

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Place of True Fellowship

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. (Acts 2:41-42)

In our present study of the New Testament church I have tried to focus on neglected or misunderstood aspects of Scripture's teaching regarding the church. We spent several weeks on spiritual gifts from 1 Corinthians 12-14. We now move into a highly intimate and personal area of the New Testament's teaching that is typically ignored and contradicted in our present culture. Often, even in a church, Christians are encouraged to ignore the collective body of the church and each person go about his own private version of the faith. Satan loves to isolate a believer, for he knows that such isolation guarantees his victory over this naïve and misguided soul. And Satan's favorite tactic is to inflate the believer's pride in his own knowledge or ability. "You are wiser than they. You know more about the Bible than anyone in your church, even the pastor. Don't listen to those ignorant people." In such self-imposed and prideful isolation from other believers, Satan can plant an endless number of spiritual weed seeds in our minds and motivate us unsuspectingly to fertilize the weeds and tear out the fruitful spiritual qualities that glorify our Lord, all the while thinking ourselves the enlightened and superior believer who "Really understands" it all. Satan thus guarantees a spiritual casualty and a wholly neutralized and ineffective believer by this "Anti-social" tactic.

Our study passage describes the immediate aftermath of the first powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' ascension, fulfilling His promise to return and to empower and direct His church with grace. Take special note. The Holy Spirit didn't empower the apostles and that first church to isolate themselves in prideful and contentious isolation. He directed them to speak with one heart and one mind. They didn't preach twelve different versions of the gospel. They all spoke with one voice and one message of truth for the Lord and His way, not their own private ideas. They spoke with a heart to reach out to as many of the thousands gathered on that day as possible. Their goal was not to gain private disciples to their personal ideas, but to the one united faith of the Lord Jesus and His gospel.

Let's consider each activity that is mentioned. Take note that all of these activities grew out of a common foundation. Those who followed this course of personal and collective conduct (The

passage requires both) were those who "...gladly received his word and were baptized." The reference is to Peter's sermon and subsequent instructions. Folks who receive the gospel with skeptical or unbelieving minds are blind to the whole passage and its behavioral and safe implications to a church body.

Jesus warned the disciples both to take care **what** they heard and **how** they heard it. (Luke 8:18; Mark 4:24) Yes, we are to hear with a discerning mind that knows error and rejects it, but, once we understand that a man's teaching contradicts Scripture, Jesus' words require that we discontinue listening to what he says. The "What" of Jesus' warning focuses on the false teacher who promotes himself or his private interpretations, typically under the guise of having received new insight or even a "New revelation." Often "The Lord revealed to me..." is followed by a private interpretation far more likely revealed by Satan, the great deceiver, than by the Lord. The "How" of Jesus' warning turns the focus internally to us. When we hear sound Biblical preaching, "How" do we interpret what we hear, and what do we do with the information imparted? Scripture teaches us to become well informed and sound believers in the faith so that we discern truth from error and rightly reject the error and embrace the truth. Our study passage describes the right cultural reaction that we should take as individual believers and what we should promote in our church as members of that body.

The passage links "they" who heard Peter's preaching, believed it, and were baptized to "they" who obeyed that preaching and manifested their faith by a transformed life of intimate and loving fellowship with other believers and with the Lord. You can't repent of sins and serve the Lord apart from this intimate and integrated fellowship with other believers. Impossible.

1. ...they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine. They didn't continue steadfastly in their own private opinions or private interpretations, often in contradiction to other believers and to the apostles' doctrine. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine or teaching. Christian faith is not about each believer arriving at his own private version of the faith and "Doing his own thing." It is about

rejecting one's personal opinions and philosophies in favor of the "*apostles' doctrine*." Notice the singular form of the word, "doctrine." Each apostle didn't come up with a different doctrine. They were all agreed. They all believed and taught the same things. In earlier chapters of this study, I have repeatedly emphasized that part of this "*apostles' doctrine*" is Paul's emphasis that the church is the "*...house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*" (1 Timothy 3:15) Each apostle's opinion—or each believer's opinion in a church today—was/is not the "*pillar and ground of the truth.*" The errant, self-promoting preacher who claims "The Lord revealed to me..." is not the Lord's pillar and ground of the truth. Jude refers to "*...the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*" (Jude 1:3; emphasis added. The Holy Spirit directed Jude to use the definite article to define and to describe this faith. It is one faith delivered literally once for all time. In this verse the Holy Spirit forever repudiates the errant preacher's "The Lord revealed to me" idea. He did reveal the faith repeatedly to each generation or to one individual, but He did so only once to the apostles, and through them to us by way of the New Testament. The Lord's church, not any individual believer, is the divinely chosen custodian and protector of that truth. Our divine charge is to discover and to preserve that single truth, that one "*apostles' doctrine,*" not perpetually seek to expand or to alter it to our whims and private opinions)

2. *...and fellowship.* "Steadfastly" defines this activity as fully as it defines "*apostles' doctrine.*" Fellowship in the New Testament, fellowship that begins between us and the Lord, but always grows to include fellowship with other believers, is not merely an appealing option. It is a **required and life-transforming outcome** that grows out of steadfastly continuing in the apostles' doctrine. Today's sadly typical believer often thinks, "My faith is my private business between the Lord and me. It is no one else's business. I'll serve God my way. You stay out of it." How does this idea mesh with John's inspired words? "*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.*" (1 John 4:20-21)
3. *...and in breaking of bread.* This behavior is not an optional idea or action, but a required one if we hope to be steadfast in our faith. Breaking bread might refer to enjoying a common meal and personal fellowship with other believers, or it could also refer to participation in the Communion, the "Spiritual" commemorative meal of the church. In either case it refers to a

collective participation, never to a private activity. Don't suggest that you and other believers get together for fellowship and a common meal while you harass and abuse them with an overbearing "It is my way or the highway" attitude regarding your private opinions about God. You can't truly "break bread" with someone while you are striving to break his head. If you truly desire to "Break bread" with your brothers and sisters, work constantly to manifest a caring and gracious respect for them. (Philippians 2:1-4) If the intent of the term "breaking of bread" is the Communion, take note. It is a collective function of baptized believers, not a personal and private act of one believer.

