

Acts 2:42-47 and Ecclesiology

*Father, we thank You and praise You that You give us these hours to be under Your Word. Father, we thank You that You do not leave us to our own devices. You do not hand us over to the darkness of our own sinful existence or leave us alone to find our way out—as if we could—but rather, Lord, we praise You that You have entered space and time. You sent Your Son to be among us as the revelation of God. We thank You and praise You that this occurred as the culmination of Your speaking throughout the ages, patiently and faithfully calling Your people. We thank You, Lord, that this holds true today. We are not somehow separated from Your wonderful work throughout the ages, but Your work and call continue even to this moment in time and space. So we thank You that You would consider our weak frame and weaknesses, and that You would reach down into the depth of our individual hearts. You call, free, pardon, reconcile, and love us. You draw us into fellowship and bring us into a place of staying on the Rock that will not bend. Lord, we confess that we still have many trials and challenges, and yet there are some things established in our lives that will not fade—that will persist even to death. Therefore, although we do not know how long we shall live, we do know that we will be in Your hand and thus safe. And so we praise You for this day. We pray that You would bless the time we spend together under Your Word and that You would instruct us in righteousness—in a life with You based on Your grace and unmerited favor toward us. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In this lecture we will be looking at Acts 2:42-47 and the ecclesiology of Acts. Ecclesiology is an important topic and I will not be able to do justice to it in this lecture. I will only be able to make a few comments on this topic. I hope to integrate our study of Scripture to what we are studying now. Let me begin by reading the section of chapter two of Acts. As we study this section we need to remember the pattern of external and internal growth in the face of external opposition and internal tension that we see throughout Acts. This pattern is also evident in this section. This is a summary statement following the outpouring of the Spirit of God, Peter's first speech in Jerusalem, and the first piercing of the hearts of those who listened. After these things comes this summary statement of the internal consolidation and strengthening of the church. Please notice the context in which we find this reference that describes the inner fiber of the very early messianic church. The proclamation of the Gospel leads to community and it has this as its fruit, as it relates to the entire purpose of God: that He would have a people according to His heart and that they would, as His people, also be joined together. Thus the very purpose of redemption is a reconciled community that worships the living God. This is not some kind of a new, surprising, unusual, or unprecedented phase in man's history. Rather, we are finally seeing the first fruits of God's redemptive work of the proclamation of the Gospel going out; people are being called by that and meeting together. What we read here is the structure and heart of that newly-found life together in God and a description of what is happening therein. As we read this passage we should see it in that particular context, because that is the context of the flow of thought in Acts. Acts 2:42-47 says this:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It would be wonderful if Acts ended on this note, with no martyrdom of Stephen, no persecution and inquisition of the Apostle Paul, no expulsion from Jerusalem in chapter eight—none of the drama, tragedy, and challenge, but just a wonderful sense of togetherness and the fruit of fellowship. But you

know the purpose of God is not accomplished by just enjoying the fruit of His gifts. God's purpose is accomplished by us being revived by His gifts and strengthened to do His work. This is an important stage of life: to be refreshed, renewed, and strengthened. But God give us this stage in order that we may go back out and do His work. So we should not see this as the end of the journey. The stage described in this passage is a place of repose, re-strengthening, and refueling—only to be motivated to go back out. These are stations that describe internal strengthening and the collecting of those who have been added to the church. Those in the church are already in the thousands! They receive something in order to then be commissioned to go back out. Let us pay attention to this. I see that the patterns described here are often repeated in Acts. Therefore, I do not see this as an isolated suggestion, but because of the repetition there is something continuous—something of greater importance for the life of the church in these patterns.

Some would call this passage the description of the four pillars of church life. These pillars, characterizing the messianic, covenant congregation of God are the teaching of the apostles, devotion to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. The reason why I would separate out the references to the sharing of goods is because I do not see that to be a pattern that is repeated consistently. Therefore, while I would say that this particular section is very much at the center of the messianic church, the sharing of goods is a viable option. It is an important option, but not as essential as the characteristics of the church described here in Acts 2:42-47. The meeting together every day in the courts in a way echoes verse 47: "Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." Let us reflect a little on these four pillars. I do not think these are necessarily the only pillars, so I am not saying that this is the sum total of what characterizes the church. These are important, noteworthy, and summary elements that characterize the early church.

