

A New Beginning in the Church

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Date: 14 January 2018

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[0 : 0 0] chapter, but the verse that I particularly want to focus on this morning is verse 42. Verse 42, where we read, they, the believers in the church in Jerusalem, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Just, I think it was last Sunday, someone in the congregation was reminding me and, dare I say, reaffirming to me the importance of the book of Acts in the shaping of the church today.

And particularly when we read in the book of Acts, as we see there how the early church was formed, how the early church developed, this should encourage us here in Livingston, as, you know, we seek to be that church, a congregation that's ever reforming, ever growing in faith, ever growing in obedience, as a Christ-centered, God-glorifying, spirit-enabled body of believers.

Because we're here to honor God, we're here to serve Him, and we do it first and foremost to glorify God, to do it according to God's word.

Not according, first and foremost anyway, not, you know, how other churches are doing it. No, we look at how God's church does it, how God's church glorifies God.

[1 : 3 7] And as we see here at the start of the book of Acts, as the Holy Spirit has come upon the church there in Jerusalem, we see particularly the way that spirit-filled believers responded in faith and obedience.

You see that in verse 42 there, in this new beginning for the church. You see the immediate impact of the Holy Spirit upon the church, and particularly these four aspects of the church and the life of Christians together.

You see, we're told they were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Now, obviously, we'll look at these in more detail, but, you know, to bring these four aspects, we might bring them into three headings.

Because as we look more closely at what Luke's telling us here in Acts, and as you see the headings in your notes, the church there in Jerusalem was a learning church.

It was a loving church. And it was a church that looked beyond itself, that looked outwards beyond itself, an evangelistic church. And, you know, as we see there right at the start of verse 42, not only were they engaged as a learning church, a loving church, a church looking out beyond itself, we're told they were devoted.

[3 : 0 2] And, you know, in everything that we look at this morning, in these particular areas of the early church's life, look at how devoted they were. This word that tells of their utter confidence in God, their utter focus on Him, their, if you like, their one-sided commitment in service, in obedience, in following God and His word.

In, was it last year, towards the end of last year, in our prayer meetings, we're particularly focusing on on the whole aspect of holiness, being devoted to God.

And surely this is what we're seeing here in the life of the early church and their devotion to God in their exercising a holiness for the glory of God, for the furtherance of His kingdom.

So, what do we notice firstly then? We notice that the church is a learning church. So, let's see. The overall emphasis of devotion, and firstly, in relation to the church, they are being a learning church. So, what are we told here? They're told, we're told that these believers are devoted to the apostles' teaching. First and foremost, the apostles' teaching. So, they're a learning church.

[4 : 2 1] They're fully committed to being taught, taught the things of truth, just as Jesus had taught the disciples who became the apostles. Now, these apostles are transmitting what the Lord had taught them and teaching to other believers.

And these believers, they're eager. They're eager to learn. They want to learn. And they want to learn from those who were taught of Jesus. They want to learn about God's truth.

They want to learn about the reality of the cross and the life of God's people. They want to learn about the cross. They want to learn about the cross. They want to learn about the cross. They want to learn about the cross. They want to know what it means to live God-honoring lives, to live as children of our Heavenly Father.

They want to know what it means to live a Jesus-centered life. They want to know how to connect with others in relation to the one true faith. Believers didn't despise learning.

They didn't despise learning. I think it's always just for clever Christians, intellectual Christians. And importantly, and keep this in mind, the believers didn't relegate the mind to experience.

[5 : 30] You know, which is so often the fact today, experience seems to be the be-all and end-all of interaction in a congregation. No, don't ever relegate the mind beneath experience.

These believers there in that early church, they used their minds. They learned about God. They learned how to serve Him. They learned how to worship. They learned how to live for Him.

They learned how to live for the glory of God. Now, by the world's standards, these are ordinary men and women. They're young, they're old, they're from all different backgrounds.

But they're devoting themselves to learning the truth of the Gospel. How to live by that truth in a hostile world around them. And for ourselves here as a congregation, for you, for me, we all must continue to be a learning church.

So don't ever despise learning, learning the things of truth, learning the Word of God as something that's out of date or irrelevant. You know, learning of God, learning of the Saviour, learning of salvation through Christ, it's the most exciting thing in the world.

[6 : 40] You know, when you learn more of, each day, learn more of the love of God for sinners. That Jesus came, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the children were being told, the Son of Man, coming to seek and to save that which was lost.

It's a lesson that you and I come to repeatedly. Learning of our great salvation. So when you come through these doors, yes, you come to worship God.

But in your coming to worship God, be prepared to learn and never stop wanting to learn the truth of God's Word.

You know, learning is never boring. It should never be boring. I'm afraid that is not happening in this congregation. But the learning from God's Word to help you, to help you to be devoted to Him, to help you to grow in holiness, to help you to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

forever. So, as the early church was a learning church, so may it be that this church, this congregation, whichever other congregation you come from, as I know there were visitors here this morning, you be a learner in a learning church.

[7 : 55] What else do we notice in this passage? You see that the church has to be a loving church. because we're told here that the Spirit-filled church there in Jerusalem devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the fellowship.

There's a great, great biblical word, fellowship. I mean, it's so full of meaning, it's so full of relevance. You know, we just spend the whole time just thinking of this one aspect of the Christian life, the fellowship.

fellowship. And we use it so often, don't we, even in general conversations, certainly in church context. We're talking about ladies' fellowship, men's fellowship, after church fellowship.

But, you know, just think about what this word is telling us in its richness and its meaning, particularly in our life here as a congregation. true fellowship, true fellowship, true coming alongside one another, true partnership, true sharing, because fellowship has all these aspects.

That fellowship one with another in a congregation is so crucial to the health of a congregation. Because I'll maybe be so bold as to say this, that without fellowship in a church, without fellowship in a congregation, in any church without true fellowship is going to wither, it's going to fail to live up to the word of God that commands us to love one another, to be in fellowship one with another.

[9 : 27] Because as we said, fellowship speaks of partnership, sharing. And that sharing can be a practical thing, in a practical sense. It can be sharing material goods.

Of course, above all, it's that spiritual sharing one with another. And here in this context of this church, here in this spirit-filled church in Jerusalem, you see this fellowship there in their partnership, one with another in the Lord.

Each and every believer there, a partner, one with another, connected through the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember what Jesus said? I'm the vine, you are the branches.

And every Christian, as it were, is a branch interlocked in that vine, one with another, through fellowship with the Lord Jesus. no coincidence, for example, and we were looking at this some time ago, remember when we were looking at the various benedictions in the New Testament.

And remember the benediction that Paul pronounced in the church in Corinth, the one that we use so often here, where Paul blesses the church with the fellowship, and we can use the word communion, because it's the same word, fellowship, communion, of the Holy Spirit.

[10:43] That fellowship, that communion that each and every believer enjoys one with another through fellowship, yes, through being filled with the Holy Spirit, that you're enabled to live lives devoted to God, that you're enabled to live your life separate from the world instead with the Holy Spirit.

And that fellowship that you're enabled to enjoy one with another through the unity that you have in God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.

Isn't it a joy? It must be a joy to be in fellowship one with another, even in this corporate act of worship this morning. Shoot, it must be. We're going to sing the last time, I joyed, went to the house of God, or the more modern version, to the Lord's house.

They were calling and with joy I went with them. I'm sure there was to be that joy in the context even of a worship service such as this because we are in fellowship, in communion, one with another has been in communion, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who's drawn you to the Father through the Son and done so in love.

Because when we think of the Holy Spirit, it's the Spirit of unity, the one Spirit who's in the hearts of each and every believer, to be one in the Spirit.

[12:08] The Spirit brings about that unity. So, when we talk about being devoted to the fellowship, when we even see there in verse 42, surely we're being told here of believers in that Spirit-filled church being devoted one to another in their common bond that they have through the Spirit in Christ.

in every one of us here who knows the Lord Jesus, shares the one faith, one faith, one Lord, one Saviour, being one in Christ, partners together, partners in the work that God has given each one of us to do.

And so surely we have to remember we are to be one in the Lord, belonging together, and that kind of relationship, that unity, we have to say, is unknown outside of the church of Christ.

If you're looking for unity or fellowship anywhere else other than the church of Christ, you're looking in the wrong place. The depth of relationship, the depth of fellowship, of communion one with another, that depth through the blessing of God is unknown outside of the church.

But then, what does it mean in practice? What does it mean here as we find, what does it mean to devote ourselves to the fellowship? Well, as we, as you write it, it's said right at the beginning there, it's loving one another, loving one another in the Lord.

[13:41] That love, as we said, that depth of love that's impossible outside of the church. Paul wrote to Romans, Romans 12, verse 10, be devoted to one another in brotherly love.

