lived at the same time as Christ and the other apostles.

We can be very dogmatic when we say we have the same apostles today as they had in the infant church. We can be equally dogmatic when we say that there never has been, nor ever will be, any other apostles in the Christian Church. The reason we can be dogmatic about this is by the authority of sacred scripture. If you will recall, when Peter and the other apostles were seeking out a man to replace the bishoprick of Judas (and they wasted no time in their endeavor to fill it) Peter gave the qualifications one must have to be chosen:

"Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22).

According to Peter, an apostle must have the following qualification to be a genuine apostle: They must have accompanied the original apostles from the baptism of John until Christ's ascension. Who, today, can claim that qualification? No one! Who, even then, could claim it except those closely associated with the apostles themselves? None! Not even Pliny the great historian. We can be sure that the many false apostles that have risen up since Christ's ascension cannot make this claim. Nor can Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha, Joseph Smith Jr., Brigham Young, Charles Russell, or any of the false prophets who have claimed divine authority since those days... for they have witnessed *nothing*.

As a side note, I will remind you that false prophets, and false apostles have risen up since the days of the original apostles claiming to have had visions, being given wisdom from angels of light. We have been faithfully warned by Jesus and the apostles about these false apostles, prophets, and dreamers. To the Corinthians he wrote: *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the*

ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

To the Galatians he wrote: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8)

I continue to remind my readers of this because so many of God’s people are led away by these false professors whose end is recorded in the book of Jude. Let us never forget that we have the same apostles as the infant church had, and thus, the same scriptures, and thus the same doctrine that Luke refers to accurately as “The Apostles’ Doctrine”.

It is not within the scope of this little book to comment upon the many versions of the Bible available to Christians today nor the manuscripts they have been taken from. All I will say is “Buyer beware!” Printers print to make a prophet. Men will interpret according to their own passions. Churches promote their own policies. Let us be honest and seek God’s truth. In my own personal opinion, you will never go wrong with a good KJV. Though it is not today in the king’s language, if you will do some study, you will find that nothing has been changed in it since it was originally presented to King James. It has been used by the Christian Church for centuries and I do not believe that the many historic revivals and blessings among God’s people could possibly have been the result of spurious manuscripts. Any other manuscript should be compared to this one.

There may be those who ask, “Were not some of the books of the Bible written by men who were not apostles?” This is an accurate observation, yet easily answered. Though some of the books in the New Testament were written by men who were not apostles themselves, they were men who were personally acquainted with the original apostles or with Jesus. They walked with them, talked with them, discussed with them , and learned firsthand from them the doctrines of Christ. They were qualified. No man since the days of the original apostles can make that claim.

Most scholars agree that fourteen of the books of the New Testament were written by the apostle Paul, five by the apostle John, two by the apostle Peter, and one by the apostle Matthew. The other books of the New Testament were written by men who were either closely associated with the apostles themselves or with Jesus. It seems that James, and Jude, were half brothers to Jesus, having the same earthly mother. Mark was the cousin of Barnabus. Peter referred to Mark as "Marcus my son". Mark was the companion of Barnabus and Saul on some of their journeys.

Luke was a close associate and traveling companion of Paul. He was with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment, and Paul referred to him as "Luke, the beloved physician." It was from his pen that we received not only the gospel of Luke, but also the monumental account of the "Acts of the Apostles", the book from which our text is taken. In his opening remarks in the book of Luke he cites the source of his doctrine as the apostles themselves, eyewitnesses of all that Christ did and said, who then delivered Christ’s doctrine to ‘us’:

“Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were

eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed." Luke 1:1-4

All scripture, both Old and New Testament, is divine, proceeding forth from the mind of God. When the Jews marveled at the doctrine that Jesus taught He said unto them "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me." It would be accurate to say that "the apostles' doctrine" came down from heaven.

On the Isle of Patmos, John viewed the apostles' doctrine in its purity as "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" -Rev. 22:1. Its divine source ensures it clarity and purity. The preacher is not to add anything to this doctrine. His job is to keep it pure, learn from what has been written and preserved, preach and teach it for the edification of the New Testament church, and publish it for the conversion of the elect.

Why is it important to remember we have the same apostles today? As I have already mentioned, and as prophesied by the beloved apostles, false apostles have, and will rise up and teach things contrary to sound doctrine. Peter warned us in 2 Peter 2:1-2: "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. "

Jude warned us in Jude 1:3-4: "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." When Jude writes 'once delivered' he means one time, once for all.

Much more could be written concerning the finality of sacred scripture, and the many false prophets and cults that have risen up since the time of our Lord. These all have their writers with new revelations, new bibles, new truths, new doctrines, new prophets, and new apostles. This includes the Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormon Church sometimes known as the Latter Day Saints, the Christian Science, Islam, Buddhism, and any other form of religion which dethrones our faithful Lord Jesus Christ, adds to sacred scripture, endeavors to overthrow the faith of the elect, and which presents any other way to glory other than salvation by grace by the blood of the Lamb. (Acts 15:11)

To the wise, one thing that every false religion has in common is that they all deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Secondly, they take from, or add to the scriptural cannon.(see Revelation 22:18). They have their own writers, books, bibles, and their own personal view of heaven.

Suffice it to say that the sacred cannon of scripture was completed in the days of the original apostles or shortly thereafter by God-called men personally acquainted with the

original apostles or Jesus Himself. There have never been any other apostles. The truths they recorded are the only rule of faith and practice for the church till Christ returns. The apostle's doctrine is the doctrine that Jesus taught the apostles and that the apostles infused into the New Testament Church. This foundation has never, nor will ever change or the great walls of the church will crumble and Jesus has promised that this can never happen.

The church in every age is verily built upon "the apostles' doctrine". According to Paul, the church is built "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" -Ephesians 2:20. This tells us that the apostles' doctrine is the superstructure of the church in every age. It also tells us that the apostles' doctrine is in complete harmony with the "prophets". The apostles' doctrine agrees completely with the writings of the Old Testament. They complement one another. The apostles' doctrine is the doctrine of the entire Bible. In short, it is the witness of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for the elect of God.

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE

"But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."-Matthew 15:9

The apostles' doctrine is the bedrock of the New Testament church. After all, what would the church be without "the apostles' doctrine". It would be a name without a face. It would stand for nothing. It would champion nothing. According to Jesus, our worship would be for nothing (in vain) if our doctrine is not composed of truth. It is "the apostles' doctrine" which gives the church her identity. This identity is found in the person of Jesus Christ because the doctrine testifies of His great accomplishment: the salvation of His people. The apostles' doctrine will always glorify our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is doctrine which separates the religious world, denominations, even cults. It is doctrine which clearly identifies the church from worldly organizations. Even though there are many groups and organizations that are developed, and maintained, for charitable causes, the purpose of the church is to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ and spread His doctrine. Though every church should be involved in charitable activities this is not the primary purpose of the church. The primary purpose of the church is the same today as it was in the days of the apostles. The preachers and pastors of our day have the same job: spread the doctrines of Jesus Christ at home, and abroad.

It is doctrine that gives the church her direction. As the Holy Ghost fuels the church and gives the power from above, doctrine guides. Just as we need gas to move our cars from point to point, we also need a steering wheel. A church must have the Spirit for gifts, graces and power, but without doctrine a church will fly out of control, and crash into a ditch. Thus, we have been given the apostles' doctrine.

According to the apostle John, doctrine is the superstructure of the church in every age.

In his vision on Patmos he noted: "the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" Rev. 21:14. These were the revelators, the initial builders. As John further measured the city, he noted that every line was plumb and square; every principle and doctrine agreed perfectly with all other truths of the Bible (which agrees with Paul's words of Ephesians 2:20). And notice the man that all of this must agree with: "And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel" -Rev. 21:17. This angel is the angel of Rev. 20:1, who came "down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand." This is that man, "Christ Jesus", the "chief corner stone" of all that we believe and practice. All that we believe and practice today as the New Testament church revolves around Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. We cannot accurately preach the written word without preaching the living Word and we cannot accurately preach the living Word without preaching the written word. Jesus IS "the apostles' doctrine".

C. POINTS OF DOCTRINE

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." -2 Timothy 2:15

The apostles' doctrine is multifaceted, including every area of instruction and practice ordained of God and given to men. It is, in reality, the whole Bible. These doctrines include the deity, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It includes doctrine of the salvation of the elect, practical godliness, the divine ordinances of the church, encouragements to Christian exercises like prayer, meditation, study, fasting, the glorification of the saints, the doctrines of faith, hope, charity, the atonement, the second coming of Christ, and the list goes on. The doctrines of the church are comforting to the saints. They remind them of the special promises of God made especially to them. Utmost respect should be given to every word preserved of God and published by the apostles. The most humbling and arduous task of every God-called man who preaches the word is to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Success is last, faithfulness is first. To be faithful to truth is the first and primary rule for any minister of the gospel. If we love Jesus we would never want to misrepresent Him, His apostles, or the truth. Many of the apostles signed their testimony in blood for the honor of God and the perpetuity of truth and the church.

Why is doctrine so important? Because the apostle's doctrine *defines* the God that we worship in the New Testament Church. When I say define, I mean that it gives an accurate description of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. After all, we baptize in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost. If we do not define God by our doctrine, how do we, or our converts, know or understand who we are baptizing people into. When God is not defined by our doctrine, we are just going through a meaningless ordinance or to say it another way, we are making the ordinance meaningless.

Therefore our doctrine should define God the Father with biblical principles like

“foreknowledge”, “predestination”, “election”, and His absolute sovereignty in every area. It should define His eternal love for His people. The doctrine should display His choice, and will, in saving His people from their sins because this is what the apostle’s doctrine taught. It should present God the Father as One who is Holy, Just, and loving.

