



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 2:41–47

“The First Believers Chapel”

TRANSCRIPT

Let’s turn to something more interesting. Will you turn to Acts chapter 2, and our Scripture reading for today is Acts chapter 2, verse 41 through verse 47. Remember the context. For those of you who may be visiting today for the first time, Peter has just concluded the first apostolic sermon, and now we read in verse 41 after he has said,

“Save yourselves from this untoward”—or crooked—“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.”

May I just say one thing, because later we will have to make the point again, and perhaps it will help, since it’s a bit technical. One might think from reading this, that the apostles continued in four specific things; apostolic doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and in prayers. Of course, you would know that that couldn’t possibly be, because how can you have a four-point message. A sermon has to be three points, or seven.

But at any rate, aside from that odd homonym argument, in the Greek text the little word “and” after “fellowship” is not found, and thus we do not have, “apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship,

and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. In fact, it is this, “in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship,” comma, “breaking of bread and prayers.” Now the fact that, that little “and” is missing makes it more likely, that the last two nouns, “breaking of bread, and prayers,” are explanatory of fellowship. In other words, there are three activities that characterize the early church. They continued in the apostles’ doctrine: point one; point two: and in the fellowship of the breaking of bread; and in the fellowship of prayers. So three things characterize the early church’s activity; the apostles’ doctrine, the fellowship of the Lord’s Table, and the fellowship of prayers. Now that, I think, is rather important since the term “fellowship” is not defined, and therefore, we do not have to speculate concerning its meaning. The fellowship is the fellowship of the Lord’s Table, and the fellowship of prayers. So those three things; biblical doctrine, breaking of bread, or the Lord’s Table, and prayers characterize the acts—the act—the practices of the early church.

In verse 43 we read,

“And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common.”

And we read in verse 45,

“And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added daily, or together, such as should be saved.”

Now I have omitted the words “to the church” found in the Authorized Version, because those words are not found in our most ancient manuscripts, and probably are not genuine. The sense

may be valid, but actually, the words are missing. May the Lord bless this reading from his Word.

Let's bow together now in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we are thankful to Thee that Thou hast given us this magnificent description of life in the early church. And we would ask, Lord, that life in Believers Chapel may follow the principles that are set out by Luke, the writer of this history of the early church. And we pray that the things that we learn may be instructive for us in our daily life as a local assembly, and also in our individual lives, as these things may have application. We are grateful for the apostles' doctrine. We're thankful that we have it when we have the Scriptures. We thank Thee for the privilege of the remembrance of our Lord around the Lord's Table in the breaking of bread, and we thank Thee for this magnificent opportunity and privilege to approach Thee, through the name of the Lord Jesus, and know that Thou dost hear us. How blessed we are, and we give Thee thanks.

To think that we here upon the earth may lift our hearts to Thee, and know that Thou dost hearer—hear us; amazing and astonishing is that. We give Thee thanks. We also, Lord, would ask Thy blessing upon the entire body of Christ today; the whole church, wherever the church may be in its parts and in its meetings and its individuals. We commit it to Thee; the church may be significant for the life of this world, and for the life of our country, and for the life of this community. We thank Thee for all who are members of that body, and we pray that today may be a day of growth in the knowledge of Christ.

We also pray, Lord, that other may by Thy grace, be brought into this body, and may today the Lord continue his work adding, through the preaching of the Word.

And, Father, we would ask for our country, and for the president, and for those associated with him in government. We know that Thou art sovereignly in control of matters, and we are grateful for that, and we entrust with thanksgiving, these matters into the hands of our sovereign, infallible God. We thank Thee, Lord, for the ministry of the Word through the Chapel, its radio

ministry, and its tape ministry, and publications, the Bible classes, the other forms of outreach which Thou hast in grace given to us. We pray, Lord. Bless them richly.

And especially do we pray for those whose names, and concerns, and desires are expressed in our Calendar of Concern. O God, minister to those who have needs in a way that will glorify Thy name. We give Thee a special thanks, Lord, for the blessing of eternal life, through faith in Jesus Christ. Accept our thanks. May our meeting glorify him who loved us and loosed us from our sins in his own precious blood.

We pray in his name. Amen.

