

The Priorities and Simplicity of the Early Church (Acts 2:42-47)^a

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Context

1. **Feast of Pentecost**
2. **Jews of the diaspora visiting Jerusalem**
3. **Hear the wonders of God proclaimed in their native languages by unlearned Galileans**
4. **Peter explains the miracle and its relationship to the identity and work of Jesus**
 - A. **Jesus is the promised Christ of the Jewish Old Testament**
 - B. **They had crucified the "Holy One" of God**
5. **Convicted by the Holy Spirit, cut to the heart, responded: "What shall we do?"**
6. **Repent, be baptized**
7. **Three thousand saved and baptized on the very same day**

Today's passage: the practices of the fledgling church (Acts 2:42-47).

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.¹

Birth of the Church

1. **The establishment of a new spiritual entity: the Church, the Body of Christ**
2. **We do not look to the Old Testament for how a church should be run**
 - A. **Priests**

- B. **Sacrifices (e.g., Mass)**
 - C. **Confusion regarding the OT theocracy of Israel vs. the role of NT believers today in relation to the state.**
3. **This passage gives us a basic blueprint concerning both the priorities and the simplicity of Christian fellowship.**
 4. **The essentials for any fellowship of believers in any location in any age include:**
 1. Doctrine (teaching/learning/instruction/edification)
 2. The Lord's Supper
 3. Prayer
 4. Fellowship (sometimes over meals)
 5. Ministering to those in need
 6. Praising God (worship)
 7. Evangelism ("having favor with all the people")
 8. Baptism (new believers)
 5. **In our time today: highlight and comment upon some of these essentials**

Doctrine

1. **διδαχὴ [didachē], from which we derive the word *didactics* "the art and science of teaching". Here it refers to the content of what was being taught.**
2. **"They continued steadfastly", προσκατεροῦντες [proskarterountes], a present-tense participle from προσκατερέω [proskartereō], "to persist, keep on with devotion, be faithful"**
3. **"in the Apostles' doctrine" - not just any doctrine, under the guidance of those having spiritual authority. Following the passing of the Apostles, this responsibility was vested in the elders who lead each Biblical fellowship.**
4. **No accident that doctrine is mentioned first: what we believe and proclaim is what separates Christianity from all other religions and benevolent organizations.**
5. **What is Christianity if it retains all the essentials mentioned here with the exception of doctrine? Do other organizations...**
 1. Meet to encourage and instruct one another?
 2. Perform rituals?
 3. Pray?

4. Enjoy fellowship?
 5. Minister to those in need?
 6. Praise (their concept of) god?
 7. Sing songs as a group?
 8. Recruit others to join their organization?
6. **What is it that makes a Christian church different from other volunteer organizations such as Rotary? Soroptimist International? United Way? The Peace Corps? Masonic orders such as the Elks, Eagles, Moose, or Shriners?**

7. Atheist Church

There are a lot of people who grew up going to church, who have since become atheists, who miss having that church community on Sunday mornings. That's why British comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans created Sunday Assembly, an international movement that has gained so many followers its being called an Atheist Mega Church. Sunday Assemblies have popped up everywhere from Portland, Oregon to Melbourne, Australia. But can it be church without religion? Seattle Atheists member Brandon Hendrickson thinks so. A former Evangelical Christian, who enjoyed religion until he no longer believed in it, says he has always liked the model. "Churches do ritual very well. They do let's eat together, they do let's come and hear a talk together, right?" . . . [The group "Seattle Atheists"] do their own events that involve speakers, activities for children, and general community building activities like book clubs, a knitting group and a discussion group at a pub. They also do a lot of charity work and have a non-religious AA style group for atheists recovering from addiction. Brandon says being a part of Seattle Atheists is appealing as a father. "I think there's something special that happens when you have kids and you sense this, 'How can I raise these kids in a moral community?' and you go looking for churches. It's actually, demographically, one of the biggest times that churches attract new members, new parents. So I think among our young parent group there's a desire for some kind of weekly meeting. Particularly some place where we can stash our kids, go hang out by ourselves, and know they're learning really wonderful things that will help them as people."²

8. The priority of doctrine

- A. **In the OT, teaching the people of God is compared with feeding God's flock (Eze. 34:3-5). How important is food to the life of the sheep?**
- B. **Jesus took up this same theme when He indicated Peter should demonstrate his love of God by feeding "My sheep", primarily by teaching (John 21:15-17).**
- C. **When Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread during His great hunger in the wilderness, Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "It**

is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Mat. 4:4).

- D. The first deacons were chosen so that the Apostles could devote themselves more fully to the study and teaching of God's Word (Acts 6:2).
- E. When Barnabus sought out the Apostle Paul, it was so that he could teach the church at Antioch (Acts 11:26).
- F. Paul exonerated himself before the elders of Ephesus by declaring, "I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).
- G. Pastor/teachers are among those individuals Jesus gives His Church for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11).
- H. An important requirement for the elders who lead each local assembly is that they be able to teach (1Ti. 3:2). It is by "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9).
- I. Paul tells Timothy, serving as elder of a fledgling fellowship...
 - I. To "command and teach" (1Ti. 4:11).
 - II. To "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1Ti. 4:13).
 - III. To "take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1Ti. 4:16).
 - IV. To "let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine" (1Ti. 5:17).
- J. Paul tells Titus to "speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine" (Tit. 2:1).
- K. The psalmist said: "I will worship toward Your holy temple, And praise Your name For Your lovingkindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word above all Your name" (Ps. 138:2).

