

# **The First Church**

---

**A short booklet from Maryhill Gospel Hall**

[gospelhallmaryhill.co.uk](http://gospelhallmaryhill.co.uk)

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Baptism .....	5
Commitment.....	9
The Apostle's Doctrine .....	13
Fellowship .....	17
Breaking of Bread .....	21
Prayers .....	25

# Introduction

Shortly after the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus to Heaven, the Apostles whom the Lord chose while He was on earth started to implement the instructions He had given them.

It was on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost that they first announced to their countrymen the meaning of the death and resurrection of the Lord. The first message ended by calling on them to turn from their sins to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness, the person they had crucified less than two months before. 3000 people did that, on what has sometimes been called the “birthday” of the Church.

*Now when they heard this [Peter preaching about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus], they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers (Acts 2:37-42)*

The last two sentences in the above passage describe key features of the first Church. This provides us with a convenient pattern for the Church today. This booklet contains a series of short articles that explain the biblical significance of each key area. But be warned: they will challenge you to take your Christianity seriously!

# Baptism

This article begins a little series on some of the fundamental characteristics of New Testament Christianity. Our key passage is Acts 2:37-42. What happened on the Day of Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago established a basic pattern for us to follow today. Of course there were sensational and unrepeatable events on that great occasion: the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the miracle of speaking in unlearned human languages, are the most obvious. This should not surprise us, however, for God was starting something new. He was beginning a distinct and wonderful phase in His plan for the world: the calling out of a people for Himself from Jews and Gentiles to form the Church, the body of Christ (Acts 15:14, Eph 2:11-18). But apart from such exceptional signs marking a special occasion there are principles of permanent significance here for all believers.

In Acts 2, we find that people heard the gospel, were saved, and then continued steadfastly in certain practices which are meant to be the hallmark of all God's people until the Saviour comes back.

One of the great features of those early Christians was the warmth with which they received God's word (Acts 2:41). They treated it like a valued friend to be welcomed, like a road map to be followed, like a meal to be enjoyed, like a command from the God of heaven. How sad it is when the reading of God's word becomes drudgery! Conversion begins by simply believing what God says about our sin and His remedy in Christ. And Peter's hearers on the Day of Pentecost did just that. We know that they believed not because they said so, but because they immediately surrendered to Peter's command to be baptised (Acts 2:38). Faith in God will always be outwardly evidenced by our practical obedience to His word. And the first step of Christian obedience is BAPTISM.

Let us ask and answer a few basic questions: why, who, how, what, and when.

Why should believers in the Lord Jesus be baptised? Because Christ says so! Read carefully the Lord's instructions to His apostles in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:16. Those early disciples took them seriously, for wherever the gospel was preached and souls saved, folk were baptised. The book of the Acts is clear proof of this. When Philip spoke to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:36), when Ananias visited Saul (Acts 9:18), when Peter preached to Cornelius (Acts 10:48), each conversion was promptly followed by baptism.

This makes perfect sense. After all, the Christian calls His Saviour 'Lord', a word implying ownership, because we have been bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19), and authority, because our Saviour is the Creator of the universe (John 1:3). Did not the Lord Jesus say, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15)? Surely all saved people wish to show their love for the One who has done so much for them. Christians get baptised, then, not to join a church, not because it is an old tradition, not because friends have encouraged them, but because the Lord Jesus Christ has requested it.

Who should be baptised? Our first question and answer have already made it clear that it is not infants but those who have made an intelligent profession of faith in the Son of God who are the only biblical candidates for baptism. In Acts 2 it was 'they that gladly received Peter's word' who were baptised. The sad story of Simon the sorcerer only goes to prove that in New Testament times new converts were baptised upon their confession of faith even though, in his case, subsequent events showed that he had never been genuinely saved at all (Acts 8:13,18-24). Baptism, we must realise, cannot save. Only Christ saves. Yet it remains true that all God's people are under an obligation to obey the

Lord's teaching. The apostle Peter, we may note, 'commanded' rather than advised new converts to be baptised (Acts 10:48).