[Message] Many years ago when I was attending theological seminary, I used to read the sermons of Dr. R. S. Beall, who was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Tucson, Arizona, for about forty years. He had a title for this particular passage that impressed me, and I've borrowed it and changed it. He entitled his sermon on Acts 2, verse 41 through verse 47, being the pastor of the First Baptist church of Tucson, “First Baptist Church,” in which he sought to make the point that the first church in Jerusalem was really a Baptist church; “First Baptist Church.” Well, it's a very bad title, of course. It should have been, “First Believers Chapel,” and so that's the topic for the message this morning, with a word for Dr. Beall, a friend of mine; “First Believers Chapel.”

Peter has just concluded his apostolic sermon, and in that sermon there has been produced conviction. In fact, as Luke describes it, it's a very strong conviction. When they heard him, “they were pricked in their heart,” or as the original text has it, “they were stabbed or pierced in their hearts.” But not only were they convicted, they also inquired about what they should do. “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter gave this remarkable, and really wonderful promise to 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.” And he added, “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.”

Remarkable, is it not, that conviction precedes conversion? Well, no, it's not remarkable, because conviction should precede conversion. Conviction properly precedes conversion. One of the reasons that God gave the Law of Moses to Israel was that they might be brought to the knowledge of their sin. “By the Law,” Paul says in Romans 3, “is the full knowledge of sin.” The Ten Commandments were never given to save anyone. No one could ever be saved by keeping the Ten Commandments, because it's impossible for mere man to keep the Ten Commandments. What happens, if we honestly put ourselves under the Law, is that we are convicted and convinced that we are sinners. So Israel was given the Ten Commandments to bring them to the sense of their sin in order that they might be prepared for the coming of the gospel through the Lord Jesus Christ. Conviction before conversion is normal and necessary.

One of the older preachers used to like to say, “You can sew with a piece of thread alone as long as you wish, but you will never be able to make anything until that thread first is attached to a needle, and it is by the needle, that the thread becomes useful in sewing and making a garment.”

So the needle of the law prepares for the thread of the gospel, and Peter preached the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ as the ultimate means of conviction and brought the representatives of the nation here, in part, to the conviction that they had sinned against God. “They were stabbed in their heart.” They said, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter then responded by giving them the wonderful promises, which led to the salvation on the Day of Pentecost of three thousand souls. It's a marvelous promise, and of course, in the sermon itself, there are other indications of a marvelous promise through faith in Christ. “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” Peter had said previously. “So hear, the promise is to you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

The promise is to you Jews and to your children. In other words, not simply to that generation of Jews, but the generations of Jews that would come down through the centuries. And not simply to the Jews but also to the Gentiles, “as many as are afar off.” And then looking at the real initiative in it all, “as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

Now, these promises are promises which, of course, therefore, are ours. They are promises to which we may respond. “Repent, be baptized, receive the Word of God, and the result shall be that you shall have the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Last week—for those of you who were not here then—we dealt with the question of whether baptism is necessary for salvation or not; concluded that, according to the Scriptures, baptism is not necessary for salvation, though it is, of course, a command of the Lord, and all who have believed in Christ should be baptized in confession of their faith. What is remarkable about this to me is that we who live today have these marvelous promises, and we often do not respond to them, whereas in the Old Testament times, and in the ministry of our Lord, we have instances of individuals who responded when they did not even have much assurance of promise. Take, for example, Jonah’s experience in Nineveh. He came into the city and preached that very brief statement, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed.” He went all over the city preaching that, and finally, the king of Nineveh came under such conviction, that he issued certain orders that, “Men should re—repent of their actions. They should clothe themselves in sackcloth and ashes.” And then in the description that Jonah gives of this, the king is said to have said, “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not.”

It’s almost as if the king had practically no assurance of specific promise. There was one implicit in the statement, “Yet forty days.” That suggested that there was a time in which Nineveh might repent, but no specific full promise of forgiveness, and yet they responded.

When we come over to the ministry of our Lord, and he tells the parable of the prodigal son, so far as we know from the text of Luke chapter 15, the prodigal had no sense of certainty regarding the father’s acceptance of him after he had gone into the far country, but he knew enough about the father to take a chance on it and came and discovered that the father was not only willing to receive

him, but looking for him and ran to meet him, fell upon his shoulders, and kissed him repeatedly in acceptance and reception.

