

## The life of the early church

A sermon preached by Rev. JC Potgieter on Sunday 26 June 2022 in the Reformed Church Tshwane.

Bible reading: Acts 2:42-47

Theme: Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God in one body through the cross; listen to his words, love his people

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### Introduction:

We finished last week in a good place with lots of baptisms. Men, women and children, in a very short space of time the early church grew from around 120 to over 3000 people. Lots of new faces, lots of new names to learn.

Baptised in the name of Jesus, they all received the mark of belonging, the sacrament which testifies to the washing of Christ's blood and Spirit. As surely as water removes dirt from the body these believers have had their sins washed away through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now having confirmed that the Spirit came in power just like God promised, and that He is also working powerfully to bring God's people to faith; Luke will now go on to give us a brief picture of the habits and patterns in the early church. A vision of what God's church ought to be.

Just a note of caution before we begin our reflection. It's important to remember whenever we read a Biblical narrative, that is an account of what happened, we are dealing first and foremost with a description and not a prescription. That is to say, Luke is describing to us what the early church did in Jerusalem, he is not giving us a command to be obeyed. Certainly his description is helpful to us in seeing their priorities and how they understood Scripture, but it is not necessarily the case that their example should always be copied today.

What we need to do is to compare the examples we are given with the commands found elsewhere in the New Testament. When the two are in alignment, then we know they can serve to guide our practice.

Having said all that, in the verses we've read I do think we are given an example to copy. An ideal for every Christian generation to work towards. A vision also for us in the RC Tshwane.

And that vision is quite simple: **Because Jesus has reconciled us to God and gathered us in one body; we must listen to his words and love his people.**

### The habits of the early church:

In verse 42 we are presented with four key elements that characterised the early Christian gatherings: a devotion to apostolic teaching, to fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. Most likely this is a summary of what took place on each Lord's Day when the church officially gathered for worship, with verses 43 to 47 describing the impact of this gathering on the lives of believers and the Jews of Jerusalem.

I don't know if you had a chance to look at the quote in your bulletin from Justin Martyr before the service? He's writing about 100 years after the events which Luke records and it's very interesting to note how his description of a worship service matches almost exactly with what Luke has told us. Apostolic teaching, breaking bread, prayers and fellowship, a concern for other believers.

*[On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.*  
- Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67, ca. 150 A.D.]

So on the Lord's Day the church came together for these activities. They came to meet with God and with one another, to be strengthened by his Word and nourished in the faith. Then during the week they worked hard to serve each other and love their neighbours. Simple and straightforward, they listened to God and they loved his people.

Apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayers:

Now in terms of detail I want to briefly expand on some of what Luke has said so that we can have a deeper understanding of this passage.

Firstly there is the devotion to the *apostles' teaching*.

At this point in time there were 12 apostles in Jerusalem, 12 men who had seen Jesus and learned from him, 12 men specially commissioned to teach his Word to others. If you had any questions about doctrine you simply asked them and they would make things clear.

We don't have quite the same privilege today, but what we do have is the substance of their teaching. The books and letters of the New Testament, they are the apostolic teaching that God has given to nurture and build up his church in every generation. Our task is to study those Scriptures and do what they say. That's what it will mean for us to be devoted to the apostles teaching and that is also the reason why Bible reading and preaching must always have a central place in our worship services. We don't gather on the Lord's Day for entertainment, we come to hear from God and he speaks to us through his Word.

When we consider *fellowship*, we might think about tea, coffee and other social activities. Certainly fellowship includes these things but it also goes much further. The Greek word used speaks especially to the way we see each other and our relationships. The church of Jesus Christ is a gathering of people united in their devotion to God. We are a new family of adopted sons and daughters. A family that meet together on the Lord's Day and then continues to show concern throughout the week. Having all things in common, selling possessions, this was not a primitive form of communism, but family members looking out for each other.

Typically what happened in Jerusalem, when you became a Christian, you would no longer have access to the traditional Jewish support system. The priests and Levites are now reluctant to help you with any financial needs and your family might also turn their backs on you. Now that you are part of the church, you would be very dependent on fellow believers to step up and come to your aid, especially if you were a widow or unable to work. And that's exactly what took place – Christians looking out for each other, using their wealth to serve, generous with time and money, acting like a family.

With the *breaking of bread* and the *prayers* we're also given an insight into the relationship between the old and new covenant, between the church and Israel.