Let us begin with the first important point: they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The text here is clear that they did not just check in for a little refresher course on apostolic teaching and then check back out. Rather, they devoted themselves persistently and consistently, from one day to the next. They saw that the teaching was not just a good piece of information to get, but that it was crucial. They needed to persistently devote themselves to the teaching of the apostles. This is very significant. The understanding of the word, "apostle," in Acts primarily focuses on the twelve. Therefore, when we hear this word in Acts, we should not first think of a church planter or an apostolic missionary as "apostle" would have been used in the second and third centuries A.D. in the patristic literature. Rather, we should think immediately of a particular group—a group specifically educated, trained, and commissioned to do this kind of a mission.

We turn now to the question of apostolic teaching. You may note that there is a very important standard established in Acts for the apostles. In Acts 1:21-22 Peter says this: "Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." This is a definition of who an apostle is. The resurrection witness is the final culmination of the total witness concerning Jesus Christ. It begins from there to unfold and to be developed that this one who was raised was crucified. And He who was crucified, taught. And He who taught was baptized by John the Baptist. Thus we have a clear demarcation of what the teaching of the apostles was. It was not fanciful thinking, such as how they should conduct their lives now that their Messiah had been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, or how they could organize their lives in these lovely end times: "Let us see, many people are joining; how can we organize that a little? How can we obtain revenues to build some buildings?" The teaching of the apostles was not like this at all. The apostolic teaching is clearly connected to their role as witnesses and ambassadors. We see the apostles as ambassadors telling the new converts, those who have come from

among the Jewish people, to embrace Jesus Christ and to be instructed in what they themselves have been entrusted with. They are not conveying their mind, opinions, likes or dislikes. Rather, they are mouthpieces whom Jesus had trained beforehand.

Have you ever seen an ambassador who makes a vital, national security decision without checking with the national leaders? I think he would be fired that second. An ambassador checks with the leaders. I was especially aware of that with ambassadors for the former Soviet Union. They were ambassadors who knew the western world. They understood some of the strange decisions that were made in the Kremlin. They had a very hard time at points explaining to the western politicians why such and such decisions were made at Kremlin. But people like Chervonenko always knew how to present and represent some rather questionable policy decisions. The point of the connection between these ambassadors and the apostles is that they do not speak on their own authority or have their own agenda. Rather, the apostles communicate God's agenda because they had been trained; they turned from pursuing their own agendas to pursuing the agenda of God. That is discipleship; that is what Jesus called them into as He said, "I will make you fishers of men."

There is this wonderful account of Peter who often says the wrong thing, who overreacts, who tells Jesus who He ought to be and how He ought to behave in order to fit into his understanding of how a messiah should conduct himself. Peter is changed into someone who says, "Do with me what You please." He bitterly cries over his denial of Christ. He is an example of someone becoming a shepherd of the people—being changed from an anthropocentric to a theo-centric person—from a self-centered to a God-centered person. As an aside, I think the prophetic ministry has much to do with the apostolic ministry. Therefore, I see apostleship, witness, and prophetic ministry as being very connected. Thus we see that the teaching of the apostles is a teaching that is dependent upon God. This is not a new movement led by some leaders. Rather, this is a work of God that is administered by dependent witnesses; that is so important. The apostles do not sit with big, apostolic staffs on great chairs pronouncing sentences of wisdom to those who pay homage to them. Rather, they say, "Let me tell you that the one who was crucified as a criminal was vindicated and resurrected and thereby confirmed by the living God. Let me tell you what He said because everything He said is so important and significant. Let us find out what He said because He has been so confirmed by the living God that what He has said is Gospel; it is God's truth." His words are vitally important to our lives because Jesus as a pedagogue, as a prophetic teacher, did not stumble into this world and say, "Let me open my mouth and I will slowly find what I want to communicate." No, what He would convey to the disciples about the rule of God was wisely premeditated and conveyed by means of action, story, and dialogue. Slowly they were able to see how this rule of God is connected with His own person. The mystery unfolded that the rule of God focuses on the ruler and the ruler is the master that they were confronted with.

