

THEY THAT GLADLY RECEIVED HIS WORD

The above title is taken from Acts 2: 41, 42, the full text of which reads as follows :- *“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

This is the witness of God to the local first church ever formed. Until Acts 2, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost there was no such thing as the Church. In Matthew 16: 18 the Lord Jesus said to Peter, *“Upon this rock (i.e. what Peter had said of the Lord in verse 16) I will build my church”*, indicating, amongst other things, that at the time he said these words the church had not been formed. But on the day of Pentecost the Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, who, by means of what the Bible calls *“the baptism in the Holy Spirit”*, (not to be confused with water baptism), brought into being the church, the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12: 13). But not only did the church, the body of Christ (composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus, regardless of what denomination they might join) come into being at that time, but also the first local church, the church at Jerusalem, came into existence at the same time. Here in these verses, therefore, we have the example of the early Christians, and therefore a pattern for succeeding generations of Christians.

BAPTISM

The very first thing they did when they *“gladly received his word (i.e. Peter’s word)”* was that they were baptized. I want to answer four questions about baptism as it is taught in the Scriptures, which are our only authority for what we believe and practice.

1. **HOW** should one be baptized?
2. **WHO** should be baptized?
3. **WHEN** should one be baptized?
4. **WHY** should one be baptized?

1. **HOW** should one be baptized??

The Greek word for baptism is *‘baptisma’* which always involves a complete immersion. It comes from the verb *‘bapto’*, which means *‘to dip’*. So that we read in John 3: 23 *“John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there.”* If baptism was by merely sprinkling water on the forehead John would hardly have needed much water. Also, in Acts 8: 38, 39 we read that when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, *“...they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he (Philip) baptized him (the eunuch).”* Obviously, this was a large body of water that enabled them both to walk down into it. Again, if baptism was by sprinkling, this would have been totally unnecessary.

Lastly, in Romans 6: 3, 4 we find that baptism is a symbol of death, burial and resurrection (this fact will be amplified later). Nothing short of total submersion in water would suffice to picture that fact.

2. **WHO** should one be baptized?

The answer to this question is two-fold:-

- i. Believers only.
- ii. All believers

i. **BELIEVERS ONLY**

In Acts 8: 36 the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, “*See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?*” To which Philip replied, “*If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.*” The eunuch’s terse reply was “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*” v37.

In Acts 10: 44 - 48, when Peter saw the evidence that Cornelius, his relatives and friends had received the Holy Spirit (which takes place when a person believes the gospel), he said, “*Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?*”

In Acts 18: 8 we read, “*...and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.*” In every case in the New Testament evidence had to be provided of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ before a person could be baptized.

ii. **ALL BELIEVERS**

In Matthew 28: 18 - 20 the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples what has been called ‘the great commission’. “*All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach (make disciples of) 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 always, even unto the end of the world.*” Notice that they were not told to merely “*preach the gospel*”, but to “*make disciples of all nations*”, that is, to bring the converts to see their responsibility to recognize the authority of Christ in every area of their lives. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6: 19, 20, “*...ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.*” Having “*made disciples of all nations*” they were to “*baptize them...*” and “*teach them to observe all things*” that the Saviour commanded them. Thus, all new converts were to be baptized.

In the parallel passage in Mark 16: 15, 16 the Lord Jesus said, “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*” First, we must clear up a common error. The Lord was not teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation. You will notice that he did not say, “*He that believeth, but is not baptized, shall be damned.*”, but

merely said *“He that believeth not shall be damned.”* The indication of the verse is that the Lord automatically linked baptism with believing. In New Testament days it was unheard of that a person who professed faith in Christ would not be baptized. Baptism does not make anyone any more saved, but the response of the heart in a New Testament convert was to be baptized without any question as to whether it was necessary or not. Thus it was that the Ethiopian eunuch, when he trusted Christ, said, *“See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?”* Also, in Acts 2: 41, we have already read *“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized:”*. In Acts 10: 48 we discover that baptism is **a command to be obeyed**, for there we read, *“And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.”* Baptism is never viewed as an option that can be disregarded in the New Testament. To not get baptized is to be disobedient.

3. **WHEN** should one be baptized?

The longest delay in the New Testament between conversion and baptism appears to be in the case of Paul in Acts 9. In verse 9 we read, *“He was three days without sight,..”*. Verse 17 indicates that he received his sight through the instrumentality of Ananias. Then in verse 18 we read, *“And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.”* It would appear that the three thousand converts in Acts 2 were baptized on the same day as they were saved, or at least, as near to that momentous day as was physically possible (bearing in mind the large number to be baptized). The imposition of a minimum waiting period is totally unscriptural. Likewise, the imposition of a minimum age requirement is totally without Scriptural support. These human intrusions are meant to minimize our mistakes, which is an admirable goal, but unscriptural nonetheless. The one requirement in the Scriptures is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Mistakes will be made by those interviewing prospective candidates for baptism, but these should be minimized by a careful inquiry as to the conversion of the one seeking baptism, especially if such is young.

4. **WHY** should one be baptized?

The simple answer to this question is **because the Lord Jesus Christ commanded it**. As we saw in Matthew 28: 19, the Lord Jesus, just before he went back to heaven commanded his disciples, *“Go ye therefore, and teach (make disciples of) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”* Secondly, a believer should be baptized because this was the practice of the early disciples in the Book of the Acts. Baptism was never treated as an option which could be chosen or rejected. Thirdly, believers should be baptized because of what baptism symbolizes. In Romans chapter 6, Paul, after he has given to us five chapters dealing with man's total sinfulness, and has shown that God has provided salvation for all men through the death of Christ on the cross, and has taught that that salvation is available to all on the basis of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, goes on to answer the natural question

that arises from what he has taught, “*Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?*” In other words, if we are saved through faith in Christ alone, without moral change in us as a precondition, does this give us the liberty to live as we please afterwards? The answer is clearly, ‘**No, it most certainly does not!**’ For Paul goes on to argue, “*How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*” In the rest of the chapter he goes on to state that before we trusted Christ sin was our master, and as such controlled our lives. But when we trusted Christ we died to sin as a master, and became the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we are no longer under the authority of sin, and hence should not obey sin, but rather Christ. In verses 3 and 4 Paul indicates that this death to sin as a master is illustrated by baptism. “*Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore **we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.***” Notice that Paul is not saying that death to sin is only true of baptized believers. Rather, he is automatically assuming that all his readers were baptized believers, and that, as a result of their faith in Christ they had died to sin and had been raised to walk in newness of life, that is, in order that they may live a life of a new quality, the kind of life that is pleasing to God. All this, Paul indicates, is symbolized by baptism. One does not die to sin by means of baptism. Rather, baptism illustrates the fact that at the moment of salvation I was linked to Christ in his death, burial and resurrection, and, as a result, am no longer the slave of sin. The believer who is not baptized is, practically speaking, denying that this is so, though he may be in complete ignorance of this fact.

