

Breaking Bread & Prayers

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Becoming a Christian is a wonderful thing. There is no greater title or role; there are no greater words than to confidently proclaim, "I am a Christian!" As we began studying last week, however, making that declaration in the faithful act of baptism is not the end of our journey in Christ, it is merely the beginning. The apostle Paul called baptism an elementary teaching of Christianity. It is one of the foundational doctrines upon which many other things are built (Hebrews 6.1-2).

To help us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to continue our study in Acts 2. In this chapter, we have the things over 3,000 Christians were taught shortly after they were baptized. If these were things early Christians did through the instruction of the Holy Spirit, then these are things that we should be doing, too.

Last week, we noted that early Christians were devoted to the apostles' teachings and fellowship. Additionally, they were also devoted "to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2.42). In order to learn what we should be doing after we become a Christian, we need to determine what was meant by "breaking bread" and "the prayers."

The breaking of bread is something very significant to Christians and has its roots in a Jewish holy feast called the Passover. On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he met with his disciples to celebrate this feast, which remembered the night when the angel of the Lord passed over Israel in the tenth plague against Egypt, the death of the firstborn (Exodus 12.1-32). The Passover meal was begun when someone said a blessing, broke a piece of bread and then distributed it to all who were present. After the Passover meal, everyone took one final drink known as the "Cup of Thanksgiving" or the "Cup of Blessing".

The earliest record we have of this event, now called the Last Supper, comes from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.17-34. In this record, Jesus broke the bread after he told his disciples that it represented his body (v.24). After the disciples had eaten supper, Jesus took the Cup of Thanksgiving and told the disciples it represented the New Covenant in his blood (v.25). In this way, old symbols were given a new, spiritual meaning and God's plan to save mankind, a plan made before the universe was created, was visibly demonstrated to the disciples. This act, that Christ established by saying "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me", is known as the Lord's Supper (v.25).

Why was this meal so important to early Christians? Why is it still important to us still today? Those are good questions, and we will stay within the context of 1 Corinthians and let Paul give us the answers.

Firstly, the Lord's Supper proclaims the death of Christ (1 Corinthians 11.26). The Greek word translated "proclaim" is the same word used when announcing games or religious festivals. These festivals proclaimed the greatness of a deity or their work. The Lord's Supper proclaims and teaches, in a very tangible and visible manner, God's plan to save mankind through the death of his son, a death that was necessary to pay the price of sin. In the Lord's Supper, the sole sufficiency of Christ's work and God's plan is iterated over and over again, and early Christians were reminded of the great things God has done as often as they ate the meal. The need to recognize the majesty of our God and the saving grace extended to mankind has not diminished over time. Our need for the Lord's Supper is just as great as it was for early Christians, and as they devoted themselves to that act in the first century, so should we in the twenty-first.

Another important reason for us to be devoted to the Lord's Supper is, again, fellowship. Paul would explain in 1 Corinthians 10.16 that the Cup of Blessing is "a participation in the blood of Christ", and the bread that is broken is "a participation in the body of Christ". The word translated "participation" is the same Greek word translated as "fellowship" in Acts 2.42. This fellowship in the Lord's Supper points in two directions: amongst Christians and from the Christian to Christ.

Firstly, the Lord's Supper is a way of drawing Christians together for a common purpose. When we are made citizens of the heavenly kingdom, our purpose on earth—to glorify God—becomes different from most other people we will meet. Christians, though different from the world, have a common bond with each other through the blood of Christ that was shed on the cross. We are drawn together through the fellowship of taking the Lord's Supper with one another. We cannot allow the times when we do this to become liturgical in nature, and we cannot think of it as an individual observance; it is something that was intended to draw us closer together and strengthen our already existing bond. Just like inviting someone to your house for supper brings you closer to them, Christians should be drawn together through the eating of the Lord's Supper.

Secondly, the Lord's Supper reminds us of the fellowship that we share with Christ and the benefits we receive

through his obedience. The body and blood represented in our food and drink are those of the man who is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2.11). Christ, the one who existed in the form of God, made himself nothing and took the form of a servant: a human form. After his resurrection, he ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God having been proclaimed as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings (Philippians 2.6,7; Revelation 17.14, 19.16). This Jesus—the high and mighty one, the eternal father, the prince of peace, the child of promise, the bright morning star—is our brother, and we are able to draw close to him and share in his victory. This is manifested for us in a tangible way when we eat the Lord’s Supper. Again, as we are indebted and grateful to someone who provides a meal for us, so too are we made more grateful to our Savior when we commune, or fellowship, with him through the Lord’s Supper.

A final reason for devotion to the Lord’s Supper is that it reminds us who we are and to whom we belong. In 1 Corinthians 10.18-22, Paul argues that when we partake of the Lord’s table we are set apart for the Lord, i.e. we are made holy to him. In Corinth, some Christians were both going to and participating in feasts to honor pagan gods. Paul stated that they could not be devoted to both God and the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods.

The same is true for Christians today, though the false gods that are worshipped have changed their form. We cannot be devoted to God and partake of worldliness or be driven by worldly desires. We cannot allow ourselves to be drawn away from God by any modern idol: be it a false Jesus, sport, hobby, job or relationship. If we are going to partake of the Lord’s table, then we must recognize that we belong to him. When we come together and eat the Lord’s Supper, this is an important reminder that we are God’s people, purchased with the blood and body of his son.

The final item listed in Acts 2.42 is “the prayers”. This phrase does not denote a specified list of prayers, though there may have been some prayers or phrases that were commonly used. More specifically, this refers to the practice of prayer, which, to a Christian in the first century, was not something to fall upon only when times were rough. Prayer was a constant companion and a lifeline to God. It took place both when they were gathered together and when they were dispersed. They prayed wherever and whenever they were able.

In Acts 3.1, the apostles Peter and John were on their way to the Jewish temple for the hour of prayer. They had a chance to pray with others to Jehovah God, the creator of all things. Early Christians were more than willing to pray with other people who recognized God as the one, true, living God and ruler of the universe. Likewise, we should not shy away from opportunities to pray in public, whether they be moments of silence at a football game, school or work, or if we are invited to pray with a group of people after a softball game or around a flagpole before school starts. When we have the chance to pray to God, we should probably take it.

In Acts 12.1-5, we are told that Peter was arrested and thrown in prison after King Herod killed James. While the world rejoiced in evil, Christians came together to pray. When times are tough, when there is a famine, drought, persecution or financial crisis, the only one that we can rely on to solve our problems is God. He has controlled all of world history, and he is the only one who can cause the present to work out exactly as he chooses. There is no president, congress, prime minister or dictator capable of subverting God’s plans. Early Christians knew that, so it was to God that they turned when they were in need.

The apostle Paul would urge Christians to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5.17). He instructed Timothy to pray for all people, in particular those who were rulers, so that Christians could live peaceful lives (1 Timothy 2.1-2). Some early Christians styled themselves as soldiers of the empire through the supplications they made for Roman emperors—even emperors who were trying to destroy Christianity. We, too, should pray for our government, and for all people, with the hope that everyone may come to believe the gospel of Christ and have eternal life.

Through prayer, we do not communicate anything to God that he does not already know, but we come to trust him more and gain a greater understanding that all things are truly in his control. And what a wonderful God to be able to trust, who loves us and gives us salvation!