The message of Jesus is very clearly presented. He repeats His message a hundred times over because He is an itinerant preacher. He would go from one village to the next. His message would vary a little from place to place. That is why we have the Sermon on the Mount, the pronouncement of Jesus, as one whole unit and also little pieces of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John. By this repetition the disciples would learn. They do not necessarily understand, but they do take in the message. They are being instructed and they are experiencing Jesus' presence. Then Jesus uses the pedagogical, philosophically significant means of saying, "Now you go out. Go out in pairs of two, so that if you have problems you can help one another and if there are errors you can encourage each other." He told them to go out and repeat His message, showing life under the Spirit by driving out demons as the sign that He is the God-appointed messiah. This is the systematic embedding of truths. They may not understand. Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." This is puzzling to the disciples; why glory and suffering? They do not understand but they follow. They are

in the hands of the master. And after the resurrection Jesus instructs them carefully. One instance of this instruction is Jesus' time with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Starting at the beginning of the book of God's self-revelation, He explains to them the counsel of God that the messiah had to die; He had to give His life to bring back people to Himself. He explains that this message is to go out to the Gentiles in anticipation of what Peter has yet to learn after this passage in Acts two.

So we see that this word, "apostle," and the teaching of the apostles, is so rich. We can definitely say that their teaching is not the product of their own ideas, concepts, or religious hopes. Everything points in the direction of simply saying, "We have been entrusted with a message and witness that we must faithfully pass on to these people whom God has called out. Therefore, we must attend to giving this to them and they must attend to our teaching." Thus this time of teaching by the apostles is everything except a session in dogmatic truths during which people fall asleep and wonder, "When will the catechism be over?" No, it is life; it is what you need for your life. Thus attending to the teaching of the apostles, I would say, is the life-love in this early church, causing internal growth.

It is interesting that in the Reformation period there were two aspects that identified where a church was. These two were the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. During the Reformation there was a strong emphasis on the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments in ways that are right and in accord with Scripture. But the preaching of the Word is nothing but the devotion to the teaching of the apostles, so that the church would be guarded for all centuries from succumbing to the constraints and demands of society or fashionable new movements. In attending to the preaching of the Word they will be reminded of how God has spoken through His Son for all times. Now, I am very much excited about colleagues who listen to the tones of society, the philosophies of the world, and what is going on in their particular society at this time. This is very important. But, they are all even more attentive to the teaching of the apostles and how they can bring that into their societies. It is certainly important to know what is going on, but it is a completely different thing to exchange the teaching of the apostles for a new, fashionable movement.

That temptation is not new. Paul presented the Gospel to various groups and the Gospel went out to, for instance, Colossae, and there are people there who are doing exactly that: exchanging the Gospel for a false gospel. This is always a problem: the purity of God's self-revelation versus the contemporary, modern ways of thinking in a given society at a given time. It is fascinating to me to study the history of scholarship on Jesus—this scholarship that is not based on the authority of Scripture, but rather is based on some other foundation. What happens is fascinating: the Jesus that is formulated by this scholarship in whatever time period is a Jesus that is formulated in the image of that time period. You find if you study the reconstruction of Jesus from a certain age over against the Jesus presented by the apostles, that the reconstructed Jesus is greatly influenced by the atmosphere of the time. Nothing was produced except what they were already thinking in their time and society. Thus the apostolic witness was not allowed to speak into their particular society or time; rather, they made Jesus in their own image. Therefore, Jesus looked like a man of their time. This is going on to this very day; we still have portraits of Jesus made in the image of our time and societies. It is very fashionable at this time in Germany to have a picture of a Jesus who is neither male nor female; He is just supposed to have a wonderful personality of integrity in a wonderfully designed portrait. When you look at that portrait, you see that those elements of the Gospel that fit into their pre-conceived idea of who Jesus should be are picked out. But you know we have long left the devotion to the teaching of the apostles when we create a Jesus in our own image. The early church is a reminder to us of the need for this devotion. We ought not to be devoted to the apostles themselves, saying, "Peter, what a great man you are! What a wonderful history you have had." Rather, we want to get to know the master through the bond-slave or servant, Peter, who witnesses to the truth of the Gospel.

