

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

Frank E. Allen

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CHAPTER SIX

Conserving the Strength and Devotion of the Church

(Acts 2:42-47)

OUTLINE

Key verse -

1. The requirements of church membership (38, 41-42).
2. The conduct of church members (42).
 - a. They continued steadfastly in the apostle's teaching (42).
 - b. They continued in fellowship (42).
 - c. They continued in remembrance of the Lord's dying love (42).
 - d. They continued in prayer (42).
3. A Reverent spirit came upon the whole community (43).
4. They were given supernatural powers (43).
5. They lived in harmony (44).
6. They shared their possessions with one another (44).
7. They were exemplary in their lives (46).
8. They gained favor with the people (47).
9. Members were added to the church day by day (47).

Looking forward into the future, Isaiah saw the Church enlarging the place of her tent, lengthening her cords and strengthening her stakes. In the first part of this chapter we have the record of the first great enlarging of the tent and lengthening the cords of the Christian Church. In this passage we are told how the apostles directed the church in strengthening her stakes.

The day which had just passed was one of the most eventful in the history of the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit had manifested His power when working within the Church. On one day there were added to the church three thousand souls. Within a few days the number had increased to five thousand (4:43). What were the disciples to do with all these new members? How could the Church absorb so many and remain both stable and active? The days which follow are just as important as the days which precede a revival.

The Church should be just as earnest and active in conserving the numbers and devotion of members as in bringing them within her fold.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

What was required of those who were added to the church under the immediate direction of the Apostles? Peter had told the inquirers that they should exercise faith in Christ, repent of their sins, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, be ready to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, trust in the promises of God and live separate from the world.

It is evident that their instruction and examination could not have been very extended when so many were received into the church in one day. Peter gave them some earnest instruction which is not recorded, for we are told, “**with many other words did he testify and exhort**” (2:40a). It is indicated that he talked principally about their duty to separate from the world, “**saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation**” (2:40b).

The reception of this multitude in one day, and of the thousands of others in the few days which followed, does not show any superficiality on the part of the Apostles. We remember that those who were gathered at Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Pentecost were “**devout men.**” They were acquainted with the law and the prophets.

They were worshippers of the One True God. What they needed was not instruction, but the conviction that Jesus was not an imposter; that He was the Christ, the Saviour. Those who professed Christ at this time would not do so without a deep conviction, because it was an unpopular thing to do. They were joining a hated sect whose leader had recently been tried and executed. Public opinion had never been stronger against any leader of any sect. They were offered no promise of popularity, wealth or ease. They were called to a life of separation and service.

Therefore, there is nothing in this record which indicated that during, or after a revival, professed converts should be admitted into the church without instruction and manifest devotion to the cause of Christ. The requirements of membership in the apostolic church were not superficial though thousands were baptized and received. These men had mostly, possibly all, been members of the Jewish church. The Spirit came into their hearts and convinced them that they had been mistaken as to who Jesus was; that in their denial and crucifixion of Christ they had been great sinners. They repented and gave evidence of repentance.

The man today who accepts Christ in theory but denies Him in fact, who is not willing to accept the whole teaching of the Scriptures, is either not prepared in heart or is not properly instructed for membership in the Christian Church. There was little danger of this in the early church which was so unpopular, but there is a great deal of danger in that regard today. There is, as a consequence, greater need of careful instruction and exact examination, before receiving members into the church of Christ. A hypocrite has never added strength to the church.

THE CONDUCT OF CHURCH MEMBERS

A question which is frequently asked concerning a revival is: "Are the converts genuine?" "Will they remain true?" That depends partly upon the conviction of the new members and partly upon the devotion of the church. We have here, in the example of the early church, a plan for the conservation of the devotion of the church. In the first part of this chapter we are taught how to win men to Christ; in this section we are taught how to hold them true to Him. We are told that the members of the early church remained steadfast. They made use of the means of grace.

