

Chapter 6: Bountiful Sowing and Reaping

Acts 2:42–47

In Acts 2:41, Luke told us of the inclusion of three thousand souls who had been added to the company of believers. What will these souls do? How will they operate? What challenges await them? Although the rest of the Book of Acts will narrate the early history of the expansion of the church of Jesus Christ, Luke pauses to give us a brief summary statement of the main emphases of life in the church. What we see here is a vision for the church where people invest themselves heavily—in their time, their talents, and their treasures—and find great blessing from their investment. In this passage, we learn that *whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully* (2 Cor. 9:6) in relation to life in the church.

Slow and Steady Growth (Acts 2:42–43)

As Luke gives us an initial “sketch” of life within the thriving early church, he begins by telling us what they “were devoting” themselves to with a verbal tense that emphasizes “the continuance” of four actions.¹ The grammar of this list is simple, but it is unclear what Luke means by it. On the one hand, each element is set as a distinct object of *what* they were “devoting themselves” to.² On the other hand, Luke puts the word “and” to connect the first and second items, and then the third and fourth items, and it is unclear how important these two pairs are. Some see each of these items as distinct, “a description of the ministry of these disciples to one another in a variety of contexts.”³ Others believe that the two uses of the word “and” indicate “two basic groupings: teaching and fellowship, which includes breaking of bread and prayer. If so, the teaching includes the practical art of sharing life with each other at all levels.”⁴ Still others see entirely different ways of organizing this list, understanding the last two items (“breaking of bread” and “prayer”) are further explanations of

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 115.

² Each of the four items in the list are set in the dative case (i.e., “to the apostles’ teaching,” “to the fellowship,” “to the breaking of bread,” and “to the prayers”). Furthermore, “The acts are each highlighted with articles—‘the’ teaching, ‘the’ fellowship, ‘the’ breaking of bread, and ‘the’ prayers.” (Bock, *Acts*, 149–50, citing D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996], 225.)

³ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 115; Bock, *Acts*, 149–50, citing G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, vol 1: *Einleitung, Kommentar zu Kap. 1, 1–8,40*. Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 5. 1 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1980), 286.

what Luke means by the second item (“fellowship”).⁵ I think the strongest argument is to be made that Luke’s structure intentionally reflects two pairs; however, this does not widely affect the interpretation of those items.

The first item in the list, then, is the “apostles’ teaching.” Bruce helpfully connects what this term meant to how the church today is to access this teaching in the Bible: “The apostolic teaching was authoritative because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles. In due course this apostolic teaching took written shape in the [New Testament] scriptures.”⁶ Thus, it continues to be a chief mark of the church for us to give our attention to the teaching of the Scriptures of the Old *and* the New Testaments. There is very little disagreement about the interpretation of this term among biblical commentators.

The second item, then, becomes more difficult, especially because the word is so unclear: “the fellowship.” As Bock notes, “This is the only use of this term in Acts.”⁷ As noted above, some try to interpret this term on the basis of the next two terms: “the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” If so, then this might be understood as their fellowship of gathered worship, where the Lord’s Supper was celebrated (“the breaking of the bread”) and prayers were offered. Given Luke’s use of “and” to connect the apostles’ teaching with fellowship, and then the breaking of the bread with the prayers, I think it is better to understand “fellowship” more broadly as related to the whole social life of the church: “mutual society and fellowship, unto alms, and unto other duties of brotherly fellowship.”⁸ Thus, we see that the church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching, but not as the Gnostics who put all their emphasis on the accumulation of “knowledge.” In the church, the teaching unfolded the person and work of Christ, and also laid emphasis to the social responsibilities that the church had toward one another, based on their varying relationships. We see this kind of connection numerous places in the New Testament, but it may perhaps be clearest in Paul’s letters to the Romans or to the Ephesians, where the first chapters teach doctrine (Rom. 1–11; Eph. 1–3), while the latter chapters apply that doctrine to practical living within the church (Rom. 12–16; Eph. 4–6).

The third item of “the breaking of the bread” is somewhat disputed because Luke repeats a similar phrase later in the passage (v. 46), and some commentators insist on interpreting these two uses very differently. Generally, commentators see this use as referring to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, while some believe that the later use refers only to social meals.⁹ Others wish to bridge the gap between social meals and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper by noting that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper often followed a joint meal.¹⁰ For me, the connection (“and”)

⁵ “The key may be to see the terms ‘breaking of bread’ and ‘prayer’ in apposition to ‘fellowship.’ The meaning would then be that they devoted themselves to a fellowship that was expressed in their mutual meals and in their prayer life together. If this is so, then the meaning of the third element, ‘the breaking of bread,’ would be further clarified. Joined with fellowship, it would likely carry the cultic sense of a meal with the Lord, participating in the Lord’s Supper.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 119.)

⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 79.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 150.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:126.

⁹ For the positions of those who see different meanings to these usages, see Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:132 and Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 120–21.

¹⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, 179.

between the breaking of the bread and the prayers suggests that Luke is talking about worship in the second pair of items, with the specific celebration of the Lord's Supper in view.

Fourth, the “prayers” of the church could refer only to seasons of prayer within the church.¹¹ I think it better here, though, to understand a broader meaning for “prayers,” as Lenski suggests: “i.e., to the worship in their own gatherings, 4:24, etc., and to the stated devotions in the Temple, 3:1, etc. It seems that this word is used to designate the entire service or worship and not merely the praying. We thus see how Luke first pairs teaching and the fellowship it involves and secondly the Sacrament and the worship which parallels it.”¹² That is, the two pairs are designed to set out practical teaching and worship as the two activities to which those in the church “were devoting” themselves.

Luke's description of the effect of these efforts is fascinating: “And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (v. 43). To begin, it is important to note that the word for “awe” is φόβος (*phobos*), which is often translated as “fear.” Further, the phrase “every soul” almost certainly refers to those outside the church, given Peter then distinguishes this group from “all who believed” in the next verse (v. 44).¹³ There is also an important parallel in Acts 5:12–13 where the reaction to “many signs and wonders” from the apostles is similar awe: “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.”¹⁴ We should also remember the connection to the passage from Joel 2 that Peter quoted earlier in this chapter, which talked about the “wonders” and “signs” that would accompany “the great and magnificent” “day of the Lord” (Acts 2:19–20). Bruce writes, “just as the miracles of Jesus when He was on earth were ‘signs’ of the kingdom of God, the miracles performed by His apostles partook of the same character.”¹⁵

Beyond the parallel to the signs Jesus performed, this description echoes a common statement in the Old Testament about the fear that God would bring on surrounding nations to protect his people. Thus, God brought fear on the nations to protect the patriarchs: “And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” (Gen. 35:5). Further, God brought fear on the peoples to protect Israel as they made their way through the wilderness (Ex. 15:14–16) and promised to confuse the nations in Canaan with fear upon entry into the promised land: “This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you” (Deut. 2:25; see also Ex. 23:27; Deut. 11:25). Rahab testified to this fear among her people as they heard reports of Israel's victories across the Jordan (Josh. 2:9–11), and that fear multiplies when the peoples hear that the Lord dried up the waters of the Jordan to bring his people into the land (Josh. 5:1). In light of these Old Testament parallels, we see that this “awe” that “came upon every soul” was not just intrigued curiosity, but a sense of dread over what God was doing in front of them—a sense of dread that anticipates the horrors of those who will face the Lord's Judgment on the final installment of the Day of

¹¹ “As for ‘the prayers’ in which they took part together, the primary reference is probably to their own appointed seasons for united prayer within the new community, although we know that they attended the public Jewish prayers as well (*cf.* Ch. 3:1).” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 79–80.)

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 117.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 117.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 120.

¹⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 80.

the Lord. So, while this fear did not lead outsiders to convert, it performed the important function of causing “men to stand in a doubt, and so, consequently, doth, as it were, so bind them hand and foot, that they dare not hinder the Lord’s work.”¹⁶

No Gutting for Profit (Acts 2:44–45)

Luke writes, “And 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” (vv. 44–45). These are extraordinary verses that build on Jesus’ own teaching (Luke 12:33; 18:22).¹⁷ Unfortunately, many have missed the point of this passage by arguing that the early church practiced communism. Even a solid commentator like Bruce suggests that “the members of the new community, living together thus with a deep sense of their unity in the Messiah, gave up the idea of private property....This pooling of property could be maintained only when their sense of the unity of the Spirit was exceptionally active; as soon as the flame began to burn a little lower, the attempt to maintain the communal life was beset with serious difficulties (cf. Chs. 4:32–5:11).”¹⁸ In my opinion, Bruce goes too far here, since the story of Ananias and Sapphira makes clear that the early church did retain personal property: “While [a property] remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4). Lenski wisely comments, “This was not communism but the product of something that communism does not understand....As needy cases arose they were taken care of in this manner.”¹⁹

I think we might understand two aspects that fit together. (1) This may indeed mark an extraordinary season of life in the church, which can bring with it extraordinary measures. Therefore, these seasons may have *practices* that are never meant to become *rules*. (2) If these practices become rules (whether written down [*de jure*] or in force as unwritten expectations [*de facto*]), then legalism is sure to spring up, where perception of one’s keeping the *rule* becomes more important than the true generosity that God requires. What we see here is the difference between the slavish, detailed tithing of mint and rue and every herb practiced by the Pharisees (Luke 11:42) and the abundant generosity of a man like Boaz, who went out of his way to take Ruth under his wings before he ever knew anything about her other than that she was caring for Naomi (Ruth 2:6–12).