I consider this a foundational aspect for the understanding of the life of the church. I would establish this thesis or theory: where the Word of God is taught through the prophets and the apostolic witness, there is life. And where there is deviation from the prophets and the apostles, there is death. Obviously, you can be devoted to the teaching of the apostles and still be so boring and dead in your presentation of their teaching that people fall asleep—even though your presentation is wonderfully orthodox. Therefore, we need to be creative in our presentation of the Gospel. But more importantly, we need to be living letters of the Lord. The writing of the Lord ought to be reflected in our lives bit by bit, by His grace. But the devotion to the Word of God, the apostolic witness, is dynamite. That is, in fact, what sparked the Reformation (as one major, but not solitary, example of revival). Thus the devotion and dedication to the apostolic witness is very crucial. We need to see how intimately and deeply it is connected with the person of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the will of the Father.

The second pillar described in Acts 2:42-47 is the fellowship of the believers. *Koinonia* is the Greek word translated here as “fellowship.” It is interesting that as reconciliation with God occurs, there is fellowship established. God’s work is not solely vertical; it has horizontal consequences. We have seen this in Acts and we experience it in our own lives. We are called and drawn through those barriers that we have been conditioned to and live in—that we have learned and accepted somewhat unconsciously. We all need to break through these barriers of race, socioeconomic status, fear of the unknown, and whatever else. We are called to break through these barriers partly for the sake of this fellowship, this *koinonia*. Now, this fellowship should not be idealized. We know that there were some serious questions and problems in this fellowship. There is, for example, this story of John Mark, who gets scared and leaves Paul and Barnabas to go back to Jerusalem. Paul, it seems, is done with John Mark while Barnabas, the bridge builder who sees a little farther down the road, says, “I think John Mark will turn out all right; he is just a little flimsy still. I will work with him. Maybe we need to split up; you work in that area and I will work in this area.” There are some challenges to this fellowship. Acts six is a great description of injustice. Money goes to some and not to others; people are overlooked.

I do not know how it is in your church, but the church I was involved with in Germany was mostly made up of people in their 20s to 40s. We had a real problem of seeing and being involved with other members who were older—in their 60s and 70s. They were a little bit on the sidelines. The younger families had discussions with each other; they had similar needs and interests. So we as elders in that church saw that our older people—who had wonderful wisdom and had been involved in two or three church plants and were now helping with this one with their money, hearts, and prayers—were being silently marginalized, when in fact they were central to the life of the church. In this we can see that fellowship is a commission rather than something that just happens. It is something to work toward. I am indicting myself as much as I may be challenging you to seek areas where this *koinonia* does not happen, where this fellowship is being hindered. Paul models this in Galatians when he says, “Peter, you cannot separate from the Gentiles when some of your Jewish brethren come from Jerusalem. You must equip, send out, and have table fellowship with the Gentiles to demonstrate the outgrowth of the Gospel. Where two believers are placed together they stay together, whether they like it or not.” Obviously this is a bit of an exaggeration, but fellowship is not something that just happens. It is something that God gives us and that we are challenged to pursue. As we see in Acts, fellowship was not only a given, but also a task—a challenge. Two examples of the challenges to fellowship in Acts are chapters 6 and 13.