How should baptism be administered? The New Testament does not concern itself with tiny incidental details of place or performance. Indeed, even the actual baptiser is of little account, as Paul makes plain to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:14-17). The action, however, is beyond all reasonable doubt. Although the language of the New Testament possesses words which can express the idea of sprinkling or pouring, the Holy Spirit chose to employ one which means 'to immerse, dip, plunge [in water]'. We read that John baptised in Ænon because there was 'much water' there (John 3:23), while the accounts in Matthew 3:16 and Acts 8:38-39 imply that both baptiser and candidate went into the water - a most unnecessary action if only sprinkling was in view! Baptism is therefore very simply a dipping in water.

What does it all mean? Baptism is no arbitrary ceremony but a precious visual-aid to help us (and others) understand something about God's salvation. Romans 6:1-6 tells us that it pictures death, burial and resurrection. As the believer is immersed in water he goes through an illustration of the work of Christ. Just as the Saviour experienced these things in reality (1 Cor 15:1-5) so the Christian takes part in a symbol of them. It is as if the believer says, 'I am glad to identify myself completely with what Christ did for me. I have come into the good of His death at Calvary, and by grace I intend henceforth to live as one who is dead to sin and alive to God'. In short, baptism announces that the old life is dead and buried. The Christian has done with all the old sinful habits, all the old priorities, all the old attitudes. Instead, the believer is to 'walk in newness of life' (Rom 6:4). Now this change actually takes place at conversion, not at baptism. Baptism does not save, nor does it make anyone a better Christian. All it does is illustrate what happened when we were born

again. But what a challenge it is to all believers, however long ago their baptism may have been! We have to ask ourselves, 'Am I living out the truth of my baptism? Am I really, day by day, dead to sin and alive to God?' May the Lord give us help to walk worthy of Him.

When should it take place? This may best be answered with another question: how long do you wait before you bury a corpse? In the New Testament the longest gap between salvation and baptism is probably the three days that Saul fasted and prayed before being visited by Ananias (Acts 9:9). Once his sight was restored he acted with remarkable speed and submitted to baptism even before taking a much needed meal. The Psalmist's testimony is a good model for us: 'I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments' (Psa 119:60).

Although baptism has no saving power it is 'the answer of a good conscience toward God' (1 Pet 3:21). If my reader is born again but as yet unbaptised in water, may God give you grace to see the truth and act upon it. It is, you see, a privilege only for this world. You cannot get baptised in heaven! Take to heart the question of the Ethiopian, 'What doth hinder me to be baptised?' (Acts 8:26).



## Commitment

Christians are not meant to grow on their own. From the beginning man was not created to be solitary, for 'it is not good that the man should be alone' (Genesis 2:18) and what is true socially is even more so spiritually. The people who responded to the gospel on the Day of Pentecost and were baptised as a consequence did not scatter and revert to their old ways. On the contrary, they had found both a Saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ and a new company of like-minded friends with whom they desired to associate. Thus we read that there was added to the existing group of believers in Jerusalem about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41). These newly redeemed folk committed themselves to a spiritual home, no longer now the physical temple but the company of God's saints.

Of course, every believer is immediately joined to the Body of Christ at the very instant of conversion. Salvation unites us eternally with the Saviour in such an intimacy that we are spoken of as members of His body (1 Corinthians 12:12-14; Ephesians 5:29-30). From that universal church there can be no removal. As the Lord Jesus said while He was on the earth: 'I will build my church and the gates of Hades [that is, the powers of death itself] shall not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18). This is a comforting guarantee of eternal security: because we belong to Christ we are for ever safe. That great invisible host of the saved will never be glimpsed in its entirety until the Lord returns and gathers us for the best of all Christian meetings - in the air! (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17).

But the Bible also makes it plain that every child of God is responsible to join a local church of believers for the purpose of fellowship and service. A local church is neither a building nor an organisation, but simply a recognisable

group of saved people who habitually meet together to obey the specific commands of their Saviour.

The apostle Paul illustrates the point. As Saul of Tarsus he became a member of Christ's body the moment he surrendered to the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-6). The genuineness of his conversion is proved by his instinctive desire to obey the Lord (Acts 9:6), Ananias's acknowledgement of him as 'brother Saul' (Acts 9:17), and his prompt submission to baptism (Acts 9:18). But that was only the beginning. He joined himself in happy fellowship with the very people he had come to destroy (Acts 9:19b), who encouraged him in his evangelism and aided him in his peril (Acts 9:20-25). When he had to leave Damascus he could no longer continue as part of the local assembly there, so, once in Jerusalem, he made an effort to enter the local company of Christians in that city (Acts 9:26-28). When they were convinced of his reality he was received and thereafter identified himself with the believers in all their spiritual activities, for he was 'with them coming in and going out' (Acts 9:28). That is true commitment. And wherever Paul travelled he did the same, seeking out the Lord's people (Acts 21:4).

