

## Activities of the NT Church

### Overview

In Eph 4, we considered the basic processes of the church's activity (equipping and service) and the objectives of that activity (doctrinal and spiritual unity, growing together into the body of Christ). This week, we focus on four specific activities that occupied the early believers. The most concise summary is Acts 2:42.

Another passage often quoted with reference to NT church practice is Heb 10:25, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” At first glance, this seems to have nothing to do with the specific activities of Acts 2:42. But in fact, the two texts stand in a close relationship with each other.

- The context of Heb 10:25 refers to the same four activities that Acts 2:42 describes.
- The context of Acts 2:42 gives us an example of the faithfulness to which Heb 10:25 exhorts us.

### Acts 2:41-47

Let's notice first the four basic **activities** of the church, and then the **attitude** of the believers.

#### *Their Activities*

v. 42 summarizes the four activities. Then vv. 43-47 give us a short narrative description of the life of the church in which we have examples of each of these four activities, in the same order.

#### **The apostles' doctrine**

We saw in Eph 4:11-12 that the apostles were one of the four classes of gifted men responsible for equipping the saints to do the work of ministry. Teaching was a primary aspect of their work (Acts 6:4). Other believers might teach one another in various settings, but the church activity included a focus on teaching by those responsible for equipping the saints at large.

One aspect of their doctrine is emphasized in the following narrative:

**43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.**--By repeating the reference to “apostles,” Luke means us to associate their wonders and signs with their teaching. The wonders and signs were not done for their own sake, but to authenticate the teaching already mentioned.

#### **Fellowship**

“Fellowship” κοινωνία means to have things in common. Luke (5:10) uses the related noun κοινωνος to describe the relationship among Peter, James and John as “partners” in their fishing business. The early believers were involved with one another, at least as intimately as business partners. What benefited

one, benefited all; what hurt one caused loss to all.

**44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need.**--This sense of common interest extended even to material things. The needs in Jerusalem led to community property. Now, 1 Cor 15 shows that this is not the only possible pattern. But the believers in every church should recognize one another as sharing common interests, and should reflect that interest in their care for one another.

## Breaking of Bread

This phrase is the most common description in the NT for the simple ceremony by which our Lord asked his followers to commemorate his death, the sharing of the bread in memory of his broken body, and of the cup representing his shed blood. It has become common to call this ceremony “the Lord's Supper,” but the two are quite distinct in the NT, as we'll see when we study 1 Cor 11.

The example of this practice in the following narrative in Acts shows both activities:

**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,**

## Prayer

The final activity of the church was corporate prayer. The Lord offered a special promise to those who would agree on what they would ask (Matt 18:19). We should pray individually, but prayer is also an important activity for the church gathered. In his instructions to Timothy on caring for new churches, Paul states (1 Tim 2:1, 8),

I exhort therefore, that, **first of all**, supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks, be made for all men; ... I will therefore that men **pray** every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.

The narrative focuses on one particular form of prayer, what Paul calls “giving of thanks”:

**47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people.**

Their prayer was distinguished by praise. I remember when we first began to meet with the assembly in Jerusalem, how impressed I was with the prayers that brothers offered at the breaking of bread. Prayer for me had always focused on requests. I had never heard prayers before completely dedicated to praising the Lord, and it was a great boost to my spirit..

We see an example of this priority in the openings of each of Paul's epistles. With the exception of 1 Tim and Titus, every one begins with either a doxology, a word of thanksgiving, or both.

## *Their Attitude*

The context gives three details about the attitude with which they performed these activities.

**41-42 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized:**--They were believers, and had confessed their faith publicly through baptism. Based on this verse, we ask that people be baptized

before participating in the breaking of bread. As we'll see in 1 Cor 11, that activity (unlike the others) explicitly commands that the participants recognize one another as believers.

**and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.**--They recognized themselves as part of a community. They thought of themselves as an identifiable group that you could count.

This aspect of their attitude is consistent with, and even necessary for, the objective of “building up the body of Christ” that we saw repeatedly in Eph 4. If the objective of Christian ministry is to build up the body, we must recognize that we are part of that body.

**42 And they continued steadfastly ...**--The verb προσκαρτερεω appears 11x in the canonical Greek Bible, and describes devoted attention, faithfulness, perseverance. Consider some examples:

- When the Lord was teaching by the sea (Mark 3:9), “he spake to his disciples, that a small ship should **wait on** him because of the multitude, lest they should throng him.” The boat was dedicated to his use, like the Marine 1 helicopter that is always available for the President. No other errand can preempt its availability.
- Similarly, Acts 10:7 describes the messengers whom Cornelius sent to Peter, as including “a devout soldier of them that **waited on him continually**,” that is, a member of his personal escort, who were always by him. (“Continually” is part of the verb, not an extra word.) They were not only there when it was convenient. That was their main job.
- In Rom 13:6, Paul describes the civil authorities as “**attending continually** upon” their duties. It is not a casual or occasional responsibility, but a full-time job that requires their dedicated attention.
- The apostles in Acts 6:4 recommended the appointment of deacons, noting, “we will **give ourselves continually** to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” They wanted to focus their attention on these exercises, and they took steps to do away with competing activities to ensure that they could properly fulfill their duties.