The breaking of bread is a third fruit of the new, messianic congregation. This is the third area mentioned in the passage in Acts two. “Breaking of bread” does not necessarily have the connotation of the sharing of the Lord’s Supper. “Breaking bread” can be a reference to table or meal fellowship. We know from 1 Corinthians that the Corinthians got together for a fellowship meal where everyone

brought food to eat together. In the case of the Corinthians there was difficulty with the rich having food that was much better than that of the poor. It seems to have turned into a social presentation where everyone was striving to demonstrate their high status by what they brought to the meal. So the breaking of bread is not necessarily a clear indication of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This phrase can make reference to a simple meal, a combination, or exclusively the Lord's Supper as we have it in Acts 20:7. I would tend to say that the use of this phrase in Acts two refers to the Lord's Supper, but we should not be precluding the possibility that this was more along the lines of simple table fellowship or a combination of both. Therefore, a description of the church could include coming together for meal fellowship. I cannot develop that at this point, but meal fellowship was much greater in the first century than it is now. It is still a lovely thing; I was invited recently to a supper with some students and it was wonderful to share that. There is something wonderful about meal times and that was all the more true in the ancient world.

A fourth area that characterizes this new, messianic community is prayer. Again, the phrase, "they devoted themselves...to prayer," is more of an open statement than a closed, precise statement. I would see that with all these areas and the teaching of the apostles as well. This passage is a very wide description of what is happening in the church. This prayer may be prayer of worship. We see that in the prayer of the church in Acts four. It could be intercessory prayer, as in Acts 12:12 for Peter. It could be prayer for sending out messengers, as in 14:2. There are many different forms and sides to prayer: personal, missionary, intercessory, and worship. The type of prayer is not specified here—just prayer, fellowship prayer.

I know coming from my culture that for the older generation in Germany it is extremely difficult to pray publicly or in a group of people. The understanding of the older generation in Germany is that if you speak publicly in prayer to God, you are putting yourself forward. You have, they think, given up the dignity that God deserves. The sincerity of God, they believe, is only preserved in the privacy of your chamber as you pray alone. Now, there is some truth to that, but when cultural understanding becomes the rule, one pillar—the pillar of fellowship in prayer—falls, or falls partially. Of course, we must not misuse group prayer and take the opportunity to preach at one another and say what we think the person next to us needs to hear, praying things like, "God, how wonderful it would be if all of us were humble, especially my friend James who is here next to me." If you misuse prayer, that is very sad. Corporate worship, intercessory, and thanksgiving prayer are very important. But there is something to be learned from these warnings against misusing prayer. I have heard some prayers of an elder where, after preaching the sermon, the elder repeated his entire sermon in the prayer of thanksgiving. There are abuses of prayer, but we should not allow these aberrations to deter us from devoting ourselves to prayer.

It seems, as we read Acts, that for this messianic congregation, listening to what Jesus had entrusted to the apostles about God's purposes—particularly who Jesus is—devoting themselves to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to thanksgiving and worshipful prayer, is a very natural response to God's work. This shows that the fruit of God's work is worship and praise. The chief end of man is to worship God and enjoy Him forever.

Acts does speak about various forms and structures of government in the church. I cannot develop that at this point except to say that there are certain congregation elements of the life of the church in Acts six, and there are also examples of eldership-style government in Acts 20. It is interesting to note that in Acts 20, as Paul is addressing the leadership of the Ephesian church, two words are used: *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi*. These words are used interchangeably. These are two descriptions of leaders in a church who have been called to watch over, shepherd, and care for this congregation. This is too much to get

into right now, but I want to close by saying that it is very wrong for scholars to claim that organization of the church came later. Some would say that charisma came first and then office. That is very wrong. I think we need to observe in Acts that while there is the gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, there is also office—reference to order and structure. Those are not conflicting elements in Acts. Structure, authority, and order are there from the beginning to give clarity to how this organism should function together as a reflection of the character of God. Authority and submission, love, sacrifice, purity, honor—all kinds of wonderful dimensions of the Godhead—are to be reflected in the family and in the body of Christ, the messianic church. The church then and now is to reflect God's characteristics just as Israel was meant to reflect the faithfulness of God.