It follows, then, that a wilfully solitary Christian is a disobedient Christian. It is, for example, impossible to honour the Saviour's dying request to break bread in remembrance of Him except as part of a local church. Indeed, all the privileges and duties of believers in Acts 2:42 demand that the child of God be joined together with others who love the Lord.

The Old Testament explains the value of togetherness among God's people in memorable language. 'Two are better than one: because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe unto him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken' (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Here we learn that godly fellowship promotes work, for it is so much easier to serve the Saviour in gospel activity and witness when there are others to assist. On the Day of Pentecost Peter stood up 'with the eleven', that is, his open air gospel address was delivered with the visible and prayerful support of fellow believers (Acts 2:14). Personal fears can be overcome when we stand together for the truth of God, 'striving together for the faith of the gospel' (Philippians 1:27). Fellowship also provides practical help in time of trial. We are so prone to fall; but the presence of others who love the Saviour will help us along. All God's people are liable to suffer bereavement, sickness, redundancy and poverty. Being saved does not make us immune to sadness. But in such distresses the loving care of other saints is a great blessing (Romans 12:15). Indeed, the Lord very often ministers to our needs through others, just as Paul was comforted 'by the coming of Titus' (2 Corinthians 7:6). Further, fellowship stimulates spiritual warmth of soul for God. Just as bodies keep warm by being together, so too believers keep their hearts' affections for the Lord aflame by enjoying one another's fellowship. Absence from the assembly gatherings is a sure sign of coldness in heart towards Christ. Let us not forsake 'the assembling of ourselves together' (Hebrews 10:25). Finally the many provide protection in time of trouble when one on his own might collapse. When two believers found themselves persecuted for their faith in Acts 4, they at once informed the church with the result that prayers ascended to God for their encouragement (Acts 4:23).

Commitment to Christ and the local assembly (and they are inseparable) brings great blessing. It also demands loyalty. The early Christians 'continued steadfastly': they kept on going despite all the problems. This of course is the great test of reality. It is relatively easy to progress when the sun is shining, but

it takes determination to push on in the storms. A godly lady in the assembly where I have fellowship is a good example. Knowing that her believing husband was dying she did not go to pieces but continued faithfully to take her place in the gatherings of the saints. That is commitment.

Perhaps the writer and readers of this article could assess the level of their own commitment by asking the following questions. Do I faithfully attend all the meetings of my local assembly? Do I come with a desire to enjoy the fellowship of God and His people? Do I make an effort to pray and show concern for the other believers in the assembly? May the Living God grant us the self-discipline and determination to commit ourselves fully to a scriptural company of His people for His glory. It is, after all, the best preparation for the eternal fellowship of Heaven!

## The Apostle's Doctrine

Continuing steadfastly as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ means whole-hearted obedience to His word. The early Christians in Acts 2:42 devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the earthly representatives of a Saviour who had now returned to heaven. Their teaching was His teaching (John 14:26), their commands were His commands (2 Peter 3:1-2). We can therefore be certain that all the folk saved at Pentecost attended gatherings where the apostles taught God's word. After all, they had no books, magazines, or cassettes of Bible ministry! Every child of God today must gather with other believers in the fellowship of a local assembly to hear the scriptures explained (Acts 11:26).

Although there are no apostles now we do possess a perfect written record of what they taught: the scriptures of truth. Let us therefore consider exactly how authoritative and significant the Bible, the word of God, is.

During His great prayer in John 17 the Lord Jesus states four simple truths about the scriptures. First He emphasises their importance. 'I have GIVEN them thy word' (John 17:14). Our appreciation of a gift often depends upon our knowledge of the giver. Can we doubt that any gift from Christ will be just what we need? In John 17 the Saviour gives His people eternal life (John 17:2), the word (John 17:17), and glory (John 17:22). First we trust Him and receive life everlasting - that is salvation. Then daily we feed upon the living word - that is sanctification. And at the journey's end there is glorification. But why is scripture so important? Because it is the only revelation of God's salvation in Christ (2 Timothy 3:15; John 5:39). Further, it is the only source of authoritative instruction for every aspect of the believer's life, in the home, at

business, and in the local church. How sad - and how foolish - to believe the Bible when it speaks about salvation and yet not surrender to its directions for daily living! Everything in our sin-infested world must be measured against this one absolute standard of reliability (Isaiah 8:20). 'What saith the scripture?' (Romans 4:3) is the Christian's dependable safeguard against error.