In conclusion, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, but are not yet baptized, you should seek to be baptized as soon as possible. When you consider how much the Lord Jesus has done for you, surely it is not too much to expect that you would be baptized as a testimony to your faith in him and your desire to please him. In John 14: 15 the Lord said, “*If ye love me, keep my commandments.*”

ADDED

Following upon their baptism we read, “*and the same day there were **added unto them** about three thousand souls.*” Acts 2: 41. Baptism was just the first step and was followed by a life of obedience to the revealed will of God. Two expressions are used in the Book of the Acts to describe Christian life. The first is “*this life*” Acts 5: 20, and the second is “*the way*” Acts 9: 2; 19: 9, 23; 22: 4; 24: 22. These expressions indicate that Christianity is **a life to be lived, and a road to be traveled**. New Testament Christians recognized that they had been “*bought with a price*” 2 Corinthians 6: 20, and that as a result they were not their own masters. This produced a tremendous transformation in their lives from the day of their conversion and onward. But now the question arises, ‘To what or to whom were they added?’. Some have suggested that since the words “*unto them*” are in italic writing (indicating that they do not represent any words in the original Greek text), that the true sense is added “*unto the Lord*”. This may possibly be so. But, since in

verse 47 we read “*And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*”, we have to come to the conclusion that, while they were most certainly added unto the Lord, they were also added to the newly formed church at Jerusalem.

The first thing that needs to be stressed here is that Christians were never intended to live in isolation. One of the great preservatives in Christian life is fellowship with other Christians. We read of Saul (later known as Paul), after he was saved and went from Damascus to Jerusalem, that “*he assayed (attempted) to join himself to the disciples.*” Acts 9: 26. The word here translated “*join*” means literally “*to glue*” or “*to cement*”. After the Christians in Jerusalem were assured that Saul had been genuinely saved we read that “*he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.*” In other words, he had become completely one with the assembly of Christians at Jerusalem, he had become “*glued*” to them. Christians who have no interest in being united to other Christians are in a very vulnerable and unhealthy state.

But the question asked today is ‘What church should I join?’ In New Testament times there were no denominations to join, and no denominations to leave. The very existence of denominations is a testimony to division, sectarianism and departure from the simple pattern that God has given us in His Word.

But it may be asked, ‘Are there any churches today that seek to follow the simple path that God has given us in the Scriptures?’ The answer to that question is ‘Yes, though in great weakness and failure.’

The next question to ask naturally would be, ‘Where can I find such a church?’ In reply I would say that it is impossible to give a list of such churches all over the world. But what can be done is to give an outline of principles taught in the New Testament that identify a church as God intends it to be.

1. New Testament churches did not take sectarian names

We read of “*the church of God which is at Corinth*” 1 Corinthians 1: 2, “*the churches of Galatia*” Galatians 1: 2, “*the church of the Thessalonians*” 1 Thessalonians 1: 1, etc. These terms identify the location of the churches. We also read of “*the churches of the gentiles*” Romans 16: 4. This merely indicates that Paul is referring to churches that were composed primarily of gentile Christians, rather than Jewish Christians. But in the New Testament we never read terms that distinguish churches on the basis of doctrine. The very taking of a name to distinguish us from other Christians is sectarian, and sectarianism is sin. Believers should not join any ‘church’ that takes any sectarian name.

2. New Testament churches acknowledged the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures

Of the church at Philadelphia the Lord could say, “...*thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My Word...*” Revelation 3: 8. In 2 Timothy 3: 16 Paul wrote “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God...*”. Peter also claimed that “*the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*” 2 Peter 1: 21. In seeking to correct certain disorders in the church at Corinth Paul wrote “*If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.*” 1 Corinthians 14: 37. Invariably, when seeking to correct error, the apostles appealed to the Scriptures, not to the tenets of the church. The New Testament, specifically, is the sole source of authority as to how Christians should gather. Believers should not join any ‘church’ that does not acknowledge the complete inspiration and exclusive authority of the Scriptures

3. New Testament churches acknowledged Christ as God and as head of the church

Of the church at Philadelphia the Lord could not only say “*thou...hast kept My Word...*”, but also, “*and hast not denied My name.*” Revelation 3: 8. One of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith is the deity of Christ, that is, the fact that Christ is God, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We make no pretense of understanding the Trinity (three persons in one Godhead), but the Bible teaches it, and this is sufficient for all true believers. Very many scriptures could be quoted to prove this, but a few will suffice for the present purpose.

John 1: 1 - 3 reads “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.*” That these verses refer to Christ is substantiated by verse 14 of the same chapter, “*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father)...*”. In verse one we learn that Christ is **eternal**, that he is **distinct from the Father**, and that **he is God**. In verse three we learn that **he is the creator of all things**. Verse 14 indicates that he became in the fullest sense of the word **a human being**, and yet **never ceased to be, at the same time, God**.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in quoting Psalm 45: 6, says, “*But unto the Son he saith (i.e. God says), Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.*” Hebrews 1: 8. Here we have very clear indication of the fact that not only is the Son God, but also that he is the King for whom Israel has been waiting.

Peter, in introducing his second epistle, writes, “*Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus*

Christ.” 2 Peter 1: 1. A more literal translation of the last part of that verse would be “*through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.*” Clearly, Peter also believed that Christ was God.

But the early churches not only believed that Christ was God, but that each church was **his exclusive property**. They are described as “*the churches of Christ*” Romans 16: 16, and on numerous occasions as “*the churches of God*”. 1 Corinthians 11: 16 etc.

We may sometimes speak of the church of which we form a part as ‘our church’. But if such a church is seeking to follow the pattern of the New Testament it is most certainly not ‘our church’, but Christ’s church. As believers we should seek the fellowship of a church that acknowledges the deity and authority of Christ.

4. New Testament churches preached the gospel

Of the church at Thessalonica it could be said, “*So that ye were ensamples (literally “a pattern”) to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord...*” 1 Thessalonians 1: 7,8. Included in this preaching of the gospel was a **declaration of man’s need as a sinner** (Romans 3: 23 etc.), and **God’s remedy through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ** (Romans 3: 24 etc.), and that man enjoys the benefits of the salvation God provides **through personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ** (Romans 3: 25 etc.). Often new Christians are encouraged ‘to join the church of their choice’. But a Christian who truly wants to please the Lord and obey his Word should never join any ‘church’ that does not preach the gospel of the New Testament.

5. New Testament churches practiced the baptism of believers

It has already been substantiated that the MODE of baptism in the New Testament was by **immersion**, that **believers only** were baptized, and that **all believers were expected to be baptized**. Before joining any church a believer should be sure that that church practiced baptism (by immersion), and that of professing believers only.

6. New Testament churches regularly commemorated the Lord’s death by breaking bread

This will be dealt with in more detail later. We read of the Christians at Troas that “*...on the first day of the week...the disciples came together to break bread.*” Acts 20: 7. When looking for a church to join a believer should be sure that such a church regularly (i.e. each first day of the week) remembers the Lord in the breaking of bread.

7. New Testament churches believed in and practiced the priesthood of all believers

Peter said, “*Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, AN HOLY PRIESTHOOD, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*” 1 Peter 2: 5, and again, “*But ye are a chosen generation, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light;*” 1 Peter 2: 9. The Christians in New Testament days knew nothing of a distinction between CLERGY and LAITY. The priestly functions of WORSHIP and PUBLIC SERVICE were never intended to be restricted to a distinct group within the church based on their education or specialized training in religion. In seeking to join a church a believer should be sure that such a church believes in and practiced the priesthood of all believers.