Our Lord also tells the parable of the importunate widow who was disturbed by an adversary, and came to the unjust judge, and asked him to avenge her of her adversary. What is striking about this is that the judge is described as an unjust judge; a man who did not fear God, nor man. And yet the widow came and pled with him until finally, the unjust judge says, “Though he didn’t fear God and didn’t care about men, he nevertheless would respond to her request.” We have these marvelous promises in the Word of God, all of the specific nature of acceptance if we turn to him—and yet, sad to say, so many do not, in spite of these magnificent and great promises—so many of us do not respond to the Lord God.

Well, the thing I want to lay a bit of stress on this morning, is the fact that these verses form a very instructive picture of the life and worship of the first New Testament church. Notice the statement made of the formation of it in verse 41. “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added about three thousand souls.” Notice the three steps that are set out. They gladly received his word. That’s the beginning of spiritual life; to respond to the Word of God, to receive it. Then, secondly, they were baptized.

Many have had difficulty with three thousand people being baptized in one day. Well, of course, if we baptized people like we do in Believers Chapel, it would of course, take us more than a day, because we baptize them one at a time, and ask them specific questions. It might be a problem to baptize—if one person baptized—to baptize three thousand people in one day. We have nothing in the Word of God to suggest that one person did the baptism—baptizing. As a matter of fact, the chances are that the hundred and twenty participated in it, and there is really no problem at all. In fact, Augustine baptized—or is said to have baptized—ten thousand in the swale on a Christmas Day. So there is some historic evidence for the baptizing—baptism of more than three thousand. When people hit upon something like this, as designed to cast discredit upon the Word of God, they are certainly looking for something that does not carry conviction.

The third thing that is said about them is that they were “added.” Now, we look at verse 47 and we read, “Praising God, and having favor with all the people, and the Lord added to the church daily as sh—such as should be saved.” So we gather then, that the reference in verse 41 to “added” is a reference to the work of our Lord Jesus. Remember, Luke has told us in the second verse—or first verse of this book, “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” This is what he is continuing to do and teach. He is through the activity of the Holy Spirit, bringing conviction and conversion, and adding individuals to the body of believers. So the Lord, by the work of the Spirit, forms the church. We aided—we’re added to him first, and then we’re added to them, and nothing is said about a church roll. Did you notice that? There is no such thing as a church roll in the New Testament. Some people are very desirous of having a church roll. Well of course, they like to vote, and they like to have a roll in order that they may vote, but if you read the New Testament, there is no such thing as a church roll. There is no need for a church roll, if the church is organized according to the principles set out in the New Testament.

Occasionally individuals ask, “How do you join Believers Chapel?” It’s very simple to join Believers Chapel. Of course, first of all, you must be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, but when you come and begin to meet regularly with us in our meetings, and when you by so meeting, affirm that you are willing to remain under the supervision or oversight of the elders, you are one of us, and you are a member of Believers Chapel. And you can say, “I am a member of Believers Chapel. I attend regularly the Chapel. I am under the oversight of the elders of the Chapel.” It’s just as simple as that.

I have lived in my Christian life and ministry in churches in which a membership roll existed, and in Believers Chapel for twenty-two years now, and I must say I prefer this. I think it’s scriptural. I think it’s—meets all of the needs that we have, and I like to think of myself as a simple member of Believers Chapel. I attend regularly here, and I’m under the oversight of the elders. Mr. Prier’s my boss, together with mith—Mr. Dean, and Dr. Mims, and Dr. Howard, and I’m perfectly happy in that and respond to that oversight. There is no such thing as a church roll. People like to think that a

church roll will be helpful to the elders, because then they will see who are members, but elders ought to be observing who is attending regularly, and therefore, they would know who are members. Now of course, if the elders are not observing, the fault is not the church roll. The fault lies with the elders. We don't need a church roll in that case. We need to encourage the elders a bit, but—in other words, we shouldn't go to something that is unscriptural to con—to correct something that is more fundamentally in error.

Now, that is the description of how the church was formed. Let's look now at the activity of the church as it is described in verse 42 through verse 47. One question that might come up, is the question of succession. There are three ways to have succession in the Christian church. One might have ecclesiastical succession; that is, one might seek to show, that the church—a certain church—is the first church, and therefore, if churches are related to that first church, then there is ecclesiastical succession. The idea lying back of that, is that, that would communicate some more authority for the decisions and activity of that church. If we could show that this is the first church related most closely to the apostles, then we would, in effect, be educating that they would therefore have more authority. Ecclesiastical succession; original churches, then churches succeeding in the same general organization or relationship. That's one way in which one might have succession.