Concerning the Son, the doctrine should depict a successful Savior, one who came down from heaven to save His people from their sins...and did it. It should not teach a savior who only made people savable or redeemable, but rather a savior who knew His people personally, and intimately, and put their sins away forever.

Concerning the spirit, the apostles doctrine teaches a Holy Spirit that was, and is, irresistible, that regenerates the elect according to God’s time, and will, not man’s time, and free will. A spirit that is not subject to programs, schemes, and models.

Surely, it would be heresy for a church to baptize people in the name of a Father who doesn’t know His family, but is waiting to be introduced to them when the world ends; or into a Son who doesn’t know His bride, but is waiting to meet her when men have done all they can; or into a Spirit that needs the permission of sinful man to change the stony heart. Surely, this is not the apostle’s doctrine. I am amazed at those who say they have accepted Christ, but reject the apostle’s doctrine.

Doctrine should, must, give an accurate description of the God that is worshipped in the Church. Who is the God that you worship in your church? I am persuaded that the true God has not changed! A church may attract the masses with schemes, programs and music, a church can be deeply involved with the traditions of their forefathers, but without this accurate teaching of God and His character their worship is in vain (Matthew 15:9).

D. WHAT IS YOUR FIRST QUESTION

“Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” -Acts 16:29-30

What should be our first question when we seek a place of worship? To the Roman jailer, it had to do with salvation, “What must I do to be saved?” It was the first question they asked after Peter’s monumental sermon at Pentecost, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And it was the first question that fell from the lips of Saul of Tarsus when Jesus appeared to him, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” They were pricked in the heart because of their sin and wanted to know how to get right with God. We know that salvation is by grace, and that there was nothing we, or they could do to receive the merits of Christ, for they are free. But so far as a public confession is concerned, so far as following the Lord, there was a lot they could do. And they were all given an answer. They were to believe the truth of the gospel, repent of their sins, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

If you feel to be a sinner, if you know that you deserve hell, this should be your first question when you seek a place of worship. You should inquire as to the church's doctrine concerning the salvation of sinners? Does it agree with the word of God? Does it agree with your own conscience? Are there scriptures that back it up? This should be the most important thing to any sinner who is seeking a place of worship... for we worship a *Savior*. Everything in the church revolves around *salvation*.

Some are seeking other things in a church. Salvation hasn't crossed their minds. Some seek a place to play. Some seek a place to meet new people. Many seek a daycare, or a place to deposit their children for a day so they can do other things. To some, this verse might read, "Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what do you have for the young people?" Though this may seem terse it does seem to be the most prevalent question people ask today when some seek a place of worship. Why? Because they have not seen their personal need of Christ!

There are many churches that are willing to accommodate their desires. But let us be serious. The first question anyone should ask when they seek a place of worship should be the same as the jailer's. They should ask how sinners are saved. They should inquire as to the church's doctrine of *salvation*!

When we stop in think about it, salvation is the dividing line between most Christian churches. They all have a different method whereby sinners are saved. Some place the emphasis upon baptism. Others place their emphasis on sprinkling. One places an emphasis on accepting. Another places their emphasis upon confession. If one is absolutely correct, the others are in trouble....eternally! Salvation is not by a method. It is by grace, through the finished works of Jesus Christ. This is what we are to believe.

The question of how sinners are saved was the subject of the first major controversy in the Christian church. We should not be surprised if it continues to be a matter of debate. In wisdom, the apostles settled the matter. We read in Acts 15 that they came together to discuss the question. After they all had their say they concluded: "*But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.*" (Acts 15:11). **Salvation is by grace!**

We can be sure that this is the most important principle in the Christian church. Though it is sad to say I must say it anyway, doctrine is not the most important thing to many Christians in our modern day. It is not at the top of their list. When people look for a place of worship the questions are usually: "What do you have for the children?" "Do you have something for the singles?" "What programs do you offer?" ,and etc. They are really looking for good friends for their children, activities for them, a dating service, a nursery, and some form of entertainment mingled with church so they will not be bored. Many people want churches to be what they want them to be, not what God wants them to be. What they should be asking is "What does your church stand for?" "What do you teach?" "What is your doctrine of Jesus Christ and Him crucified?"

Though it is sad, it is true. A church could teach practically anything about the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and as long as they had what the people initially asked for they would be at the top of their list. It is without question, the focus of many Christians today is not upon sound truth, but rather programs and services...with a little Jesus mixed in. This is well understood by the church growth movements of our modern day. They have developed sophisticated models for growing churches. Just as many food chains have a business model that they use to grow their consumer base, many churches have their own model. They usually run like this: send buses out and gather children which will in turn bring their parents; involve them all in a programs, even teaching (when they have not been taught themselves); have plays, cantatas, contemporary rock music, and whatever it takes to attract the young and the masses; diet programs, marital programs, single programs, youth programs, billboards with attractive people on them; all of these appeal to the masses. Though *some* of these may be beneficial at times, anyone who has read the Bible should know that these were not found in the church at its beginning...and it prospered greatly. Their focus was on truth, conversion to the truth, in short, the apostles' doctrine.

As I mentioned earlier, Luke's instruction reeks of simplicity. It takes nothing fancy to truly worship our Lord. Paul and Silas depicted a most profound worship service in a jail cell at midnight...and God answered in approval with an earthquake opening the prison doors. This all happened with only two men, singing, and praying. I believe churches can remain in the simple confines of Luke's text, and be very busy, and very active. The faithful, simple worship service, and the faithfulness of the people to perform it, was the basis of early Christianity!

E. DIFFUSION OF THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."-Acts 1:8

The apostle's job was monumental! It was also an impossible job for mere men. These men must have been endued with power from on high! They were to infuse the *instruction*, the sound doctrine of Jesus Christ, into the New Testament church, and then spread it unto all nations, world without end. Their work continues today with every preacher, in every church, among all Christians. Jesus commanded them to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." -Matthew 28:19-20.

Within this verse we observe church perpetuity, evangelism, a continual cycle of teaching within, and without the church, and the baptizing of believers. Until the world ends, until all nations are taught, this is the commandment of Jesus to the New Testament church: spread the apostle's doctrine. This will exalt Christ. The New Testament church has been commanded by Jesus to teach and baptize people in our communities, in other communities, in other cities,

states and countries, people "out of every kindred, and tongue, and nation, and people".

The spreading of the gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth is beautifully illustrated by Jesus when he spoke in parable and said: "*The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof*" -Matthew 13:31-32.

The spreading of "the apostles' doctrine" began as a tiny seed, planted in the areas of Jerusalem, a remote corner of the world. But as we view it today, it has spread like the branches of a great tree. It grew from Jesus to the apostles, then to their hearers. On the day of Pentecost "the apostles' doctrine" began to branch out rapidly with the conversion of about three thousand. From there Peter carried it to the Gentiles. Since that time, the branches of this tree have spread from person to person, family to family, city to city, nation to nation, country to country and continent to continent, to the uttermost parts of the world. For almost two-thousand years, many of God's children have found a resting place in the branches of the glorious gospel of our resurrected Christ

F. STEDFASTLY

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."-1Corinthians 15:58

According to our text, the infant church continued "stedfastly" in the apostles' doctrine. Steadfastly means *earnest towards*. It means to *persevere*. It means to be *constantly diligent*. It means to *attend assiduously*. Is this your personal attitude? Is it the attitude of your church?

If our eyes are open we know that we are living a day of sad decline, a day where a pseudo-spirit is fabricated by loud music, programs and schemes. With all of this comes many challenges. I was visiting with a preacher-friend today and he reminded me that churches are much more difficult to pastor than they were fifty years ago. Today we are dealing with issues like sodomy, abortion, drugs, the internet, face-book, movies, religious cults, evolution, pornography, that are causing great havoc in the lives of God's people. Most of these were hardly found fifty years ago. What are we to do? I believe we are to do what they did. We are to continue steadfastly "in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

The infant church was earnest and aggressive, unmovable in their doctrine and practice. They were not interested in changing the doctrine of Jesus for the purpose of drawing crowds. They were looking for children of God, touched by God's spirit in such a way that they would be submissive to Christ, and His doctrine. Should we not be just as faithful today?

Satan has sought out many devices to sever the various limbs and organs from the spiritual body of Christ. This fast paced society in which we live has made it extremely difficult for people to communicate, and fellowship in the church. We are constantly

bombarded with meetings, sports activities, recreations, clubs, organizations, phone calls, television shows, concerts, movies, hobbies, shopping trips along with a host of modern luxuries, all of which devour our time and attention. Many jobs today require the husband and wife to maintain such a hectic schedule that they meet one another in the carport coming and going. Even though these areas that we have defined can be enjoyable, and some are not sin in and of themselves, we must be careful to not allow these privileges to destroy those blessings within our homes and our churches. We are to, "*walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time*" (Col. 4:5). These words tell us that we should be very wise concerning the world and our use of the things in the world. We must structure our time in the most profitable way that we can. When fellowship and communication break down, relationships break down, in both the home and in the church.

I must acknowledge that I am a part of this. I find it difficult in a world of prosperity, entertainment, and scheduling to be steadfast. I know that I can be more faithful. I am sure that you can be as well. Come, my brethren, let us gird up our loins and be steadfast. What we do, let us do faithfully, steadfastly, till Christ returns!

