

Okay...Now What?

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I have never won the Stanley Cup, the Super Bowl or the World Series, but I imagine that the feelings of joy and accomplishment are second to none so far as athletics is concerned. It would be great to be called the world champion of something, but I've always wondered what goes through an athlete's mind a few weeks after they've won the championship and they get over the initial jubilation of success. After you've proven that you're the best, what is there left to do? Where do you go from there? I have a pretty good idea of what I would be thinking: "Okay...now what?" The only answer that I can think of, from an athletic perspective, is to get better. I would want to become so great that every year afterward I was the champion again. Otherwise, what's the point of playing?

From a spiritual perspective, a Christian is someone who has won the greatest victory in the world. When someone chooses to be baptized into Jesus Christ, they have overcome sin and death by being connected with Jesus' resurrection. If God raised Jesus from the dead, then surely he is powerful enough to change my body to be like his body, to clothe what is mortal with immortality and to swallow up my death with an everlasting life.

When I arose from the waters of baptism, I knew that my sins had been washed away, I knew that I had been made into a new creature through the powerful working of God, that I had been added to the body of Christ and I knew that I would be saved on the last day by the grace of God which I accessed through my faith. I had won the victory and Satan had been defeated. Okay...now what?

After I was baptized, I had loving Christians who were ready and willing to help me realize there is more to Christianity than getting dunked in a baptistery. As great and as wonderful as that decision was, that wasn't the last decision I needed to make—it was the first decision. Baptism is not the ending point of a journey, it is the very beginning. Just like a world champion athlete looks forward to becoming even better, so too must a Christian set their sight on a goal greater than what they have already achieved; we cannot be satisfied with past decisions of faith, but we must press on toward the goal, toward the upward call of Christ Jesus.

We have a great reason to rejoice before God with the baptism of three people into Christ! They are our new brothers and sisters, and angels in heaven are rejoicing with us because of their decision!. They have a new Lord and Savior, and have been remade in the image of Christ in order to glorify God through good works. They have made the first step in transforming their lives, renewing their minds and making their lives living sacrifices to our God and Father. Our obligation to them as their new family is to help them grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which, by the way, is the same thing that we owe, and have owed, to each other all along. What exactly does it mean to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus? What is it that we must learn about and do once we've been baptized? Those questions are answered the same way questions about baptism are answered, by looking through the New Testament and finding out what the apostles taught all Christians to do. Acts 2, a very helpful reference when studying baptism, is a great place to go for information about these questions.

In Acts 2.38, the apostle Peter teaches a group of Jews that they had to repent of their sins and be baptized in the name of (by the power or authority of) Jesus Christ. When they did these things, they would receive the remission of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. On that day, those people who heard and believed Peter were baptized. What did they do after they were baptized? That's what the rest of the chapter tells us, and, in doing so, it shows us exactly what we should be doing after we are baptized.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And, day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2.42-47) The first item we come across is devotion to "the apostles' teaching". While there are no apostles around today, the things that they taught are recorded for us in the letters they wrote, which in turn make up the New Testament. Paul instructed early Christians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that were taught either by [his] spoken word or by [his] letter" (2 Thess 2.15). As noted, we no longer have Paul's spoken words, but we certainly have his letters. If we are to be devoted to the apostles' teaching like all the new Christians in Acts 2 were, then, clearly, studying the New Testament is important to do.

When we are told to be "devoted" to these teachings, it does not mean to worship them or those who wrote them. Worship and adoration are reserved for God alone. Instead, this word means "to focus on" or "to be in continually". Early Christians were people who looked for directions from God in every decision they made. We, likewise, should look for God's guidance and direction in our every action.

In Hosea 4.6, the prophet warned that Israel was being destroyed because they lacked knowledge. Was it merely cerebral knowledge they lacked? While a possibility, I think that is highly unlikely. It seems that Israel lacked the knowledge by which Christians are saved, a personal and relational knowledge of God. Jesus said, in John 17.3, that knowing God and the Christ was eternal life. Again, this is not intellectual knowledge; it is a deeper connection than that. It is a knowledge that is rooted and grounded in love. This is why we study the Scriptures: to learn how to love God and mankind more perfectly. The more we learn about God, the greater our love grows for him and the better we know him. The more we learn about his love, the more we will love other people who were created in his image. As we grow, both in

love and knowledge, we will be those people who obey the Lord's commandments through love (John 14.15). Additionally, as we grow in love, we learn to fear less. We work toward being complete in our love so that fear is cast out and we look toward the coming day of the Lord with joy and eager expectation, the day when we will be caught up together with Jesus and live with him forever (1 John 4.18-19, 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18).

The second item we notice is that Christians also devoted themselves to "the fellowship". Most religious people in America probably think of social events, like potlucks and parties, when they hear this word. However, this is not the meaning I think is conveyed by its use in the New Testament—at least not in Acts 2. It seems to be working on a few different levels, and we need to carefully examine each of those.

First, the word fellowship simply means "common" or "shared" in the sense of shared ownership in something. This surface meaning seems to be understood literally by Christians who, in Acts 2, made their possessions "common" (v.44-45). When there was a need among these people, they pulled together and made sure that need was met. This is what a family is supposed to do; when someone in your family needs help, you help them no matter the cost. This is the attitude that Christians should have toward one another, and this is part of the real meaning of fellowship. If we see someone who is a Christian in need and we do not help them, then we do not have love and we do not have fellowship (1 John 3.17).

A second meaning of the word fellowship is the idea of "participation". This word steps beyond self and the members of a local congregation to Christians and non-Christians alike. This idea of participation is directly connected to the teaching of the apostles. Christians have been given a new lease on life—eternal life—because someone took the time to share the gospel with them. As Christians learned from the apostles, they shared in the responsibility of teaching the gospel to all nations and the whole creation (Matthew 28.19 and Mark 16.15). Everyone did their part in teaching those whom they met. As Paul would write in Romans, how can people hear the gospel without "someone preaching" (Romans 10.14, ESV)? Notice it doesn't say apostle or preacher, it says "someone". That's because we all have fellowship in, or a sharing in, the duty to preach the gospel.

A third aspect of fellowship is the making of a connection, of being drawn close to someone. It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, the word fellowship is never used in respect to God. Indeed, one would assume that the Old Law was unable, in some fundamental way, to draw people close to God. I do not mean that people could not worship God, but I mean they could not have a relationship with him. They could not come close to God the way that a son draws close to his father.

That changes with the New Testament. Because of the sacrifice that Christ made, we are able to draw close to God now. James clearly says that if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us (James 4.8). This is an expression of fellowship. God draws near to us the way that a father would take up a child in his arms. We may have fellowship with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit after we become Christians (1 John 1.3, 2 Corinthians 13.14). It is this fellowship that becomes the basis for our remaining faithful; God is faithful to us and will never turn away, just as a loving, earthly father would never abandon his children.

We have been given such wonderful gifts and promises through Jesus Christ! These ought to encourage us to learn more about God every day. Next week, we will continue looking at Acts 2 and the things Christians should start doing after baptism. May God bless us all as we strive to become more pleasing to him!