9. Apostasy

- A. Apostasy is a departure from the faith which was once professed.

- B. **The departure is from the beliefs and tenets of Christianity.**
- C. **But what is this except a denial of the doctrines, the teachings, of Christianity?**
- D. **Thomas Ice, *Drowning in Apostasy*:**

[There are] seven major passages that deal with the last days for the church . . . Every one of these passages emphasizes over and over again that the great characteristic of the final time of the church will be that of apostasy. The New Testament pictures the condition within the professing church at the end of the age by a system of denials. (1) Denial of God (Luke 17:26; 2Ti. 3:4-5); (2) Denial of Christ (1Jn. 2:18; 1Jn. 4:3; 2Pe. 2:6); (3) Denial of Christ's return (2Pe. 3:3-4); (4) Denial of the Faith (1Ti. 4:1-2; Jude 1:3) (5) Denial of sound doctrine (2Ti. 4:3-4); (6) Denial of the separated life (2Ti. 3:1-7); (6) Denial of Christian liberty (1Ti. 4:3-4); (7) Denial of morals (2Ti. 3:1-8, 2Ti. 3:13; Jude 1:18); (7) Denial of Authority (2Ti. 3:17).³

- E. **Is it any wonder that apostasy is rising with every day while doctrine is slighted, openly disparaged, or even condemned as divisive within many fellowships?**
- F. **If Christianity is compared to a rocket speeding through history:**
 - I. **then Christian doctrine, the teachings of the Bible, are the guidance system of that rocket**
 - II. **when the guidance system is off by only a degree or two, as the rocket speeds to its destination it ranges ever wider of the mark—eventually missing the destination entirely**
 - III. **if we consider zeal and devotion to be the fuel for the rocket, there too we encounter trouble.**
 - a. **Uninformed zeal is a recipe for disaster! Those who crucified Christ did so out of what they thought was zeal for God. Paul said, “ I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Rom. 10:2).**
 - b. **Devotion will not be sustained by God’s Spirit where God’s Word is not honored and consistently taught.**
 - IV. **Spurgeon commented on the illogic behind professing great love for Christ while exhibiting indifference to the Scriptures:**

I do not understand that loyalty to Christ which is accompanied by

indifference to His words. How can we reverence His person, if His own words and those of His apostles are treated with disrespect? Unless we receive Christ's words, we cannot receive Christ; unless we receive His apostles' words, we do not receive Christ; for John saith, 'He that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.'⁴

10. **Worship, "praising God" (Acts 2:47), mentioned almost as an afterthought**

- A. **In the early church, praise was secondary to teaching (its all worship!)**
- B. **There is relatively little said in the NT concerning the use of music in praise. This implies at least two things: (1) there was great latitude in regard to praise and the use of music in praise; (2) musical praise did not occupy a position of importance anything near like that of teaching and doctrine.**
- C. **Unlike our own day, the style of praise music was not a concern of the Apostles. It certainly did not occupy a place of such importance that it became the basis for choosing a place of fellowship⁵, challenging or even eclipsing doctrine in importance.**
- D. **Think about it: can a person truly be devoted to another whom they don't know? Jerome understood this when he wrote:**

Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.⁶

- E. **It would seem that a lack of doctrinal emphasis and teaching within churches has fostered a popular style of self-centered worship which portrays God as a giant vending-machine-in-the-sky Whose main reason for receiving our praise is because of "what He does for me!"**
- F. **Is God truly the focus of our worship? Or is my own personal preference and experience receiving greater emphasis?**
- G. **Selfish, divisive**
- H. **Splitting up church services based on preference of worship style (which usually reflects age categories) is a sure sign of selfishness and contributes to undermine the unity of the body of Christ in the local fellowship.**
- I. **Style of music or praise has become an idol, prompting John MacArthur to devote an entire CD presentation to the theme of *Contemporary Worship: Civil War In The Church*.**
- J. **If we never existed and God never met a single need, it would not diminish**

His praise-worthiness one iota!