One might also have succession by personal Episcopal succession; that is, we might affirm that Peter, for example, is the first Bishop of Rome, and we might try to show on the basis of the Word of God, that Peter was given certain authority, and we might try to claim that that authority that was given to Peter was communicated to others who would be ordained by Peter. And so authority would res—would rest in a succession of bishops from the original Bishop of Rome. As you know, that is the general theory that lies back of the formation of one of our large religious organizations, Episcopal succession. The question of whether it's taught in the Word of God is, of course, something we won't try to deal with now. It would take us too far astray.

There is a third form of succession, succession doctrinally; that is, the things that the apostles taught are continued to be taught by a body of people. In this case, we have doctrinal

succession. So we may have ecclesiastical succession. We may have Episcopal, or succession by bishops, and ordination and laying on of hands, or we may have doctrinal succession.

Now, what I would contend is that the New Testament suggests that the best kind of succession is doctrinal success—succession. The apostolic fellowship was the product of apostolic teaching, and that apostolic teaching has become our New Testament. So succession is ultimately seen in those who continue in the teaching of the apostles, and if a church or a group of churches should continue in the teaching of the apostles, they are in true apostolic succession. If they do not continue in the teaching of the apostles, though they may exist within a—~~a~~an organizational framework for which succession is claimed, it is not true succession. If one studies the Old Testament, and then studies the New Testament, it’s very plain, I think, that the third form of succession is the desirable form of succession.

Now, look at the dim—general description of the activities of the early church in verse 42. Luke has a marvelous little way of saying a whole lot in just a few words. Let me remind you of how he summed up twelve years of our Lord’s life in one little verse, “And the child grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.” What a magnificent description of our Lord’s twelve years in one verse, and then the next eighteen years of our Lord’s life are summed up in this word, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” Twelve years. Eighteen years. That’s a marvelous way of compressing this magnificent truth into a beautiful statement. I contend that verse 42 is like that. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and in fellowship; the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers.” So this man who knew how to put a whole lot into one text, puts a whole lot here.

Now, there are two principle things that are set forth. You can tell, they continued in the apostles’ doctrine, and they continued in fellowship, but the fellowship is defined by two subheadings. But the two things are, first of all, they continued in the apostles’ doctrine; teaching. One might say, “Oh my, it would be so wonderful if we could have been there when the apostles were teaching. Just think, day after day we could have gone to the temple mount, and as Peter and

the others gathered there around the temple and preached, we could have heard the authoritative apostles preaching the Word of God.

What do we miss in 1984? What a tremendous blessing it would have been.” Well, my dear Christian friend, you have an even greater opportunity. You have the teaching of the apostles in this marvelous book that you hold in your hands. So I have a hunch, that if Peter were suddenly were to appear on our scene and were to preach downtown, though it'd be a magnificent crowd of thousands of people, but it wouldn't be long if he continued to preach until most of us, having lost the curiosity and novelty of it, would have been toward Peter as we are toward our Word. We leave it over on the desk, or we put it by our bedside. We occasionally open it up and look at it, but we really wouldn't have quite that interest in the teaching of the apostle that we think we might if they were really here. Here is the teaching of the apostles in the Word of God, and you have the privilege every day of listening to the apostles proclaim the Word of God.

Now, notice there is no creed set out specifically. There are certain parts to a possible creed. I don't have any objection to a creed, providing we change our creed as we come to further understanding of the Word of God. I believe that Abraham Kuyper was right, when that great Dutch theologian said that, “He had nothing against creeds and the making of them, but the own—the thing that he had against them was that they were not continually remade.” Because you see, our understanding of the Word of God does grow, and there is nothing wrong with a creed if we are willing to remake it. The trouble with creeds is that when people make them, they suddenly have a vested interest in them, and they're embarrassed to change them, and therefore, they refuse, and refuse to follow for the light that the Holy Spirit may be given to them.

Notice also, that standing first in the apostolic experience is the experience of biblical doctrine. They continued in doctrine or in teaching. C. S. Lewis, in one of his most famous works, *Mere Christianity*, tells of an officer in the RAF who, after listening to a talk on Christianity burst out with the protest, “I've no use for all of that stuff, but mind you, I'm a religious man, too. I know there is a God. I've felt him out alone in the desert night; the tremendous mystery. And that's just

why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about him. To anyone who's met the real thing, they all seem to petty and pedantic and unreal.” Now Mr. Lewis, with his characteristic wisdom and insight said, “There is something about that statement that is probably true. We all feel that when we express on a piece of paper a biblical doctrine, that we've lost something from personal experience. But,” he said, “we need to rethink this.” He said, “For example, if a man looked at the Atlantic Ocean from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning to something that seems very real to him; the waves, the surf, the vastness of the ocean; to something a whole lot less real; a piece of colored paper.