The word is a favorite one for describing diligence in prayer:

- Eph 6:18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all **perseverance** and supplication for all saints;
- Acts 1:14 These all **continued** with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.
- Rom 12:12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; **continuing instant** in prayer;
- Col 4:2 **Continue** in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

The attitude of the early believers to these four activities was not casual or based on convenience. Like Cornelius' personal bodyguard, they were always there. Like the civil magistrate or the apostles, the dedicated themselves to these activities. These four activities were not something that they fit into their schedules when they could. Other things were set aside so that these could take priority.

This steadfast continuing in Acts is an example of the kind of behavior to which Heb 10:25 exhorts us, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” But is Hebrews really concerned with these four

activities, or with other, more casual gatherings of God's people?

## Heb 10:19-25

Heb 10:25 is not an independent clause, but the modifier of a series of three exhortations. Vv. 19-21 modify the same series on the other end. Thus we have three exhortations, one for each of the great theological virtues (1 Cor 13:3; 1 Thes 1:3; 5:8),

- Let us draw near ... in full assurance of **faith** (13 words in Greek)
- Let us hold fast the profession of our **hope** (16 words)
- Let us consider ... **love** (9 words)

surrounded chiasmatically by two modifiers,

- Having boldness and a great high priest (36 words)
- Not forsaking.(18 words)

The modifiers together occupy more space than the central exhortations. By the law of proportion, this suggests that these are more important to the writer than the others.

### **First Modifier, vv. 19-21**

By the law of proportion, this is the most important component of the paragraph. It is also the most obscure syntactically. We don't have time now to expound it fully, but note the following features:

- Its orientation is to the group, not the individual. We are reminded of our high priest “over the house of God.” 1 Tim 3:15 identifies this as the church, and Eph 2:21-22 reminds us that it is the holy temple composed of the believers.
- It focuses our attention on our Lord's flesh and blood as the basis for our boldness in carrying out the exhortations.
- The “therefore” shows that it derives this teaching from the preceding context, which emphasizes the sacrificial nature of both elements (though in separate passages).

9:12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but **by his own blood** he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

10:5-10 Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a **body** hast thou prepared me: 6 In burnt offerings and *sacrifices* for sin thou hast had no pleasure. 7 Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. 8 Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and *offering* for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure *therein*; which are offered by the law; 9 Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. 10 By the which will we are sanctified through **the offering of the body** of Jesus Christ once *for all*.

By bringing together the flesh and the blood of our Lord, the author reminds his readers of the breaking

of bread. He is describing the reality that the breaking of bread commemorates, and urging them to keep that reality in mind as they follow his exhortations. Here is our first link to Acts 2:42.

### **Exhortations, 22-24**

The strong parallelism among these three exhortations encourages us to see them as a group, to which both modifiers apply. These three exhortations correspond to the other three activities in Acts 2:42.

To understand the first two, it's useful to compare this whole passage with Heb 4:14-16, which describes the same two activities, with a very similar motivation. (By reversing these two, it also shows that the motivation goes with multiple exhortations, not just with the first one.)

4:14-16	10:19-23
14 Seeing then that we have a <b>great high priest</b> , that is passed <b>into the heavens</b> , Jesus the Son of God,	19 Having therefore, brethren, <b>boldness</b> with respect to the entering <b>into the holiest</b> by the blood of Jesus, 20 By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, <b>through the veil</b> , that is to say, [the entering] of his flesh; 21 And <i>having</i> an <b>high priest</b> over the house of God;
<b>let us hold fast our profession.</b> 15 For we have not an <b>high priest</b> which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet <b>without sin</b> .	having our <b>bodies washed with pure water</b> , 23 <b>Let us hold fast the profession of our faith [hope]</b> without wavering; (for he <i>is</i> faithful that promised;)
16 <b>Let us therefore come προσερχομεθα boldly</b> unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.	22 <b>Let us draw near προσερχομεθα</b> with a true heart <b>in full assurance of faith</b> , having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience,

**22 Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience,**-- The parallel in 4:16 shows that what is meant here is coming to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy and find grace. This is the “prayer” of Acts 2:42. It is possible only because our hearts have been sprinkled, a process he has described already in 9:13-14.

13 For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: 14 How much more shall **the blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, **purge your conscience** from dead works to serve [λατρευω “worship”] the living God?

The service in 9:14 is specifically worship, corresponding to the “praise” in Acts 2:47, and is based on the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. The first modifier has reminded us of this blood, which we commemorate at the breaking of bread.

**and having our bodies washed with pure water, 23 let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)**--The washing of water refers to baptism, by which we confessed our faith in Christ, and reminds us of the baptism of the Jerusalem converts in Acts

2:41, in response to Peter's sermon, by which they entered into the corporate life described in v. 42.

Having made this profession, they are to hold it fast. Though our version says “faith,” the actual Greek word is “hope.” It is not just their baptismal confession that they are to hold firm, but the hope that is set before them, the hope of a godly life in this world, of the Lord's return, and of their reign with him. Peter's sermon did not expose them to all these truths before they were baptized. The author is pointing them to the full array of truth that they learned in the assembly of the saints, what Acts 2:42 describes as “the apostles' doctrine.”