- K. **Spiritual maturity test: can we still worship God when the style of music doesn't fit our personal preferences? Will we divide our fellowship over such matters? (How does any of it *really* sound to a Holy, perfect God anyway?)**

Fellowship

1. **The anonymous Christian?**
 - A. **Much that God wants to accomplish in our lives and the lives of others is impossible without embracing vulnerability and transparency.**
 - B. **One reason for the popularity of large fellowships: a believer can meet the letter of the law by attending, yet remain aloof and unknown—safe from relational challenges.**
2. **The “lone ranger” Christian?**
 - A. **Gifts not available to edify others in the fellowship**
 - B. **Correction/balance unavailable (doctrinal and social dangers)**
 - C. **Characterized by zeal without knowledge, often without love**
 - D. ***Modus operandi*: “hit-and-run” proclamation and evangelism**
 - E. **Potentially very useful, but rough edges which won't get rounded-out while they remain isolated**
3. **The challenge for larger fellowships: engaging the believer (small groups and specialized ministries as one solution)**

Breaking of Bread

1. **“From house to house” (Acts [2:46](#))**
2. **Association of the breaking of bread with doctrine and prayer seems to infer that communion, the Lord's supper, was chiefly in view.**
3. **It also seems likely they had general fellowship over meals—beyond the practice of the Lord's supper—just as we richly do among our fellowship**
4. **Not a building: church is where two or more are gathered in His name**

5. **Epistles establish an order and authority within such fellowships: a NT church is led by elders**

Ministering to Physical Needs

1. **“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” (Acts [2:44-45](#))**
2. **Care in exposition**
 - A. **John Calvin**
 - I. **“But this place [passage] hath need of a sound exposition, because of fantastical [fanatical] spirits, which do feign a commonalty or participation together of goods, whereby all policy or civil government is taken away; as in this age the Anabaptists have raged, because they thought there was no Church unless all men’s goods were put and gathered together, as it were, in one heap, that they might all one with another take thereof.”⁷**
3. **Biblical duty to those in need**
 - A. **“If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.” (Deuteronomy [15:7-8](#))**
 - B. **“But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John [3:17](#))**
 - C. **“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share . . .” (1 Timothy [6:17-18](#))**
4. **Not communism or socialism**
 - A. **Voluntary participation (Acts [5:4](#))**
 - B. **Goods not evenly distributed, but given as the need arose**
 - C. **Private ownership upheld by scripture, eighth commandment: “You shall**

not steal” (Ex. 20:15)⁸

5. A *genuine* need

- A. **After familial support:** “Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. . . . If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.” (1Ti. 5:3-4,16)
- B. **No work, no eat:** “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12)
- C. **Poor budgeting priorities:** waste resources on *wants*, then unable to buy *needs*

6. It appears that this practice only prevailed in Jerusalem and did not continue beyond the early chapters of Acts

- A. **May reflect the earliest expectation of the church:** for the any-moment arrival of Jesus.
- B. **Many who remained in Jerusalem had initially expected only to only travel to Jerusalem for the feasts and return shortly thereafter.**
- C. **Some who initially came to know the Lord from among the Jews were disinherited by family.**
- D. **As one commentator observed:**

But even at Jerusalem this bright vision of a paradise on earth was soon troubled by the earthly dissensions recorded in Acts 6.; and the Christian community received a timely lesson that things good in themselves are not always practicable in an evil world, where sluggish virtues require the stimulants of bodily wants to draw them out and strengthen them, and where hypocrisy often claims the kindly offices which are due only to disciples indeed.⁹

Summary

1. **The preservation and teaching of doctrine, including the foundational beliefs of Christianity, must be a priority for any fellowship which seeks to truly honor God. Without it, the Church degenerates into yet another International-Society-of-Do-Gooders, serving people in this life while leaving them to face hell in the next.**
2. **The fellowship of believers in our age, the NT church, is meant to be a simple institution: having no elaborate hierarchical structure, requiring no fancy buildings or elaborate edifices, needing no pomp or circumstance, eschewing shows of religiosity, and having but two ordinances: the Lord's supper and Baptism.**
3. **History has amply shown that wherever believers are foolish enough to depart from the priorities and simplicity modeled by the early church in the NT, trouble is sure to result.**

Mon Dec 9 10:32:16 2013



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Endnotes:

1. [NKJV, Acts 2:42-47](#)
2. [ATHEIST-CHURCH](#), 1
3. [Ref-0181](#), Volume 8, Number 90, August 2011, p. 4
4. [Ref-1324](#), 160
5. For one thing, there were not multiple fellowships available within each city to choose among.
6. [Ref-0165](#), 277
7. [Ref-0696](#), Acts 2:44
8. A small sampling of verses upholding private ownership: Ex. [20:15](#); 1Cor. [16:1](#); 1Ti. [6:17](#); 2Th. [3:12](#).
9. [Ref-0932](#), Acts 2:44

Sources:

ATHEIST-CHURCH Rachel Belle, *Godless Church: Seattle Atheists on The Atheist Mega Church Trend*, <http://mynorthwest.com/874/2397524/Godless-Church-Seattle-Atheists-on-The-Atheist-Mega-Church-Trend> accessed 20131206.

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- Ref-0165** James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995).
- Ref-0181** Tim LaHaye, *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (Dallas, TX: Pre-Trib Research Center, n.d.). [www.pre-trib.org].
- Ref-0696** J. Calvin Calvin's *Commentaries* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).
- Ref-0932** H. D. M. Spence, Joseph S. Exell, *Pulpit Commentary* (n.p.: 1890).
- Ref-1324** Clarence Larkin, *Commentary on Daniel* (Broken Arrow, OK: StudyLamp Software, 1929).
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Links Mentioned Above

- a** - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/12_Acts_2_42-47/index.htm.
- b** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.