

Continuing in the Apostles doctrine

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now to the Duke of Acts on the second chapter at verse 42. Acts chapter 2 and verse 42.

And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine, in fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers.

Now we have in the closing part of this chapter a great picture of the post-Pentecost Christian Church.

We see that that church was composed of a certain kind of person. They had been baptized. Baptized because they were penitents. We're told in verse 38, repent and be baptized. We're told in verse 41 that they received the Apostles' word gladly.

[1 : 09] And if we put all those words together, we find that as far as its membership was concerned, this church was composed of men and women who received God's word with gladness and had been each one for themselves down in the depths of contrition and sorrow.

And their lives had undergone a radical redirectioning. They had repented. They had turned their lives right round.

There had been this tremendous revolution in the life of all the members of the church. And then we see also that this church was composed of people who had all undergone baptism in the Holy Spirit. They were all filled, we are told, with the Holy Spirit in verse 4 and began to speak in other tongues. In other words, this huge gathering of early Christians was, in a most marked and eminent sense, a charismatic community.

It was a charismatic church. A church composed of members, every single one of whom had been baptized in God's Spirit.

[2 : 57] Everyone had been filled with the Spirit. Everyone had received the Spirit of God. And that was God's intention for His church down through all the ages.

That is, church everywhere and always should be a charismatic community. And that every single believer should be a charismatic.

That is, every single Christian has the charisma or the gracious gift of the Spirit of God.

and that gracious gift of charisma affects the whole life of every single Christian congregation.

Every office bearer must have the charismatic gift which his office requires. our worship, our worship, our teaching, our praise, our evangelism, all of these are rooted in the majestic reality of universal and indiscriminate Holy Spirit baptism as an experience undergone on the very threshold of discipleship by every single belief.

[4 : 25] Every one that therefore was a convert. Every one that had his life revolutionized by the grace of God. And every single one was a charismatic.

And I believe tonight that this congregation is in the great biblical sense the charismatic congregation. And I believe that every single living member of God's church in this audience is a charismatic that every true child of God has undergone an indelible and indispensable baptism in the Holy Spirit.

And we should see ourselves as charismatic. In other words the potential and the structures and the aspirations of a Christian church are not to be measured in terms of organization or human intellect or human talent or ability but in terms of the charisma and charismata of the Holy Spirit. they were all men and women whose lives had been transformed by God's grace. They were all charismatic. And then we see also in the closing part of the chapter that this was a tremendously effective and effectual church.

We see that the Lord was adding to the church daily such as should be saved. We see that this church had favor in verse 47 with the whole neighboring community.

[6 : 11] We see in verse 43 that there was tremendous respect for the church fear came upon every soul. In other words here was a living vibrant church making this tremendous impact this church which had a high profile in their own particular situation and one that was in the most dynamic sense a growing church.

Now if we pause again we have seen those three great characteristics. It was the church whose members had had their lives revolutionized in the experience of conversion.

it was a church in which every single member was endowed with the power of the Spirit of God. It was a church which was in the highest and most harmonic sense an effective church.

And yet you will see that in between those points there is this great description of verse 42. a description that lies in between the affirmation of the penitential charismatic character of the church and the highly effective and dramatic impact which the church was made.

In other words I could ask what is the life of a charismatic church like? and I would say it is like the church of verse 42.

[8 : 01] And I could ask what kind of church is going to make this mighty impact made by the apostolic church?

And I would say it is the church of verse 42. And I want for a moment tonight to focus upon this very elementary statement of what a Christian congregation ought to be.

The attestation of our charismatic status is that we continue steadfastly in the apostles' teaching in fellowship in breaking of bread and in prayers.

And similarly the great precondition of evangelistic impact is that we continue in the apostles' teaching in fellowship in breaking of bread and in prayers.

let's reflect for a moment upon these four great qualities. We see first of all that they continue steadfastly in the apostles' teaching.

[9 : 23] Now I know and maybe at some personal cost that it is appallingly easy for us to have a built intellectual Christianity it is the way to all the faith of devils in which there is nothing but a mere academic grasp of the truth.

It is so terrible as it is untratchingly impossible for us to be characterized by nothing more than a cold and the dead orthodoxy.

And I've been bold enough already to suggest that one of her great problems and parallels of the denomination is that we are more concerned with truth than we are with love.

And I have suggested because I believe it to be true that that is the universal of the biblical order. I believe it is more important for a church to be characterized by love than even to be characterized by the truth.

But it would be perilous nonetheless to minimize the importance of truth. when the apostle Paul said to the Ephesian church to bid on the whole armor of God the first thing he said was having your loins girded about with the truth.

[11 : 00] He said again as they were engaged in this great war with the devil struggling for their spiritual survival they had to have the sword of the spirit which was the word of God.

When the Lord prayed for the sanctification of his church he said sanctify them by the truth. And I believe that although there is always the peril of a dead orthodoxy there can be no authentic discipleship without the great mission which is given to us in Christian truth let us remember after all that the truth we are concerned with is the truth of God's self disclosure the truth of what God has revealed what God has told us about himself and if we pause to reflect we shall surely quickly see that it is close to blasphemy to dismiss as irrelevant or as unimportant to a

Christian life those great words in which God has delineated himself for us that truth must be precious and we see that these people they continued steadfastly to come to the teaching you bear in mind that at this point there were no office bearers in the church but the apostles no pastors and no teachers and all the teaching was being done by the apostles and these early in these very young Christians they were coming to the apostles for the teaching they were hungry for teaching they were absolutely desperate for teaching now it may be terribly elementary but

I'm not at all sure but we have to ask ourselves tonight just how true it is of ourselves that we have continued steadfastly in the desire to be taught it seems to me that if there is one area where the three churches come listened it is that whatever is wrong with us we are well taught and well grounded in the faith and it is my experience as I compare the church of my birth and the church that I love with many other churches in the United Kingdom and beyond that that complacency is

very very far from being justified and I believe that we are in grave danger of becoming an anti-intellectual and an untaught and a non-theological church largely because we assume that whatever weaknesses we may have in evangelism in the depth of our experience we have no weaknesses so far as our teachability is concerned and so far as our openness for instruction is concerned and I have nothing to lose when I suggest that that is a grave miscalculation and that there is an impatience with teaching and an impatience with theology and impatience with the study of the word of God which bodes for the church it has come to the stage where in many areas of the church one is to fall over backwards to be simple to the point of simplicity to be brief to the point of absurdity because the people are no longer hungering and thirsting for the sincere mercy of the word and that is the most elementary point made by this great picture they were continuing steadfastly waiting upon the teaching of the apostles and I'm asking how is it with ourselves under personal bible study do we search the scriptures do we try to unravel its doctrines do we read our confession of faith looking up and checking up all the proof texts do we read elementary books on christian doctrine on christian ethics do we pour over these and the longing to be taught but above all do we wait upon the preaching do we wait upon the post ministry longing to be taught they continue steadfastly waiting upon the apostolic teaching they were longing to hear more about god more about christ more about the holy spirit more about justification by faith more about sanctification more about the cross more about the atonement more about the sovereignty of god more about the second coming more about heaven they wanted to be taught and any living church is going to have that great characteristic that we turn the whole thing around it is tremendously important that we mobilize the church for evangelism it is important that every lay member every single person in the church be motivated and constrained to engage in the work of personal testimony and personal witness but there is a grave peril that we shall make a division a distinction between witness and knowledge of the truth a distinction which is going to be absolutely fatal to the effectiveness of our testimony some of you maybe all of us will recall that in the recent war in the

[19 : 38] South Atlantic we lost the destroyer shettles and I remember being struck when I read somewhere that when that ship was launched and its specifications were made public certain experts in ship design were appalled at its poor armor and its poor armament it was built for speed and it was sadly inadequate in the capability of defending itself and one expert said quite pointedly I hope they'll never let her out alone I hope they'll never let her out alone now we must pause as we mobilise so excellent young people for the work of high-wis and by-wis missions and every similar enterprise and I think we must have the same reservation one might almost in some situations say

I hope he is never let out alone because there is a distinction being drawn between the active Christian and the contemplative Christian between the evangelist and the theologian that is totally unbiblical truth I'm saying in other words that we cannot witness unless we know the truth a housewife cannot tell her neighbor the elementary simplicities of God's gospel unless she has been taught that truth an untaught church an unreflective church cannot be an evangelistic church unless we know our position unless we know the reason for our position unless we know the arguments by which we defend our own position then it were much better that we were not let out alone there can be no testimony there can be no proclamation and there can be no witness unless first of all we are properly grounded in the truth and I fear that there is such a reaction to the peril of a dead orthodoxy that we are neglecting this primary emphasis that these people were adhering steadfastly to the teaching they were longing to be taught and the second thing is this they continued in fellowship now fellowship to us is a very vague and largely an undefined concert we speak of having fellowship in the church fellowship with God we speak even sometimes of fellowship let's if we come for a moment right down to the basic and elementary meaning of this word it means they continued sharing they continued having things in common the word used of the apostle Peter when he had the vision and he was rebuked by God to say to him that which God has cleansed call not thou common it's the word common we have here they continued in fellowship they continued sharing they continued having all things in common in other words they weren't living as individuals they were living as fellowship they were living as family they were living as sharers they were living having all things in common let me be more particular they shared all their earthly possessions they practiced initially a complete and simple communism in which all the possessions were totally shared that didn't last long and that is not

God's permanent will for his church and here it is a reminder to us that we are called before God to share with the whole church such as we have all the world's resources our wealth our homes our transport any economic social assets that we may possess we are to share them we are to use them for the good of the kingdom of God we are to have them in common we bear in mind that the law of the tithe said not that the tent was

God's but that the hall was God's and that it may be the danger that we imagine that once we are given to the collection our responsibility is over and over against that we have this great picture of a community which took the view that the assets the total assets of every single member were assets of the whole congregation are to be deployed in the service of the kingdom of God none of them said that any of the things he possessed was his own it was all to be used for the people of God and for the kingdom of

[27 : 11] God they were sharing in all the material position again they shared they had in common their spiritual gifts each one had his own gift each one had his own charisma some had great gifts and some had small gifts and some had many gifts and some had only one gift but all the gifts were indispensable and all were used for the benefit and for the glory of the kingdom of God and the well being of all the other members and we have to learn to do the same view that none of us has a gift for himself that all the gifts we have all the talents all the endowments all the aptitudes be they few or many be they small or great they are to be shared it may even be that in the deployment of those gifts we should take the view that the decision is not a role that it's not my responsibility to decide how and where my gift should be used that a man does not have sovereign control and sovereign disposal over his own gifts because these gifts belong to the body they belong to the whole

Christian church again those people share their burdens bury one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ I know that sometimes it is a wisdom to keep things to ourselves but there is surely an undue sensitive mess an undue isolation an undue anonymity in the church of God there is nothing more touching than to discover that many of God's people have for years suffered in loneliness and suffered in isolation bearing some burden bearing it alone bearing it unsupported the burden of family grief a burden of family sorrow a burden maybe of secret pain and secret ill health the burden of some financial problem the burden of some spiritual problem maybe there is some member here year after year no assurance and yet hiding that solemn and debilitating condition behind a smiling face and no one knows the last thing we want in the church is invasion of privacy the last thing we want is men acting as busy bodies but we surely are here to share too often men and women have stood alone making critical decisions feeling unable to consult anybody as to the steps they ought to take we should learn to spread and learn to share the

Lord so that there is none of that loneliness and none of that isolation in the Christian family we bear one and other's burdens and so fulfill the law trust that is remember there is a humility that bears the burden there is a humility that shows the concern there is a humility that asks what is wrong but there is another humility too that is willing for the burden to be shared that is willing for other people to know that is willing to disclose and willing to inform and willing to spread the load and maybe very often it is not the sufferer it is not the observer is to blame but the sufferer is to blame because in a perverse pride we are refusing to let the load be shared you see all so merversly in

Gethsemane no man had a more unique role than Christ no man had a more unique burden than Christ no man was more eminent no man was more distant from ordinary mortals and yet when the Lord of glory went to agonise in the garden he took with them Peter and James and John and they were spectators of the sorrow and they knew how he felt even although they failed him it took them to be with them and I think that we have to face the challenge of that of that willingness to let people know that we're having difficulty coping that we're not super men and super women that we're not able to bear the whole Lord alone but we are sharing they continued in the fellowship having all things common let me add to one thing more fellowship means that we share insights