The Lord Jesus speaks to His Father of 'THY word' (John 17:14) for the scriptures are not man's thoughts about God but God's perfect message to man. This involves divine inspiration. As Paul puts it, 'All scripture is God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16), which means that the Bible is as much the very voice of God as if He were to speak audibly from the heavens! 66 books penned by some 40 writers over a period of around 1600 years, but the ultimate author is God Himself. Because the Bible is God's word, there is nothing in it that should not be there, for 'every word of God is pure' (Proverbs 30:5). The account of creation in Genesis is not meaningless poetry but truthful history and must be believed. Paul's instructions to the Corinthian Christians about conduct in church meetings are to be obeyed. It is equally true that there is nothing missing from the Bible which ought to be there, for the writer of the Proverbs also says, 'Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee' (Proverbs 30:6). We must beware of placing human tradition and speculation on a level with scripture, for all the Bible is all the word of God - not one word too few and not one word too many. How wonderful to be able to rely completely on such a book. 'Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it' (Luke 11:28).

'Thy word', says the Lord Jesus, 'is TRUTH' (John 17:17). This teaches us the infallibility of the word. The Bible is utterly without error whether speaking about salvation, history, geography, or science. The God of the universe is 'true' (John 17:3) and 'cannot lie' (Titus 1:2). Since the Bible is His word it follows that from start to finish it is truthful and accurate in all its details. The Lord

taught this when He said ‘Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled’ (Matthew 5:18). We must not miss the wonder of this. A jot is the smallest Hebrew letter and the tittle is a tiny pen stroke distinguishing one Hebrew letter from another. God’s word is settled and sure to the smallest possible detail. Truly, ‘the scriptures cannot be broken’ (John 10:35). In a world of desperate uncertainty and confusion the child of God finds all his resource and assurance in the unchanging word of God. With Paul we can say ‘I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me’ (Acts 27:25), for our God means what He says and says what He means.

Finally, the Lord Jesus indicates the powerful impact of the word of God. All God’s truth is designed to affect the lives of His people, for He wants us to be set apart from a dirty world and fitted for His exclusive use and enjoyment. This grand purpose is effected as we read and obey the scriptures. ‘SANCTIFY them through thy truth: thy word is truth’ (John 17:17). It is through the Bible that God guides, instructs and sanctifies His children. Like a lamp, it provides light for the next step (Psalm 119:105). What should the new believer do after conversion? Answer: be baptised and join the fellowship of a local church which follows the pattern laid down in the New Testament (Acts 2:41-42). Like a mirror, it show us up as we really are in all our sinfulness (James 1:22-25), for God must first reveal our mistakes before He will put us right. Like pure water, it washes away sin’s grime and defilement (Ephesians 5:26; Psalm 119:9) by constantly reminding us of the finished work of Calvary. Like honey, it brings sweetness, joy and comfort to those who are tasting the bitter experiences of life (Psalm 19:10).

Yes, God’s word is the rock-solid authority for all the Christian believes and does. We can build our lives confidently upon such a strong unshakeable

foundation. Because the Bible is God's book let us, like the early believers, read it, trust it, obey it, enjoy it, share it - and live it!



## Fellowship

In earlier papers we have looked at three features of New Testament Christians which should be a challenge and encouragement to all today who seek to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. We have noticed that they were baptised, that they committed themselves to a company of believers, and that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:41-42).

Now we shall consider another truth in which these believers 'continued steadfastly': fellowship. This must be one of the great misunderstood words of the Bible. To many people it simply means Christians enjoying one another's company, a cosy corner of social intercourse, perhaps dignified with a hymn or chorus. But in the Bible 'fellowship' is a serious word of great import. It means partnership, sharing, having in common. And one of the best ways to explore its meaning is to see how it is used in an ordinary secular context.

In Luke 5:1-11 we read about Peter, James and John who were jointly engaged in a fishing business. When the Saviour worked a great miracle so that Peter's net became full of fish to bursting, his colleagues hastened to aid him. 'They beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink' (Luke 5:7). This is a perfect illustration of what real fellowship or partnership involves. From it we can build up a list of those characteristics which should mark fellowship among God's people in a local assembly.