4. *...and in prayers.* Study the New Testament to learn the content of the God-honoring prayers that were offered. "*...with thanksgiving*" (Philippians 4:6 and Colossians 4:2; both include thanksgiving as an essential component of every prayer) However urgent our sense of need, however strong our desire for the Lord's help, we should never neglect thanksgiving as a central element in every prayer we pray. Scripture never teaches a fatalistic "God has it all wired so there is no reason to pray for Him to do anything" attitude. Quite the opposite, "*...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*" (James 5:16b; emphasis added) There is nothing fatalistic about this verse, or any other Scripture that teaches us to pray for that matter. Shall God avenge His elect who cry night and day to Him, or shall He ignore them? (Luke 18:7) Discipleship without prayer is incomplete and anemic discipleship. Prayer is essential for the collective gathered church, as well as for each individual believer.

"**steadfastly**" describes what that first church did in these four essential activities of the church. Sadly, today most churches and individual believers make an endless variety of programs and entertainment their list of "Essentials," but they neglect and often contradict these four Biblical "Essentials" for a faithful, "steadfast" New Testament church.

Our emphasis here is on fellowship. What does this word mean? How was it understood by the first century culture, by those who used the word and taught the first generation churches to practice it? I will cite a few excerpts from the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, a highly respected and comprehensive resource for understanding Greek words used in the New Testament. All quotes are copied from the dictionary's definition of "Fellowship."

1. "Friendship is for the Greeks a supreme expression of fellowship."
2. *koinōnía* (The Greek word translated "Fellowship" in the New Testament) is a favorite

term in 1 John for the living bond that unites Christians. It begins as fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:3, 6) by an abiding that commences here and is fulfilled hereafter (3:2, 24; 4:13). It issues in the family fellowship of believers (1:3, 7).

3. The Absolute Sense: 'Fellowship.' In Gal. 2:9 shaking hands expresses the full fellowship of common faith in Christ. In Acts 2:42 *koinōnia* denotes, not the Christian society nor its community of goods, but the family fellowship established and expressed in the church's life.

Several times in his extended definition Kittel, the editor of this encyclopedic dictionary, uses the term "the family fellowship," not to describe a natural or human family, but to describe the safe, intimate, and "Familial" relationship and spirit that the Lord intends for His people to maintain in His church, in *His*—never our—"...*pillar and ground of the truth.*" A faithful Biblical New Testament church will foster a safe, loving "Family" climate among its members. Please take note. This familial climate is not a "Dysfunctional" family in which envy, spite, and "One upmanship" rule and destroy relationships. It is the godly family where each member loves and prays for each other, rejoices at the other's blessings, and grieves at the other's pains and trials. It is a family that practices self-denial and the fostering and encouragement of other believers, the "Philippians 2 model."

Sadly the believer who lives by the attitude, "I abide steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, but I have no interest in tolerating inferior believers such as you who will not accept what I believe," likely has as little true knowledge of the apostles' doctrine as he has of what Biblical fellowship really means. And this self-serving and self-admiring attitude contradicts and fails the inspired description of the four things named in the passage that a person who truly receives the gospel and is transformed by it does. Most people I've known who live by this faulty attitude actually view their own personal opinions and private interpretations of Scripture as their exclusive and private "Pillar and ground of the truth." They often view the collective church with contempt, considering themselves and their ideas far superior to any and all in their church whom they regarded more as polite pagans than as believers to be respected and embraced in true Biblical fellowship.

If these four behaviors accurately and fully describe the lifestyle of a believer who has been transformed by the gospel, we should—we must—conclude that a believer who fails to manifest all four behaviors as his life's character needs to do precisely what Peter directed these people to do when his preaching first touched them, "**Repent.**" (Acts 2:38) The people gathered on Pentecost who heard the apostles preach their doctrine firsthand were very religious Jewish people. They were not immoral or amoral pagans. The repentance of

which Peter spoke likely emphasized far more these four traits than repentance from pagan or immoral sins. The same need exists today, but sadly far too many professing believers smugly think themselves so right that they need no repentance, thinking themselves to be the superior believer who is too "Spiritual" to condescend to those other "Inferior" believers—if they really are believers at all—in their church. The Lord's churches emphasize and strive to model all four of these traits, not one or two of them.

We need to understand the central and necessary impact that each of these behaviors and underlying attitudes has on a repentant and thereby truly "Transformed" life. (Romans 12:1-2) Only then shall we understand the meaning of fellowship in the Lord's "**house,**" "**church,**" and "**pillar and ground of the truth.**" And until we learn and begin to practice these traits, we shall live in an unrepentant and failed effort in our attempted discipleship.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor