

Acts 2:41-47

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. [TNIV]

What is God's wisdom and love at work? It is this: God takes His people and forms them into the Church, the body of Christ. As His people we belong to God: each one of us can say, "I know that I am God's son," "I know I am God's daughter." Naturally we keep company with many others who belong to God, all of whom form a very diverse group of people.

In this passage we see what followed the response to the sermon preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. In verse 41 of Acts 2 we read "**that about three thousand were added**" to the number of Jesus' followers. This was an example of the Holy Spirit at work in the preacher and in the listeners. This combination is essential for the word of God to take hold and bear fruit in a church for its maturity and growth.

Directly after this incredible church growth experience we read in verse 42

that *“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* These are the activities they enter into after 3,000 people are added to the 120 strong (Acts 1:15) who had met to pray after Jesus’ ascension. This increase follows Peter’s Pentecost sermon. He preached because something unique had happened. The 120 had gone through the tremendous experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. What a time it must have been!

And how overwhelming! What do you do with all these people? I mean, do you form small groups, or put them on committees; do you march them through Cursillo or start them in a discipleship programme or make sure they all sign up for an ALPHA course; or do you just give continuous times of stirring worship to keep them all interested? Do you do surveys of their needs and wants in order to hang onto them?

Well, the verse I quoted earlier from this passage, tells us what takes place. It’s none of the above. We aren’t told how they organize, but we do know what they are doing. They enter into four things: 1. **The apostles’ teaching** 2. **Fellowship** 3. **Breaking of bread** 4. **Prayer**.

At the outset, it’s very important to remember that this is taking place in response to the mighty work of God the Holy Spirit. This is not the development of the Church’s life after many years; it’s not their early experiences distilled into this formula. That’s why it’s good to refresh our memories. For the Church, moving forward always includes going back to the basics, to our foundational principles in the Scriptures. These four things developed quickly, and were entered into wholeheartedly.

It’s almost instinctive. God acts - and the Church responds. Rather than trying to maintain the “high” of the Day of Pentecost, what God is doing in their lives is grounded in some very concrete activity which is meant to sustain the *substance* of what they are being given in these momentous days.

The first thing is that they are taught. Teaching is the first significant activity that the Church provides for its members. And likely these first converts wanted to learn about their new-found faith. They undergo the regular teaching of the apostles. It’s important to recognize that even in this most exciting of times, they are not left to their own devices to sort it all out. They are taught. This is significant. They need instruction, and they are willing to devote themselves to receiving it in this their response to the work of God in their lives. Today is no different. The teaching of the faith is vital to the health and growth of the Church. It’s very

important that those trained to do it *do it*, and that the members of the Church receive it.

Another translation for the word “*devoted*” is “*adhered*”. They “*adhered*” to the apostles’ teaching. It is not just a matter of everyone deciding for himself or herself what to think, all on his or her own. Teaching is to provide a highly significant anchor for the healthy on-going life of the Church. Through teaching the Church keeps “*itself straight about what it is and what it is about.*” (William Willimon, Acts)

And it is appropriate for the apostles to do the teaching. They had been the intimate companions of Jesus during His ministry. Likely, they are regarded as the guardians of the knowledge about Jesus and His teaching for His followers as the Church grew and developed. Now much of this we find in their writings in the New Testament.

But these early and young Christians don’t just sit there and take notes. They share what they have learned and experienced. They probably discuss what the apostles are teaching them. Fellowship has to do with sharing, and not just the sharing of their material possessions, something which I will touch on in a moment. They share their common oneness in Christ, they share in the one Spirit who has filled them, they share in their belonging to God as the Father’s children.

True Christian fellowship is not just the sharing in common experiences or ideas, it is the sharing *in Christ*. It is the fact that Christ holds them together. And this, I believe, has to be understood as *more than* just the sharing of experiences of the Lord, and more than having the same views about the Lord and His work. It has to be the sharing *in Christ Himself*, it has to be the fact that it is the Holy Spirit Himself who is the basis of fellowship.

It’s the Holy Spirit who is the one who makes us into the body of Christ. So while Christian fellowship does include the sharing of faith experiences, as is quite acceptable, it is much deeper than only the singing of songs and the sharing of testimonies along with refreshments.

It is knowing and accepting that God the Holy Spirit is the one who brings us together. It is knowing and accepting the “in Christ-ness” of the others, regardless of how one actually feels about them. And that has to be the dynamic and powerful work of the Holy Spirit, or else it would be impossible!

Certainly nothing else can provide that true, uniting work. Look at how many different ethnic backgrounds are represented in this newly-expanded church! People from all over the Roman empire have come together in this new gathering of believers. Acts 2:5 tells us that there are people *“from every nation under heaven”* in Jerusalem. That includes cultures and ethnic groups which likely have hated one another for centuries. It likely includes people who have been dominated by another race, or defeated in battle many years ago.

Therefore, this fellowship is a mighty work of God. That’s why I say that, despite its flaws, *the Church is the ongoing miracle of God*. It's the immediate expression of God’s work amongst them, and not simply the decision to have a Benevolent Society for the Promotion of Multiculturalism, Jerusalem Branch. Furthermore, this fellowship is not just an outburst of religious enthusiasm. No, *“they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”* It has a practical manifestation that results in a radical and visible care of one another.

Now we see the third thing that they adhere to, are devoted to, in their response to God at work in them. They continue in *“the breaking of bread.”* Most likely, this is more than the simple sharing of common meals, though it certainly could have included it. The Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist would be in mind here, this highly significant meal and act of remembrance, of receiving the Lord Jesus Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. As their fellowship is in Christ, so their frequent act of worship, to which they are devoted, is deeply imbedded in this same Christ whose body and blood they receive and which strengthens His presence in them and amongst them. This is not just a mental reminder of Christ’s actions on the cross. It’s real spiritual food! What a marvelous thing to be devoted to - and that’s why we are devoted to it by having Eucharist every week! And, ideally, as a Cathedral we should be celebrating it every day.

This eating and drinking together is also a sign of their unity. By its very nature it is all in Christ, and it is only in Christ that they can know solidarity with one another despite their social and cultural differences. The table is a holy place. The eating and drinking are sacred activities. These dimensions of the breaking of bread come from their Jewish understanding of what happens when food is blessed.

Lastly, these early believers *“adhere”* to prayer. Why not? No-one other than God has made possible what they experienced on the Day of Pentecost and what they are experiencing now. Prayer highlights a full reliance on the power and will of the Lord of all life. They are hearing about Jesus in the apostles’ teaching, they are receiving Him in the breaking of bread, they know Him and His uniting power in

their fellowship - no wonder they are devoted to talking and listening to Him in prayer!

Though it doesn't say, their praying potentially is a combination of spontaneous prayer, and prayers of the Jewish liturgy that is so familiar to them all (and as it would have been to Jesus who had attended the Synagogue every week). We also read that *"they continued to meet together in the temple courts,"* quite likely at the hours for prayer. In all the newness, they do not abandon the spiritual traditions of their ancestors.

Finally, we read: *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"* – that this is the Lord's work appears again. *It's to be clear to all, that this is the Lord at work.* Without Him there is no Church, no salvation. And there is no increase to the Church either. We must be crystal clear about the fact that it is the Lord who grows the church - we do not grow it. Our role is to cooperate with God's work of growing His church, and as best as possible, to remove the obstacles to God growing His Church. But **always**, it is *God who grows the Church.*

In today's bulletin I put a question - *"what is the church called to become?"* How would you answer that question? Here's the answer: **It's called to become more like Jesus.** A mission-shaped Church (often seen as the primary objective of the Church currently) is a very good thing but it is not the ultimate goal. The Church is to be shaped, formed, guided, inspired, by none other than Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Lord of the mission, and the Lord of the harvest, as we see in this passage from Acts. And as we follow the priority of becoming more like Jesus we will become even more mission-shaped than if we had mission as our top purpose!

The Church fundamentally is a life-changing encounter with our mighty God, who alone saves, and draws His followers together into the Church. Clearly there is no Church without people. More importantly, there is no true Church without God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A profound awareness of God, **a deep hunger for God**, needs to be the foundation and centre of all that we are and do to truly be the Church. The Church in many ways is God-in-our-midst, it is our being caught up in God and in his love for us.

And the very things that answer the question "how," how *is* the Church God-in-our-midst, how *are* we to be caught up in God and his love, are the very expressions of God at work that we see in this Acts passage, namely being *"devoted ... to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* To know God amongst us and to enjoy his love means, we, as a corporate

body (for Acts has the corporate nature of the Church in mind and not so much the individual Christian), are to be devoted, are to adhere passionately to the teaching of the Scriptures, to fellowship in the Spirit, to the worship of God in the Eucharist, and to talking and listening to God. And in doing these things we give real evidence, we give witness to the fact, of being the Church, namely God-in-our-midst, and being identified by his holy presence and love. Yet, lest the Church becomes a mere 'holy huddle,' the Church is God's chosen instrument for His mission to the world. *The Church is for God for the world.*

This is our challenge as we look to the future. There is only a listless existence for us as the people of God, as the body of Christ in its incredible diversity, without our deep commitment and devotion to God's word, to His fellowship, to His sacrament and to interaction with Him in prayer. May these four things be constant in our life as a Cathedral church. This is so for us as individuals, too, because there needs to be a one-by-one response; we each have to be committed. And from this commitment and devotion will flow the responses so needed in action and service within the Church, in outreach to the community and in mission throughout the world.

In closing, may we be drawn ever more fully into the life of God, for **God is the purpose of the Church**, by the work and filling of the Holy Spirit, and may **He** add daily to our number those who are being saved. Why? So that His Church is built up and His kingdom is expanded and He is glorified as God's mission is being fulfilled.