Before the new members were received they were baptized. That was the initiatory rite. It signified that they were cleansed by the blood and Spirit of Christ, and that they intended to remain in covenant with Christ forever. Following their baptism we have an outline of their conduct.

1. The continued steadfastly in the apostle's teaching: "**And they continued stedfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers**" (2:42). The disciples taught them that which they had learned from Christ and that which the Holy Spirit had revealed to them as organizers of the New Testament church. We have that teaching preserved in the New Testament. The new members listened eagerly and endeavored to obey that which they were taught. They enjoyed the daily worship and instruction in the temple. A true follower of Christ is always eager to know about his Master and what He teaches. When men are truly revived there is a hunger for Bible teaching.

Dr. Alexander Maclaren once uttered this forceful statement: "There are thousands of men and women in our churches who know no more about the rich revelation of God in Jesus Christ than they did on that day long, long ago, when first they began to apprehend that He was Saviour of their souls. When I sometimes get glimpses into the utter Biblical ignorance of educated members of my own and other congregations, I am appalled; I do not wonder how we ministers do so little by our preaching, when the minds of people to whom we speak are so largely in such a chaotic state in reference to Scriptural truth. I believe there is an intolerance of plain, sober, instructive teaching from the pulpit, which is one of the worst signs of Christianity in this generation. And I believe that there are a terribly large number of professing Christians, and good people after a fashion, whose Bibles are as clean today, except for one or two favorite pages, as they were when they came out of the booksellers shop years and years ago. You will never be strong Christians, you will never be happy ones, until you make conscience of the study of God's Word and continue steadfastly in the Apostle's teaching. You may produce plenty of emotional Christianity and of busy and sometimes fussy work without it, but you will not get depth."

2. They continued in fellowship (42). Their fellowship was definitely Christian. Their gatherings were not merely get-together meetings at which they talked of everything except their soul's desires and the principles of the Christian religion. They had heart to heart talks about their Christian experience and new desires: about the great love of Jesus which they had been so slow to discern. What blessed fellowship might Christians have if they would converse about that which is nearest their hearts rather than mere shop-talk, as is so frequently the custom!

In their fellowship-meetings, the early Christians of whom Paul speaks were so ready to speak that the Apostle had to caution them to speak one at a time: **“How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints”** (I Corinthians 14:26-33). One had a Psalm, another a teaching, another a revelation, and another an interpretation, and other there was confusion because so many wanted to speak at once. Their enthusiastic, warm-hearted fellowship is an example to us. If we had more of it, it would mean much for the conservation of the devotion and love of the church.

3. They continued in remembrance of the Lord’s dying love (42). We are told that they continued **“in breaking of bread.”** Later the breaking of bread at home is spoken of (v. 46), but in v. 42 it evidently refers to the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. “The Bread,” is special bread which was broken in remembrance of the Lord. “Bread at home” (v. 46), is ordinary bread which was commonly eaten. **“For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me”** (I Corinthians 11:23-24).

They could not express their sorrow for the manner in which they had treated the Lord while He was on earth. They longed to keep Him in constant remembrance now that they knew He was the Son of God. A poor Scottish Highland widow kept on a cupboard an old cracked cup, covered with a glass globe, as though it were an object of great value. The old cup was very dear to her. Years before, a carriage with a lady inside, had stopped at the door of the lonely cottage. The lady asked for a little water and it was brought to her by the woman in this very cup. To her astonishment, she afterward learned that the lady who had used the cup was Queen Victoria. The fact that the Queen’s lips had touched the cup made it an object of great value to the old widow. How much more should the bread, which represents Christ’s body, arouse in the heart of the communicant thoughts of reverent love for Christ, as he thinks of all that He was and of all that He did for him!

4. They continued in prayer (42). The early Christians believed in private prayer and, like their Master, they prayed much. They believed just as firmly in the value of social prayer. Therefore, they did not neglect the prayer-meeting. They knew that Christ had promised a special blessing upon those who meet together and pray in His name. No church can conserve her spirit of devotion without frequent meetings for prayer. No Spirit-filled church will desire to neglect social prayer.