PART 2: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SAINTS

We have considered the importance of doctrine. A church is not a church without doctrine. But we must know that a church is more than a doctrine. The New Testament church, in its very awakening, were people who loved one another, and fellowshiped together. Though a church is nothing without doctrine, it can have a perfect doctrine and be a dead, orthodox skeleton, a carcass without life, an empty shell! Fellowship is important. That is why God moved Luke to record this intricate part of the body of Christ.

A. CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IS LOVE

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” -John 13:35

A church that is alive, one that is spiritual, is a church that not only loves their Lord, and His truths, but they also love one another. Jesus said this was how the world would know that we are His disciples. Not by a doctrine we hold, but by the love we have for other Christians. Surely, there were those in John’s day that felt they were right with God because they knew the doctrine. But to many of these Jesus said they were full of dead men’s bones. They appeared fine on the outside, but on the inside they were dead corpses.(Matthew 23:27).

John wrote: *“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.”* Apparently there were those that said that they were in the light, that they had the light, that they had the truth, that they were the most religious, the most righteous. They claimed to have the doctrine. But they had a fatal problem. They hated their brethren. As Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun. We know of some of like this today. Jealousies, personality conflicts, competition, popularity, all contribute to this hatred among those who believe the same thing. But John makes it clear: knowledge of doctrine without love is still darkness.

Perhaps there were other reasons. Perhaps some had learned the doctrine, but didn’t want to be around the church people, so they took the doctrine home with them never to return to God’s house where they learned it. Perhaps they loved the doctrine, but they loved the world more than Christ. So they took the doctrine home, put it under a basket, and played with their friends in the world. Perhaps they were jealous of other Christians. Many reasons for their hatred of other Christians could be given. The point is that they knew doctrine, but hated the brethren...and they were in darkness.

John was accurately referred to as the apostle of love. It was said that in his last days they brought him to church on a cot. That is what I call “continuing stedfastly.” Jerome stated that one phrase was continually on his lips: “My little children, love one another.” When they would ask him why he always said this he replied, “It is the Lord’s command, and if this alone be done it is enough.” If we are really a Christians, we love Christ, His doctrine, and other Christians...and we want to be with them. Love for the brethren is the true badge of

discipleship.

Here we find a vertical and horizontal love relationship in a lively church which is God honoring. This dual love relationship is depicted in the first communion service. The partaking of the wine and bread represents our fellowship with the Lord: His body and His blood. The washing of the Saints' feet represents our love for our brethren, and our desire to serve them. Luke observes the New Testament Church as a place where both the vertical, and horizontal love relationship is observed. Christians fellowshiped, and they genuinely loved one another. They enjoyed "the fellowship of the Saints".

There are places of worship where people assemble together, bow down together to worship, and then return to their separate places of abode with little, if any interaction with one another. This is displayed in worldly religions, and sometimes in Christian churches. They do not know one another. They do not share their families, their lives, their jobs, nor their sorrows and joys. But I ask this question: "How can people love one another, as Jesus describes, if they do not know one another?" Surely, this is not the picture of the infant church. They knew one another very intimately. They met and prayed when they had problems, and they knew where one another lived. (Acts 12:13). Togetherness is the most prominent concept of the word fellowship. It is displayed in one simple thought that they loved one another. If you love someone, you want to be with them. And we come to love others by sharing our lives with them, getting to know them, and being with them. And something is obvious here: you can't love someone that you do not know!

The importance of the fellowship of the saints can be slighted by God's people, many times unknowingly. As long as they attend the sermon, many Christians feel they have done their duty. And that is what church is to them. It is a duty, and not a joy. But being a member of the New Testament church is much more than going to hear a message. It involves active participation with other Christians. This should be a joy.

Churches may suffer because this fundamental aspect of Christianity is neglected. The people unknowingly suffer as well. They are not ministering to those in need, and in turn they have no one to minister to them when they have a need. People go to church, hear a message, and go home and forget about the other members till the next Sunday. They are not involved in the "fellowship of the saints." Surely, this is not the Christianity of the Bible.

B. CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IS FRIENDSHIP

"But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name." - 3 John 1:14

I believe that fellowship involves *friendship*. John apparently felt it to be so as he referred to his brethren as friends. Yes, apart from our own earthly family, members of churches should prefer their beloved brethren above all other friends on the earth. Our brethren should be our best friends. These are the people we should feel comfortable sharing

our faith with, and our problems. It is certain that we should have some friends outside our church walls. Without these who would we invite to God's house? But our best friends, the ones we would want to spend the most time with, should be our beloved brethren who love our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was pressed by the crowd, and He was informed that His mother and other members of His earthly family were trying to find Him, He replied *"Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!"* (Matthew 12:48-49)

Yes, to Jesus the disciples were his most intimate friends. Are your best friends Christians? If you claim to be a Christian they should be. Some of these should be members of the same church you attend. How can we bear one another's burdens if we are not close enough to our friends in the church to share them with one another? Our best, most intimate friends, those faithful ones we would desire to share our greatest trials with, should be other Christians. They should be our beloved brethren, people we love, people we know intimately, people we know will pray for us with caring hearts, and souls. This is the fellowship of the saints. It is through this fellowship of the saints that people feel to be a genuine part of Christ's body. This is what people see first when they come to your church!

C. THE HOME CHURCH MOVEMENT

"Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as we see the day approaching."- Hebrews 10:23-25

There is a movement going on today which hinders the fellowship of the saints: the home church movement. This group has deemed churches today to be boring. They, therefore, have done exactly what the writer of Hebrews has encouraged us not to do...forsake the assembly. Perhaps they do not like the apostles' doctrine. Perhaps they do not like the apostles' themselves... or other Christians. Perhaps they are like many of us, they have had some bad experiences in man-made churches. Whatever the reason, these have abandoned the public assembly to meet in their own homes with their families.

The confusion here is that this is not altogether unscriptural. We read of churches that met in people's homes in the days of the infant church. There was a church that met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5. But there were specific reasons for this practice in the days of the infant church, even in days to follow.

One reason was the absence of meeting houses when the church first began. They were put out of the synagogues, so they met in their homes. *Persecution* also forced them into the confines of their homes. They hid. This hiding has been practiced by Christians through the centuries. Another reason is because churches, when first planted, are small. They have small

memberships. There is no need for a church building. Homes are great places to worship until a congregation grows to such a proportion that a home can not contain them.

Homes are the best places to invite neighbors. Many times a neighbor that will not come to a meeting house will come to a home. Yet in light of all of these reasons, we never read that a home church involved only the members of *one* family. Nor do we read of home churches being alone in their worship...they were always involved with a local body of baptized believers. Even Aquila and Priscilla were affiliated with the church at Rome. Though some churches began in homes, their meetings were attended by many families under the leadership of a God-called minister. There are many blessings missed when people flee to the confines of their homes to meet with their families alone. Allow me to mention a few.

One thing that is missed is the teaching, and guidance of God called men. Though fathers of homes are ordained to teach God's word to their children, and their families, they are not ordained to pastor a church...not even if it consists of their own family. When the father is the pastor of his own family there is not a genuine church in the home. There is a home, but not an *ekklesia*: a called out assembly. *Ekklesia* is the biblical term for a church. Therefore, the sacred ordinances of the church, which include baptism and the observing of the Lord's table, cannot be respectfully observed. The New Testament church has men that God has called for that special purpose, who have been given a gift to teach the local assembly, and administer the sacred ordinances. Fathers of homes are to learn from these men and teach their families the word of God. The father is never to assume the role of a pastor unless he has been duly ordained by the presbytery of a local assembly. One of the principle marks of the New Testament church is a God-called ministry.

Another thing we receive in the public assembly that we can never get in a home church is the example of other Christians, and their walk. Here we find peers that we need to observe, and emulate. It is in the assembly of the saints that we find the most wonderful peer examples. Granted, Christians are not perfect, yet many good manners are learned just by being around God's people. These gifts and graces are too numerous to be found in a mere family setting. These keep us in check as Christ is displayed in their lives. Their speech, their temperament, their love, and kindness, cause self-examination. We all need to be around these God-fearing people.

It is in the local assembly that we hear God speak to His people from His word through one of His chosen vessels. The public proclamation of the word of God has always been the center stage of public worship. Peter preached to thousands; Paul to some women by the river side; Philip to one Ethiopian; Jesus to the multitudes; and we see Ezra, the priest standing on a wooden platform reading the law to the people half the day in the Old Testament. This is worship, par-excellent and was never confined to people's homes. You will not find this anywhere in the Bible! The proclamation of God's word always came from the tongue of God-called men, not fathers of homes. It is in this mode that we learn from God what we would never learn on our own. God is glorified in it.

Another area which is lost in the home-church is a means of discipline, or authority in the life of the believer. As Christians, we need to be accountable to the church, and other Christians. In a home church, this is lost. The action taken by the Corinthians, as outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, could never be performed in a home church. As sinners, we need to be accountable to other faithful believers who are not related to us by earthly ties. Relatives can be prejudiced. Even in good churches this can be a problem. We are not isles unto ourselves. Our personal conduct and behavior affects the testimony of Christ, and His cause. It has a bearing on how people view the church, and God's people in general. It gives the enemy great opportunity when we walk unworthy of Christ. Thus, we need to be accountable, not to our own family alone, but also to a body of baptized believers. This keeps us in check in our daily walk.

There is yet more. It is in the public assembly that we have the opportunity to converse with other Christians. Dialogue is important to our Christian growth, and maturity. This we will never get, in proper measures, in our homes. We need others of like precious faith to discuss scripture, as well as other things that are subject to Christian principles.