**24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:**--The fourth element of Acts 2:42 was fellowship, a “partnership” with other believers that emphasizes the things we have in common. Here, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to just such fellowship. “Consider one another,” contemplate one another, figure out each other's needs so that you can proactively help.

### **Second Modifier, v. 25**

In the first modifier and the three exhortations, we have clear allusions to the same four activities outlined in Acts 2:42. In the breaking of bread, they are reminded of the Lord's body and flesh, by which he has entered heaven on their behalf. Emboldened by this reminder, they are to engage in prayer, hold fast the teaching they receive, and have fellowship in caring for one another.

Now we come to the second modifier. It is customary to associate it with only the third exhortation. But the parallel of 4:14-16 shows that the first extends across multiple exhortations, and it is most natural to give the second modifier the same scope, thus forming a lovely chiasm.

**25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.**--This modifier makes two important points.

First, it shows us that the three exhortations are meant to be carried out corporately. The Hebrew Christians might be tempted to exercise their new faith in secret, to avoid persecution from unsaved Jews. The author denies them this deception. They are to assemble together.

Second, it encourages them to take these times of gather seriously. They are to “exhort” one “not [to] forsake” the assembling together. Acts 2:42 simply noted that the early Christians devoted themselves “steadfastly” to their corporate activities of doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Heb 10:25 turns this example into a command.

### **Conclusion**

The early church collectively carried out four activities: teaching by those distinguished in Eph 4:11, fellowship that emphasized what they had in common, remembering the Lord's body and blood in the breaking of bread, and corporate prayer. Both Acts and Hebrew bear witness to these four activities, and also to the zeal and steadfastness with which the early believers pursued them. We also must not forsake the assembling together of the saints for these purposes.

Now we know



- from Eph 4, how the church functions, and
- from Acts and Hebrews, what activities occupied them.

Next week, in the will of the Lord, we'll look in more detail at instructions for the actual meetings that they conducted, from 1 Cor 11 and 14.

## Notes

### *προσκαρτερεω*

#### Non-theological Contexts

Num 13:20 And what the land is, whether rich or poor; whether there are trees in it or no: and ye shall **persevere** and take of the fruits of the land: and the days *were* the days of spring, the forerunners of the grape.

Mark 3:9 And he spake to his disciples, that a small ship should **wait on** him because of the multitude, lest they should throng him.

Acts 8:13 Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he **continued** with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Acts 10:7 And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that **waited on him continually**;

Rom 13:6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, **attending continually** upon this very thing.

#### Theological

Eph 6:18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all **perseverance** and supplication for all saints;

Acts 1:14 These all **continued** with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

Acts 2:42 And they **continued stedfastly** in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 2:46 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,

Acts 6:4 But we will **give ourselves continually** to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

Rom 12:12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; **continuing instant** in prayer;

Col 4:2 **Continue** in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

## ***The Entering In of Heb 10:19-21***

Follow John Brown on the understanding of this passage.

**19-25 Having ... boldness ... 21 And an high priest over the house of God;**--He begins by reminding them of two possessions that they have: boldness, and a high priest over the house of God.

The “house of God” describes the church:

1 Tim 3:15 But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Eph 2:21 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

So at the outset, his focus is on their corporate life, rather than individual spirituality.

These two possessions, boldness and a high priest, are to encourage them in carrying out the three exhortations.

**19-25 Having therefore.**--“Therefore” takes us back to the preceding context, and reminds us that they have these possessions in view of the truth that he has just been teaching, in ch. 9 and the first part of ch. 10. That teaching concerns two things.

The first is our Lord's entrance, as our great high priest, in the heavenly sanctuary.

9:11-12 But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by[ through] a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; 12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood **he entered in once into the holy place**, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

9:24 For Christ is not **entered** into the holy places made with hands, *which are* the figures of the true; but **into heaven itself**, now to appear in the presence of God for us:

The second is the sacrifice that he has offered, the sacrifice of his body and blood.

9:12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but **by his own blood** he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

10:5-10 Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a **body** hast thou prepared me: 6 In burnt offerings and *sacrifices* for sin thou hast had no pleasure. 7 Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. 8 Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and *offering* for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure *therein*; which are offered by the law; 9 Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. 10 By the which will we are sanctified through **the offering of the body** of Jesus Christ once *for all*.

**19 to enter into the holiest**—The Greek text says, “having boldness unto the entering into the holiest.” Our version translates the prepositional phrase as an infinitive, assuming that it is our entrance into the holiest that is in view. But the previous context, to which the author makes explicit reference, is focused not on our entrance, but on our Lord's. It is far more appropriate to read the verse, “having boldness with reference to the entrance into the holiest.” The sense is thus exactly parallel to that in



4:14-16,

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, **let us hold fast *our* profession.** 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are, yet* without sin. 16 **Let us therefore come boldly** unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Note that this earlier passage encompasses two of the three exhortations that appear in the present text, “hold fast our profession” and “come” (προσερχομεθα, translated “draw near” in 10:22), and that it repeats the theme of boldness.