A writer in The British Christian Herald gives the following account of some Christians who gathered for earnest prayer.

“In a Scotch mining village there had been a remarkable work of grace. Some of the young converts met with a good deal of opposition from the world, which strengthened their faith; but by and by the opposition ceased, and the first love of some began to wax cold. But there were three godly aged women - real mothers in Israel - in that village who used to meet twice or thrice a week in one of their houses to pray, and one said to the others, ‘We’ll need to swaddle these bairns with believing prayer, for they are in more danger now than when the devil was roaring against them. I never got in at some corner, and was doing mischief secretly, and, unless the Lord prevent and rebuke him, we’ll have sorrow and trouble.’ So the three godly women met to pray every night, especially for the lambs of the flock, who were in danger of being led astray by the wiles and subtleties of the adversary. They prayed and watched, and by-and-by the hour of temptation had passed and the young believers had come safely through. But it came out in later years that some wonderful deliverances were wrought the very week that the three aged women met nightly to pray. One had been invited to a ball and had decided to go, when suddenly the word, ‘**And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them**’ (Ephesians 5:11) flashed across her mind; and she confessed her sin, renounced her purpose, and was restored to God. Another had gotten into company with an unconverted young woman, and was on the way that leads to an unequal yoke, when God spoke to him during the silent night, and he was delivered from the snare. There was a general restoration of soul, followed by a time of refreshing and a great revival. Everybody rejoiced and shared the blessing, which was heaven’s answer to the cry of the three aged women who ‘swaddled these bairns’ with prayer.” it brought a blessing to those who engaged in prayer together, and a blessing to those for whom they prayed.

There is no department of the church’s work that is more important than her prayer meeting. The hours when the disciples waited upon God, in obedience to His command, in the upper room were just as important as the hour when Peter preached. If the church is to have power she must take time for devotion and prayer. Many a pastor has found his church growing cold, but with a revival of the prayer meeting there has come fervency and power.

A REVERENT SPIRIT CAME UPON THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

“**And fear came upon every soul:**” (2:43a). A few days before some of these people had cried out, crucify Him! crucify Him! That same day some had mocked and charged the disciples with drunkenness. So striking was the power of the Spirit that He silenced such talk. They had seen strange things. Multitudes had experienced a change of heart. The work of the Spirit was going on and many were being turned to the Lord. All together, the events attending the crucifixion, the undeniable fact of the resurrection, the miracles performed by the apostles, and the events attending Pentecost, produced in the minds of the people a state of veneration and awe.

The mighty works of God, though they have not always led to an exercise of faith, have produced a state of fear and veneration in the minds of those who have witnessed them or have come in close contact with them. Moses declared that, “**Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges**” (Deut. 32:31). The Egyptians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians in turn, stood in astonishment when they witnessed the wonderful works of God. It is well to fear God, but fear is not enough.

Some of those who feared were shortly crying out against Peter and John, and later, against Paul. Fear that does not produce faith is not enduring.

THEY WERE GIVEN SUPERNATURAL POWER

“And many wonders and signs were done by the apostles” (2:43b). The apostles are particularly named here as those who did wonders and signs, but the power to work miracles was not limited to them. Later, we are told of miracles which were performed by the disciples of the early Christian church. Peter and John healed a lame man, who had been lame from his infancy. He entered into the temple walking and leaping and praising God. The people were filled with wonder and amazement at what had taken place. Some were strengthened in the faith and some were angered as a result. A little later a terrible miracle of judgment took place when Ananias and Sapphira were stricken dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit. The people in Samaria were awakened to give heed to Philip because they saw and heard the miracles which he did.