“But,” he said, “really, if you'll reflect upon a map for a moment, the map reflects the experience not of one person, but of literally hundreds of thousands of people who've been exposed to the ocean, and having been exposed to the ocean, have contributed their experiences so that we have a satisfactory picture of the ocean. And furthermore,” he said, “while you may enjoy walking down the beach, and looking at the ocean, and really think that you have entered into something experiential that's extremely important, and of course you do, if you've ever lived by the ocean. But look,” he said, “if you want to get to America, you'll need the map. And the facts are, if you really want to know spiritual truth, you must know the Holy Scriptures. It's only through them that we have the knowledge of the Lord that is valid. Every Christian experience must be wedded to the words of the Word of God. Christian experiences that are not wedded to the Word of God are often not Christian experiences at all.” I'm not surprised that the apostles said that, “The early church continued in the apostles' doctrine.” First on the list; teaching the Word of God; what the apostles constantly taught.

Now, the second significant thing is that word “fellowship.” When people think of fellowship in the Christian church today, they think of getting together and eating, having a time of social relationship one to another. Why as a matter of fact, you can have, quote, “Christian fellowship,” unquote, and the name of Christ is not even mentioned, but you've been together. You've had a good time. You have a lot of the same interests, a lot of the same de—likes, and so

you’ve been together, and you’ve had a good time of, quote, “Christian fellowship,” unquote. I don’t think that that’s entirely worthless. I just think you ought not to call it “Christian fellowship.” If you gather together, and you discuss politics, your business, your children, and the discussion is not gathered around the truths that are in the Word of God, it’s questionable whether you ought to call that “Christian fellowship.” But if you Christians get together, and you talk about the things of the Lord, that’s “Christian fellowship,” and when we get together as Christians, why should we not discuss the things of the Word of God; our experiences with the truths that are found in the Word of God. That’s “Christian fellowship.” That’s edifying. That’s the way in which we help one another, and exhort one another. We can call that “Christian fellowship.”

I think that’s great to have that kind of Christian fellowship. However, let me say this; that’s an introduction. Luke didn’t have that in mind at all. Fellowship is defined by the two things that follow. They continued in the apostles’ teaching, and they continued in fellowship. And because of the lack of that little connective *kai*—“and” in Greek—it’s evident that those last two things, “breaking of bread and prayers,” are explanatory of fellowship. What he means, is that they continued in the apostles’ teaching, and they continued in fellowship, but specifically, the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers.

Now, you can see from this, that looming large in the life of the early church was the preaching of the Word of God, and the observance of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. All of these men had been baptized once, for once and for all is sufficient for baptism. It’s important. If you are a Christian, and you have never been baptized, you should seek out the elders and ask to be baptized. How can we expect to obey the Word of God when the simple command of the Lord Jesus to be baptized in water is disregarded? One wonders if our Christian testimony is at all important to us, when something so simple and so easy to carry out. Obedience to that simple command is so possible to us, but we avoid it, and do not carry it out.

But now, once we have been baptized and we have come into the fellowship of a local assembly, the teaching of the Word of God, and then the fellowship of the breaking of bread and

prayers. We know the early church observed the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. The early historical references that are made by the early church writers affirm that as a well-established fact. Surprisingly, later on, many who did not practice that affirmed that that’s the most desirable thing. Let me remind you, for example, that the Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, “We ought to observe the Lord’s Sup—Supper every Sunday.” The Methodist John Wesley said, “We ought to observe the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.” John Calvin, the great Calvinistic and Presbyterian theologian, in the “Institutes of the Christian Religion” has affirmed that in his opinion, “It’s most desirable to observe the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.” This is not something strange. It’s the history of the Christian church; well-established; seen in certain ways in the Roman Catholic observance of the Mass every Sunday. It’s traditional in the Christian church, but we have avoided it.