I come back again to this whole problem of her lack of theological knowledge her lack of doctrinal awareness her lack of familiarity with the truth and the word of God and I said we must read the literature such as we can we must engage in Bible study as much as we can we must wait on the preaching as much as we can but is it not all so important that we should get together in a fellowship of discussion to share the insights the knowledge of our own Bible study to benefit from the insights of others and their Bible study that we should share what God has taught us and should benefit from what God has taught others we have to engage in that fellowship which is the

exchange of truth the exchange of views the willingness to be contradicted to be exposed in the absurdity and in the untenableness of many other own positions and let me relate that again to the whole business of witness unless we first of all become skilled in verbalizing in setting words to the truth in the intimacy and tolerance of

[35 : 36] Christian fellowship unless we learn to verbalize the truth in the intimacy of the church unless we learn to speak it and to defend it among friends then it's at our peril that we venture out among our enemies because we are called upon to go and hold forth the word of light to a crooked and perverse nation unless we are skilled in verbalizing unless we are able as Christians however humble to find words to express our praise we are not going to be effective witness and unless we acquire that skill in throwing the truth about from one to the other in the intimacy of the church then we lack a fundamental training for evangelism we have to share the truth and so you of this church it was adhering steadfastly waiting eagerly upon the teaching of the apostles it was characterized by shame and then thirdly it was characterized by the breaking of bread now that breaking of bread refers at one level to the

Lord suffer and all I want to say on that is this it is a reminder to us that the Lord's Supper is an indispensable element in a healthy Christian life in other words it is not a luxury it's not superfluous it's not an addendum that some of us in our pretended humility can afford to do without in other words if you say that man is rebuking Christians who don't become communicants you are exactly right I am doing precisely that it would be mad it would be perilous for us to say you don't need the teaching perilous to say you don't need the fellowship perilous to say you don't need the prayers it is equally perilous and equally foolish to say you don't need the breaking of bread there is not a single disciple alive who has a divine mandate to violate

God's directive this do do in remembrance of me I don't believe that I have such a dispensation and I don't believe you have such a dispensation I don't believe that I could live an authentic Christian life or a normal Christian life without the Lord's supper and I don't believe that you can lead such a life either I think in other words the deposition is biblically untenable and I'm saying that not to be a communicant it's not a mark of humility it is either a mark of grave misunderstanding or it is a mark of defiance and in that your position

I want you to abandon it at once and to become a regular and a biblical Christian because we need the breaking of bread just as we in those other great aspects of privilege mentioned in this particular text I let me descend as it may seem from that to this the breaking of bread didn't refer simply to the Lord's supper but to the larger fellowship meal of which the Lord's supper was a part of which it was indeed normally the conclusion in other words you get this almost banal fact that those Christians often ate together nothing so banal as it is it is again a great sign of intimacy and the fellowship of this community they were much in each other's company they did not see each other only outside the church in the exchange of brief and formal courtesies.

It wasn't a matter simply of weekly greeting, but they ate together. It was all part of the sharing.

[41 : 09] Now I'm not going to take the risk of being too particular on the application of that. But I have said that our homes belong to the people of God.

Our homes should be the location of Christian fellowship. We should have that fellowship even in this precise way in the joy of eating together.

And in that context, sharing our burdens, sharing our insights, sharing our gifts.

Now I don't think that we should concede to the so-called charismatic movement what are called house churches.

I believe that there should be far greater use made by the people of God in the homes that God has given them, not as substitutes for the public gatherings the apostles taught in the temple's precincts, but that when men plead for more informal fellowship and more informal discussion, then the ideal context is in the homes of our people around a meal shared with other Christians.

[42 : 48] They continued in the breaking of bread. And then, at last there was this, they continued in the prayers. Now it's not only that they continued praying in their own private homes and their own closets.

That is an immensely important Christian practice and privilege. for this is concerned with the prayers in the church.

The prayers of the gathered church expressing its fellowship on those people who had repented, those people who had been filled with the Spirit, those people whose witness was so tremendously effective, those were people who attended the public prayers of the Christian community.

Now I have great sympathy with the man of our denomination who have to face the terrible strain as it is for me as for them of engaging in public prayer.

But it is a serious impoverishment a deprivation that they are imposing upon the congregation if they are absent from the prayer meeting.

[44 : 20] And it is an impoverishment of their own selves. It is mandatory that as we wait upon the teaching, as we share in the fellowship, as we sit at the breaking of bread, it is equally mandatory for spiritual health that we are present at the prayers.

Those great communal prayers of the people of God. And I think again that there are many problems in the structures of our prayer meetings.