8. New Testament churches recognized the fact that each believer has a spiritual gift

In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 Paul compares the church to a normal, healthy, functioning human body. He says, “*For by (literally “in”) one Spirit are we all baptized into one body whether we be bond or free;...*” 1 Corinthians 12: 13. That is, by means of the baptism in the Holy Spirit all believers have been incorporated into the church, the body of Christ, and as such each believer have been endowed with a spiritual gift that is intended to be exercised for the spiritual enrichment of the local church. A number of principles are taught in 1 Corinthians 12 :-

- i. We are not all endowed with the same gift (vv.4 - 10).
- ii. The Holy Spirit **sovereignly chooses** the gift for us (v11).
- iii. The exercise of every spiritual gift is necessary for the proper functioning of a local church (vv. 15 - 18)
- iv. No Christian can properly operate independently of the rest (vv.19 - 21).
- v. We should be characterized by love and concern for one another's welfare (vv.22 - 26).

Unfortunately, in denominational circles, believers are not at liberty to exercise their spiritual gifts without the consent of ‘the pastor’. Usually the spiritual gift of a believer is not recognized unless such has been to a Bible Institution of some kind and has been ‘ordained to the ministry’. While one's spiritual gift has to be cultivated by its use, it is certainly present without human ordination, and does not require formal education in order for it to be able to function. On the other hand, if a believer has not been endowed with a particular gift, for example the gift of teaching, no amount of education or formal qualifications will produce it. In seeking to find a church the believer should reject any church where there is not the liberty to exercise one's spiritual gift.

9. New Testament churches recognized the authority of a plurality of elders

In Acts 20 three terms are used to describe the leaders of a local church :-

- i. In verse 17 they are called ELDERS. We read there “*And from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.*” This term emphasizes their SPIRITUAL MATURITY.
- ii. In speaking to the elders in verse 28 Paul calls them OVERSEERS when he says, “*Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers,*”. The particular Greek word used here (*episkopos*) is most commonly translated “*bishop*”, for example in 1 Timothy 3: 2. Therefore, an elder is an overseer, and an overseer is a bishop. In churches where the term “*bishop*” is used, a bishop is a church official over a number of churches or a diocese. But notice that in Acts 20 there was a plurality of bishops in one church. The term “*overseer*” or “*bishop*” emphasizes THE WORK OF THE ELDER.
- iii. The third term used in Acts 20 is found, once again, in verse 28. Paul exhorts the elders “*to feed the church of God...*”. The word translated here “*to feed*” is the verb form of the noun “*poimen*”, which is generally translated “*shepherd*”, but is once translated “*pastor*”. In fact, the English word “*pastor*” is only once used in the New Testament, and it is this particular word. Therefore, we must conclude that the ELDERS of the church at Ephesus were at the same time the OVERSEERS (or BISHOPS), and the PASTORS. Christendom has tended to distinguish these terms, but the New Testament is clear that an elder is an overseer, is a bishop, is a pastor.

The qualifications of such are given us in 1 Timothy 3: 1-7, and in Titus 1: 5-9, and those qualifications are seen to be primarily MORAL and SPIRITUAL, and are certainly not ACADEMIC, or based on BUSINESS SUCCESS.

In seeking a church to join a believer should insist on a church where there are elders functioning according to the New Testament, or at least, in the case of a recently established church, where there is the potential for such elders.

10. New Testament churches recognized the God appointed distinction of the sexes

In these days of ‘women's lib’ and ‘the equality of the sexes’ it is very difficult for some to accept the fact that God has made a distinction between the sexes, not only physiologically, but also functionally, as far as the home and the local church are concerned. For this reason most churches have either sought to minimize the difference, or have chosen to ignore it altogether. But GOD'S WORD REMAINS UNCHANGED. Paul states, in a context that deals with the proper use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14), “*Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*” v34. This is not a contradiction of what has been said above about all believers being gifted. Not all gifts are for public exercise. Not even all males exercise their gifts in public.

Of the family of Stephanas Paul could say, “*they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints.*” 1 Corinthians 16: 15. That is, they sought to serve the welfare of the Christians in whatever way they could assist them. Blessed addiction! This certainly did not require taking any public place in the church.

Such an injunction as we have in 1 Corinthians 14: 34 is not to treat the sisters as inferior, any more than a brother whose gift is not public in its exercise. God has given male and female their own relative place in creation and in the church, and we, as believers, must bow to that. In 1 Corinthians 11: 3 Paul teaches that “*the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.*” Notice firstly the last clause, “*the head of Christ is God.*” This certainly is not teaching that Christ is inferior to God. Rather, it is teaching that Christ **voluntarily** took a place of **subordination** to his Father when he came into the world. By the same token, the verse is not teaching that the woman is inferior to the man, but has been given a place of subordination to him. Paul indicates that the **outward sign** of that subordination is **the covering of the head of the woman**. “*Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered dishonoureth his head (that is, he dishonours Christ). But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head (that is, she dishonours the man).*” vv.4, 5. It has often been objected that the reference to her prophesying infers taking public part. But this is not so. In Acts 21: 8,9 we read of the daughters of Philip the evangelist that they prophesied. The context indicates that they prophesied **within the confines of the home**.

Much more could be said along this line, but this will suffice for the present purpose. Any believer seeking a church to join should insist on joining a church that recognizes the silent place of the sister, and where the sisters acknowledge their subordinate role by covering their heads in church meetings.

These are but some of the distinct features of a New Testament church, and, while observance of these features may be a rarity, there are throughout the world assemblies of God's people who in simplicity, if in weakness, seek to follow the pattern that God has been pleased to give in his Word. May the reader recognize the scriptural-ness of what he is reading, and seek to link himself, or herself, with such an assembly of Christians who seek to obey the Word of God, and seek to contribute to the spiritual health of those who thus gather by his or her spiritual contributions.

THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

So far we have seen that those who responded to the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, that is, who believed the gospel, were baptized. Following upon their baptism they were added to the local church at Jerusalem. In other words, in the Scriptures baptism always precedes being received into assembly

fellowship, while, at the same time, those early believers did not stop at baptism, but went on to be received into the assembly.

These two events, baptism and reception to the assembly, were never intended to be repeated. If, of course, due to serious sin in their lives after conversion, any had to be “*put away*” from the fellowship of the assembly (see 1 Corinthians 5), or if an individual left the assembly for some reason, then, under right conditions, the individual could be received again. But, ideally, neither baptism nor reception should need to be repeated. But what is said of these early Christians in Acts 2: 42 is that “*they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*”. Let us examine the first of these four statements.

“*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine...*”. The word translated “*continued steadfastly*” means “*to persevere*”, literally, “*to be strong towards*”. These early Christians appreciated what the Lord had done for them in delivering them from what they so richly deserved, and for bringing them into the family of God. Hence, they **persevered** in the apostles' doctrine.

Before answering the question “*What does it mean to persevere in the apostles’ doctrine?*” we must ascertain what is meant by the term “*the apostles’ doctrine*”. The word “*doctrine*”, by common usage has come to mean “*dogma*”, that is, a particular set of teachings considered fundamental to the Christian faith. But it originally meant merely “*teaching*”. Therefore the statement could as easily read, “*And they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles*”. Whatever the apostles taught them they “*persevered in*”, they steadfastly obeyed. At this particular point in time the Old Testament was all that existed of the written Word of God. And, since ‘the church’ was something entirely new in the program of God, the first Christians needed instruction as to how they should live and how they should congregate. Thus, they were dependent upon what the apostles taught them. Later, of course, what the apostles taught was given to the church in permanent form in the New Testament. The New Testament is to the church what the Old Testament was to the nation of Israel. Not that the Old Testament no longer has anything to teach us. But that is another subject not to be covered here.