This morning after the message, in which I said essentially this same thing, a lady met me out in the hall—a very nice Christian lady; affirmed that she had been a Christian, but she hadn’t observed the Lord’s Supper for months and months. Now, in the early church they continued steadfastly—by the way, that particular construction, “to continue steadfastly,” is used by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 13 of the fact that tax collectors really keep after their business. So it’s a kind of word you’d associate with the IRS. They really keep after what they’re doing. They are—as our word here says—they are “steadfast” in can—seeing that we pay our taxes. Well, it’s that kind of assiduousness that is referred to here, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and in the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers.”

Now, references are made to prayers at various places here. In chapter 3, verse 1 we’ll have the apostles and the apostolic community praying, then again in chapter 4. We had them in chapter 1 praying. So that characterized the early church. They did pray, and they prayed also in their meetings, and I think that is primarily what Luke has in mind here. Do you notice, as you read through the book of Acts, that there is no such thing as a stated prayer meeting? In other words, we don’t have any indication that the early church met on Tuesday nights or Wednesday nights for a prayer meeting. That’s characteristic of Christian churches today. Wednesday night is prayer meeting night,

or Tuesday night is prayer meeting night. But we do not have anything like that in the New Testament. I'm not speaking against prayer meetings when I say this, only to say, while it is a church's freedom to do that if they wish, it's not something required by the New Testament. The pattern of the New Testament is for the early church to pray as needs arose on specific occasions. Then one may call a prayer meeting for prayer. That seems to be their practice.

So at any rate, the apostles' doctrine, and the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers. Even the Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Linske says, “The Word and the Table take precedence in the early church.” And I'd like to say this. This is a personal testimony. When I came to Dallas, Texas, I met some young men who observed the Lord's Supper every Sunday. I had never observed the Lord's Supper every Sunday in my Christian experience. I met them. I met with them around the Lord's Table in Dallas Theological Seminary at eight o'clock in the morning on Sunday morning. It was not an official meeting of the Seminary, although Dr. Chafer used to attend it regularly until his wife became sick, and he had to stay home with her. She was in a coma for considerable number of months. We gathered around the Table, and we observed the Lord's Supper very similarly to the way we observe it in Believers Chapel at 6:30 on Sunday night. I think I can testify to the fact that it had a tremendously deepening result in my life. Reflecting upon the elements—the bread and the wine—for a lengthy period of time on Sunday morning, in a sense gave me the opportunity to think about the true significance, and deep significance of that which Jesus Christ had done for me. And I think I can testify that through the years, it has continued to have a deepening experience upon my Christian life. I don't know where I would be if I did not have the privilege and the opportunity of sitting at the Lord's Table and thinking about that which Christ has done for me.

You know, one of the simplest things we learn from it is that Jesus Christ did not stay at base headquarters and issue commands to his servants to do this and to do that, but he came forth himself, went into the front line trenches—not only did that, but actually met the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, and just like David won his battle over Goliath for the whole of the nation, so the

Lord Jesus, in his saving work, has won the battle for those who are his people as well, the Christian church.

So, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers.” The verses that follow give some of the special details. It’s not necessary to lay stress upon them. There was great fear as a result of what was happening. It was the awe that was due to the preaching of men who preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, and through whose preaching conviction came. It was also the awe that was due to the miracles that they were performing as apostles. As Paul will later say, “The miracles are the signs of an apostle I have wrought in your midst,” and so these apostles wrought the signs of apostleship in the midst of the people of their day. We read also in verse 44 that, “All that believed were together and had all things common; And sold their possession and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.”

This is not a reference to communism or socialism. What is done here is something that is totally voluntary. The gospel does penetrate the economic realm, and it should have its effect upon economics, as it should have upon everything, but this is something the early church did voluntarily. If someone would like to say, “Ah you see, the early church was, if not communistic, at least socialistic.” Well then, I would like to simply remind them, that if the early church was socialistic, then it’s strange that it was a such a failure, according to your understanding, because later on, one of the chief activities of the Apostle Paul, is gathering collections for the poor saints at Jerusalem, and in effect, many of them were put on welfare.

Maybe they did practice socialism after all. But actually, the Bible has not a whole lot to say about that. In my opinion, the Lord Jesus definitely, as far as I can tell, gives approval to such a system as a capitalistic system. Listen to what we read in Matthew chapter 20 in verse 15, for example. The Lord Jesus, in the midst of a parable says, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil because I am good?” It’s perfectly all right to own property. The right of private profit—property is recognized by the New Testament. We have the same thing in Acts chapter 5, to which we will refer later on, the Lord willing.