Jesus had promised the disciples that they should be able to do signs and wonders. That promise was being fulfilled at this time. Supernatural power was given to the disciples of the apostolic church in order that they might convince a skeptical world that Jesus whom they preached was indeed the Christ the Saviour of the world. It was evident that they would not have been able to work miracles, including the casting out of unclean spirits, unless they had been true witnesses for Christ.

THEY LIVED IN HARMONY

“And all that believed were together” (2:44a). It seems like a very natural thing for men of like faith to be together. After all it is a severe test of their Christian spirit if men live together for an extended period. The missionaries who are often thrown into such close proximity, both in their homes and in their work, tell us that this is one of the most severe tests of the missionary. It is a practical test as to whether the Christian is of a meek and quiet spirit: whether he is forgiving and helpful, or whether he is jealous, surly and resentful. Throughout Scripture the quarrelsome spirit is condemned; it is represented as being from the evil one, and the man who possesses it is declared to be a sinner. On the other hand, the quiet, loving and forgiving spirit, is commended as coming from God.

And old miner in California, who was a consumptive, was approached by a missionary. He swore at his visitors for a long time, but finally when God's Spirit entered his heart and awakened him to love his Lord and Saviour he welcomed others, spoke kindly to his friends, and was anxious to do all that he could for them. The Spirit of Christ in their hearts thus changed scornful Pharisees and led them to take pleasure in the company of men of all nations. The spirit of harmony that is displayed among members of the church, and towards those of the community, is a strong factor in recommending the church in every land. This spirit does not exist in the heathen world; it does not exist among godless men in an enlightened land. It is important that every Christian shall show that spirit of love which becomes a true child of God. It is regarded as a test of character. It blesses the Christian church wherever it exists.

THEY SHARED THEIR POSSESSIONS WITH ONE ANOTHER

“And had all things common. And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (2:44b-45). They were ready to share their possessions and goods with any man who had need. This was not a law of the early church, but it was a demonstration of their entire consecration to God. It was not the communism which we know at the present time. These people said: “All mine is yours.” The political communist says: “All yours is mine.” The Bible does not here, or elsewhere, teach a law of communism; it does, however, teach that the possessions of the Christian should be consecrated to God. It is a living example of how men on fire for God, and fully consecrated to Him, will lay themselves and all that they have on the altar for God. Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor, because He knew that the young ruler was depending upon his riches. The only way to get them out of his way, that they might not stand between him and Christ, was to part with them.

All that we have is God’s and should be used for God. These people at Jerusalem had been accustomed to giving a tenth under the law. Now under the Gospel dispensation, filled with the Spirit and the love of Christ, they would give up anything and everything for Christ. They wished to share with other disciples who were less favored. They wished to fill the treasury of the church so that funds might not be lacking when they should continue to carry out Christ’s command and go into all Judaea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world.

There have been in every age, and are today, men who put the average professed Christian to shame in the manner in which they have given their possessions and their lives to the service of Christ. Charles T. Studd might have lived a life of ease and pleasure in England. At the bedside of a dying brother God opened his eyes to see the futility of the gilt and pleasure of the world. He had inherited an estate of half a million dollars. He had won great honors as a champion cricket player of England. He resolved to become a missionary and to give up all of his inherited estate and go out in faith in God. He went as a missionary, first to China, then to India, and then to the center of Africa where he founded the Heart of Africa Mission. He has labored there for many years trusting in God to supply all of his needs and receiving a great blessing from the Lord upon his labors.

Sadhu Sundar Singh came of a very wealthy family in India. After he became a Christian he resolved to give up home and all the wealth to which he was entitled and go out as a lone missionary of Christ to the neglected of his own dark land. His father tried to tempt him to turn back and possess the great wealth to which he was heir.

His uncle, a man of great wealth, took him to his large house and into his deep cellar, and revealed to him such wealth as he had never seen or dreamed of, and said: “All these shall be yours if you will remain with us.” But resolutely forsaking all he has gone out barefoot, with only his simple robe, blanket, staff and Bible, preaching the love of Christ to lost men. Many others, like those of the early church, and like these, have consecrated all to God, and have been used in a wonderful manner, to extend the church of Christ.