Were the Apostles inspired of God in what they wrote?

Paul was in no doubt whatever that he and the other apostles were inspired of God. In 1 Corinthians we find that the Corinthian Christians were tending to follow particular men. In chapter 1: 12 Paul wrote “*..every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas (i.e. Peter), and I of Christ*”. That is, they were making these men leaders of divisions amongst the people of God. In the chapters that follow, up to the end of chapter 4, Paul indicates that none of these men, that is, Apollos, Peter or himself, had any interest in

getting a following for themselves. In fact, Paul teaches that each of the apostles was inspired of God personally in what he taught. In chapter 2: 7 he says, “*But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory;*”. In verses 9 and 10 he says, “*But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. **But God revealed them unto us by his Spirit***”. That is, the things which cannot be comprehended naturally God revealed to the apostles by the Holy Spirit. In verse 13 of the same chapter he says, “*Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual*”. The last clause could have been accurately translated “*communicating spiritual things by spiritual means*”. If verse 10 is teaching that God revealed his truth to the apostles through the Holy Spirit, verse 13 teaches us that the apostles taught the Christians **in words that were given to them by the Holy Spirit**.

In 2 Timothy 3: 16 Paul says, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:*” The Greek word here translated “*scripture*” (*graphe*) is only ever used in speaking of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, of the Holy Scriptures, Paul says that they “*are given by inspiration of God*”. The expression “*...given by inspiration of God...*” is one word in the Greek, and literally means “*God breathed*”. “*All scripture is God breathed*”. No doubt Paul had in the back of his mind the creation of Adam in Genesis 2. There we read, “*And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, **and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.***” v7. One moment Adam was just a lifeless body lying on the ground. But when God breathed into him the breath of life, “*man became a living soul*”. What makes the Bible different from every other piece of literature ever produced? God has breathed into it! It is “***the living Word***”! Some might argue that this statement only applies to the Old Testament since at the time Paul wrote only the Old Testament existed in permanent form. But Peter says “*...even as our beloved brother Paul also **according to the wisdom given unto him** hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest (twist), as they do also **the other scriptures**, unto their own destruction.*” 2 Peter 3: 15, 16. Notice that Peter here speaks of “*the other scriptures (graphe)*”, inferring that Paul's epistles were scriptures (*graphe*), otherwise the words “***other scriptures***” make no sense.

So that Peter claims two things about the writings of Paul :-

- i. He wrote “*according to the wisdom given unto him*”.
- ii. What he wrote was “*scripture*”, therefore, “*God breathed*”. The true believer, therefore, is totally persuaded that the Old and New Testaments together are the inspired Word of God, totally accurate as to history, science and doctrine. This being so, the Bible is **authoritative**, that is, all believers are responsible

to obey all that it teaches, not rejecting what is not palatable or unpopular! In 1 Corinthians 14: 37 Paul says *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, **let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.**”*

This brings us back to our original text in Acts 2: 42, *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine,...”*. One of the things that characterized the early Christians was that they unquestioningly obeyed what the apostles taught them, being fully persuaded that the apostles were communicating to them the will of God. Paul could also say of the young church at Thessalonica, *“And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the Word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.”* 1 Thessalonians 1: 6. Here Paul claims that the Thessalonian Christians demonstrated their faith in Christ by the manner in which they received the Word of God, despite the conditions of persecution that this produced for them. He says that they became followers, both of the apostles, and of the Lord himself. The inference is that if we do not obey God's Word we are not following the apostles, and even more seriously, not following the Lord. In the New Testament there are a number of different words translated *“to receive”*. The particular word used here means *“to receive by deliberate and ready reception”*, or *“to welcome”*. There was no hesitancy or reluctance on the part of these Christians. They yearned to hear the Word of God in order that they might obey it. In the next chapter Paul says *“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it **not as the word of men**, but as it is in truth, **the word of God**, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”* 1 Thessalonians 2: 13. The Thessalonian Christians, like those of Acts 2, were fully persuaded that the apostles taught them the unadulterated Word of God.

Peter also exhorted the Christians of his day, *“As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the Word **that ye might grow thereby:**”* 1 Peter 2: 2. Clearly, desiring the sincere milk of the Word does not merely mean desiring to read it, because this could not produce growth. The analogy of a newborn baby is most forceful. A newborn baby will not cease to cry until its hunger has been satisfied. But the mere drinking of the milk does not produce the growth of the baby. The milk must be assimilated, thus providing the necessary ingredients that cause the bones etc. to grow. So, as we read **and obey** the Word of God, it produces growth in our spiritual lives.

One would take this opportunity of seeking to encourage any believer who reads these pages to set aside a definite time each day to read the Word of God. Set a target of reading the Bible through at least once a year. This is certainly not as big a task as it might appear. Three chapters in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament each day will enable one to cover the whole Bible in a year. This should require for most readers no more than an average of fifteen minutes each day. You may not find it easy **to find** the time. In

this case you will have to **make the time**. We all make time for the things that are most important to us. May I suggest that there is nothing more important than reading the Word of God. I am sure that a good number of us could make time to read the Bible through more than once a year, if it is important enough to us. But you will have to determine yourself how much time is available to you.

Try to read a portion in the Old Testament, and a portion in the New Testament each day. This will help to retain a balance. You might consider reading through one book in the Bible four times before proceeding to the next book. For example, if you are reading in Genesis in the Old Testament and Matthew in the New Testament, read Genesis four times before proceeding to Exodus. Likewise, read Matthew four times before proceeding to Mark. Reading each book four times will help cement its context into your mind. Possibly, you might decide when reading some of the smaller books of one to five chapters, to couple them with the books preceding them, or following them. This will prevent you having to read one book four times in one day although this certainly would not do you any harm. The important thing is that you will have to be disciplined about it if you are going to continue. **Read your Bible prayerfully**. After all it is the Word of God and can only be understood as the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds. **Read your Bible carefully**. It is not just like any other book. A great deal of what the Bible teaches will only be understood after many years of faithful Bible study. I have often compared the Bible to a complicated jigsaw puzzle. The more often you put a jigsaw puzzle together the more acquainted you become with the individual pieces, and the more readily you will understand where each piece fits into the whole. So it is with the Scriptures. The Bible is a library of sixty six books, covering numerous subjects, all important in the Christian life. It is not just a text book of things to believe and things to obey. Truth must be carefully sought. **Read your Bible submissively**. In Psalm 119: 9 we read, *“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? **By taking heed thereto according to thy word.**”* Read through Psalm 119 at your leisure. Notice the number of times the writer speaks of obeying God. In verse 11 he says, *“Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”* It is said of the “blessed man” in Psalm 1, *“...his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, **that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.**”* Psalm 1: 2,3. Here we learn of the one who meditates in God's Word :-

- i. He is stable (*planted*).
- ii. He is fruitful (*bringeth forth his fruit*).
- iii. He is spiritually attractive (*his leaf also shall not wither*).
- iv. He is spiritually prosperous (*whatsoever he doeth shall prosper*).

You will soon discover that no time of effort spent in reading and studying God's Word is wasted time. But there must be that willingness to do his will.