Members of churches also receive the special *ministration* of the saints. When they have problems and sorrows, they have other Christians to pray for them; counsel them; encourage them, and love them. They also learn how to minister to others in need. It has been a special blessing for me as a pastor to see our church family minister to one another. When a family has lost a loved one, when they have been in hospitals, when they have had family problems, when they have been depressed, I have seen them stand by one another, and minister to each particular need. I see Christ displayed in their lives. Nothing is better for a pastor's heart than to see Christ in the lives of the congregation he serves. This is fellowship which goes beyond the bounds of a single home.

I do believe there is a slight tinge of Pharisee-ism in the home church movement. Many parents, though it is a God-honoring motive, want to keep themselves, and their children from bad examples. When they bring their children to the public assembly there are children there who do not hold their particular views of dress and behavior. So, to keep their children pristine, they worship in their homes. Yet, if their children are the good examples, would not these be a special blessing to those children who need peer examples? I am not suggesting (as I hope you all know) that parents subject their children to gross, immoral examples. But the Christian church, the biblical picture of the Christian church, the historical picture of the Christian church, has always been one of people from all walks of life, from many different nations, tongues, languages, traditions, worshipping together. A child may see a bad example of some sort, but that is the parent's great opportunity to point it out while allowing their child to be a light to others in the church.

As we read the New Testament, we become acquainted with many individuals who made up the initial membership of the New Testament Church. We find a composite of people from various walks of life. There were fishermen, tax collectors, doctors, business men and women,

soldiers, tent makers, moms, dads, sisters, brothers, children, as well as a host of others who all shared one common bond which drew their hearts and lives together. This bond was their love for Jesus Christ. It was from this relationship that these brethren were brought together to enjoy "the fellowship of the saints".

Just imagine how these people, coming from diverse backgrounds, affected one another? Imagine the diverse membership at Corinth, with some members coming from the temple of idol worship. Heathens with tattoos, cuttings, nose rings, green hair, and everything else imaginable were probably observed there. The effeminate visited Corinth; the sodomite; the fornicator; the adulterer; the thief; the drunkard; and a host of others (See 1 Cor. 6:9-10). Yet, as they learned of Christ, the nose rings, green hair and other trappings of a dark world began to fall off, and fade away. Sinners repented under the sound of the gospel. Lives changed before their eyes. And remember, some of these did not have a home. How could they have ever heard the gospel message that changed their lives if all of the people of Corinth had been selfishly worshipping in their own homes? The real church is truly an *ecclesia*.

Paul's words to the Pharisees of Corinth were, "*And such were some of you*". There were children present in that day, and Paul didn't command the parents to keep their children at home. They worshipped together, and their children witnessed real changes in people's lives. Imagine how their individual testimonies helped, and compliment one another. Fellowship in the local assembly is a testing ground for genuine faith! If I can't get along with other believers, with other lovers of Jesus Christ in His church, what am I anyway? Getting along with other members of God's family is a part of our growth in grace which produces Christian maturity.

It is from the public assembly that the light of Christ shines brighter in our communities and in our country. If every Christian worshipped within the walls of their own homes who would know that Christ even existed? How would other strangers and pilgrims find truth, other Christians, and learn the apostle's doctrine? How could they be the witness they should be in a dark world? Had Paul, Peter and the other Christians of the infant church worshipped in their homes they would never have been put in jail, beaten, and persecuted for Christ. The church would have died at birth. God wants a public witness for Christ!

Though this is negative, it seems that there are some (not all) in the home church movement who want to worship in their own homes so they will not be subject to the things I have mentioned. They do not want to be subject to the authority and discipline of a local church. They do not want to be financially obligated to a church. They want to teach their own doctrine. They want their own timetable. They do not want to be around some they deem to be bigger sinners than they are (which, according to Jesus is the worst sin). Basically, it is a worship of self under the guise of home church. As pious as it may seem, it is not God honoring, and many innocent families, who want to protect their families, follow them to their own hurt. The home church movement is not scriptural.

The New Testament portrays the church as a viable, living body made up of baptized believers. Each member is an important part of the body connected to all other members "by

joints and bands". Paul depicts each member of the church as a vital part of Christ's body: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). Just as the arm, the leg, or the eye is an important part of a natural body, each member of the church is an important part of the spiritual body of Christ,

This means that each member of the church is useful, and of great importance for the proper structure, and performance, of the body of Christ. Take yourself, or your family from the local assembly to have a home church, and you affect Christ's cause in your particular area. This is a serious charge. You may feel to be only a little finger, but you have an important place in the living body of our Lord Jesus. The severing of just one body member is painful to the whole body. I believe that many times we fail to realize just how important "the fellowship of the saints" really is until we lose a body part, a member. I encourage those who are involved in the home church movement to search the scriptures and see if these things are so, to continue with their family devotions, and find a local congregation that teaches the "apostles' doctrine and unite with them.

As I said in the beginning, it could be possible for a church to have its doctrine down to perfection, but still fall far short in the area of Christian fellowship. In every church there must be some interaction among the members which goes beyond sitting together and listening to a sermon. The saints must have a special time to communicate, to share one another's joys, and sorrows. For brothers and sisters in Christ to maintain a profitable relationship in the church there must be interaction. We must participate in "the fellowship of the saints".

D. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP?

"And all that believed were together, and had all things common"- Acts 2:44

The word 'fellowship' means many things. First and foremost, it simply means *being together*. But fellowship is much more than this. People could be together and just stare at one another with no interaction at all. Though this would be company, it would not be fellowship. Or they could just be joined together as members of a church in a legal way with no interaction. This is not fellowship either. Church fellowship is an action word. When we look it up we find that it carries with it three prominent meanings: partnership, participation and communication. From this definition we gain a great deal of insight into Luke's observation of the New Testament Church in its very beginning. It was a place of (1) Partnership; (2) Participation; and (3) Communication. These can never be accomplished apart from an interacting, loving congregation of believers. Consider these with me.

(1) PARTNERSHIP

Every member of the church is a partner with Christ (and one another) for the furtherance of the gospel and the prosperity of the church. When Paul wrote his second epistle to the

church at Corinth, he introduced them to Titus and said "he is my partner and fellowhelper concerning you" - II Cor. 8:23. Titus was working together with Paul for the cause of Christ and the benefit of the church. Therefore the prosperity of the local church is basically in the hands of every partner, looking for blessings from above.

If you were involved with business partners, what qualities would you desire in them? I believe we all could say that we would like partners who would take a personal interest in the business. We would want partners who cared just as much about the success of the business as we did. We would want partners who would labor by our side to see that the business did not fail. We would want partners who showed up at work every day, who were on time, and in the right frame of mind. We like for them to be honest and faithful partners. We would want productive partners who would do all that they could to get along with the other partners so that the business would run smoothly.

Now, if we would do all of this in a natural business setting, how much more should we be willing to do so in the kingdom of our Lord? Granted, the overall success of a church is in the hands of God. Yet, we know from the letters to the seven churches in Asia that God can, and will, remove a candlestick if the membership fails.

Partnership means that we are all in this together. It means that the overall success of the local assembly is in the hands of every individual member, not just the pastor or the deacons. Regardless of how well the church is run, regardless of how well the preacher preaches, a church can go downhill if the partners are not working together. So much of the New Testament is devoted to this loving partnership. Allow me to give you a few of the thoughts.

To the Galatians, Paul wrote,

"But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh." (Galatians 5:15-16).

To the Ephesians he wrote,

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3)

To the Colossians he wrote,

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." (Colossians 3:1-12)

These are just a few of the many encouragements that are given.

You might ask why Paul and the other writers of the New Testament devoted so much space to the encouragement of the saints to work together, to love one another, and to get along in the church, for all to do their part. The reason is because they knew that they could risk their lives to preach, they could travel thousands of miles to evangelize, they could sacrifice their whole life to serve a church, and nothing would become of their efforts if the other partners were not doing their part. Yes, the apostle Paul could be beaten, whipped, stoned,

nearly drowned, and then all of his efforts could be thwarted by Satan if the other partners were not doing their part. I hope you can see just how important this word really is.

When we read passages like those I have just cited in Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians we have a tendency to skip over them with little thought. We think these are of little importance since there is nothing deep, dark and mysterious about them, or because there is no doctrine concerning our salvation in them. Yet, these are the most difficult ones for us to live up to. These are of great importance for the success and survival of the local congregation.

It should be the desire of every partner to see others enjoy the blessings of the gospel. If a new customer entered the doors of your business, would you not be careful to welcome them, wait upon them, answer their questions, see to their needs, and invite them back? How much more should we entertain strangers and visitors when they first enter the doors of our church. Let us *"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"* Hebrews 13:2. Would you help an angel find a seat in your congregation? Would you be a partner? Fellowship means partnership! What kind of a partner are you?

(2) PARTICIPATION

Fellowship involves *participation*. This means to be present, and active. If we are to enjoy the "fellowship of the saints" we must be present and we must be actively involved in the affairs of the church. If we are truly involved in true fellowship with the saints, we are participating in every worship service that we can possibly attend. If we have problems attending, we should be earnestly striving to find some way that we can alter our schedule to be there and we should be praying that the Lord will bless our efforts to do so. If we are in fellowship with the brethren, our heart is beating with the local assembly, and most of the time, so is our temperature. We should know what is going on in the church. We are of one mind and one accord with our fellow helpers. We are participating!

When I first opened my business, my accountant gave me some very good advice. He told me if I wanted my business to do well, I must be on the job while the store was open. I found out that he was right. Even when I would take off just one day, some of my customers would not like it. They would come in and want to know where I was... even if I had worked the other 364 days out of the year! My being absent, just for one day, discouraged their patronage.

