

TUTORIAL
2.12

Life in the New Church at Jerusalem

This tutorial looks in detail at the description of the Early Church from Acts.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 2:42-47**.

Last time

We considered the significance of the Apostles baptizing the 3000 new believers in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We asked ourselves why this was significant and reflected on what kind of baptism was appropriate for the New Covenant. As with other areas, the fledgling Church would need the Holy Spirit's help to reinterpret baptism's significance and meaning in this new era. Although it might bear an outward resemblance to what happened under the Old Covenant and during John's ministry, it would have an entirely new meaning under the New. Baptism, then and now, represents a believer's identification with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection to a new life.

There are invaluable principles embedded in the Acts account

Luke continues his Acts account with a brief description of what life looked like for that first group of believers in Jerusalem. Any details that we find in these accounts of the early *Ecclesia* or Church are very important and well worth our attention. It's not that we are looking to exactly replicate the way they did everything...the physical and cultural landscape was obviously quite different from ours.

From the beginning God has been writing and telling the true Narrative of who He is in real places, events and particularly the people of the world He created. He does not lock us arbitrarily into the outward *forms* of a particular historical or cultural setting. Instead, the Holy Spirit guides His people from different places and times in how to live out His Narrative in their own lives as they worship Him and try to be effective witnesses for Him. This is part of the genuine collaboration He invites His people into and then equips them for, as they're willing.

So when we scrutinize the Acts Narrative it is for the purpose of seeing how the Apostles guided the early Church as they tried to be all that they knew their Lord wanted them to be. As we observe the way they did things, what we're keen to identify is the underlying principles that the Holy Spirit was teaching them. We know that these principles will line up with the threads of the Narrative that we have been tracing all the way through - who God is, why He created man, how He deals with anything that violates His perfect holy standards, what His intentions are, the kind of relationship He wants with us, and so on. But now, we want to understand how the Holy Spirit was helping the Apostles to guide that first generation of Christ's *Body* in applying that truth under the New Covenant in their time and place.

Those are obviously important insights for us because we are called on to live out that same truth in *our* time and place. Also, if we are to be well equipped to contribute to His Task that has passed down to us from the Apostles, we need to know how to guide others as they are joined to His *Body* and also become contributors to His purposes.

They were eager to hear the Apostles' teaching

The New Living Translation, which is what we're using for the text of the Narrative, translates into English the next part of Luke's account like this; "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer." (Acts 2:42).

The first thing highlighted here is that the believers highly value coming together and listening to the group of men Jesus had specially authorised to speak for Him. Remembering of course that the written Narrative, God's Word for the New Covenant - or *Testament* - is not yet available at this point. So, just as Jesus had said would happen, the Spirit is constantly reminding the Apostles of things that Jesus taught and did during His time with them. Then in the regular times they are together with the other believers, they are passing on what they've remembered. But they're not just reminiscing - although no doubt everyone who'd spent time with the Lord has very fond memories to share.

When the Church is gathered, the Apostles are reviewing what Jesus taught them...but now they understand so much more and are able to explain it to the group. At the time, when they were with Him, they knew He was telling them really important things, knew it was true, believed Him completely...but often felt like they were groping in the dark to understand. Now they feel the Spirit making those things clear, like opening the blinds one by one in a dark room.

And He's also giving them new insights. As they read the Old Testament Narrative these days, they're seeing everywhere threads God embedded there that point forward to Jesus the Christ. Every day, it seems, they are blown away

to stumble upon something there, which they can now see was fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But when the Apostles gather the believers, they are not just sharing theoretical, abstract truths, they're also helping everyone apply those things...to think through how they should live now, right here in Jerusalem - how to act and speak, how to relate to others. They're helping them grapple with the freedom and the responsibilities of living under the New Covenant - something that's going to take time and revelation from God's Spirit to understand. Everyone is excited by this process of hearing Truth revealed. They feel as though they are on a journey together, with the Apostles out in front and God's Spirit leading them all.

The great news for us is that the things the Spirit was teaching the Apostles were written down over the next decades as part of God's Narrative - the *New Testament*. He has made sure that all the important truths He helped them uncover and pass on to the 1st century believers are also available to us in the 21st century. What's more, the Holy Spirit is eager to help us understand and apply truth to our lives, today. And - as we'll see - He gives the ability and authority to men within local bodies of believers to ensure that everyone understands the Apostles' teaching and can relate it to real-life situations.