FELLOWSHIP

So far we have seen that in Acts 2: 41, 42 we have an outline of principles that are intended to be a guide to all generations of believers. The full text of the verses in mind reads, “*Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*”

We have seen that those who trusted Christ as their Saviour in those early days were baptized by immersion. Following upon their baptism they were received into the local church at Jerusalem. At that time there were no denominations to join, and no denominations to leave. All that existed, that was of God, was the local church. Thus it should be in our days. Then we saw that while these steps were intended to be experienced once for all, in verse 42 we see four things in which they continued, “*They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*” We have just looked at the subject of “*the apostles’ doctrine (teaching)*”, and have seen that these believers recognized that the apostles were divinely inspired in passing on to them what God had first revealed to them, and that the early Christians implicitly obeyed what they were taught. So it is that all genuine believers acknowledge that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and that we should therefore be just as diligent in seeking to obey what God has to say to us in the Scriptures.

Now we come to the topic of “*the fellowship*”. In the original language of the Bible the text reads, “*...they continued steadfastly in ...the fellowship...*”. The use of the definite article (the) is important, because it specifies **what fellowship is being referred to**. The fact of the matter is that the term “*fellowship*” is not exclusive to Christianity. The Greek word, sometimes translated “*communion*”, means “*a sharing in common*”, and could even refer to a common purpose to do evil. For example the verb form of the word is used in 1 Timothy 5: 22, “*Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither **be partaker** of other men’s sins:*”. Even in our day we speak of “*the fellowship*” of certain fraternities such as the Order of Foresters etc., which have no Christian connections. Here the writer speaks of “*the fellowship*”, not just any fellowship, but the fellowship into which we, as Christians, have been brought.

The term “*fellowship*” is never used in the New Testament to define one group of Christians as distinct from another. This would be positively sectarian. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul indicates that those who composed “*the church of God which is at Corinth*” had been “*sanctified in Christ Jesus*” and were “*saints by calling* (literal translation)”, in association with “***all that call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.***” 1 Corinthians 1: 1, 2. Then, in verse 9 of the same chapter he says, “*God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.*” This fellowship is the common privilege of all true believers. John, the apostle, refers to that same fellowship when he says, “*...and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with*

his Son Jesus Christ.” 1 John 1: 3. You will notice that he says “*our fellowship is with **the Father**...*”. The fellowship is based on **relationship**. It is a fellowship that is the result of being in the family of God.

But belonging to the fellowship, and participating in the fellowship are two entirely different things. Notice, please, the full text of what John wrote, “*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.*”, the inference being that, while we are brought into the fellowship as a result of our relationship to Christ, we may not be in the practical enjoyment of that fellowship. The context of 1 John indicates that unconfessed sin will interrupt our enjoyment of fellowship.

Notice again the statement in 1 Corinthians 1: 9, “*God is faithful, by whom ye have been called unto the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ **our Lord**.*” Here the stress is on the Lordship of Christ. In other words, if, by our actions, we deny the Lordship of Christ in our lives, we will not enjoy the fellowship into which, by God's grace, we have been called. Now let us come back to our text in Acts 2. “*And they **continued steadfastly**...in the fellowship, ...*” Acts 2: 42. It is one thing to have been called into the fellowship, it is quite another to continue steadfastly in it. These early Christians were intent on enjoying to the full the fellowship into which they had been brought.

Fellowship, in its New Testament usage, has two sides to it. There is the vertical fellowship, that is fellowship with God, and there is the horizontal fellowship, that is fellowship with other Christians. Not that these are two distinct fellowships, but two sides of the same fellowship. Notice again the words of John the apostle in 1 John 1: 3, “*That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have **fellowship with us**.*” There we have the horizontal side of the fellowship. But then he proceeded to say, “*and truly our fellowship is **with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ**.*” Here we have the vertical side of the fellowship. If we are enjoying the one aspect of the fellowship we will also be enjoying the other aspect of the fellowship. Conversely, if we are not enjoying the one aspect of the fellowship we will not be enjoying the other. They are inseparably linked together. If, for instance, I have taken my eyes off the Lord, and become preoccupied with material things, it will not be long before I will be finding fault with my fellow believers. On the other hand, if I have in some way been unkind to a brother or sister in the Lord I will not be able to enjoy communion with the Lord.

The question arises, ‘How can I maintain fellowship with God?’ Here are a number of factors to be borne in mind :-

i. I must read my Bible every day, since it is by this means, primarily, that God speaks to me.

- ii. I must be alert to anything the Lord has to say to me from his Word and be prepared to make any necessary adjustments in my life.
- iii. I must spend time each day in prayer, since it is by this means that I speak to God. King David said, “*My voice shalt Thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.*” Psalm 5: 3. In Psalm 119: 164 we read, “*Seven times a day do I praise thee...*”. We must not only pray, but praise!
- iv. I must be sensitive to any sin in my life, and be quick to confess it and forsake it. David prayed, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*” Psalm 139: 23,24.
- v. I must be careful to maintain the horizontal fellowship, that is, I must be careful about my relationship with other believers.

Let us now think of practical expressions of the fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul speaks of the body. In fact he refers to no less than three distinct bodies in the chapter.

- i. He refers to “*the church*”, of which all believers form a part from the moment of their conversion, regardless of where they may live, or when they may have lived, as being a body (v13). That “*body*” is composed of all true believers.
- ii. He refers to a normal, healthy, functioning human body (vv. 14 - 26).
- iii. He refers to a local church as being a body (v27). The second of these three serves as the illustration of the other two. There is no more apt illustration of “*fellowship*” than the functioning of a healthy body. All the members work together for the well-being of the whole. Each member has its own unique place and function, yet there is no jealousy. Each member is content with its own place in the body, and no members ‘takes it easy’ while the others do all the work. **They have a common purpose!** They recognize that their own well-being is dependent upon the well-being of the whole! Two words could describe the various members of a healthy body, **functioning**, and **caring**.

Thus it should be in the fellowship into which we have been called. Every believer is in the church, the body of Christ (sometimes called ‘the universal church’, or ‘the church of the Dispensation’), and have a responsibility to every other believer. On the other hand, every believer, as we have seen, ought to form part of a local church, patterned after the New Testament, and as such ought to be functioning and caring in the local church. No doubt there are many believers forming part of such a local church, and yet have never done much more than ‘warm a seat’ in the place where the church gathers. This is very sad! 1 Corinthians 12 teaches that, as in the natural body, so in the spiritual, every member has his or her unique place and gift. How sad it is to see a person whose body will not function properly, whose members are not fulfilling the purpose for which they were intended! The same is true in a local church.

Let us continue with the analogy of a healthy human body. After a baby has been born it is not long before the various members of the body begin to function. First the particular function of each member has to be discovered. Then there must be attempts to exercise that function. Then, as such attempts are made, the particular member develops the necessary strength and skill. All this requires time and patience of course! The same holds true in the spiritual realm. Firstly, the individual believer must be concerned to discover what particular work the Lord has in view. Then, as opportunity affords itself, the ‘gift’ must be exercised. eventually, with diligence on the part of the Christian, his or her gift will be developed sufficiently to be of service in the local church. Have you, my friend, been before the Lord as to what particular work the Lord has for you in the fellowship?

The term “*fellowship*” is used on a number of occasions in the New Testament, with different emphases. Let us examine a few of them.

i. It is a fellowship of giving.

In Romans 15: 26 we read, “*For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem.*” The word translated “*contribution*” is the same word for fellowship. So that fellowship involves seeking to meet the material needs of Christians less fortunate than ourselves. Notice the words “*It hath pleased them*”. Their giving was not compulsory, nor were they shamed into it. It was entirely voluntary, and out of hearts of compassion. The same thought is conveyed in a number of other passages in the New Testament.