If you are faithful in your fellowship, you know what I am talking about. You turn around to see who is present at any worship service, and when you see an empty seat, you wonder why it is empty. We can become very discouraged by empty seats, especially when we know these could be present. We, too, can become discouraged by the patronage of others.

But there is more to it than that. I found that it was not only important for the sake of my customers, but also for the proper operation of the business. Being present allowed for me to

know what was going on inside of the business, to keep control of the inventory, to encourage and guide my employees, and to see that the business was heading in the direction I had initially planned. I had to participate.

It is certain that we could not be in fellowship with God, nor his people, and spend our Sundays in another place. As we have already mentioned, this world has plenty of other places for us to go. Some of our excuses can get to sounding as pathetic as the two men who went fishing one Sunday. After fishing for some time, and catching nothing, one of the men began to feel guilty for going fishing instead of going to church. He looked across the boat to his buddy and said "You know, we should have gone to church this morning instead of going fishing". To this remark his friend replied, "Well, I couldn't have gone anyway." His friend asked him why? His reply: "My wife is sick." He could go fishing with a sick wife, but it excluded him from going to church. Doesn't this sound familiar? Bad weather, being tired, relatives coming, ground hog day, or some other thing will keep us from church, but not from the sporting event or some other thing we enjoy. In other words, Christ is not at the top of the list where He should be. The problems that we face in our lives, our health, the weather, the distance, can have a greater impact upon our availability at church...but not to the other places we love to go. Should not the opposite should be true?

The Lord's house should be the place that we would drive the farthest, through the worst weather regardless of the problems that we are facing in our lives... even when the fish are biting. David said, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" Psalm 137:5-6. I believe that this is the "fellowship" that Luke was observing as he penned these words. He observed people who met to worship the Lord even during the problems and persecution which prevailed around them. We should do our best to *participate* at every message, every prayer, every meal, every communion, every time the church meets together. After all, we are partners!

(3) COMMUNICATION

Fellowship also involves *communication*. As we read the account of the New Testament church in the pages of Acts (as well as other places) we find that the infant church was composed of people who *communicated* with one another. These did not have telephones, cell phones, emails, and text messages. They either spoke face to face or they wrote letters. The epistles themselves serve as a constant reminder to us that one of their primary modes of communication was pen and paper. The written letter was one of the chief means of communication between the apostles and the churches.

There were times when a portion of the elders, and apostles, met for the sole purpose of communication. They met to discuss issues in the churches. For instance, in Acts 15, "Paul and Barnabus, and certain other of them", went up unto Jerusalem to discuss certain matters of

the law and how it should pertain to their Gentile converts. They *communicated* one with the other. Even though there was some disagreement, they continued as partners and worked towards a solution that was acceptable to all.

One of the most beautiful things that we observe here, as well as in Acts 11, is that they settled their discussions with "thus saith the Lord". As they met to communicate we find that their conversation was *scripturally* oriented. They didn't say "this is what I think" or "this is what I feel", or "this has been the tradition". They didn't try to discredit a brother because he had done something a little differently than they would have done it. These brethren looked to the scriptures to settle their point of contention. They were men of integrity. They did not twist a scripture to fit their personal desire. Their desire was to fulfill their ministry and please the Lord. This keeps our communication spiritual.

Communication is vital in any loving relationship. It is important in relationships between husbands and wives. It is important in relationships between children and parents. It is important in a workplace. We can be sure that it is of great importance in God's house. In order for this to transpire, members of the church must fellowship, they must interact, they must spend time together, and they must love one another.

E. WHAT DOES FELLOWSHIP ENTAIL?

"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."- John 1:3-4

The fellowship of the saints entails many spiritual things. According to John, it is necessary if our joy is to be full. As already noted, it includes but is not limited to, hearing a message. This is easily observed in the infant church.

Another area of fellowship the infant church enjoyed was in the area of *prayer*. We find them meeting many times to pray. I will comment on this in detail later because prayer is mentioned specifically as one of the four birthmarks of the Christian church. Though prayer is a form of worship, it is, as with preaching, a time of coming together, a time of fellowship.

Another form of fellowship we observe in the infant church was at mealtimes. Though you may not have thought about it when you met for potluck, dinner on the grounds, or lunch in the basement, you were really participating in fellowship *infantile*. It started way back then!

"And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2:46-47).

It has been noted by some that it was difficult to tell when they finished their meals and began the Lord's table. Perhaps this is the reason the Corinthians mingled the two to such an extent it became a drunken feast. It is without question that they ate many of their meals

together, and this served as a form of fellowship.

Sometimes things in the Bible are so simple, we miss them. What better place to fellowship, to share our lives with our brethren, than at an informal meal! When we want to know people, when we want to share our lives, we usually invite them over for dinner. We are in the habit of complicating things, of making the spiritual something almost unattainable. Concerning this facet of fellowship, God is saying, "Just chill out, enjoy a meal together, and let the conversation flow." You can't eat together without getting to know one another, without sharing. When you miss the meals you are missing a vital part of the church: fellowship of the saints!

Another form of fellowship we read about was found around the Lord's table. This was instituted by Christ in the upper room with the apostles. As with prayer, this is one of the distinguishing birthmarks of the infant church so I will comment on this later in that section.

We also know that the early church met for the reading of the epistles sent to them by the apostles (15:22,23). Imagine how it must have been to have heard one of these epistles read at a church meeting, sent fresh from the hand of one of the apostles. It must have caused the pastor many hours of prayer, meditation and study to explain all of the details of the epistles.

We also read where they met together to share the success of the gospel with the churches (Acts 14:27); where they met to send men out to preach in other areas (Acts 13:3,4); to ordain men to the office of deacon (Acts 6:6); to the office of a gospel minister (1 Timothy 4:14); to take care of church business (Acts 6:3); and I believe they also met on occasion just to sing some spiritual songs. We also read where they met together for dialogue, to ask questions (Acts 20:9). And of course, they met together, as I have already mentioned, to hear the expounding of God's word. All of this is fellowship, and may be enjoyed by the church.

Yes, there are many ways to fellowship. To hear the gospel; to listen to epistles; to pray; for meals; to observe the Lords table; for business; for ordinations; for sending out men to spread the gospel; to sing; and I am sure this is not all they did. But these are surely mentioned. We should participate every time the church meets together for any of these. Through them we enjoy just a little bit of the blessings that we will one day enjoy throughout eternity: the fellowship of the saints!

F. CHRIST CENTERED FELLOWSHIP

"God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."- 1 Corinthians 1:9

There are many things that draw people together. The magnetism of the New Testament church has always been a crucified and risen Christ who has brought salvation to his people. We

must always remember that for whatever reason we, as a body of believers meet for fellowship, Christ is to have the preeminence. Whatever the cause, it is for Him that we meet for fellowship. In the church, Jesus Christ should be the common denominator of every heart and soul. Our lives should be fused together in bonds of Christian love. John's idea of bringing others into the fellowship of the Saints was not carnal entertainment and worldly pleasure, it was, "*That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" - 1 John 1:3. According to John, fellowship with the church was fellowship with the Father the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*

I hope I have presented the importance of fellowship in the church. Jesus loved to fellowship with His disciples. He had more than doctrine. He had friends. He **fellowshipped with them:** "*Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.*" (John 15:15). He loved them so much He gave His life for them: "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13).

A real friend is a person that you can share you most embarrassing and difficult problems with, who will pray with you, who will help you endure your struggles, rise above your sins, who will be there when you need them, who does not tell your problems to their friends, but rather tells them to the Holy Father for divine assistance. One person said, "A true friend is the one who comes in when everyone else is going out." I see this faithfulness in the fellowship of the infant church. I see it in the personal ministry of Jesus with the apostles. This is all involved in genuine fellowship. Do you have it in your church?

PART 3: THE BREAD OF LIFE

"I am that bread of life." -John 6:48

We have considered the "Apostles' Doctrine", and "The Fellowship of the Saints". The third identifying mark of the infant church was their faithful and steadfast observance of the "breaking of bread". What does this mean? Surely it means more than the eating of bread at mealtime because Luke places the breaking of bread on equal footing with doctrine, prayer, and fellowship. It can only mean the observance of the Lord's table or the time of *communion*. It refers to that special time when a church comes together as a family to remember their suffering Savior.

Many of these early disciples knew Jesus personally in the days of His earthly ministry. As the infant church gathered together to *break the bread*, they remembered their friend who walked with them, talked with them, taught them, healed them, and ultimately died for their transgressions. As the bread was crushed and broken, their hearts were upon the body of their Lord whose body was crushed and broken for their sin. Oh, that we might break the bread with

such affection today!

A. THE FIRST COMMUNION WAS AT NIGHT

"He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night."-John 13:30

The first communion service was a *night* service. For this reason, many churches observe this service at night. It was a sober ending of a special day. The dark night must have added a degree of solemnity to the words of Jesus. There, Jesus spoke with them, taught them, and warned them of things to come. They sang as they walked away from the upper room and went out into the night. Though we do have some of their dialogue in sacred print, it would be wonderful to have a recording of all that was said that night. Can you see John leaning on the breast of Jesus, and Peter whispering to John to ask Jesus who would betray Him? Though solemn, this was loving fellowship.

