

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

October 4-10, 2020

Sermon Series: A Method to Your Madness

Week Two: "A Classy Group"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Lord Jesus Christ, You demonstrated faithfulness in all of life, even to death on the cross. Grant unto me grace and strength to faithfully follow You all the days of my life. Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

The ministry of the church is all about helping you be what you were created to be. There are ways to make that happen on purpose. Methodists are all about purposeful process.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

Class meetings were a part of Methodism for a long time. Where else does someone ask you the question, "How is it with your soul?"

Sunday Scripture Reading: Acts 2:42-47 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What four things did the earliest Christ followers devote themselves to? (2:42)

What did the apostles do that caused everyone to be filled with awe? (2:43)

What did the earliest Christ followers hold in common, or share? (2:44)

How did the earliest Christ followers manage to take care of the needy among them? (2:45)

Where did they typically meet at this time? (2:46a)

What did they do together in their homes? (2:46b)

How were they perceived by their neighbors and the people around them? (2:47)

What did the Lord do as a result of all these behaviors? (2:48)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We might wish we had more detail about what this early “devotion” to teaching, community, breaking of bread, sharing of meals, and prayer really looked like.

We probably wonder about the “wonders and signs” the apostles were able to perform – what did they involve?

We almost certainly wonder about the actual logistics of “holding everything in common” or “sharing everything.”

Similarly, we probably wonder who actually collected proceeds from selling possessions and property, and how they decided how, and to whom, they would be distributed. Did the “giving to everyone who had need” mean just within their community, or even folks outside their fellowship?

We might wonder if they realistically met every single day! For how long? When? Didn’t they have work to do also?

We might also wonder whether any temple authorities questioned them meeting there, in the temple courts area.

Some more word-for-word translations say they “broke bread together” in their homes, while others simply say they “shared food together.” We might wonder if that is supposed to be a reference to Holy Communion or just a way to talk about having a meal together.

We might wonder how all this led to the early believers being held “in favor” by the whole community.

Finally, we might ask about the early believers’ role, versus the Lord’s role, in so many people being added to their numbers every day. The text says it was the Lord who added to their numbers. Were they actively evangelizing or were people just attracted to the lifestyle and behaviors they witnessed?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Acts 5:1-11; Acts 6:1-6; Acts 5:21; Luke 4:15; Acts 3:1-10; Luke 6:30-36; Luke 24:35; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 1 Corinthians 11:24

Luke, the author of Acts, paints an idyllic, and perhaps idealized, portrait of the earliest Christian community in these verses. This is not to suggest that these first believers did NOT have a high sense of unity and community amongst themselves, but simply to acknowledge that there *were* issues as the community attempted to live out its ideals, as the stories just ahead in Acts 5:1-11 and 6:1-6 will show.

In verse 42, Luke gives a very brief summary of what this ideal community life looked like, and each of the four elements of this life are elaborated on in the following verses. The four elements of this community life include the teaching of the apostles, the “fellowship” or “community,” the “breaking of bread” or “shared meals,” and prayer. Most translations say that the early disciples were “devoted” to these four elements of community life, but often the same Greek phrase would be translated to say they “persevered” in these things. What Luke most wants us to see in this language is that engaging in these practices was a continuing, and consistent, pattern of community life among the early disciples.

It should come as no surprise that the first, primary element of these gathered disciples was a dedication to the teaching of the apostles. In fact, the book of Acts contains innumerable accounts of the teaching of the apostles (see 5:21 for one example), and the letters that make up the rest of our New Testament are, in effect, written records of this teaching. Part of Luke’s purpose in writing the book of Acts is to show how the early believers, empowered by the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus, are continuing the activities of Jesus. Thus, the apostles are continuing the ministry of Jesus, whose teaching role Luke has also emphasized throughout the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 4:15 for another brief example), in the power of the Spirit. The same continuance of the work of the Spirit is evidenced through the awe-inspiring “wonders and signs” the apostles are able to perform. The story of Peter healing a crippled man in Acts 3:1-10 immediately follows our passage to provide the first of many examples in Acts of the apostles’ empowerment by the Holy Spirit to do as Jesus had done.