In Philippians 1: 5 Paul thanks God for the fellowship of the Philippian Christians “*from the first day until now.*” In chapter 4: 15 of the same epistle he writes “*Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed out of Macedonia, no church communicated with me (fellowshipped with me) as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only.*” Linking the two passages together it becomes obvious that the fellowship of which he speaks in chapter 1: 5 was **a fellowship of giving**. Here we learn that we can give, not only to needy Christians, but particularly to those who are engaged in the service of Christ, and have no other means of livelihood.

ii. It is a fellowship of prayer.

No doubt also involved in the statement in Philippians 1: 5, “*...for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now*”, was the matter of prayer. Often, in his epistles Paul asked the Christians to pray for him in his service for Christ, and at the same time he indicates that he is praying for them. As many as there are Christians in the world there are Christians who need to be prayed for. The old hymn says, “*O the pure delight of a single hour that before thy throne I spend, When I kneel in prayer and with thee my God I commune as friend with Friend.*” I wonder how much we know of this experientially!

iii. **It is a fellowship of working together.**

Very likely Paul also had in mind that in their “*fellowship with him*” they took every opportunity of standing alongside of him in his witness for Christ. How sad it is when a servant of the Lord is invited for gospel meetings and is left to do all the visiting in the neighborhood. What a golden opportunity this is for the believers to serve the Lord, and in doing so have practical fellowship with one of his servants. Each one of us is responsible to maintain a testimony for the Lord. Paul indicated that the young church at Thessalonica had become “*a pattern to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the Word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad;*” 1 Thess.1: 8,9. A church is intended to be as a lighthouse, lighting up the darkness of this world. How sad it is when the local church fails in this respect. Sometimes we get the idea that as long as we regularly hold a gospel meeting we have fulfilled our responsibility. But the Lord Jesus said, “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.*” Mark 16: 15. We are responsible to go to the unsaved with the gospel, rather than expect them to come to us. A regular gospel meeting certainly has its place, but we should not, especially in these days of indifference to the gospel, solely depend upon the gospel meeting to reach souls.

On the other hand, how sad it is when some believers do not feel it their responsibility to support every effort of the local church to spread the gospel. Paul exhorts the Philippians, “*...stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.*” Phil.1: 27. By ‘support’ is meant, not only personally attending the gospel meeting, but praying fervently that God will bless to the salvation of souls, and doing all that we possibly can to influence people to come to hear the gospel.

iv. **It is a fellowship of faith.**

In Philemon 5,6 we read, “*Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; That the **communication of thy faith** may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*” The word that is twice translated “*faith*” in this passage is translated “*fidelity*”, that is, “*faithfulness*” in Titus 2: 10. This seems to be the sense of the word in this context. Paul had heard of Philemon's faithfulness toward God and toward the saints. Then in verse 6 he says, “*That the communication (literally “*fellowship*” or “*sharing*”) of your faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*” That is, I take it, Paul was praying that the faithfulness of Philemon might be fruitful in producing an acknowledgment, on the part of others, of the goodness of God in his life. Philemon's faith was displayed in his love and faithfulness toward God and his people. We might ask ourselves the question, ‘Do I, by my life, share my faith in Christ?’

In summary, one would point out that along with the privilege of being in a church patterned after the New Testament there are also responsibilities. In Luke 5: 10 we read that James and John “*were **partners** with*

Simon” in their fishing business. The word translated “*partners*” comes from the word for “*fellowship*”. If we tried to run a business on the same lines as often we expect a church to run we would soon bankrupt the business. Each partner in the business must ‘pull his weight’. Thus it should be in an assembly of God's people, we must be “*faithful*” in discharging our responsibilities toward the assembly, including **faithfully attending the assembly gatherings** where circumstances permit.

BREAKING OF BREAD

One of the assembly gatherings that they faithfully attended was the breaking of bread. Acts 2: 42 reads, “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and in the fellowship, and **the breaking of bread**...etc.*”. The terms “*the breaking of bread*” or “*breaking bread*” were commonly used for the partaking of an ordinary meal. Thus we read in Luke 24: 35, “*And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.*” This was the occasion in which the Lord Jesus revealed himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, after he rose from the dead. Clearly, they were not commemorating the Lord's death as he had instituted in the upper room, but rather were having a meal together. So it is also in Acts 2: 46, where we read, “*And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and **breaking bread from house to house** (literally “*at home*”), *did eat their meat (food) with gladness and singleness of heart.*” The reference to “*breaking bread*” here is clarified by the additional remarks “*did eat their food with gladness*”. The verse is simply stating that, while they congregated daily in the temple, they did not stay there permanently, they ate their meals at home.*

What then is meant by the statement “*...and they continued steadfastly in ...the breaking of bread*”? The term is synonymous with the expression “*to break bread*”, used in Acts 20: 7, the only difference being that the former expression uses a noun (“*a breaking*”), the later a verb (“*to break*”). In either case the same event is in view. The term comes from the fact that the initial act involves “*the breaking*” of a load of bread. The only other term used to describe this event is found in 1 Corinthians 11: 20, “*the Lord's supper*”. While the term ‘communion service’ is commonly used in most churches, it is nowhere to be found in the New Testament.

The Lord Jesus himself first instituted the breaking of bread in the upper room on the night of his betrayal by Judas Iscariot (1 Corinthians 11: 23). The Lord was initially in the upper room to keep the Jewish feast of the Passover for the last time. In Luke 22: 15 we read “*And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.*” But having kept the Passover (which, by the way, is an Old Testament picture of Christ's death) for the last time, he then instituted the breaking of bread using the materials that were already on the table, left over from the Passover, bread and wine. It is not without reason

that no details are given us of the actual act of keeping the Passover, while we are given very specific details of the breaking of bread.

For the sake of brevity we will quote 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - 26, while referring to one or two points from the gospel records. Paul says, “*For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread; And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and 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 is the new testament (covenant) in my blood:** this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, **ye do show the Lord’s death till he come.**”*

Why is it so important to “break bread”?

- i. Because the Lord Jesus Christ himself commanded it (vv.24,25).
- ii. Because three of the four gospels emphasize that the Lord taught it (Matthew 26: 26 - 28; Mark 14: 22 - 24; Luke 22: 19 , 20).
- iii. Because Paul indicated that the Lord had personally revealed it to him (1 Corinthians 11: 23). Some have suggested that because the “*new covenant*” of which the Lord spoke in relation to “*the cup*” was promised only to Israel (Jeremiah 31: 31-34) it has nothing to do with Gentile churches. The fact that the Lord directly revealed this ordinance to Paul, “*the apostle to the Gentiles*” (Galatians 2: 8), and not through the earlier apostles, indicates that the Lord’s supper definitely applies to Gentile Christians. Added to this is the fact that it was to a predominantly Gentile church, namely the Corinthian church, that Paul writes about the observance of the Lord’s supper. Also, in Acts 20: 7 it was a predominantly Gentile church that “*came together to break bread*”.
- iv. Because it was practiced by the early churches (Acts 2: 42; 20: 7).

Why can we not just break bread at home?