B. WHERE IT BEGAN

"And he will shew you a large upper room furnished and prepared: there make ready for us." -Mark 14:15

The "breaking of bread" was first observed in an "upper room" by Jesus and His apostles. On this occasion, Jesus had commanded His disciples to go into the city where they would find a man bearing a pitcher of water. They followed the man to his abode where they found an upper room furnished, and prepared. It was the time of the Jewish Passover and Jesus, being a Jew, fulfilled the law by observing this feast. But that was not all that was observed that special evening in the upper room. As they observed the Jewish Passover, and remembered the deliverance of natural Israel from the hand of the destroying angel, Jesus instituted an ordinance for His New Testament Church. His instruction led His disciples from the ordinances of the Old Law directly into the New Testament ordinance of remembering not the type and shadow, but the true sacrifice. He showed His disciples the true meaning of the unleavened bread of the Passover, and its significance in the New Testament Church. This ordinance would perpetually stand as a reminder to the New Testament Church of the body of Christ Jesus, the "bread of life".

C. A COMMUNION OF BELIEVERS

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"- 2 Corinthians 6:14

As we read the account of the first communion service it is clear that the world was not invited. It was a communion of baptized *believers*. They could have opened the doors and invited the public in for a little bread and wine, to have a larger crowd. But this service was, and is, reserved for members of Christ's church alone. Some may say that only the apostles were invited to this service, and it was a onetime thing, only for the benefit of the apostles.

But we must remember that the church was not yet constituted as a body. Christ was teaching these men the proper way to observe His death so they, in turn, would teach the church after Pentecost. This makes it a *divine* ordinance, instituted by Christ for baptized believers.

The "breaking of bread" should mean something to the partaker. Someone died for them. This death saved them not from a mere loss of life in this world, but more importantly, from the wrath to come. This has no meaning to an unbeliever.

The "breaking of bread" is not a ritual that we perform to make us holy. The performance of this sacred ordinance does not make us anything we are not already. Nor was it intended to do so. The breaking of bread is an outward performance of our inward affections for Jesus. Its purpose is to help us remember Jesus, and His body broken for our sins. It is an expression of the debt that we owe; an expression of our thankfulness for His love and suffering; a testimony of our utter dependence upon His substitutionary death for our sin; an acknowledgement that His body and blood are sufficient payment for our debt. Therefore, the "breaking of the bread" is to be partaken by those who know Jesus and the significance His death; those who agree on His substitutionary death and His accomplishments upon the cross; those who are partakers of the common faith; people who share the same beliefs, and hold the same doctrine. In short, baptized believers, members of His church.

The breaking of bread was not an ordinance open to the public at large. As the apostle has asked, "*for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?*" (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

Of course, the answer to all of these questions is "none at all". Righteousness should have no fellowship with unrighteousness. Light should not commune with darkness. Would we allow Satan to commune with us? Is the doctrine of Jesus Christ in harmony with the doctrine of Belial or the humanistic doctrines of our day? Should an infidel, an unbeliever, be allowed into the marriage feast? The breaking of bread is a time for baptized believers to assemble together and remember Jesus Christ their savior.

Apart from a public confession of faith and baptism into the body of the New Testament Church it would be impossible for the church to determine who is sincere in their devotions to Jesus Christ. In its very beginning, the "breaking of bread" was a communion of believers, closely observed by the baptized believers of the church of Jesus Christ. It should be observed as such today.

D. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE

“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.”-Luke 22:19

According to Luke, and the other inspired writers of scripture, the primary purpose for the communion table is to give thanks to God by remembering the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. As I mentioned earlier, the Lord's table does not make us any thing we are not already. There is nothing magical or mysterious about it. It didn't make the apostles anything they were not already. And it surely didn't make Jesus anything He was not already.

Since the days of the infant church there has been much controversy over the essential nature and purpose of the Lord's Supper. Several positions have been taken as to the significance of the ordinance. Some hold the position of "*Transubstantiation*". These believe that the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, are contained "truly, really, and substantially in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist" (Merrill F. Unger, "The New Unger's Bible Dictionary", "Lord's Supper", p. 784.). In other words, they believe the bread and wine actually and physically become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ as it is consumed.

Another position is the theory of "*Consubstantiation*". This position assumes that "the body and blood of Christ are mysteriously and supernaturally united with the bread and wine, so that they are received when the latter are"(Ibid.).

There is also the "*Spiritual Presence View*". According to this view, "this hallowed food (the bread and wine), through concurrence of divine power, is in verity and truth, unto faithful receivers, instrumentally a cause of that mystical participation whereby I make myself wholly theirs, so I give them in hand an actual possession of all such saving grace as my sacrificial body can yield, and as their souls do presently need, this is to them and in them, my body"(Ibid.).

And finally, there is the "*Symbolic View*"(Ibid.). By this, the bread and wine are viewed as *symbolic* of the body and blood of Jesus, and are used to remind the partakers of His body and blood... to call Him to remembrance.

What are we to believe? We are to believe the words of Jesus for they are paramount concerning the proper view of this divine ordinance. After all, Jesus was the one who instituted this ordinance in the first place. Jesus said, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me" - 1 Cor. 11:24-25.

From the language of Jesus, this bread and wine do not physically become His flesh and blood, nor do they tie the partaker to His divine essence in any way. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. The bread and wine are *emblems* used to call attention to His body and blood. They are used as a method to *remember* Him. They also remind us that salvation is all of Christ. It has

nothing to do with our works. These *symbolic emblems* help us to remember the body of Jesus, the very body on which our sins were placed, and His blood which paid the full price for our sin. To one who can say "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling", this is sufficient.

E. THE BREAD OF LIFE

"Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." -John 6:53

When Jesus spoke the words of John 6:53, there was much confusion. Some thought He meant that his physical body and blood must be consumed in order to have fellowship with Him. But Jesus was not referring to actually consuming His physical body. He was referring to the gospel, feasting on the message of His sacrificial death for our sins. When we rejoice and find comfort in Christ crucified for our sins, we are spiritually eating His flesh and drinking His blood. By this the soul is refreshed, enlightened, strengthened, and comforted. When they spoke of the miracle of the manna from heaven given for the nourishment of natural Israel, Jesus turned their minds to Himself, the true bread, which came down from heaven for the life of spiritual Israel (John 6). Jesus said *"I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"* -John 6:51.

Jesus depicted His body as the bread of life over and over again in His sermons. When he fed about five thousand with five barley loaves and two small fishes He warned them to, *"Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life"* - John 6:27. He again, pointed them away from the natural bread which only sustains the natural body to Himself, the meat which endures. As the manna was ordained only for the life of the Israelites, Jesus is given for the lives of the elect: "the life of the world"-v51. Oh, how difficult it was for them to see Christ as more than a life sustainer (natural bread), and to see Him as the source of life, the life giver (spiritual life). Their hunger for natural bread was evidence of their natural life. Our hunger for spiritual bread I evidence of our spiritual life. Surely, He is "the bread of life".

As Gill has said, *"This 'bread of life' will never grow old and the doctrine of Christ crucified is now as strengthening and comforting to a believer as ever it was. As the manna was sweet in taste and sustaining to the natural body so is this "living bread" to the hungry soul. We enjoy the sweetness of his fruits, His word, His doctrine and ordinances, those meats which includes in them all happiness."* He is our ever living, everlasting bread, that never molds, nor waxes old.

They looked for this manna *daily* and so should we for He strengthens our soul and causes us to rejoice. As the infant church met together for the "breaking of bread" these things were upon their hearts and mind. *This do in remembrance of me* remains a mark of the New Testament Church and I believe shall always be world without end. As we meet together to break the

bread let these thought be upon our hearts as well.

F. HOW OFTEN?

“After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me”- 1 Corinthians 11:25

It is difficult to tell just how frequently they observed our Lord's body in this way. At Troas, they came together to break bread *upon the first day of the week* (Acts 20:7). In another place we read where they, "continuing *daily* with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). As we read these passages we find their fellowship so closely knit that it is difficult to tell where the Lord's supper ended and their regular meals began. Therefore, the Bible does not tell us how often we should break the bread and remember our Lord in this way. But one thing is certain concerning the infant church: they could not remember Him enough; they could not forget their Lord's death. They were just as *stedfast* in the "breaking of bread" as they were in their doctrine.

Much of the time, their circumstance required the early Christians to meet in their own homes to worship together and *break the bread*. As they brake the bread from "house to house" I can almost hear them say: "I want to observe the master's death at *my* house". To them, it was a blessed privilege to observe this service in the confines of their personal dwellings. What a testimony it must have been to their immediate family and their neighbors as they worshiped the Lord, brake the bread, and told the story of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Every baptized believer should joyfully anticipate that special time when the saints of God gather together and remember Jesus in that sacred ordinance of "the breaking of bread".

According to Jesus, they could do it as often as they wanted to as long as it was done decently and in order: " This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

PART 4: CONTINUING IN PRAYERS

“And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” -Luke 11:1

As we have learned, the infant church believed a particular *doctrine*, and adhered to it. They enjoyed the mutual *fellowship* of their brethren. They were also earnest in their observance of the *Lord's supper*. But that was not all. They were also *faithful* in another Christian discipline. They recognized the necessity of a constant, and fervent prayer life. They continued steadfastly in *prayers*.

As Luke penned the book of Acts, the Holy Ghost stirred his heart to record a portion of both the public, and private prayers of the saints. This book is saturated with the prayers of the infant church, a people who lived on their knees. Luke's record allows us a glimpse into some of their most intimate worship scenes...their prayers. These scenes remain a constant witness to us today, reminding us of both the necessity, and power, of prayer.