We might further understand this by way of an illustration of the body, which is frequently used as an image of the church (e.g., Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 5). You hear sometimes of someone who needs some kind of surgical treatment—perhaps a reconstructive surgery after a bad injury, or perhaps a surgery to remove cancer. In those surgeries, sometimes a graft of tissue is required to fill in the gaps. In such cases, the best source of tissue comes from the patient’s own body, since the body is less likely to reject or react adversely to its own tissue. Yet, this does not mean that we should all stop and mutilate our own bodies to set aside tissue grafts for some theoretical need in the future—that would only damage our bodies without serving any specific need. Yet, we naturally recognize that,

¹⁶ “Like as there be some at this day who will willingly be ignorant of the gospel; or, at least, are so holden with the cares of this world, that they cannot thoroughly join themselves unto Christ; and yet they are not so hard-hearted but that they confess that the truth is on our side; and, therefore, they rest, as it were, in the middle way, neither do they favor the cruelty of the wicked, because they are afraid to strive against God.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:128–29.)

¹⁷ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 163.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 80–81.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 119.

where one member of the body is in need, and where another member of the body has excess tissue, it makes perfect sense to sacrifice from the one member with an excess in order to make up the lack in the needy member. In the same way, because communism is a materialistic philosophy, it mutilates societies by destroying high functioning members without actually helping members in need. What we see here in Acts is not communism, then, but an eagerness of individual members to sacrifice what they have in excess in order to fill up what is lacking among fellow members who have needs. This recognizes both the integrity of individual boundaries, while also honoring our mutual connectedness as members of the same body.

No Get-Rich-Quick Schemes (Acts 2:46–47)

In the final two verses of this chapter, Luke expands on the initial portrait. There are very similar words and phrases as what we saw in the first section, but these two verses make an important contribution to expand our understanding of life in this early, vibrant stage in the history of the church. So, Luke begins by again stressing the repeated, constant action of the church. What the ESV has, “And day by day,” might be stated slightly more precisely as, “Each day also....” Then, what the ESV has as “attending” is actually the same word that appeared in v. 42, translated there as “devoted themselves.” In this case, they devoted themselves what the ESV translates as “together.” This translation, however, is a weak rendering of the word ὁμοθυμαδόν (*homothudon*), which derives from ὁμός (*homos*; “one”) and θυμός (*thumos*; spiritedness, impulse, or even wrath). Polhill captures the range of what this word means in the Book of Acts well:

The word translated “with one accord”... is commonly used in Acts to express unity of purpose and particularly applies to the “one heart and mind” (4:32) of the Christian fellowship cf. 1:14; 2:1; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25). F. Stagg, however, points out that single-mindedness is not always a good thing. The same word is used of the angry mobs that rushed upon Stephen (7:57) and Paul (19:29). For the Christian community, fellowship and unity of purpose are salutary only when rooted in fellowship with Christ and in the unity of his Spirit.²⁰

Here, Luke is telling us that “Each day also, devoting themselves to a single impulse” (my translation), whether they were “in the temple” or “in each home.”²¹ There was a spirited vigor that animated the early church in a single direction, no matter whether they were in public worship or conducting their private lives in the home.

When Luke speaks of their being “in the temple,” he clearly has public worship in mind, as the first verse of the next chapter indicates: “Now Peter and John were going up *to the temple* at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1). In part, the early church was animated with spirited vigor to attend public worship—conducted for the moment in the temple, until circumstances forced believers to move their worship

²⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 121, citing F. Stagg, *The Book of Acts: The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman, 1955), 67–70.

²¹ For the translation of “impulse,” see Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 706. BDAG suggests “with one mind/purpose/impulse” for ὁμοθυμαδόν.

elsewhere.²² Also, as the next chapter shows, they attended the (Jewish) temple each day for the same reason that Peter had preached during the (Jewish) feast of Pentecost: namely, that Jesus had sent them to bear witness to him, beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8; 3:9, 12ff; 5:12, 20–21).²³

In their homes, Luke tells us that they were “breaking bread,” so that “they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people” (vv. 46b–47a). Although “breaking bread” here is very similar to “breaking bread” in v. 42, the phrase there was “breaking *the* bread” (τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου; *tē klasei tou artou*), while this is “breaking also (in each home) bread” (κλῶντές τε κατ’ οἶκον ἄρτον; *klōntes te kat’oikon artou*), or, with the additional words stripped out, “breaking...bread” (κλῶντές...ἄρτον; *klōntes...arton*). So, the first phrase refers to breaking *the* bread (i.e., the bread of the Lord’s body in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper), whereas the second phrase refers simply to *breaking bread*. Thus, in v. 46, Luke has in view the sharing of ordinary meals.²⁴