THEY WERE EXEMPLARY IN THEIR LIVES

“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” (2:46). This is made clear in the forty-sixth verse. They not only worshipped every day, but they were a joyful company. Even to see them at their meals and hear them talk, one would know that a great change had come over them. They were not possessed of the old pharisaical spirit. Their very faces beamed with gladness.

Men often forget that even in their eating and drinking they are to do all for the glory of God. They forget that they may even entertain their friends and neighbors, and do it with a selfish purpose. When luxury and fashion creep in they often make the day of entertainment a burden. When harmful drink is used and late hours are kept, the gladness and singleness of heart give way to heaviness of heart the corruption of character.

To those of the early church, religion and social enjoyment were closely intermingled. No wonder that members were constantly being added! One of the difficulties in the way of holding a revival today is that often the lives of professed Christians do not testify to the world that they are profoundly interested in the Gospel of Christ. Their neighbors have become prejudiced because they think that the Gospel means nothing to those that profess it. Often professed Christians will not attend the services with regularity. They think that they do not need to attend, and others think that they are not interested. If as in the early church, and as witnesses tell us today in the Korean church, the members of the church were willing to rise early in the morning to attend prayer meetings, to meet day after day for weeks and even months, there would be no doubt of the effect it would have upon the members themselves and upon all the community.

THEY GAINED FAVOUR WITH THE PEOPLE

“Praising God, and having favour with all the people” (2:47a). Their humble, devoted, charitable, joyful manner of living won the hearts of the people. Those who had mocked them saw that they were not drunken. Those who had opposed them saw that they were neither hypocrites nor fanatics. Even those who did not believe in Christ looked upon them as a good and respectable people.

We remember, however, that this is an historical fact, spoken of those days, and not a prophecy of the future. Opposition, then persecution soon harassed the church. No matter how pure and earnest the church may be, she may not always expect to be popular. Her very earnestness arouses Satan and those whom he can use. The church which is revived may astonish and interest the world, but it is likely to meet with opposition ere long. It is not according to the prophecy of our Lord that the church shall continue in favor with the world. **“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake”** (Matthew 5:11).

When opposition arose against the early church it came first from the rulers and not from the common people.

The common people who heard Jesus gladly were favorably impressed with the devotion of the early church. It is still true that a devout church is an attractive church. The warm church which draws the earnest Christian repels the formalist. Where Spirit-filled Christians feel at home, there the hypocrite finds an undesirable environment. Fervent preaching of the Gospel of Christ is not the only attraction of the church. The earnest, joyful, generous lives of the members of the church bring it into favor with the people. If the preaching is drawing one way, and the inconsistent lives of the people are drawing in another, the influence of the church will be greatly lessened. As it was in those days, so it is usually today, that unless there is an organized effort to pervert the minds of the common people, they have regard for the earnest, devout, humble congregation of God's people in any part of the world.

MEMBERS WERE ADDED TO THE CHURCH EACH DAY

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (2:47b). This was very encouraging to the early church. The Holy Spirit had been sought; He had been trusted and He had been honored. The Christians were continuing to honor Him in their faith, life and work. They saw the blessed results in the continual ingathering of the harvest.

The same conditions would produce wonderful results today. If all who are called Christians were equally consecrated and were equally faithful in following the apostles' teaching, if they continued in the same warm fellowship and in earnest prayer, they would see marvelous revivings in the world in a short space of time. Today there are many who are teaching false doctrines. There is a neglect of Christian fellowship. There is a neglect of public worship. There are many who engage in worship in merely a formal manner. As for giving all their possessions to help spread the Gospel, not only is this spirit of consecration very rare, but there are many professed followers of Christ who seem to begrudge every small contribution which they give to the church. When the churches began to grow cold and worldly, a few years after this, what was the trouble? Many in the church of Ephesus had left their first love.

There were some who professed to be Christians in the church of Smyrna who were not.