You see the connection. So that expression of fellowship, devotion, one to another in brotherly love, it's going to be the characteristic of any church that seeks to reflect the head of the church, the Lord Jesus.

He is our Saviour, our Lord, our King, the King of love. And it was certainly that love, one with another, that the outsiders noticed almost 2,000 years ago.

The outsiders noticed the believers and their relationship one with another. One of the leaders of the church almost 2,000 years ago wrote this.

It's mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a mark upon us. See, they say, how they love one another. See, they say, the outsiders say, how they love one another.

[14:47] Is that how others see the Livingston Free Church? A church where there's such partnership in the Lord, fellowship that's tangible, that's noticeable, that devoted care one for another, whether it be, well, it has to be spiritual care, even a material care, so that others are saying, see, how they love one another.

There in the church in Jerusalem, that church, that spiritual church, there's that devoted fellowship. And you see, more particularly, how that devotion and love is spelled out there in verses 42 to 46. Now, of course, love expresses itself in a congregation in many, many ways. But Paul is highlighting two ways where love and fellowship is seen and practiced.

Look at the material sharing, the sharing of goods, the sharing of resources. And then, secondly, look at fellowship and worship. Look at the material sharing firstly.

Verse 44, and all who believed were together and had all things in common and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need.

[16:01] Verse 44 and 45. I mean, notice the unity of believers here. That unity that leads them in that fellowship relationship to sharing.

They're together. They're so much as one that they're actually looking out for one another. They're caring for each other. Every member in that church in Jerusalem, it seems, was being cared for as the next person.

You know, they all mattered. They were all together. And, you know, if we're going to build ourselves up as a church committed to the Savior, then remember each and every person this congregation is important and it's included in the fellowship.

There can be no league table of Christians, no preferential treatment to anyone. It's only possible when you love one another in the Lord and you do that in a fellowship and the consequences are going to be seen.

It's going to be seen. I mean, because we look at the material as well as the spiritual needs of every single person in the church. It's a battle for everyone in the fellowship. As we reiterated there in verse 42, if any believer was a need, whatever that need was, then the church there was able to help and doing so in particularly sacrificial ways.

[17:28] No one in the fellowship believers there, certainly at this point in the church's life was destitute or left destitute. There were sufficient resources there to keep body and mind aligned.

And it was done so voluntarily. We were looking at that last week when we were talking about the voluntary aspect of our giving. Remember, that voluntary aspect of giving, as we noticed last week, has to be done out of love.

Out of love, first and foremost, of course, for the Lord Jesus who gave himself for us. But also in our giving, even for the Lord's work, we're giving out of love one for another.

And the believers there regarded possessions as not their own. As if what they had was everyone. Yes, of course, the believers had their own home.

They had their own property. They used even what they had for the glory of God. Home is opened up in fellowship, sharing meals. We'll look at it in a moment.

[18:31] So their wealth was used not just for themselves, not just for their own exclusive use, but for the sake of others in need. And there's this great principle, surely, to be learned then for a spirit-full church.

We're not our own. We're not our own. God has blessed each one of us in so many ways, even in material ways. We give thanks for our daily bread.

We give thanks for the resources that God has given each one of us. And we do so, surely, in the context of a church family and a church fellowship where God calls us to use our resources for His glory, for the furtherance of His kingdom.

So, what have we seen so far? We're to strive, strive to be a church that's a learning church, a church that's grounded in apostolic truth.

We're to strive to be a loving church where fellowship and the Lord's demonstrated and active love one for another. We're to be a body where there's that evidence of the growth of grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

[19:43] We're to be devoted to the Word and devoted one to another because we are to seek God's will for us as a congregation. And you know, as we continue to think about the church as a loving church, and that is seen and expressed through fellowship one with another, then let's look more closely at the particular spiritual side of this.

Look at what we might call the interior fellowship of the church. The two things that are mentioned here, the breaking of bread and the prayers. So we'll look at the breaking of bread first of all and then look at this intriguing expression, the prayers, the prayers.

In two weeks' time, God willing, on our Sunday evening service, we will be remembering once more the Lord's death through communion.

It's a joyful occasion, a joyous occasion because we are seeing the expression of fellowship, fellowship brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing in the Lord's Supper, supper instituted by the Lord Jesus to nourish your soul, remembering his death through word and through sacrament.