It was always our Lord's habit to encourage His disciples to *pray*. Many reasons could be given for this. The most obvious is one that we know only too well: prayer is a difficult task, even for the most spiritual among us (remember the apostles in the garden the night of our Lord's betrayal). If we are honest, we must confess that genuine, heartfelt prayer can be a difficult. For this reason, the asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

When we are in great need, prayer is almost automatic, our spirit groaning to God. But to pray “without ceasing”, as Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, to be as our Lord, who was in constant communion with the Father, we find to be a daunting task. Yes, prayer can become monotonous, dull, dry, repetitious, and apathetic. Though God does not tempt us with sin, He does try us, and many times trials are brought before us to bring us back into fellowship with Him. We are His children, and He has not heard from us for some time...at least a *meaningful* conversation. All we have done is ask for things. We haven't thanked Him, praised Him, or rejoiced in Him. Yes, our prayer life serves as a barometer for our present, spiritual condition. This is one reason I believe our Lord encouraged His disciples to pray. It can be difficult to pray as we should.

There were other things that hindered their prayers, things we can certainly identify with. There were times that they probably felt they were not worthy to ask of Him. Though this is always true, we are still invited to ask. Perhaps they felt that God was too great, and they too insignificant to approach the Creator for their needs. Perhaps they thought God would not hear their requests, or they would never get what they asked for. These, and other negative thoughts, are things that hinder the prayers of the righteous. These are just a few of the reasons that Jesus continually encouraged His disciples to pray.

But Jesus did more than that. He not only encouraged them to pray, He also taught

them *how* to pray, some specific things they should pray *for*, and the *attitude* they should possess as they approached His throne of grace. Yes, He prayed before them, showing them how to pray. Prayer was always on His mind and heart. If we are His disciples we should be of the same mind. We should continue steadfastly in both our private, and public prayers. And if we have problems with prayer in our private life, we can be sure that all of the above applies to the church as a body.

Prayer is also a spiritual barometer for a church, just as telling as in our own individual lives! As a body of believers, prayer can be difficult, monotonous, dull, dry, repetitious, apathetic, and there can be a lack of thanks, praise, and rejoicing in His Glorious Majesty. No wonder it can be placed on the back burner. As we shall see, this was not the attitude of the early church. They continued *steadfastly* in prayers.

A. PRAYER MEETINGS

“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.”-Acts 1:14

1) THE CHURCH MET COLLECTIVELY TO PRAY

After the ascension of our Lord, the first activity of the infant church was a *prayer meeting*. They may not have used those particular words to describe their meeting, but they did meet for worship in the mode of prayer. This is important, and Luke is careful to record it.

In the first chapter of Acts, after Jesus was taken up into the clouds, we read that the disciples returned to Jerusalem. It was there that they met in an upper room and "*continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren*" -Acts 1:14. Therefore, we can safely say that the first meeting of the New Testament Church, after the ascension of our Lord, was for *prayer*.

We should not be surprised at this. After all, there was a lot for the disciples to pray about at that time. The office of Judas needed to be replaced. There was persecution all around them. Jesus had told them that something big was about to happen. The church needed help, direction, and counsel. Therefore, they sought the Lord for wisdom. We are no different today. We need help, direction, and counsel. Churches need to pray together.

2) WOMEN MET TO PRAY

In Acts 16:13, we read of women meeting together to pray: "*And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.*" Apparently, there was a group of spiritual women who met in a certain place by a river to pray every Sabbath. We are not given the reason that they met in this particular place. Perhaps they were not allowed to meet in the synagogue. They may have

chosen this place because it afforded them a degree of privacy. One thing we do know is that their prayer meeting was well known by others. Someone informed Paul and his traveling companions of their faithful devotions. The word "wont" means that it was a custom, or habit for women to meet there to pray together. Knowing of this prayer meeting, Paul and his company sought them out, and shared Christ with them. It was at that prayer meeting that Lydia's heart was opened to the things spoken by Paul. She became a Christian, and her whole house was baptized!

We know that women are not to usurp the authority of the men in the church. But for women to meet and pray we find no warning. Surely, this is scriptural. Had they not been in this habit, Paul would never have found them. Perhaps, Paul's message was what they were praying for.

It is interesting to read how the Lord worked all of this out. Not only Lydia's conversion, but also the jailer, and his house. Here is a brief synopsis of what happened.

It was in a vision that Paul saw a man of Macedonia asking him to come to Macedonia and help them. Not knowing who the man was, Paul goes to Macedonia *"assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them."*

After *certain* days, nothing happened. So they hear of women praying by the river, and on the Sabbath they attended the prayer meeting. Paul preached to them, and baptized Lydia and her household. Lydia constrained Paul and his company to stay with her. A day or so later, as they are going to pray (probably at the river with the women again), they are met with a damsel possessed with a spirit of divination. From this encounter, Paul and Silas are thrown in prison. It is there that Paul and Silas, prayed, and sang praises to God at midnight. In answer, God sent an earthquake, and opened the prison doors. The jailer is ready to commit suicide(because he would be put to death by the Romans if prisoners escaped). By divine intervention, all the prisoners are stayed in their cells, and Paul preaches the gospel to him. He believes and he, and his whole house, are baptized. Perhaps he was the man in the vision asking for help. Regardless, from this faithful, women's prayer group, the church at Philippi was planted by the Lord. Lydia, the jailer, and their families, were Paul's first converts. As we read Paul's prison epistle to them, we notice the tender love Paul had for them: *"Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."*(Philippians 4:1). All of this sprang from a women's prayer group!

There are certain advantages for women's prayer groups. Women are usually best at ministering to the sick, the poor, and the confined. Their heart is more tendered towards these things. We find this to be the case in the gospels. It was women that ministered most to our Lord. Thus, they will be more prayerfully, and physically involved in ministering to the poor and afflicted.

Not only this, but in this setting, they are more inclined to share their most intimate family problems and struggles. What they will not share with the whole congregation about their marriage, their children's problems, in short, the family circle, they will share with other

women of like precious faith. They need this personally, for comfort, strength, and support, knowing that their sisters will pray with them, and for them. This is in opposition to the worldling's gossiping about the problems of others and reveling in them. If women cannot confide with their sisters in Christ, and pray for one another, what kind of Christians are they anyway?

Surely, this is a powerful assault on the gates of hell as satan bends all his power to destroy families. We know of many prayers in this regard that have been answered. Never underestimate the power of praying women! Paul certainly didn't. It is scriptural for women to meet together and pray. Paul said nothing against it. He was returning to pray with them the next day, and God certainly blessed their efforts. What better confirmation do we need?

3) MEN PRAYED TOGETHER

We read in Acts 20, where Paul met with the elders of Ephesus. After speaking to them, he prayed with them. *“And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.”*(Acts 20:36-38).

Though this was more than a prayer meeting, prayer was definitely one of the chief reasons Paul sought them out. He needed their prayers, and he wanted to pray with, and for, them! It was at this meeting that Paul admonished, encouraged, and warned them. He admonished them to take heed to themselves, and the flock. He encouraged them in their work in the ministry. And he warned them that there would be those who would arise from among them, and draw away disciples after themselves. He also shared his own heart: “ye shall see my face no more”. Yes, he shared with them his expectation of imprisonment, and death. They all needed prayer! These were men, sharing with other men, elders, the current affairs of the church, and their calling. Men were praying with men. This, too, is scriptural.

4) THE CHURCH PRAYED FOR PROTECTION, AND SUCCESS

In Acts 4, we read a notable prayer of the local assembly recorded by Luke. Peter and others had been imprisoned, and threatened by the chief priests and elders for preaching Christ. Immediately, after they had been loosed, they returned to their own company. They reported to the brethren all that had happened to them. I am sure they were frightened. They needed boldness. They needed wisdom. So they prayed together.

We are not sure who offered this prayer. Perhaps they all prayed, taking their turn in sacred petition to God. It just says, “they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.” From this language, it seems that God heard them as *one voice!* God answered their petition with a great confirmation that He heard their cries... He sent an earthquake! He also fill them with the Holy Ghost, giving them the power they needed to go forward with the gospel in a very unfriendly world. This was the result of prayer!

Have you ever wondered what might have happened if they had not met to pray for power on that day? Or other times of prayer we read of? And what does that say of us today if we are not meeting together for prayer? Spiritual power lost. Blessings, and opportunities, missed. Guidance obstructed. And fellowship with God less than what it could be.

5) THE CHURCH MET AND PRAYED FOR PETER

“...but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him”-Acts 12:5

In every age, there have been times when churches have met to pray over a particular person, or problem. This can be abused. We wouldn't call the church together to pray over a member's rose garden, or a final exam. Serious problems that a person or a family is finding difficult to deal with would be at the top of the list. Or a church member that is in eminent danger as we find in Acts 12.

Here we read that Herod beheaded James, the brother of John. Seeing that it pleased the Jews, he placed Peter in prison, probably intending to repeat the process. I am sure this is what Peter and the church expected. The church was not silent. They met to pray for Peter: *“Peter therefore was kept in prison.”*

Once again, God answered their cries. He sent an angel to rescue Peter. The chains fell from his hands, the prison doors opened, and the angel led him out. When Peter found the brethren they couldn't believe it. At first, they wouldn't let him in the house! It seemed like a miracle...and it was. All because they prayed! I wonder if we would have had his two epistles if the church had not met to pray for Peter?

I have given you only a few of the recorded prayer meetings that we read of, and I am sure Luke did not record every prayer meeting they enjoyed. As we enter in to these solemn services through the lens of God's word we are witnessing people who wanted to be together in the midst of their trials. They apparently met, discussed, shared... and they prayed.

All of this does not mean that a church *has* to have a prayer meeting to exist. But it means they can, and should at certain times. Men can meet with men to pray. Women can meet with the women to pray. Men and women can meet together to pray. The whole church can meet together to pray. Small groups from the church can meet together to pray. Friends can meet together to pray. There are no bounds for genuine, heartfelt prayer.

