



CONTINUALLY DEVOTED: SHARING MEALS

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The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) was a day like no other, either before or since.

Jesus Christ had been crucified and buried, then rose from the dead on the third day and spent the next month preparing His stunned disciples for their mission of leading and equipping the church to take the Good News Message of the coming Kingdom of Heaven around the world.

When I say “the coming Kingdom of Heaven” I do not refer to a Kingdom yet undiscovered and waiting to be realized in some distant future. Jesus said, “*The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 10:7) and “*The Kingdom of God is in your midst*” (Luke 17:21). This Kingdom, His Kingdom, was introduced by Jesus and began to be present through the power of the Holy Spirit that was upon Him.

Before Jesus ascended back to His Father in Heaven, He told His disciples, “*It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you*” (John 16:7). Then He said, “*You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*” (Acts 1:5).

And when the Day of Pentecost arrived, “*they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance*” (Acts 2:1-4).

That same day, when Peter stood up to explain what God was doing by pouring out His Spirit on the believers, 3,000 men and women believed in the Christ he proclaimed and were converted on the spot, baptized in His name, and entered into a life of spiritual formation that visibly shifted their destiny forever.

Dr. Luke, who authored Acts, described four elements of this visible shift:

Acts 2:42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

This month, we are considering each of these spiritually seismic shifts:

- The apostles' teaching
- Fellowship
- The breaking of bread
- Prayer

We will consider what each one means, how we may engage each one for ourselves by faith, and how each may be seen by the watching world around us.

Why is this theme so important? Because once each spiritual shift *becomes visible* in our lives, then we gain opportunities to explain its root/source/reason and implications to people around us.

Too often, we want to tell others the story of Jesus *before* they have been able to witness its impact and effect in *our* lives. Without the groundwork of visible spiritual formation, our words sound like mere stories—unrooted, shallow opinions, that bear no fruit. They're not compelling.

I have spoken with you about the vital necessity of the apostles' teaching, and I'm hoping to see many of you next Saturday morning to learn How to Read Your Bible for All It's Worth, where we'll focus on practical tools and methods you can apply to make real headway in your own spiritual fruitfulness.

Now if you read most English translations, you might think that "fellowship" refers to sharing meals together, and "breaking bread" refers to taking communion (the Lord's Supper) together, but as I pointed out last Sunday, the word "fellowship" translates the Greek word *koinonia*, which also can be translated as "mutual participation" and "communion" (as in the Lord's Supper).

Last week, our emphasis was the genuine communion experienced in the manifest presence of the Spirit of God and the people of God, where "*all those who had believed were together and had all things in common... sharing them with all, as anyone might have need*" (Acts 2:44-45). We've got to have *that*—not just a monthly ceremony. It can happen anytime and anywhere that we gather in Jesus' name. Then our monthly ceremony will become the climactic celebration of the life we share together.

The point is that the church is called to be those people who gather around the teaching of the Word, and around the Lord's Supper—not to be a club, a social gathering, a welfare site, or a political action group, even if facets of the church's ministries might touch on those matters.

Today, we look at the third element of the major spiritual shift at the founding of the church: *“They were continually devoting themselves... to the breaking of bread.”* Why was this significant? How was it practiced? Is it still effective today? How can we engage this church-building activity of the Holy Spirit?

Sharing the Loaf

This word, “breaking of bread” simply means “tearing a loaf of bread.” This is clarified for us in verses 46-47: *“Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.”*

Why was this significant? Was there a cultural/historical context for this kind generosity? Indeed there was.

Many ancient cultures (though not all) practiced radical hospitality—travel was hard and long, inns were few and far between, and Jews were called to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem one or more times each year.