The context of 1 Corinthians makes it abundantly plain that the breaking of bread is a local church ordinance, to be practiced **corporately**. Notice that the context actually starts at verse 17 of 1 Corinthians 11, and goes on to the end of the chapter. In the context Paul is seeking to rectify the abuses of the Corinthians. They were making “*the Lord’s supper*” an excuse for drunkenness and gluttony (v21). First of all he exposes their sin (vv.17-22). Then he sets forth the simplicity of the Lord’s Supper as it was instituted by the Lord himself (vv.23-26). Thirdly, he shows the seriousness of such sin (vv.27-29). And lastly, he indicates that the sickness and death that were occurring amongst them was in fact the chastening hand of God because of their sin (v30). None of these things, of course, are the subject before us presently. However, I want you to notice two expressions, each of which appears three times in verses 17 - 22.

- i. "...ye come together...". This expression appears in verses 17, 18 and 20. This clearly indicates that the abuses that were taking place in relation to the Lord's supper, were not taking place in the domestic sphere (see also verse 22), but rather, when the saints were congregated together.
- ii. "...among you...". This expression, used in verses 18 and 19 (twice), reinforces the fact that their sin in relation to the Lord's supper was taking place in the public sphere. Aside from the problem of their sin it is clear that when they broke bread they did so communally, when they were congregated together **in church capacity**.

Notice also, in Acts 20 the circumstances surrounding the breaking of bread. In verse 6 we read that Paul and his companions arrived at Troas and remained there seven days. Then in verses 7 to 11 we read of the breaking of bread and the events that ensued. At the end of verse 11 we read of their departure from Troas. Nothing is said about what happened between the day of their arrival and the events of the seventh and final day. The inference seems to be that, whatever else took place during the interval, **the primary purpose of their stay was that they might have the privilege of breaking bread with the local church at Troas**. This purpose having been accomplished they left Troas the following day. This may only be circumstantial evidence, but, coupled with our previous points in relation to 1 Corinthians 11, the suggestion is very strong that the breaking of bread is a local church institution to be observed collectively.

How often should we break bread?

While we have seven passages of scripture that refer to the breaking of bread, we only have one recorded example of its actual observance after the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 20: 7). Here we read "*Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples were gathered together to break bread,...*". Let it be observed that although the most outstanding preacher of all time, other than the Lord Jesus himself, was present, they had not come together to hear Paul preach, they had come together "*to break bread*". Paul did preach, but this was incidental to the main purpose of their coming together. In the one example of the observance of the breaking of bread it was on the first day of the week that it was observed. This, of course, is not conclusive in itself. But couple with it the fact that it was upon the first day of the week that the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples. Also, his second appearance to the disciples was on the first day of the week (John 20: 25). Also, it was upon the first day of the week that the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost in Acts 2. Then again, the Christians at Corinth were instructed that they were to "*lay aside as the Lord prospered*" upon the first day of the week (1Corinthians 16: 1,2). All this indicates that the Sabbath day no longer held significance for the believers, and that the new special day was the first day of the week (described in Revelation 1: 10 as "*the Lord's day*"). Some have appealed to Acts 2: 46 to suggest that we can break bread any day, but, as we have seen, this verse is talking about the partaking of an ordinary meal.

How should we break bread?

“For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and 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. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.” 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - 26. A quick reading of the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke will show that they essentially say the same thing, as far as the procedure is concerned.

The first thing to notice is **the simplicity of the procedures**. Most churches have very much embellished the Lord's supper and introduced names for it that are totally without scriptural sanction. The only material things associated with the Lord's supper are the bread and the cup. The word for “*bread*” also means “*loaf*”, and is often so translated. The use of wafers or pre-cut bread are clearly a departure from the Scriptures. As to the contents of the cup, even this would have been unknown if it were not for one statement in Luke 22: 18, *“For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God come.”* While it may be conjectured that the bread was “*unleavened*”, and the contents of the cup wine (i.e. fermented), the Scriptures are silent on these points. No mention is made of a silver chalice or plate. The whole picture painted is **the essence of simplicity**. In fact, the more complicated we make it the more we obscure its significance. Secondly, notice **the procedures themselves** :-

i. *“...the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat;...”* 1 Corinthians 11: 23 , 24. In each of the three gospels that record this event the order is the same, **the bread is broken first**. When the breaking of bread was originally instituted **the Lord Jesus himself broke the bread**. Clearly, this is not possible today! But the Lord was setting the example for us. In 1 Corinthians 10: 16 Paul says, *“The bread which we break, is it not the communion (or “fellowship”) of the body of Christ?”* The inference here is that we each break the bread as it is passed around from one believer to another.

ii. *“After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped...”* v25. This latter expression requires a little explanation. The statement *“after he had supped”* does not mean that the Lord Jesus himself drank of the cup. Literally it should read *“after the supping”*. The word translated “*supped*” or “*supping*” actually refers to the partaking of a meal, and in Luke 22: 20 the identical expression is translated *“after supper”*. What Paul is stating, as did Luke in Luke 22: 20, is that all this took place after the observance of the Jewish Passover. This is not to say that we should be keeping the Passover. The occasion in which the Lord instituted the Lord's supper was a very important occasion. The Lord kept the Passover for the very last time, and then instituted the Lord's Supper. Here we have the ending of one era and the commencement of another, the ending of the age of law, and the commencement of the age of grace. The expression *“After the*

same manner” indicates that just as the Lord himself took and broke the bread, so now he himself administered the cup. Notice also that there is no mentioning of his filling the cup first. Some would like to make of lot of significance of the filling of the cup. But it appears that the cup was already full when the Lord gave thanks for it. We must be careful that we don't add to what the Scriptures say.

Verse 26 says, “*For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup,...*”. Clearly then, the loaf is to be passed around and each believer is to break off a piece and eat it. Then the cup is passed and each believer is to take a sip from the cup. There is no suggestion of an officiating priest, minister, or elder taking the place of the Lord Jesus Christ. No one should ever assume to be worthy to take His place in officiating at the Lord's supper.

What is the significance of the breaking of bread?

The simplest answer to this question is that the breaking of bread **commemorates the death of the Lord Jesus Christ**. “*For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.*” 1 Corinthians 11: 26. There is nothing magical or miraculous about the Lord's supper. With regard to the bread the Lord said, “*This is my body, which is broken for you.*” 1 Corinthians 11: 24. Some denominations have taken this and the subsequent statement regarding the cup as teaching that the emblems literally become the body and blood of the Lord, and that as we partake of the emblems we are literally partaking of the body and blood of the Lord. But at the time the Lord Jesus instituted the breaking of bread and made these statements he was standing before them. How then could the emblems be the literal body and blood of the Lord? In Isaiah 40: 6,7 God says, “*All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.*” Are we expected to believe these words in a literal sense? Surely not! The natural sense of these words would suggest that we are to take them **figuratively**. The same principle applies to the words of the Lord Jesus regarding the bread and the cup. The clear sense of his words is “*This represents my body...This represents my blood.*” Thus as we break the bread we are reminded of the coming into manhood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and his subsequent death for us in a body of flesh. as we partake of the cup we are reminded of the shedding of his precious blood for our sins.

Also notice that Paul says, “*For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.*” 1 Corinthians 11: 26. So that, at the breaking of bread, we look backward and forward. We look backward to the Lord's death and resurrection, and forward to his coming again!

Does the breaking of bread have any practical significance?

It most certainly does! Paul says in connection with the breaking of bread, “*But let a man examine himself, and so eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.*” v28. There should always be a self-examination before we partake of the Lord's supper! Not that we should refrain from partaking if we are not in a proper condition. Rather, we should seek to rectify whatever may be wrong in our lives, “*and so...eat...*”.