And of course, the sacrament being the wine that speaks of the blood of Christ and the bread that symbolizes his broken body. So we prepare for that.

[21 : 06] We prepare for that time of communion. We examine ourselves. We examine ourselves in relation to our communion with God and indeed our communion one with another.

We cry out with David, search me, O God, know my heart, try me, know my thoughts, see if there's any grievous way in me, lead me in your way everlasting. And you see here in verse 42, the believers are devoting themselves to the breaking of bread.

Now, I think we have to say that this breaking of bread spoke of course, well included anyway, ordinary meals, sharing together in each other's homes. But there's more than that, surely, isn't there?

There's more than that. Surely we're seeing here at the fellowship of believers around the Lord's Supper. Because that's this great privilege that the Lord Jesus has given to us to remember his death till he comes, to remember our saviour, the head of the church, to remember the one whose body was broken for you.

And that's an amazing expression of fellowship. You know, when the people of God sit around a table or an area set apart, when we share in the bread and wine, we do that in expression of our unity one with another, the unity that we have in our God and saviour.

[22 : 29] And I notice too the spirit of that fellowship, the spirit of that sharing. Because verse 46, we're told that they received their food with glad and generous hearts.

They're praising God. They found favour also with all the people. So, the fellowship one with another is a joyous occasion. And, you know, the way that Luke brings this out, it brings out what we might say is the exuberance.

This joy coupled with sincere hearts praising God. This is a spirit-filled church. They've got so much cause to celebrate what the Lord Jesus has done for them.

So, they're rejoicing, rejoicing, sincere rejoicing. not made-up rejoicing, not hypocritical rejoicing. This is true joy. This is no kind of neutral emotion that so often we bring into a fellowship.

This is just a time to give glory to God and to do it in the joy of the Lord. And, you know, showing forth the fruit of the Spirit. Because this joy that comes from a Christian, that comes from a heart that truly loves the Lord Jesus.

[23 : 41] and you're so loved the Savior, you're delighted to share with God's people in worship and communion. You know, when we think of the Lord's Supper itself, it's a privilege.

It's a privilege to take part in that meal. It's a very simple meal and yet such a powerful meal that points beyond itself, beyond the elements, that points to the Lord Jesus Christ in His sacrifice for sinners.

For sinners such as those in Jerusalem. For sinners such as us here in Livingston. So, don't ever take for granted the fellowship meal that we have here five times a year.

It's not just another date in the church calendar. This is a God-given privilege that you and I have to do something simple and yet something so profound, even in the breaking of bread and the drinking from that cup, we're pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ and through word and through sacrament we've been strengthened.

We've been strengthened. Strengthened in our commitment. Strengthened in our devotion. In our devotion to our God and Saviour. Devotion in our learning, in our loving, in our serving our Saviour.

[25 : 02] So, cherish the Lord's Supper. You look to that opportunity to worship the Lord Jesus together. I pray that we are eagerly looking forward to a fortnight's time because this is a time of celebration and joy being in fellowship as brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus and in fellowship of course the Saviour Himself, the Head of the Table.

But notice believers in Jerusalem are devoted to the prayers. So, let's look at this in more detail. Here's this fellowship again expressed in the prayers. I think much more than simply private prayer time. Here they're showing fellowship one with another through particular times of prayer.

Prayer meetings. The prayers. It's plural. So, obviously they're praying for one another. They're praying with each other. They're doing it in the quiet of their home.

They're doing it one with another. They're devoted to the prayers. You and I have to ask ourselves how devoted are we? How devoted am I? How devoted are you to the prayers?

[26 : 21] Whether it's your own personal private time of prayer. Whether it's times of prayer fellowship that we have each Wednesday whether it be here or in our house groups.

Somebody said with much truth the prayer meeting is the engine room of the church. Now, I know, I know, you know that not all can attend that meeting. But every believer can pray.

And every believer can pray for one another and I believe too unless in exceptional circumstances pray with each other. prayer. So let's be renewed in our commitment to the prayers.

Yes, even as far as is possible attending our midweek meetings and delighting to attend meetings where prayer is wont to be made. Sometimes we substitute the prayer element for other aspects of the meeting but no, it is a prayer meeting.

Whether you pray audibly, whether you pray in the silence of your heart, then rejoice for the opportunity to gather with the Lord's people in the prayers.

[27 : 30] I'm still in my own formative years as a young Christian in Edinburgh, very much blessed through the prayers, the prayers of others.