In Pergamos there were many who openly disregarded the law of the church. They sacrificed to idols and committed fornication.

In Thyatira there was a false prophetess who was corrupt in life, who defied the law of the church and who led many to follow her in her fornication and idolatry.

Sardis only pretended to be a church. In spiritual life she was dead. That church was supposed to be prospering, and there were a few real Christians left in it, but the majority were only nominal Christians.

In Laodicea the church had all the appearance of prosperity, but had no spirituality or zeal for God. The people thought they were above criticism, but they were badly in need of cleansing. Christ held them in utter contempt. He was ready to spue them out of His mouth.

It is important that members of the church shall remember that when their names are placed upon the roll they are not through growing in grace. The Lord added to the church such as were saved. They had been added to the roll of the church, but they needed to grow in grace.

In an address recently, I heard a noted minister tell of a man whom he knew in eastern Canada. A friend who had not seen him for years was inquiring of another about the people of that community. He told him there was a man there whom he would like to know about but he could not name. He described him. He said he usually attended the prayer meetings, but always attended the business meetings of the church. And always at these meetings he would have a “chip on his shoulder.” He could not let a meeting pass without finding fault with something or somebody. His friend replied, “I know who you mean, he acts in the same way still,” and named the man. One whom he had not seen for thirty years could be so described by his lack of piety that he was known. He had been a member of the church all those years but had not grown. He may have been saved, but was not being saved, at least as the Lord would desire. He was not a commendation to the church. To a church made up of men like that, the Lord would not add daily. Only to a church that is throbbing with spirituality will the Lord add daily those who are saved, and being saved.

The church must conserve her spiritual force, she must surround her members with those conditions which shall encourage them to grow in grace and remain fervent in spirit. The revival in the early church began with the disciples, and it continued among the new disciples. We need reviving, then we need to continue in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread and prayers. It is possible that if we knew the verdict of the Spirit it would be just as scathing, in many cases, as in that of Sardis and Laodicea. We think and speak of the lost souls who have not heard of Christ, who are going down to the depths without hope; but there are many who have professed Christ who are cold and formal and as far from Christ as the man whom we pity because he is in darkness.

The Korean pastor of the Pyeng Yang church, which has had an average attendance of over a thousand for the past three years, felt that his church was growing cold and somewhat indifferent. So each morning at four he went to the church to pray until six. A few of his members observed what he was doing and joined him. On Sabbath morning the pastor told his people what he was doing and they joined him. Monday morning over a hundred were present, and by Saturday morning nearly six hundred, many of them busy business men, were spending the time from four to six at the church in prayer, getting right with each other and with God. The next month more than three thousand souls were added to the Pyeng Yang churches. Is not the Lord willing, yes waiting, to do for His church everywhere what He did for it at Jerusalem and what He had done for it in recent years in Korea?

QUESTIONS

(Acts 2:42-47)

1. How do the days which follow compare in importance with those which precede a revival?
2. How many were added to the church within a few days after Pentecost?
3. Did the reception of so great a number show superficiality on the part of the apostles?

4. Why were hypocrites not likely to ask to join the church?
5. What were some of the means used to hold the new members and keep them enthused?
6. What part has Bible study in helping new members?
7. What is the value of Christian fellowship to the new members?
8. What is the relation of prayer to growth in grace?
9. Why should Christians continue to observe the Lord's Supper?
10. What effect did this revival have upon the community?
11. Why did God permit the apostles to continue to do wonders and signs?
12. What value does the record of miracles have for us today?
13. Of what value was Christian harmony such as is related here?
14. What was it which caused the disciples to share their possessions with one another?
15. Does this passage teach communism?
16. Will the church lack financial support when men are fully consecrated to God?
17. What is the relationship between gladness of heart and Christian consecration?
18. Why is a devout church an attractive church?
19. Would the same conditions in the church produce wonderful results today?
20. What is the relation between consecration and growth in a church?

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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