The regular, weekly remembrance of the Lord should serve to keep our doctrine pure also, since we regularly reminisce on the person and work of the Lord Jesus, from his pre-incarnate glory and coming into manhood, to his death and resurrection. For the same reason it should also serve to keep our hearts warm towards his lovely person. How could we possibly remember him in this way and not find our hearts overflowing with gratitude and praise!

How was the breaking of bread observed?

Matthew and Mark add one final touch not mentioned elsewhere. “*And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives.*” Matthew 26: 30; Mark 14: 26. Thus we see that the singing of suitable hymns is very much in order at the breaking of bread. Other than this very simple addition in Matthew and Mark all we are supplied with as to how the breaking of bread was conducted is ‘the bare bones’, that is, the bare essential facts. This is to allow for a measure of flexibility from one community to another. But everything done in connection with the breaking of bread, i.e. praying and hymn singing **should be conducive to the purpose for which we are gathered**, that is, to the remembrance of the Lord Jesus in his death and resurrection.

PRAYERS

As we have seen, one of the assembly gatherings in which the early Christians “*continued steadfastly*” was “*the breaking of bread*”. But our text in Acts 2: 42 reads, “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.*” While our personal, private prayer life is of the utmost importance, this is not the subject of this verse. The theme is **the corporate prayer life of the assembly**.

Even in the interim period between the ascension of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, before any local church had been established, the early disciples recognized the importance of corporate prayer (see Acts 1: 14). After Peter and John were arrested for preaching “*through Jesus the resurrection from the dead*” (Acts 4: 2), threatened, and then released, we read “*And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.*”, after which they held a prayer meeting (Acts 4: 23-31). In Acts 12, when James had been slain and Peter was put in prison, we read “*but prayer was*

made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” v5. The disciples never underestimated the value and importance of corporate prayer.

The prayer meeting has often been described as **the power-house** of an assembly, and it is indicative of a weak assembly when the prayer meeting is poorly attended. It is sad to sometimes see large numbers of believers at the breaking of bread, but few attending the prayer meeting, and, unfortunately, the problem is not uncommon. In fact it is so common that in some places they have sought to embellish the prayer meeting with all sorts of entertainment in order to encourage attendance. But what value is there in the prayers of saints if they are only there to be entertained? I could hardly see any of the early believers insisting on some kind of incentive before they would attend the prayer meeting.

Two things motivated the early disciples to be at the prayer meeting. Firstly, a sense of need, and secondly, a realization that God is very capable of meeting that need. Unfortunately, many of us have lost both the sense of urgency and the realization of the fact that God hears and answers prayer. The question has often been asked ‘How can we revitalize the prayer meeting?’ The answer is simply ‘**Revitalize the saints.**’ What is required is not new approaches to the prayer meeting, but a genuine approach to God in prayer.

Of the early Christians it could be said, “*They continued steadfastly...in the prayers*”. The prayer meeting was not an unwelcome intrusion into their leisure time, or a duty reluctantly attended to. It was to them as necessary as the air that they breathed. It was as sweet as the honeycomb.

When Esther approached the king uninvited it could have cost her her life (Esther 4: 11). By way of contrast we are bidden “*to come boldly to the throne of grace.*” Hebrews 4: 16, and that at the infinite cost of the precious blood of Christ (Hebrews 10: 19). Considering the price that was paid in order that we might have this free access into the presence of God in prayer, how can we treat it with such disdain, or find it so boring that we have to embellish it with entertainment?

No doubt our prayer meetings could be improved upon! Not by embellishing them, but by us being more exercised about matters for prayer. We should each be on the look-out for matters that require or that would benefit from the corporate prayers of the saints. Perhaps a few minutes at the beginning of the prayer meeting could be spent in which brethren could mention matters for prayer. And even sisters could inform brethren beforehand about matters for which they would appreciate prayer.

Also, brethren should be careful not to just pray for the same things each week (usually the result of lack of exercise in prayer). We should also avoid generalities in prayer. If we pray for everything in general and nothing in particular we will never know whether or not the Lord has answered our prayers.

Then again, we should be careful that we do not all just pray for the same things as one another. No doubt some things will be sufficiently upon the hearts of all the brethren that all will pray about them. But for most things, if a brother has prayed about a particular matter, or for a particular missionary, surely we can find other things and other missionaries to pray for.

Also, brethren should not use prayer meetings to scold their brethren, or to pass on information in prayer. There is nothing more despicable and deadening to a prayer meeting than to hear some brother preaching at his brethren when he is supposed to be praying to God!

Then again, it is important that the sisters realize that they are not just observers at the prayer meeting. In Acts 1: 14 we read, "*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, **with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.***" No doubt most of our sisters realize this, but some may not. It would certainly make the prayer meeting more interesting for our sisters if they realized that they have as important a part to play in the prayer meeting as the brethren, even though it is a silent one.

Some well-intentioned assemblies have started the practice of having the brethren and sisters meet in separate rooms in order that the sisters may pray audibly, thus having more prayer ascending to God. But this betrays the false notion that God is concerned about **the number of people praying**. God is not concerned so much about how many are praying. Rather what He is looking for is **unity in prayer**. Acts 1: 14 reads, "*These all continued **with one accord** in prayer...*". This, of course, would infer that we should never pray publicly for something that our brethren may not be in agreement with us about.

Another important point is to avoid long pauses in the prayer meeting. Nothing kills a prayer meeting quicker than long pauses. While it is important to leave room for others to pray, this should not necessitate long pauses, in fact the longer the pauses the fewer will be able to take part.

We should also avoid being too long in prayer. **Long pauses and long prayers kill a prayer meeting**. If time permits, and others have not covered all that is upon our hearts, there is no reason why we could not pray a second time.

I would suggest that another thing to avoid is a brother **always praying at or about the same time** in the prayer meeting (the same thing applies to the breaking of bread). Some brethren always like to pray first, while others prefer to be last. This can become as much a rut as always praying for the same things.

May the Lord help us, if we have seen the precious truth of being gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, to see the importance of attending as many of the meetings of the assembly as we possibly can, including the prayer meeting. What a tremendous thing it is that in prayer we can '*move the Hand that moves the world to bring deliverance down*'!

In closing the writer would point out that although the only 'meetings' of the assembly mentioned in Acts 2: 41, 42 are the breaking of bread and the prayer meeting, most assemblies also have other meetings not specifically mentioned as such in the New Testament, such as the gospel meeting, the Bible reading, and the ministry meeting. The fact that they are not specifically mentioned does not make them unscriptural. The pattern in the New Testament is given in such a way as to allow for variations according to local conditions and needs. One could hardly contest that the assemblies in the New Testament did not maintain a public testimony to the gospel, or that they did not study the Word of God together.

I trust that those into whose hands this literature falls will be enlightened and blessed by it. The writer has no intention of upholding any sectarian position, or of condemning those who do not believe the same things. All that is desired is the blessing of saint and sinner.

In summary I would say that the Scriptures are designed, not only to bring a sinner to the knowledge of Christ as Saviour, but to lead those who have been saved into the path that the Master- designer has preplanned for all his children. Oneness amongst God's people can only be achieved as we lay aside all that does not have the sanction of the Word of God, and seek in humility to obey what has been given to us in the Scriptures.