Maybe we pray too long. Maybe our prayers are too wide ranging, too lacking in the precise and the particular of enlightened intercession.

And I believe that we have much to learn in this whole field from other parts of the church of the living God. But none of these things can be pledged as an excuse for absenting yourselves from the public prayers.

Now, I know that in many instances you have excellent excuses, excellent reasons, the force of which God will see to the nth degree.

[45 : 44] And now, I know that in many instances you have excellent excuses, accident reasons, the force of which God will see to the nth degree.

All I am saying is that us all search yourselves and ask ourselves whether there is religion in this whole connection as we ought to be. Now, I must bring this to a close.

We see in the closing verses that this community was a highly effective community. We see that they found favour throughout the community.

We see that the fear of them fell on all the people. We see that the Lord was adding to the church daily. It was a growing church.

The house was pausing over because we don't seem to be a growing church. And I believe that this church was a growing church because it was an outgoing church.

[46 : 51] Its apostles were preaching. Its people were bearing testimony in their own homes and to their own friends and to their own neighbours and as I'm sure to their own enemies as well.

But behind all that there was the quality of the life of the church itself. And that is what I want to leave you.

That if we are going to make a transforming and reforming but upon our land and upon our day we are first and foremost to look to the quality of our own collective congregational life and our own collective denominational life.

We have to look to the teaching. We have to look to the fellowship. We have to look to the breaking of bread. We have to look to the prayer meetings.

There was some most intimate connection between the quality of the congregational life and the impact which these people made.

[48 : 10] There was the fact that they didn't spend the whole time out but they came back from their exertions into the comfort and the inspiration of the fellowship.

And they went out inspired by the fellowship into the world around them. The quality of what they had and the quality of what they were bore most directly and most intimately and most intimately upon their testimony and upon the impact that they made.

You are the light of the world. Let the light shine. What must the light do to shine? The light must be light.

light. And that's all. And I'm saying that if indeed we become an authentic and totally biblically controlled church then the Lord will add to our number those who are being saved.

of course it is the sovereignty of God. Of course also there was their own evangelist and their own heroic and their own sacrificial testimony.

[49 : 41] And I still come out of this. What kind of church was it that was growing? It was a church which continued in the apostles' teaching fellowship in breaking of bread and in prayers.

I am sure that I have the privilege tonight of speaking to a congregation that conforms in large measure to those great ideals. But you would agree I hope too that you have not yet attained and that we're not yet perfect.

Let's press on to the mark. Let's move on to this great perfection in the quality of our own congregational lives.

Let the pulpit know please let the pulpit know how desperate you are to be taught and get close to one another so that you live as the family of God and you share.

You have the humility to let other people know your burdens and you have the grace and courage to bear in measure the burdens of others and may it be it we shall hear and hear continually that being that kind of church the Lord is adding to you daily such as are being saved.

[51 : 22] saved. And just one word as I close to maybe those one or two to whom this message is irrelevant because they have not yet come into God's church.

You see how it is in verse 37 of the same chapter man and brethren what shall we do? Maybe one soul here tonight who is maybe envying God's people maybe who longs himself herself to share in all the privileges of God's church.

Men and brethren what shall we do to become Christians? And Peter's great answer repent turn to God in Christ and it's not something to be done simply as hypothetical long term purposes but that Christ who here tonight is saying come to me that we submit your lives to him that we fall that his feet and acknowledge his sovereignty acknowledge his lordship acknowledge his God let us pray amen o lord we ask thee to use thy word for the glory of thy name we pray thee to have mercy upon our souls and to forgive us o lord that we are not what we should be and that therefore our testimony and our impact are not what they should be either may we know thy power that power which enables us to perform what thou hast commanded us to do and as we are told tonight, O Lord, to be this kind of church which hungers to be taught and which is characterized by sharing and by fellowship and by praying may it be, Lord, that we shall hear not only the words of man's demands, man's strident affirmation of the law but even God's gracious affirmation of the law only but may we experience that power out of which obedience can come and for any Lord who are present who are not thine, may it be that they too may be pricked in their consciences in their hearts as were those men of old and may they ask what they must do and may it be that thy word shall address them clearly and cogently and compellingly that they may be added from this moment onwards to the church of the living God hear us for our saviour's sake, amen ■ ■ ■