First of all, assembly fellowship, like a business partnership such as that of the three fishermen, must have a united aim. It was no use Peter and John turning up determined to catch fish if all James wanted to do was sunbathe on the deck

of the boat! When Paul wrote to an assembly where there were disturbing signs of division beneath the surface calm, he particularly emphasised the importance of unity. 'Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind' (Philippians 2:2). When the disciples gathered 'with one accord' (Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 5:12) they were consciously united in their submission to the Lordship of Christ. A local church is not controlled by the strongest personality or the rule of the majority but by the Saviour Himself. It is only as we bow to His word that we shall ourselves walk in step with Him and with one another in harmony and joy. After all, it is to His name that we gather (Matthew 18:20). The things of God must have first place in the assembly of God. Therefore we go to the prayer meeting to pray (not to engage in gossip), and to the Bible teaching meeting to learn from the word.

Second, a partnership involves regular meeting together. How could James and John conduct the business if Peter insisted upon staying at home? Likewise every believer in the local assembly is responsible to attend all the gatherings (Hebrews 10:25). The timetables of our lives should be so arranged that we are free to gather with the saints. And punctuality is important. It has been said that a spiritual atmosphere is the hardest thing in the world to create and the easiest thing to destroy. One sure way of destroying it is to arrive late and noisily. Since we shall all gather in the air on time when the Lord returns for us (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), it is only right that we should make every effort to meet on time down here.

Then comes mutual concern. If Peter fell ill, James and John would be deeply concerned, for the absence of one partner damages the whole enterprise. In a local church, likened by the Apostle Paul to a body (1 Corinthians 12:27), each member has a necessary place and each is vitally joined to all the others. Thus, when 'one member suffers, all the members suffer with it' (1 Corinthians

12:26), for we are to be 'kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love' (Romans 12:10). Read Paul's letter to the Philippians to see how grieved the assembly was to hear that their dear brother Epaphroditus had been seriously ill (Philippians 2:26). When the Lord's people are persecuted they come together for support and encouragement (Acts 4:23). Each assembly should be a sphere of divine love and tenderness.

Of course, every business demands hard work. And the fishing trade is no exception. There would be nets to mend, boats to repair, long nights at sea searching for fish, muscular effort hauling in those loaded nets. There can be no mere passengers on a fishing boat. In the local assembly all are to be involved in the work of God. Stephanas and his family provide a good model, for they 'addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints' (1 Corinthians 16:15). Not all have the same activities, though, for God equips His people in different ways. The Bible makes clear that public testimony (vocal prayer and preaching) is entrusted to the men, not to the women. If you cannot preach you can give out tracts, and if you cannot give out tracts you can pray for those who do. Perhaps even more important than ability in the work of God is reliability. Some Hebrew believers were praised for their 'work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints [that is, in the past], and do minister [in the present]' (Hebrews 6:10). What they had started for God they were continuing. We all ought to ask ourselves what we bring to our assembly gatherings. Am I a help to the other believers or a hindrance? One of the grandest commendations spoken by the Lord Jesus on earth was to a faithful woman: 'she hath done what she could' (Mark 14:8). May that be true of each of us in our local assembly.

A business also calls for the sacrificial investment of its partners. If the fishing boat needed to be renewed, then Peter, James and John would have to bear the

cost. Membership of a local assembly means that we are obligated to share in the running costs of the building where we meet. Should one of the saints fall into poverty the others might well feel a responsibility to provide practical, material aid. In New Testament times the need of believers in another part of the world stimulated sacrificial giving. Christians in Greece saved up to send help to poor saints in Judaea (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). How wonderfully the love of Christ breaks down national barriers!

Finally, Peter, James and John would all enjoy the profits of their work. After all the toil at sea came the share of the reward. Being in assembly fellowship brings countless blessings down here and promises yet more in the future. The joy which the Psalmist felt in Jerusalem as God's dwelling place (Psalm 48) expresses the New Testament believer's delight in recognising that each little assembly is God's house (1 Timothy 3:15) where He condescends to make His home among His redeemed ones. Can there be any greater privilege for us? A tiny company of saints may not mean much in the eyes of the world, but it is precious in the sight of heaven. Let each one of us remember how God has blessed us and seek to 'continue steadfastly in fellowship.'