Breaking of bread is a reference to the Lord's Supper. Gathering in homes for worship, the early church celebrated this sacrament on a weekly basis. It served as a constant visual reminder of God's promises in Christ, and an expression of the family fellowship that ought to be enjoyed among believers. One body we eat from one bread and drink from cup.

Then we get to the prayers and notice it is *the* prayers. This refers to set times and occasions when the church gathered together for prayer, specifically the liturgical prayers or psalms that would be used during a worship service. And it is with regard to these kind of prayers that there is a link to the Temple.

If you look at Acts 3:1 you'll see that Peter and John were going up to the Temple at the hour of prayer, that is the ninth hour or three o'clock in the afternoon. Every day there would be set times where the Jewish priests lead a formal time of prayer and singing and the apostles participated in this. Also from 2:46, we see that this was the practice of all the believers. They kept going to the Temple where they praised God and enjoyed the favour of all the people.

Now why would they do this? If they were holding worship services and meeting with God in their homes, why continue to go to the Temple? Why participate in prayers led by Jewish priests when the old covenant is finished and animal sacrifices are to be done away with?

We might think that a clean break was in order but that is not what happened and I think the reason has to do with the continuity that exists between the new and the old covenant. The apostles were not coming with a new religion. They were not calling on Jews to turn their backs on the LORD or to forsake the Old Testament Scriptures. No they were proclaiming that Christ is the fulfilment of Scripture and that rightly understood, the Old Testament is all about him.

By continuing to meet at the Temple for prayer the apostles, the early church is visibly demonstrating their connection with past revelation. They are still worshipping the LORD who has revealed himself to Israel, they have not forsaken him. However, by celebrating the Lord's Supper away from the Temple in their homes, they also highlight the fact that a change has taken place. It is the blood of Christ which makes us right with God and not any animal sacrifice. Jesus has reconciled us to God through the cross, he is the Messiah, he is our high priest.

#### Ordinary gathering used by God:

So there we have the early church. Nothing too fancy or spectacular. No light shows or crusades; just a gathering of people who listen to God's Word and love those around them.

And this gathering is used by the Lord to save those those he has called. Day by day he adds to their number.

"A friend is invited to come to a worship service. At first he refuses because he's a bit unsure about this new Jesus movement, but when he sees that you still pray at the Temple he's somewhat encourages and decides to come and investigate. Arriving at the chosen house he see that you follow the same service pattern as the synagogue. There is a reading from the Old Testament, the singing of psalms and prayers to the LORD. Then he hears the sermon, the gospel preached from the same Scriptures that he has grown up with followed by the Lord's Supper and a collection to help those in need. Here is a community that believes Jesus to be the Christ, a community that proclaims forgiveness of sins in his name, a community that for one another. This is a community which he also wants to be part of."

#### Application:

And that brings us to a very practical conclusion this morning: we must strive to be the church that God has made us to be.

Yes we've not all been called to organise works or service, or to rule or to teach. It is the particular duty of elders to make sure that the doctrine of the apostles is the doctrine being proclaimed in our gatherings. But as Christians all of us have been called to formally identify with God's people, to gather with them for worship and to commit ourselves to the hard work of building relationships.

Selling your possessions to cover medical bills, hosting people for a meal, inviting someone to stay in your spare room – those are all things we'd normally do only for close friends and family. We make big sacrifices for those whom we love.

When it comes to God's church, that is the attitude which we ought to have. Brothers and sisters, we must look out for each other. We must love those with whom we gather.

Now fostering this kind of love and devotion takes time, we need the Spirit to change us if we're going to love, it doesn't just happen overnight. Gathered together with people who don't look like us or think like we do, relationships in church will always require hard work. To that end may I make a few suggestions of what we can do to promote fellowship and grow in the love that Christ seeks to work in us.

Firstly, let us come to worship with the right mindset. When we gather on a Sunday morning we come to meet with God *and* with his people. We're not coming to be fed so that we can disappear. Spending time with fellow believers is a vital part of the Christian life, it is our duty. God calls me to meet him in communion with others, and that communion requires bodily presence in space and time. Let us therefore come to worship with a commitment to develop and deepen the friendships we already enjoy.

Secondly, as we come to worship, let us be on the lookout for newcomers and visitors. We really shouldn't expect visitors to make the first move in coming to greet us. If you've been here a while and you see someone new whose name you don't know, then the onus is on you to go and speak to them, not the other way round. Even if you are naturally shy and more reserved, if we are members in this church it's our job.

Finally, let us pray for the Spirit to be at work in our hearts so that we will grow in our love for fellow believers and become the family that God has made us to be. A family devoted to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.