The second element of community life that Luke highlights is variously translated “fellowship” or “community.” The actual word here is the Greek “koinonia,” which became commonly used in early Christianity to refer to the spiritual unity shared by believers. However, the word has its root in the Greek “koinos,” or “commonality,” reflecting its original, specific reference to the sharing of material possessions among a group of people. Luke elaborates on this in verses 44 and 45, in which he wants us to understand that this community did, in fact, hold everything in common, even selling possessions to help the needy. We need to understand here that in the ancient Greek world, there was a widely known proverb that said “friends hold all things in common” – a proverb that is quoted frequently in ancient Greek works such as Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Plutarch’s *The Dialogue on Love*, among many others. This sharing of all things was (and maybe still is) a feature of utopian visions of society. While the “traditional” rabbinic Judaism of Jesus’ day did not embrace this ideal, the separatist Essene communities like Qumran did, and Luke, as a Greek physician, would have been very familiar with it. What Luke ultimately wants to demonstrate for us is that the sharing of possessions was a spontaneous outgrowth of the Holy Spirit, not some formalized institution, which is why the actual processes of collecting or distributing these resources is not described more fully. The disciples are portrayed as trying to live out Jesus’ teachings, as seen in Luke 6:30-36, because the empowering of the Holy Spirit has brought about a community that aspires to the highest ideals of human longing.

The third element of community life is the “breaking of bread,” or “sharing of food” in some translations. While the believers initially met in the temple precincts for teaching and prayer, they met regularly in homes for communal meals, and the home increasingly became the center for all Christian activities, eventually including prayer and teaching. While many modern translations prefer to change the idiom of “breaking bread” to suggest no more than the sharing of meals together, it seems likely that the phrase “the breaking of bread” is meant to suggest more than the simple sharing of a meal. While it probably does not refer to a formalized celebration of Holy Communion at this early time, we

can't ignore the fact that the presence of the resurrected Jesus was noted by Luke, at the conclusion of the story of the disciples on the walk to Emmaus, during the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35). Luke frequently emphasizes the connection between meals and Jesus' presence, along with the ritual nature of sharing the bread (see Acts 20:7), and of course, by the time Paul writes to Corinth, the foundations of the remembrance of Christ in the breaking of bread that became the basis of Holy Communion was well established (1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:24).

In the end, Luke is portraying the reality of the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham through this idealistic portrait of life in Christian community. After God raised Jesus, He empowered His followers with the Holy Spirit so they could offer to future generations the same new life that Jesus had offered. Thus, the early believers "enjoyed the favor of all the people" – and the vision of society held out by these Christians drew more and more people to their ranks. The people have been restored to life as it could be, enjoying God's promised blessings through the presence of the Holy Spirit. For Luke, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit, empowering this kind of utopian life, that draws new people in, so he can honestly say that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." More than any specific behaviors of these early believers, it was their living out of submission to, and devotion to, the presence of God in the Holy Spirit that drew others to faith in Christ.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Which of the four elements of early Christian life – receiving teaching of the apostles, the sharing of resources, breaking bread together, and prayer – would you say most characterizes your own spiritual life? Which is most lacking?

How idealistic do you think this portrait of Christian life is? Do you think it is achievable?

How willing are you to view your possessions as resources to share for the betterment of the community?

How do you see the church continuing the activities of Jesus, and the "signs and wonders" of the original followers of Christ today? Are you actively participating in the life of the community in these ways?

Can you talk about ways that Christ has been present to you in "the breaking of bread"? Perhaps that is a particularly impactful experience of Holy Communion, or perhaps it is in the experience of community through a shared meal. Are you open to experiencing the presence of Christ *whenever* you break bread?

Are you participating in groups in which this kind of Christian "koinonia" might take place?

If so, is your participation in them serving as a light to draw others to Christian community?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy and Loving God, we seek the kind of committed and inspirational Christian community that we see portrayed in Acts. Help us to be devoted to the teaching of the apostles, to share our resources to benefit

the needy, to recognize Your presence when we break bread with others, and to draw near to You in prayer. May the groups we belong to strengthen our souls, and may they draw others to You as shining examples of the kind of life You want for all of us. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.