They enjoyed a special relationship

In his brief description of what was happening with that first group of believers in Jerusalem, Luke also talks about the way they were relating to each other (Acts 2:42-47). Jesus had told the disciples that it would be their care and affection for each other that would show the world they were His people. And now, bound together by the Holy Spirit, it was proving to be that way. Luke used a word - often translated as "fellowship" in English - *koinonia*, that conveys the idea of closeness and particularly of sharing something in common. In other words, they enjoy relating to each other because of what they have in common...which, the more they think about it, is a great deal.

They have Jesus as their Saviour and Master in common; they all have the Holy Spirit binding them together; they are developing a very strong sense of a shared identity; they all feel they're on a journey of learning Truth through the Apostles together; and they are all called to contribute to the Task of being Jesus' witnesses here in Jerusalem and further afield. So even though they're glad to be out talking with people about Jesus the Messiah around the Temple or in the market areas or where people congregate such as the different gates of Jerusalem, they also realize that it's important for them to have separate times together as an *Ecclesia*...as the Gathering of believers.

They ate together, remembering Jesus' sacrifice

Luke also mentions that when they got together they'd share food...Actually, the words in Greek he uses are literally "breaking bread". That was his shorthand way of referring to what would later be called "the Lord's Supper", or in some traditions even later, as "Communion". But from what we'll see later in the Narrative, it seems probable that the early Church remembered Jesus' sacrifice in that way when they were already eating a meal together. After all, as we'll remember, Jesus and His disciples were eating a meal - albeit the special one to mark the Passover - when He used bread to represent His body and a cup of wine for His blood that would initiate the New Covenant.

How often this should be done, the exact procedures to follow, and even what specific kinds of food and drink should be used to remind us of Jesus' sacrifice and victory at Calvary...these are issues that have been debated endlessly down through history. But the picture here is, in many ways, a simple one that we can learn from - those early believers regularly gathered and, conscious of all they had in common, they remembered their Lord's death together in the way He'd told them to. It's sad and unfortunate when people add their own ideas onto God's Narrative and create dogma about what has to be done in order to please Him. When in fact Jesus has already done everything to please His Father...our appropriate response is simply to trust in Him, remember Him, and be grateful, just like those first believers were.

They spent time praying together

Another real feature of the early *Ecclesia* Luke notes was how devoted they were to prayer. The Apostles and other followers of Jesus could not have missed how prayer was important to Him. Not as some formula, or empty ritual, but real, heartfelt communication with His Father. They had the record too from the Old Covenant with numerous instances of God's people speaking to Him.

After all, it's a very important part of fulfilling what we were created for. God made people in His image specifically so He can communicate with them and so they can respond. He delights in hearing His children acknowledging His creative power, His holiness, and His grace and mercy in their lives. Prayer is how we show our dependence on Him and how we communicate that we want His involvement in our lives. It is also a unifying thing for a group of believers - like that first one in Jerusalem - to hear each other presenting their combined worship and requests to God.

Further proof that this is an extraordinary time

Luke also says that the Apostles were performing "many miraculous signs and wonders" (Acts 2:43-47). God is demonstrating in this way that something extraordinary is taking place at this time. Just as He confirmed that Jesus was His Son through the extra-natural things He gave Him power to do, now He's showing that the authority to be Jesus' witnesses has been passed on to His followers. All of this has an enormous impact on the lives of the believers. They

have a deep sense of awe and joy in their hearts. They're amazed at what they are part of. It completely reshapes their values. Those with land and houses or anything valuable are selling them and putting the money into a common fund, which is used to help anyone in need.

Their generosity and unity doesn't go unnoticed in the community. The general public, even if they don't put their faith in Jesus and join His followers, can't help but be impressed by them. And some *are* drawn to hear the Truth...each day more and more recognize their need of salvation, put their faith in Jesus, and are added to the *Ecclesia*.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Explain in your own words what you believe we are supposed to get out of descriptions of the early Church. Are we meant to try to follow exactly the way they did everything? What factors should we be aware of as we try to sort out what we can appropriately apply today?
2. Obviously the Apostles had the primary authority in the Church as described in Acts. Reflect on the issue of authority, particularly in teaching, in the Church today. In your experience, do you see authority in teaching believers today bearing any resemblance to the picture we see in Acts? Identify any current issues (in Christianity and in the larger community) that you feel are a potential challenge for this authority.



ACTIVITIES

Life in the New Church at Jerusalem

1. Do some research on one of the following movements and in less than half a page reflect on any (1) *consistencies*, or (2) *contrasts* you see with the picture of the early Church in Acts:
 - Church Growth Movement
 - Seeker Friendly Church model

- Emerging Church
- Church Planting Movement (missions)