## Breaking of Bread

As well as submitting to baptism, those new Christians, saved on the Day of Pentecost, also practised regular obedience to the commands of Christ as taught by the apostles (Acts 2:42). They broke bread in remembrance of their Saviour, as He had instructed them. And what they did, we too should do.

Let us think about the Bible's description of this very precious gathering of saints. It is called the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). This speaks of its authority, for it was instituted by the Lord Jesus Himself and therefore cannot be altered or 'improved' by men. After all, a Lord is one who must be obeyed. It also reminds us of the seriousness of the gathering. As the Lord's Supper it takes its character from Him and is not to be spoiled by flippant, worldly behaviour or attitudes which are an insult to the awesome holiness of Christ. Paul's complaint about the Corinthian assembly was that their conduct was unworthy of the Lord (1 Cor 11:20,21). How important it is to gather in the right frame of mind, our hearts occupied with a Saviour who loved us unto death! Further, it is a time of glad fellowship. In Bible lands the 'supper' was the main meal of the day, when the family gathered together after the day's work for rest, for refreshment, and pleasant conversation. What can be more satisfying for the believer than to set aside the normal burdens of life and meet with like-minded saints to contemplate the person and work of Christ? Such an occupation is a foretaste of heaven! The Lord's Supper is thus a place of sacred fellowship to be characterised by reverence, seamliness and punctual attendance.

But it is also called the Breaking of Bread (Acts 2:42; 20:7). This title emphasises what we do, for the Lord Jesus sanctified the commonplace, using something as ordinary as the loaf and cup of the daily meal as pointers to

Himself. As we eat the bread we ponder the amazing truth that the eternal Son of God was manifest in flesh, and as we drink from the cup we recall that He voluntarily shed His precious blood for our redemption. And how simple it is, for there is no suggestion anywhere in scripture of a presiding clergyman, a complex ritual, or a costly ceremonial. No matter how feeble or how poor believers might become, they can always obey this simple request. And these are the only titles in the Bible. It is not called 'the worship meeting' (for all Christian gatherings, whether for prayer, teaching, or preaching, must involve worship), or 'the communion service' (because communion or fellowship marks every meeting of the local church). Christians are on safe ground when they go as far as the word and no farther.

Much as we must deplore the failure which so quickly crept into the Corinthian church we must also be thankful that it drew forth from Paul an inspired explanation of the Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Even sin becomes an opportunity for a display of God's grace! The apostle's answer is to go back to basic truths and remind his readers of the double authority for the Lord's Supper: it was commanded by the Saviour both on earth (Luke 22:19,20) and from heaven through Paul (1 Cor 11:23). It therefore holds the highest priority, standing right at the front of all Paul's instructions about church meetings in 1 Corinthians, before the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12-14) or the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor 15). Clearly it is a local assembly activity. Those who break bread should therefore be saved (1 Cor 1:2), baptised (1 Cor 1:13), in fellowship with a local church (1 Cor 1:2), and subject to proper assembly discipline (1 Cor 5:13). Believers serve the Master all the better if they give Him first place in their affections and in their assembly gatherings.

During the meeting all the focus is upon Christ - His person, His actions, His words: this meeting is primarily for Him. There is to be no glorying in men. It

is not for our edification (although we shall be blessed in obeying, John 13.:17), nor for evangelisation (although visiting unbelievers may be touched by its message, 1 Cor 11:26), but for the Saviour's exaltation. It is thus a memorial of His Person ('me', 1 Cor 11:24), a proclamation of His Death (1 Cor 11:26) and an anticipation of His Coming (1 Cor 11:26). Because it is about and for Christ, all hymns, prayers, contributions and thoughts must be ordered for His glory. Preparation is required of all believers, as the spiritual state of each Christian present will affect the whole company for good or ill. Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves how we spend our Saturday evenings: are we preparing or defiling our hearts? Scripture, which lays down the silence of the women (1 Cor 14:34,35), equally commands the public participation of the men (1 Tim 2:8) who are therefore responsible before God to lead the saints in worship. As someone has said, 'If you are a brother, you should pray; and if you can talk, you certainly can pray'. But true worship can only flow from a heart that is full of Christ. Whether silently or audibly may our hearts have something of Christ to give to God.