The Jewish Virtual Library (of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, www.jewishvirtual-library.org) provides some insight for us:

“In ancient Israel, hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and nomadic existence led by the people of Israel. The biblical customs of welcoming the weary traveler and of receiving the stranger in one's midst was the matrix out of which hospitality and all its tributary aspects developed into a highly esteemed virtue in Jewish tradition. Biblical law specifically sanctified hospitality toward the *ger* (‘stranger’) who was to be made particularly welcome ‘for you were strangers in a strange land’ (Leviticus 19:34 and see Exodus 12:49). Foreign travelers, although not protected by law (Deuteronomy 15:3; 23:21), could count on the custom of hospitality.”

We could dismiss this as nothing more than a cultural norm (or could we?).

The Jewish Virtual Library further informs us that:

“Rabbinic literature widened the scope of the virtue of hospitality, which it referred to as the ‘bringing in of guests’. It was considered a great *mitzvah*, an expression of ‘kindness’, especially when it was extended to the poor. In Jerusalem, it was customary to indicate that a meal was in progress by displaying a flag. (That was their version of “We’ll leave the light on for you.”)

“On the other hand, the rabbis denounced the parasitical guest, especially if he was a scholar. Two extremes were avoided through a clear definition of the duties of host and of guest: the host was forbidden to make his guest uncomfortable either by appearing miserable, or by watching his guest too attentively, or by neglecting to serve his guest himself.

“The guest was instructed to show gratitude, to recite a special blessing for his host in the Grace after Meals, to leave some food on the plate, and to comply with his host's wishes. The guest was forbidden to give food to others without his host's consent.

“In modern times, charitable institutions (secular or religious) have assumed most of the responsibility for communal hospitality.” But I think you’ll agree that institutional hospitality may lack the flavor of simple homespun hospitality.

Is there a Biblical *principle* behind the practice of radical hospitality?

Well, there is God’s own hospitality toward us! He not only welcomes us into His house, but into His family! He went out of His way to make it possible to bring us home with Him. And He has promised to sustain us and accompany us all the way home. No one ever heard of a God who did that!

And then there is the historic hospitality of God’s people that we may find in the Old Testament (this also from the Jewish Virtual Library):

“The Bible is replete with examples of pious hospitality. Isaiah states that one of the duties of the pious is to ‘deal thy bread to the hungry,’ and to ‘bring the poor that are cast out to thy house’ (Isa. 58:7). As soon as Abraham saw the three men of Mamre ‘from afar,’ he hurried to invite them into his house, ministered to their physical comfort, and served them lavishly (Genesis 18). Similarly, Laban was eager to welcome Abraham's servant (Genesis 24:28–32) while Rebekah attended to the comfort of his camels. The Shunammite woman had a special room prepared for the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8–11). Some acts of hospitality had specific rewards. Rahab, who had harbored Joshua's two spies, was granted protection when Jericho fell (Joshua 2).”

The Loaf We Share

The New Testament introduces us to Jesus, the Bread of Life, and He invites to His table to eat.

Revelation 3:20 *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*

And here's a wonderful story that illustrates that—three days after Jesus was entombed, two of His disciples, discouraged by the apparent loss of their Master, were returning home, when suddenly and unrecognizably, the risen Jesus joined them. After He left them...

Luke 24:32 They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" ³³ And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, ³⁴ saying, "The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon." ³⁵ They began to relate their experiences on the road and how **He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.** (Emphasis mine.)

Here's where that startling recognition came from, just days earlier...

Mark 14:22 While they were eating, [Jesus] took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is My body."

So when the Early Church were all filled with the Holy Spirit, this became one of their habits (as we read earlier), "from house to house... taking their meals together."

And this became a recognized symbol of the unity of the Christian community...

1 Corinthians 10:16 Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

It was not just the bread of the communion table that was special; the bread of their common table was also representative of and a means to their spiritual communion.

The kind of sharing demonstrated by the Early Church was an extension of that cultural hospitality with which they had grown up, now crowned with deeper significance, because it represented Jesus—His hospitality to us, His sacrifice for us, His provision for us, His presence with us.