We read also in verse 46, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.” I gather, that this is a reference to the fact that they met in homes, and they had meals together. We can call them “love feasts.” That’s what’s they—they were called. *agapē* means love, and the word also, in an associated word can mean a “love feast,” and so they gathered together, and they had their meals together, and they also had Christian fellowship thinking about the things of the Lord. So in the Temple they were there for public worship and for witness, and in the homes for the love feasts, the communal meal. I would gather, they probably also had communion there, and they gave God the glory. We read in verse 47, “Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church those who were being saved.” So from as the work progressed, many people were added to the church by the Lord Jesus.

May I sum up what I’ve been saying by just making a couple of points? The favor of the outsiders was due, no doubt, to the devotion that was shown to the Lord Jesus, and to the God that they worshiped. “Praising God, and having favor with all the people.” Probably, also, their liberality to one another. Just as we notice when individuals love one another, and truly help one another, that is something that usually derives favorable comments. Probably, also, their simplicity. “They broke bread from house to house. They ate their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.” They became an influential church. Isn’t it interesting? We think of an influential church. Now, just think of that expression for a moment, “influential church.” To what does your mind go? Well, now if you’re a Baptist, I think your mind kind of goes south from here. [Laughter] If you’re a Presbyterian, it goes kind of southeast from here, and so on. Because we think of a influential church as a large church, a wealthy church; perhaps a church that gives vast sums of money to various activities. But we’ve degraded the term “influential church.”

What is an influential church? Why, an influential church is one—no matter what size—in which the apostles’ doctrine, and the fellowship of breaking of bread and prayers, in the spirit of the New Testament is carried out. In fact, in the book of Revelation, the Lord Jesus in his letter to the

church at Laodecia, has something to say about the church that thought of itself as a very influential church. He says, “Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing. And you don’t know,’” Jesus said, “that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” In the Greek text, that can be rendered something like, “You are the wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked one.”

You see, influence is ultimately, if significant, related to keeping the Word of God. The early Christians’ testimony produced conviction of sin. That’s a great need today. We cannot do it, of course, by ourselves. It’s God who brings conviction of sin, and he does it by the chaos that exists in this world. He does it by virtue of the character of Jesus Christ himself. If one does not pay attention to the Commandments, but looks at our Lord Jesus Christ, he cannot help but say with Anselm, “You have not yet considered how great the weight of sin should be.” It’s like Iago who said of Cassio, “He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.” If you wonder about your own sin, compare yourself with Jesus Christ. That’s a true reflection of what you really are, and what you need, because our Lord is the only perfect man. So if you can stand up to the Lord, and you can say, “I’m just as holy as Jesus Christ, and therefore, I do not need forgiveness of sin,” then of course, may God have mercy upon you.

But it’s proper for us to recognize through Christ our sin. We’re not stray sheep, my friends. We’re not wandering sheep. We are rebels, and we have been taken with bloody weapons in our hands spiritually. That’s what we are. That’s why we need the forgiveness of our sins. That’s why we stand under divine judgment. That’s why you stand under divine judgment. And if you need any further conviction, take a look at the cross of Christ, and see what that reveals of the love of God and the mercy of God, and the goodness of God, and compare yourself in the light of that. I assure you, you will come to the conviction of sin. And if I may say this as a closing line, for our time is gone, the *sine qua non* of church membership, the absolutely indispensable thing for membership in the early church, and the membership in any Christian church, is the saving new birth through faith

in the Lord Jesus. And it’s certainly a remarkable and wonderful thing that the promise of entrance into the body of Christ for all who recognize their lost condition is so universally offered.

Remember Jesus’ words, “All that the Father giveth to me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” Mr. Bunyan asked, “Who is this him?” And he answered it, “Him that cometh to me. Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” You can—you see—become that “him” by coming to Christ, and if you come to Christ, he will not cast you out. “All that the Father giveth shall come, and him that cometh, I will in no wise cast out.” If you wish the assurance of the forgiveness of your sins, come to Christ and receive the forgiveness of sins, and have the assurance that he will never cast you out. Then you will be in true apostolic succession. May God give you grace to come. Shall we stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee for these marvelous words of instruction and description, describing to us the activities of the early church, which are so useful for us, and thinking about the way in which we should live our lives as members of the body of Christ. We thank Thee and we praise Thee. We especially ask, Lord, if there are some who have never come to him, may by Thy grace they receive the word of the gospel, that Christ has died for sinners, and may the Lord our [end of tape]...