Last Wednesday at our meeting we were thinking of examples, the example of other believers in their very much a believer's formative experience as a Christian, looking at the example of others. And certainly my own young Christian life growing up in Buclew in Edinburgh, I think back to two individuals who were very much influential to myself in the prayers.

Some of you know the late Douglas Macmillan and when he prayed, when he prayed in public, you knew immediately his close walk with God. It was emphasised in his prayers.

And we communed with God through the leading of Douglas's prayers. And then there was the beauty of the grace of the prayers of another.

[28 : 39] Again, some of you knew him, Clement Graham. And in his prayers, you still remember, and I'm going back 40 years, transporting that little prayer group as it were beyond space and time into the realm of eternity itself.

And I'm reminiscing now with the fond memories of these two men who are now in glory, who are beholding the Lord, their Saviour, face to face. You'll have your own examples. You'll have your own examples of those who, particularly in times of public prayer, really captured your heart and drew you heavenward by, just by the communing and prayer.

Now, as I said a moment ago, we look forward to another communion. But be in prayer for that. Be in prayer for yourself and for all who are going to be at the Lord's table in these few weeks time.

Come before God. Use even this worship service. Come before God. Even for yourself, for your own sake, pray. Create within me that clean heart.

Even to prepare you to receive the bread and the wine. That church there certainly were devoted to the prayers, to the breaking of bread.

[30 : 00] Finally, finally and briefly, they were not just a learning church, not just a loving church, they were a looking outwards church, they were an evangelistic church.

church. Because if we're to be a church where fellowship is a living aspect of our commitment one to another, then we might say that's only half the picture.

Because if any congregation, if any church, any spiritual church is serious about its service, it's got to reach out beyond its name. It's got to reach out.

It's got to be evangelistic. It's got to have that mission to the world. Somebody wrote this, the Holy Spirit is a missionary spirit who created a missionary church.

That's only the church there in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and I think that's certainly strongly inferred there in verse 47, the second part, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

[31 : 02] That church obviously was looking out beyond itself. You know, with the Lord's help, the Lord's enabling believers reaching out, witnessing, proclaiming the gospel.

Now, of course, ultimately, and first and foremost, the Lord who added to the number of the church. But of course, we can see, and of course, with the backing of scripture, the Lord did that through the preaching of the word and through the daily witness of believers there in that church.

Each believer having a part to play in the mission to the world. And as we see there, God blessing the church there by adding to the number of those who are being saved.

And surely that's an ongoing challenge for ourselves here in Livingstone, each and every congregation of our land. Yes, we're to be a learning church and a loving church.

We're also to be a church that looks out, that looks out to a needy world, a needy world out there.

You just, you drive to this church, go back again, you just count the number of cars, the number of people who are going anywhere but a place of worship.

[32 : 11] The fields are white unto harvest. And it's for you and I to be gospel-centered people with that missionary spirit, to be bold in being this, this a missional church.

Your friends, your neighbors, your colleagues, your families, you all need to hear the gospel message of the saviour who came into the world to save sinners. That's surely part essential to any life of any congregation, to look out, to reach out to a world that needs to hear the name of Jesus, not as a swear word, but as the name that's above all names.

You know, in many ways we're starting a new chapter in the life of this church, this congregation. We don't know the future. We don't know how God's going to shape this congregation, but each and every one of us, we're to move forward together in faith, we're to trust in the Lord Jesus, to lead and guide His church, we're to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, we're to continue to be that learning church and loving one another, to have that close fellowship one with another, and yes, to be as ambassadors, to be as witnesses, whether it's here in West Lothian or Western Scotland or wherever you are, pray, pray that this body of Christ, that this church, your church, will have an impact for good in the part of the country where God has sent us, and that you and I will be used for the glory of God, for the furtherance of His kingdom, through the church that God has given us, each one.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord, forgive us for the many times we have been so casual in our learning, in our learning of apostolic truth.

Forgive us, Lord, for the many times when we have failed to love one another. And forgive us, Lord, for the many, many times when we have failed to look out beyond ourselves.

[34 : 21] Lord, give us that strength to love one another. Give us that mind to learn the things of truth and give us, Lord, that desire to look out, to reach out, and to be used of you for the furtherance of your kingdom.

Bless, Lord, this act of service. Bless our fellowship within it. Bless our continued fellowship, one with another, after the benediction. It will be with us through the remainder of this day.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.