What of the bread and cup themselves? Against the superstitious notions of Rome we can demonstrate that they are only emblems or symbols because of (i) common New Testament picture language (1 Cor 10:4; John 10:9) where the verb 'to be' clearly means 'to represent'; (ii) the Old Testament example of David who spoke of water being (that is, representing) blood (1 Chron 11:17-19; 2 Sam 23:17); (iii) the Old Testament law against eating blood (Lev 3:17; 17:10-14); and (iv) the verifiable nature of genuine biblical miracles (John 2:8-10). The so-called 'miracle' which Popish priests claim takes place in 'transubstantiation' cannot meet the test of reality! Believers trust in a Saviour who has once died and risen again: they neither repeat nor re-enact but thankfully remember his death.

But while the emblems are simply signs, they are full of meaning. They speak of (i) the humanity ('body/blood', Heb 2:14-16) which the Son of God took upon Himself; (ii) the death He endured, for blood is here symbolically separated from the body; (iii) the pain He suffered, for as corn is ground and baked, and grapes crushed, so the Saviour went into the most dreadful agony for us (1 Pet 2:21; Psa 22:1-21); (iv) the blessings of spiritual life we enjoy, pictured as bread and wine (1 Cor 10:16; Psa 104:15); (v) the fellowship we share, as we join with God's delight in His Son; (vi) the completeness of the work, in that these are only symbols of something that has been perfectly done (Psa 22:31; John 19:30); and (vii) the identification we announce, for we are not asked to look at, touch, or analyse the bread and wine but 'eat' and 'drink', illustrating the fullest possible association with all the emblems mean. By sovereign grace we have come into the full good of the work of Calvary!

How often should we break bread? Scripture lays down no legal command, but it seems clear that New Testament believers met for this purpose each first day of the week (Acts 20:7). That day, already set apart by the Saviour's resurrection, became the Christian's remembrance day. And as it looks back to the cross, so it looks forward to the coming, for Paul tells us that we do all this only 'until He come'. There will always be little companies of saints seeking to obey the Saviour's word until His return. Let us be among them, remembering Him.



## Prayers

The final characteristic of the new believers on the Day of Pentecost was that they continued steadfastly in prayers (Acts 2:42). Since all the other activities listed in this verse were corporate exercises, so must this have been. Bible teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread – these are all the activities of a biblical local church. Of course, private prayer is a vital evidence of genuine conversion. Those saved by grace will instinctively wish to speak to their Saviour. The Lord's proof to Ananias that Saul of Tarsus, arch-enemy of the early disciples, was really a saved man was simply, 'Behold, he prayeth' (Acts 9:11). But one of the great features of a local assembly is that the believers come together to pray.

Because it comes last in the list of spiritual exercises in Acts 2:42 does not mean that the prayer meeting is of negligible importance. Sadly, many seem to view it that way. One has only to count heads at the mid-week prayer meeting – and possibly audible prayers too – to see that this is the Cinderella of Christian gatherings. The sad truth has to be faced: many who dutifully attend the Lord's Supper have no real interest in God's assembly. Like mere 'church-goers' they do their minimal religious observance once a week simply because it is conventional.

How different is the testimony of the Bible! The clear teaching of the Book of the Acts is that the prayer meeting was the powerhouse of the local church. All the saints were there (Acts 1:13-14; 2:41-42); they continued earnestly in corporate prayers (Acts 2:42); it was their natural activity (Acts 4:24-30); it produced marvellous results (Acts 4:31; 12:5,12-17).

Acts 4:23-31 gives the inspired record of an emergency gathering for special prayer, but the principles it illustrates are of abiding value. Let us tease out the lessons. Notice, first, that it was an assembly prayer meeting, for Peter and John returned 'to their own company' (Acts 4:23). It is a joy to pray with any real believers, but our prime responsibility is to the local church where God has placed us. And where better to turn after a chilling confrontation with a world that hates the child of God (Acts 4:5-7)? Get into the habit now of meeting with your assembly to pray. Second, it was an informed prayer meeting. The apostles 'reported all', demonstrating a practical confidence in their brothers and sisters in Christ, and a willingness to share their burdens. Are we too proud to seek the prayer support of our spiritual family? Daniel and Paul knew better (Dan 2:17-18; Eph 6:19-20). Third, it was an immediate prayer meeting, for 'when they heard that' (Acts 4:24), they poured out their hearts to God without delay. There is no more potent activity than prayer. Of course, godly prayer will always lead to godly action, but, as Bunyan puts it, 'you can more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed'.