The next phrase clarifies this point, as they “received their food with glad and generous heart.” The word for “receiving” is from μεταλαμβάνω (*metalambanō*, which indicates not only that they were *receiving* (λαμβάνω; *lambanō*), but that they were *sharing* (i.e., receiving *with*: μεταλαμβάνω; *metalambanō*). It is not merely the eating, but the eating *together* that Luke stresses here. Furthermore, what the ESV translates as “generous” hearts is a word that means “simplicity” as opposed to complexity. The idea is not so much about what they *gave* as about *how they received* their meals: namely, they were not trying to leech off the system or to make inordinate gains. They were simple in what they desired and grateful for what they received. That is, they were not so much thinking about their own desires and impulses, but the whole group was unified in a single impulse together.

On this point, Bock’s words are worth considering:

Much in Western culture drives us to an individualism that undercuts this development of community. We are taught to have things our way and that being able to have our individual needs catered to is how to measure the success of an organization. In our culture, our individual needs and rights come before any needs of the group. The biblical picture is not of what someone receives from the church, although one does receive a great deal, but of what one gives and how one contributes to it. The portrait of the early church in Acts shows that community and the welfare of the group were a priority. This attitude reflected spiritual maturity that allowed the church to grow. In the case of this earliest community, the believers’ preaching was matched by their own community, making a powerful testimony for their mission. When the early church said that God cared, the care they gave their own demonstrated this.²⁵

²² “The separation from the Temple and the Jews generally developed gradually and naturally. Until it was effected, the Christians used the Temple which Jesus had honored and which typified him (John 2:19–21) as they had used it before. Its spacious colonnades and halls afforded them room for their own assemblies.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 120.)

²³ “...they were continually in the temple, that they might gain such unto Christ.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:132.)

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:132; Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 120–21.

²⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 155.

In this way, belonging to a church is not like buying an insurance policy. With an insurance policy, we ask ourselves, “What is the *minimum* I can contribute to ensure the *maximum* benefits?” In the church, it’s the inverse: I stand to *gain* the most by *giving* the most to the church to which I belong. This is not a prosperity gospel message (“Give your money here and expect God to give you far more money in return!”), since the emphasis in that message is still on what *I* can get from this deal, rather than what I am able to give. Rather, life in the church calls us to give our whole selves—and all that we possess—so that we might find rich blessings in the body of Christ.

Instead, the members of the church were simply “praising God and having favor with all the people” (v. 47a). In addition to the fact that the believers were praising God, we see also the fruit of what we noticed above: namely, that the fear that God brought on the rest of his people’s surrounding neighbors (v. 43) is for the protective benefit of his own. Still, this does not mean that no one else was saved during this time. Quite the opposite: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47b). We see the growth of the church here, but Luke also reveals the source of the growth: the Lord. As Calvin observes, “For the ministers do no good by planting or watering, unless he make their labor effectual by the power of his Spirit, (1 Corinthians 3).”²⁶ What an exciting moment it must have been to be a part of the life of the church! Yet, the Lord lays out here a vision for the fruitfulness that he has appointed even in our day.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the early church “devote themselves” to doing (v. 42)? What was the “apostles’ teaching,” and where can we find it today? What do you think Luke means by “the fellowship”? What is “the breaking of bread”? What should we understand in “the prayers”? How would you summarize the emphases of the early church in these broad brush strokes? How did the outside world respond (v. 43)?
2. Why do some people think that vv. 44–45 suggest some kind of socialism or communism as the ideal setup of the early church? What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira suggest about the ongoing validity of the principles of private property (Acts 5:4)? How, then, ought we to understand the nature of this generosity? How should we pursue this kind of generosity in the life of the church today?
3. How does the list of vv. 46–47 compare with the list we saw in vv. 42–43? What is similar, and what is different? How is the word behind what the ESV translates as “together” used through the rest of the Book of Acts? What kind of “breaking of bread” do we see here (v. 46)? How does worship characterize the lives of believers here (vv. 46a, 47a)? What kind of effects do the activities of the early church have on the outside world (v. 47b)?
4. What kind of an investment do you make in your local church? What kind of return do you think that you receive from your investment? What kind of a return from your investment should you expect? How does what we see here help us to be patient toward slow and steady investments in ordinary ministry and fellowship within the church? How does the community of the church bless you? How do you bless the community of the church?

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:133–34.