

Becoming What We Are to Be: The Corporate Dimension (2 of 3)

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Previous time, ended with "Reign." A reign has a corporate dimension. No individualism in Biblical eschatology: City / Kingdom (Reign). No private clouds. (Reading from "He Sent Leanness")

Today I would like to base my reflections on a passage in Acts. One of Luke's "Summaries." (Question of "summaries" and their function.) This one in Acts 2: 42 – 47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Structure of passage: v. 42 is almost an outline of what is to follow: they "devoted themselves"

to four things:

- 1) the apostles' teaching,
- 2) fellowship (RSV misses here: "apostles' teaching and fellow"),
- 3) breaking of the bread, and
- 4) prayers.

The rest of the text follows this outline, except that 3 and 4 may be reversed. (And, interestingly, 3.1 - 4.31 deals with 1, and 4.32-6.7 with 2.)

Again, the central item is continually devoting, "persevering," "insisting," and "remaining constant." The noun from which the verb employed here is derived is *proskartéresis*, which is a combination of both perseverance and patience. And the verb, *proskartereō*, means to hold fast, to persevere, to be faithful, as well as to be devoted to. So, the image here is not only being devoted, but also being persistent.

1) The "teaching of the apostles" is not a rigid orthodoxy. This meaning came later. The emphasis here is on the act of teaching and the act of learning.

a) Persevere in learning/teaching. The church as a teaching/learning community. In Acts: constant learning.

b) Not only intellectual teaching/learning, but also doing. In the next level of the outline, in v. 43: "many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles" And, in chapters 3 and 4, they teach by miracle, by speech, and by example.

2) "Fellowship": *koinōnía*. Misunderstood word. Not just a good feeling, but a common ownership, a corporation. (Luke: 5.9) James and John are *koinōnói* of Simon, meaning joint owners of the boat. "The koinonia of Jesus" the "koinonia of the Spirit."

Here, it is directly related to verses 44 - 45. (Explain imperfect tenses) Insist on continuation of practice in early church.

3) The "breaking of the bread" and (4) "prayers" are the life of worship of the early church.

"The breaking of the bread" is expanded in v. 46. Of "prayers," we are only told in v. 47 that they "praised God!" (perhaps also, in v. 46, that they "continued with one mind in the temple day to day.")

The result is double: in v. 47: "they had favor with all the people" and "the Lord was adding to their number day to day those who were being saved."

Application:

I. Concern in our church about "favor with all the people" and "adding to the number." Explain that the "people" were not everybody. All one has to do is read chapters 3 and 4: "all the people saw him walking and praising God."

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priest, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. (Acts 4: 1 - 3)

"... But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." (Acts 4: 7)

After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. (Acts 4: 21)

So, favor with "all the people" is not being in good relationship with everybody. It is clearly standing by the people and with the people.

II. When the question is posed about "adding to their number," the answer is usually in terms of point 4 (prayer) and perhaps point 3 (breaking of the bread): We need more "spirituality," more "worship." The problem is we have become too radical.

III. But the fact of the matter is that in Acts all of these go together, and it is because of all four that they have favor and numbers are added to them.

IV. Look at them in reverse order:

1) Prayers. Prayer as communal, as thanksgiving, and as intercession. The need for a world-wide perspective.

2) Breaking of bread, which leads to . . .

3) Koinonia. (Pastors' salaries). This has been different in the mission field. It was also different when our church was more mission oriented. Relationship mission/structure in Acts.

4) The teaching of the apostles, both in study and in action. (Communal dimension of study. Gnosticism and pastors' control of knowledge.) Communal dimension of study: The Bible not written primarily to be read in private.

Questions for Discussion

Again, these questions are intended to guide and stimulate discussion. It is not necessary to discuss all of them.

1) Perseverance is the key to the entire passage studied. What structures, programs, etc. do we have in the congregation to promote and encourage perseverance? Are there programs that, no matter how well intended, undermine perseverance?

2) Continuing in "the teaching" (and learning) is essential to the life of the church as a body. Are we teaching/learning in ways that illustrate and promote, not only perseverance, but also community? How can teaching/learning, not only through its content, but also through its method, promote perseverance and community?

3) Do our structures and practices as congregations and as a denomination encourage us and others to persevere and to move forward in koinonia? What structures and practices should be changed? What can we do about it?

4) Many of us are directly responsible for leadership in worship. Does our worship express and promote koinonia in its fullest sense? What elements in worship should or could be changed in order to help us all persevere in the koinonia?

5) The Church constantly seeks to find favor with the people. How does our understanding of this goal compare with what we see in the early chapters of Acts?

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