Fourth, that they 'lifted up their voice' (Acts 4:24) suggests it was an open prayer meeting, with freedom for the males to participate audibly, in line with the Holy Spirit's clear instructions in 1 Timothy 2:1-8. It is as wrong for a male to remain wilfully silent at the gatherings of the saints as it is for a woman to speak. Leading in prayer, you see, is a solemn responsibility as well as a divinely-given privilege. What I personally get out of this meeting is probably closely related to how much I am prepared to put in. Fifth, it was a unanimous prayer meeting, because they acted 'with one accord' (Acts 4:24). Assembling with one common purpose, they approached God's throne to find 'grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:16). And there can be little doubt that a specific 'time of need' is a great stimulus to prayer. Emergencies wonderfully concentrate the mind,

which may be one of the reasons why God brings them into the lives of His people. Those early believers were under threat from the Jewish authorities, and that very crisis motivated their unity, just as the fear of invasion brought Israel together in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4,13. Unanimity can be expressed practically by saying 'Amen' in response to a brother's petition (1 Cor 14:16).

The prayer itself is a model of how to approach God. It is worshipful, giving God His unique place of honour and majesty: 'Lord, Thou art God' (Acts 4:24). Indeed, the very first word, *despotes*, addresses Him as the absolute, unlimited sovereign ruler of the universe. A God of such greatness makes the threats of men seem pathetically futile, putting the whole issue into the correct perspective. The One to whom we pray is creator and controller of all (Acts 4:24,28). No wonder the disciples began with adoration. The prayer is Christ-centred. It upholds the Lord Jesus Christ as the subject of Old Testament prophecy, quoting part of Psalm 2 to underline His exaltation as God's appointed prophet, priest and king. Although He is Jehovah's 'servant' (Acts 4:27, 30 RV), He is the object of this world's hatred, a hatred displayed fully at Calvary. Yet this cannot alter the fact that He is the foundation of all God's dealings with men, whether in grace or in judgment. Christ Jesus is always the executor of the Father's will. All prayer will therefore magnify the person of Christ because only through Him do we have access to the Father (Eph 2:18).

It is quite a challenge to notice how very scriptural those believers were. People who glibly tell us not to quote the word to God 'because He knows it already' will find this, along with other biblical prayers, something of an embarrassment. Indeed, the best way to learn how to speak to God is through studying the word. It is likely that our prayer meetings are barren because we simply do not know the scriptures well enough. Daniel 9:2-3 teaches that the Bible, properly read, will drive us to our knees. The serenity pervading this confident prayer

reminds us that the disciples knew their God was in total control. The victory of Calvary is the great proof, for there man's wickedness was miraculously transmuted into a perfect fulfilment of God's eternal purpose (Acts 4:28). Only a sovereign, omnipotent God who works 'all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph 1:11) is worth approaching, for only such a God can answer prayer.

Finally, their prayer is both specific and intelligible. That is, it deals plainly and openly with the present problem (Acts 4:29), requesting divine aid to accomplish the divine task of evangelism (Acts 4:30). The disciples did not pray that the Lord would change the Sanhedrin's mind, or remove them from the sphere of persecution, or even that He would reiterate His will. The first and second they knew they had no right to expect (John 16:33; 15:20-21) and the third had already been stated with the utmost clarity (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). What they did was pray for help to do what was right. Specificity in public prayer is useful: it keeps the mind alert, holds the hearers' attention, and prevents excess verbiage. No man should be afraid to come to the prayer meeting with a list of definite needs. By intelligible, I mean that the prayer as recorded in scripture makes perfect sense. In a public gathering those who pray must endeavour to be audible (Neh 9:4-5), understandable (1 Cor 14:9), relevant and brief. After all, they are praying on behalf of the entire company. Better take part several times than weary the saints with a tedious prayer.

We all need prayer and we all need to pray. No assembly can be effective for God or honouring to God without a meeting regularly and explicitly convened for prayer. As C H Mackintosh puts it, 'the prayer meeting is the place of expressed need and expected blessing – the place of expressed weakness and expected power.' May we be as committed to this meeting of our local assembly as we are to all the other gatherings, and continue steadfastly in prayer.