6) RECENT PRAYERS

God has heard the prayers of individuals as well as nations and those of individual churches. A prayer meeting is a form of worship, and fellowship. Prayer meetings can be dull and boring if God is not in the matter. But where there is a real need, and genuine prayer is offered up, it is a powerful place to be.

Some might say, "We have so much to preach about, so many things to teach and learn, why meet for the sole purpose of prayer? After all, we can pray before, and after, we preach. We can pray at home." Apparently, the infant church did not feel this way. They could have prayed at home. They could have prayed before, and after their services. We believe they did. But according to Acts, they felt the necessity for collective prayer, and there were times they met together for that purpose alone. They *continued* in prayer.

Indeed, nothing can take the place of preaching. Preaching *should* occupy the greater portion of our worship activity. But we should never forget to call upon God, the source of our power, and ask for Him to bless our efforts to worship and serve Him. And during our public worship, when we meet with the public for the expounding of God's word, our prayers should be short, and to the point. We should pray for the immediate success of the gospel. These meetings are not designed for long prayers, nor for personal, intimate prayers. This makes it even more necessary for special times of prayer.

Prayer meetings are indeed, the old paths, practiced not only by the infant church, but also by the churches of this country. In the year 1794, the Kehukee Association adopted the following resolution: "Resolved, That the Saturday before the fourth Sunday in *every month* (emphasis mine) should be appointed a day for prayer-meetings throughout the churches; whereon all the members of the respective churches are requested to meet at their meeting-houses, or places of worship, and there for each of them, as far as time will admit, to make earnest prayer to God for a revival of religion amongst us" (Church History, C.B. and H. Hassell, Chap. 20, p.713). At this time, there were 49 churches in this Association and approximately 3,440 members. This Association, even with its large membership, recognized their need of God's continued blessings, they continued stedfastly *in prayer*. Surely, we need a revival today and we are not praying to ask for one!

In the year 1799, the same Association "appointed Thursday, 21st day of November, as a day of general thanksgiving to Almighty God, throughout the churches, for His temporal blessings on their fields and farms, and that their country seemed happily delivered from the fearful apprehension of want and scarcity" (ibid., p.715). Here we find a special time when the churches of this area met for prayer. But rather than petitions, we find thanks. They met to thank God for His blessings and watch care over them. They continued *in prayer*.

B. PRAYERS ANSWERED

"And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filed with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the world of God with boldness." – Acts 4:31

As Luke records the prayers of the infant church, he is also faithful to record God's answer to their prayers. Chains fell from shackled hands, earthquakes opened prison doors, angels were summoned for divine assistance, and power was given from on high. Surely, this serves as an

encouragement for the New Testament Church, in every age, to pray as they did. We must believe in the power of prayer.

As we have noted, God heard the church's petition on behalf of Peter and a notable miracle occurred. God sent the angel to lead him home. God had *granted their petition*, and when He did, they couldn't believe it! At first, they wouldn't let him in. Oh, how we are prone to disbelieve our own prayers answered!

In the fourth chapter of Acts, the apostles and disciples prayed and asked for three things: 1) For *boldness to speak* the word; 2) For God to stretch forth His hand and *heal*; 3) And for *signs and wonders* to be done by the name of Jesus. God heard and blessed.

Lydia and the women were blessed at their prayer meeting. And countless other prayers were powerfully answered by a faithful God. Can we not anticipate the same from our Lord today? Should we not *continue in prayer*?

Some might say, "That was in the days of the apostles. We can no longer expect the outpouring of God's Spirit upon us today, as in those days." But even in our time, we read of *prayers answered*. As we have noticed, in the year 1794 and 1799, the churches of the Kehukee Association met together for the express purpose of prayer. In 1801, their prayers were answered: Hassell records the following answer to their prayers:

"According to expectation, there had been a wonderful outpouring of God's Spirit among the churches during the previous year, and a large ingathering was the result; 872 were added to the churches by baptism in one year. The interest then felt in religion-the activity of ministers and members generally, the large numbers added to the churches by baptism, upon a profession of their faith in Christ-seemed to say that the day of prosperity had indeed dawned upon the churches of the Kehukee Association, after a long night of coldness and seeming indifference. From 1789 to 1802, reports of additions by baptism had been about as follows, viz.: In 1789, 15 reported; in 1790, 446; in 1791, 99; in 1792, 192; in 1794, 57; in 1795, 19; in 1796, 33; in 1797, 13; in 1798, 43; in 1799, 72; in 1800, 129; in 1801, 138; in 1802, 872."

The Lord impressed the minds of His people to crave and earnestly beseech Him to revive His work of grace in the hearts of His children, to pour fourth His Spirit abundantly on the people, and cause the ransomed of the Lord to return and come with singing unto Zion; and as a consequence those prayers were answered. The prayer indicted by the Holy Spirit will assuredly be heard and answered by a covenant-keeping God, who regardeth the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer. It will be heard and answered, though apparently long delayed. For many years such petitions had gone forth from the hearts of God's people in the bounds of the Kehukee Association, and the set time to favor Zion at length appeared, when the Lord seemed to break forth on the right hand and on the left in her behalf, and draw many sons and daughters home to the great Shepherd and Bishop of their souls"(ibid.,p.716,717).

Did you notice the beginning of that statement? It started with, "According to

expectation". They *expected* a good answer from their God! Surely, we should be meeting together to pray for a revival in this dark day when churches are declining, and the darkness grows around us. Surely, mothers should be praying for their homes, and their children. Surely, men should be praying for the leadership of the churches. Surely, we should be praying!

Many times, the prayers of God's people have been the sparks that revived God's work among them. We have observed this very truth in the churches comprising the Kehukee Association. We notice the effect that prayer had in relation to the infant church as we read the book of Acts. But we also read of this truth in the days of Israel of old. In the book of Judges, on five different occasions, we read these words: "Israel cried unto the Lord". Each time they recognized their need, they called upon the Lord and He heard from heaven and healed their land. These accounts are found in Judges 3:9, 3:15, 4:3, 6:6-7, and 10:10. It was when they turned to other gods, ceased to pray as they should, and forgot the source of their blessings that God withdrew His blessings. But our point is this: when God's people *continue in prayer*, their prayers are answered!

C. OTHER BLESSINGS OF PRAYER

"the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul"-Acts 4:32

Our Lord is gracious and able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. We should never forget this. As the infant church met on those many occasions to pray, they received far more than they requested. Not only were their specific petitions granted, but other blessings unfolded in their lives as they *continued in prayer*. One blessing they received was the special blessing of *unity*. Yes, churches that pray together, stay together!

When they had prayed, *"the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul"*-Acts 4:32. This is a common virtue of prayer. When God's people pray together, when they pray in the right spirit, hearts and minds are bonded with unity of purpose. When husbands and wives pray together, when they seek the Lord for divine guidance as partners in their home, special blessings of unity ensue. Their desires and decisions become one, obedient to the direction of the Lord. When churches pray together, they are blessed to be of one mind, one heart and one soul, seeking the Lord's will in their affairs. It is through prayer that we are blessed with *unity*.

Another virtue of prayer is the effect that it has upon our *affections*. The closer we walk with God, the more insignificant the things of this world become. As the infant church prayed together, their sight was turned away from this present world... their affections became more focused on things above. They seemed to forget the temporal, "neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" -Acts 4:32. They recognized that all that they possessed was given to them by God, and they were willing to use it all for His honor and glory. Their temporal possessions lost their attraction as they set their

affection on things above. Their affections were focused through *prayer*.

The fervent prayers of the church seem to bring about another blessing from the Lord: *power*. The testimony of the Kehukee brethren is sufficient evidence of this. But we also notice this blessing upon the infant church shortly following their prayers.

Again, in Acts chapter four, after they had prayed, and God had acknowledged His hearing their prayers by shaking the place where they were assembled, we read, "*And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all*" -Acts 4:33. Not only were they given "boldness" to speak the word, but their speaking was blessed with results, "*And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women*" -Acts 5:14. There was power in their preaching because it was attended by the Holy Ghost. We can meet for worship, we can preach, but without the blessings of the Spirit, our best efforts are weak and void of power.

Those early days of prayer, in the upper room, prepared Peter, and the other apostles and disciples, for the events that were to transpire in their lives. It was only ten days after this prayer meeting that Pentecost would come. It was then that Peter preached with great power to the conversion of about three thousand souls: power (Acts 2:41).

Shortly after this, Peter and John went up together into the temple and a notable miracle ensued. A lame man was healed: power (Acts 3:1-8). It was on this occasion that Peter preached again when about five thousand heard the word and believed: power (Acts 3:12-26,4:1-4). And where did this power come from. It came from God in the person of the Holy Ghost.

A final blessing of their prayerful attitude is also recorded in Acts 4:33: "*and great grace was upon them all.*" Couched within this blessing is hidden meaning that no man can fully describe. They received *many blessings*; blessings that they did not deserve; blessings that they did not ask for. It was not just grace, but "GREAT GRACE!" This, in itself, would be sufficient reason to meet together and pray. Sinners need grace!

According to God's word, according to the experiences of God's people in days gone by, much can be anticipated when the saints of God meet together for prayer. Oh, that prayer meetings were as prevalent and powerful today as they were in the days of the infant church! Let us continue in prayer.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to paint an accurate picture of the Christian Church in its very awakening. Their worship was simple, yet their faith was true. Surely, these are brethren we want to emulate to the best of our ability. Much can be learned from their lives. This is the reason their Acts are recorded for us. I encourage every church, every believer, to continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. May God bless us all to be faithful, and may we see a genuine revival in Zion!-NMP