Jesus said to His disciples:

Matthew 10:40 "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. ⁴¹ He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. ⁴² And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

A Measure of Grace

It became so ingrained in their religious culture that this renewed hospitality also turned into a qualification for spiritual leadership.

It was part of the test of overseers...

Titus 1:7 For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, ⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, ⁹ holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

1 Timothy 3:2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.

It was part of the test of widows...

1 Timothy 5:9 A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work.

This was in keeping with Jesus' instructions:

"Love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

It has become a test of every ordinary believer...

1 Peter 4:8 Above all, keep your love for one another fervent, because love covers a multitude of sins. ^{4:9} Show hospitality to one another without complaining.

Just like the command to love extends even to enemies, the command to show hospitality extended even to strangers, and especially the poor.

When Paul met with Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem to review his ministry among the Gentiles, they had nothing to add, but extended him the "right hand of fellowship." Later, Paul recalled, *"They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do"* (Galatians 2:10).

Hebrews 13:1 Let love of the brethren continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Making It Happen

Why don't we do it more? Typical objections and excuses include: it takes too much effort; I'm not good at it; our home is too small; we don't have much to offer.

I can tell you this: Whatever may, for you, prevent it, the enemy will readily suggest. Remember, a Gospel-inspired life flows upstream, against the current.

Is hospitality still effective today? If humans are still human, just consider the motivation God first suggested to His people:

Leviticus 19:33 'When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴ The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

It is the rationale given that is most significant for us: *"because you were once foreigners, too."* This is a call to sympathetic kindness. And it begins within the wider church family.

In many ways, ours is a culture of rootlessness, with people frequently on the move, changing jobs, living in isolation, whose lives are in various ways compartmentalized or segmented from others.

Sometimes out of fear, other times out of woundedness, or simple awkwardness, or overload, we grow indifferent to others' needs. But the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit whom God has given us, draw us back to sympathetic responsiveness. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Treat others the way God has treated you, as if they were part of your family.

If you're not accustomed to hosting, know this: awkwardness is normal, and it's okay; it's a point of growth. "Get used to different."

How can we engage this church-building activity of the Holy Spirit? You don't need to start with a total stranger (a homeless man or woman on the street)—a socially unknown individual, who could in all reality be a danger to you.

Start within the church (the Kingdom laboratory). If you can grow it here, you can grow it elsewhere.

Look for specific opportunities to bridge the natural cultural and ethnic divides, to build the church's sense of belonging together.

What are some ways we could do this in our context? There are myriad.

You could host meals in your home, like Timothy and Laxmi. You could take meals to others, like Martha often does.

Not enough room in your house or apartment? You can invite another couple or family for a picnic in a local park or at the beach. Or make a date for coffee or juice, like Lauren and Veronica do. Make use of holidays to invite someone out or over, like Tim and Joy do so well.

Can you share a ride to or from church, like Negar does from time to time? Or arrange to meet for a walk or a hike. Take someone fishing. Go bowling. Grab your cameras and go for a photography walk. Go see a movie together and discuss it.

Whatever it is you like to do, make up your mind *not* to always do it alone, or with someone you already know—invite someone new along.

Whatever activity you choose, ask yourself if it meets the “*principle* metric”? It must satisfy the *principle* of hospitality, not just *look* like hospitality. That principle is showing love to your neighbor.

Hospitality is more about *how* you share than what you share.

Finally, practice, practice, practice.

Jacob Abshire offers five excellent guidelines in a video “Responsive Sympathy,” which I’ve adapted here:

1. Plan strategically to purposely show love to someone new
2. Start simple; invite someone from church for lunch or coffee.
3. Capture the holidays, especially for those who don’t have family to be with.
4. Utilize your hobbies; invite someone along.
5. Always pray diligently; every get together is a Gospel opportunity.

May God grant you an abundance of His love and the courage to spend it where it is needed most—to make someone feel welcomed and valued, especially around a table of good food.