

## When Christians Got Together (Part 1)

### Essay #7

In this essay we will begin a quick tour of the New Testament to see what Christians did when they got together in the first century and try to get a better idea of just what our God wants to happen “in church.”

#### Acts

First let's take a look at the book of Acts. Let me preface this brief tour by saying once again, our approach to Scripture has an incredible impact on how we seek to apply God's will and live a Christ-centered, Spirit-led life. I grew up viewing the book of Acts as PRESCRIPTIVE but now see it as more DESCRIPTIVE. In other words, I saw the book as a pattern that had to be replicated rather than a narrative of what some Christians did in one part of the world in the first century. The book does *not* claim to set a pattern that must be replicated in every detail. It does *not* claim to be a blueprint of the one and only way for Christians to live and worship. It *does* set forth to provide a trustworthy narrative of some of the main points of the history and growth of the early church.

#### The Beginning

So what do we learn about the reasons Christians met and what they did at these gatherings? I suppose we could start with the “birthday” of the church in Acts 2. Check out 2:41-47. In the early days of the church we note a number of exciting and interesting things happening. First, the church was made up entirely of Jews. In fact, they may not have seen themselves so much as the beginning of a new movement as they did the fulfillment of an old one! Much of the samples of preaching seem to emphasize Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophesied Messiah. These Christians did not even call themselves Christians. They were just Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Their only scriptures were the Law and the Prophets. They continued to meet in the Temple courts to listen to the Apostles' teaching. They continued to meet daily with one another in their homes and they broke bread together (the Lord's Supper? Meals? Both?). They did not limit their meetings to Sunday. Of course, we need to remember that there were thousands of Jews who had traveled to Jerusalem from all over the world for Passover and the Jewish festivals and a lot of them probably had plenty of time on their hands! Imagine the scene – they came here to celebrate Passover and go then go back home only to hear news that the Messiah has come and he is offering a new life

by the Spirit. Now they aren't ready to go back home just yet. They want to know the implications of the Spirit filled kingdom of God. They want to hear about the life and times of the Messiah. What did he look like? What did he say? What did he do? What does he call on us to do? Where do we go from here? They also needed places to stay and food to eat. People had to sell some of their possessions in order to come up with the funds needed to feed and house one another. Everyone shared what they had like some kind of big family. What an incredible time this was! They praised God and baptized people. My guess is the apostles didn't get much sleep.

### Meeting times

In 3:1 we see Peter and John on their way to the Temple. Why are they going there? Because it's time for church! Well, not exactly "church" as we think of it. It was the 3:00 p.m. prayer time at the Temple. These guys were still keeping to Temple meeting times and they were praying together with their fellow Jews – many of whom had accepted Jesus as the Messiah – many, many more who had not. They didn't stop being Jews. They just accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

### Sharing Possessions

In 4:32-35 we see these Messianic Jews extremely united. They continue to share their possessions. The apostles seem to be doing most of the teaching and the teaching is mostly about the resurrection of Jesus (it's just a guess, mind you, but I really don't think they were spending a lot of time indoctrinating the believers in how to do the five acts of worship – read through Acts again and see just what the teaching consisted of). Money was laid at the apostles' feet from time to time to help the needy so it appears the apostles were providing the primary leadership and oversight.

### The Hour of Power

In Acts 5:12 we see the apostles are still (apparently) the only ones working miracles. So if you were present at one of these gatherings you would have seen signs, miracles and wonders done by the apostles. They were still meeting in Solomon's colonnade – presumably because you could fit a lot of people in there. People came to the gathering for healing (v.15-16) and exorcism. Proclamation and teaching took place and the main message was about the new life in Christ (v.

20). A lot of “evangelism” was going on – “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (v.42)

### Meals on Wheels

Evidently, these early believers had put together their own “meals on wheels.” In Acts 6:1ff we see that a DAILY distribution of food was going on for those who were in need. What a massive undertaking! The Grecian Jews (did you notice they weren’t called Christians?) were upset though because their widows were being overlooked. The church begins to evolve again – the Apostles decide to delegate. Seven men are chosen to handle this responsibility. Was this an “office” that was being set for all churches at all times in all places? I doubt it. I see it more as a specific and immediate need that has to be taken care of and the Apostles improvise. The Apostles pray over and lay their hands on these seven men. One of these men was named Stephen. After the laying on of hands by the Apostles we see him mentioned as working miracles (v.8). It’s not just the apostles anymore.

### No Handbook on How to Do Church

In Acts 8, we see another one of The Seven (Philip) doing miracles (v.6) and preaching that Jesus is Lord and before long we have Samaritans becoming believers. Luke seems to be following something of an outline that he mentioned in Acts 1:8 – the message will go from Jerusalem to Samaria and then to the Gentiles. We all know how Jews felt about Samaritans so this is quite a leap that they are now being incorporated into the family of believers. Later in the chapter Philip preaches the good news of Jesus to an Ethiopian Jew. You get the idea that the lesson went quickly because it took place in the chariot and then they stop and the eunuch is baptized and SUDDENLY the Lord takes Philip away and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. Goes on his way where? As far as we know, he headed back home to Ethiopia. How much do you think he knew about “doing church?” My guess is – nothing – that is, in the way we think of doing church. Where do you think he went to worship when he got back to Ethiopia. Right, most likely you would have found him still going to synagogue on the Sabbath worshipping with his fellow Jews and trying to persuade them from the Prophets that Jesus is the Messiah. He was not given the church of Christ handbook on how to conduct an assembly and how to recognize a gathering of true believers. If I sound too sarcastic, I apologize. I’m simply trying to get us to see that the first century church was different in different places and very, very different from what our “church service” looks like today.

### Saints in the Synagogue

In Acts 9:20 we see Saul (Paul) attending the synagogue and preaching Jesus there. We'll see believers meeting in the synagogues and attending the Temple later in the book of Acts. These folks didn't stop being Jews. They did become believers in Jesus. They also used the synagogues as natural avenues for evangelism.

### Gentiles

In Acts 10, after who knows how much time has passed, the church evolves again. It took a special revelation from God but one of the apostles (Peter) finally gets it that other people can be believers besides Jews. Cornelius is converted and so begins a controversy that will become a major source of division among believers and will provide Paul with the major substance of many of his letters and us with what we call the New Testament.

In Acts 11:3 we have Luke talking about the circumcised believers. These are Jewish Christians who still believe that it is wrong to associate with uncircumcised men. Why? It's because they didn't stop being Jews or keeping the festivals, customs and teaching of the Law of Moses. And this is years down the road from that first birthday of the church! By verse 18 the circumcised believers finally seem to understand that God is so gracious that he has granted salvation even to Gentiles – of all things! Unfortunately, this one meeting wouldn't settle things. Believe it or not, even Peter, himself, would temporarily “backslide” on this issue later. So I wonder how Gentiles who had not grown up going to synagogue but would have been familiar with all kinds of pagan festivals, rituals and beliefs would have worshipped. What would Gentile church look like?

In 11:19 we have some believers preaching only to Jews but in the next verse we find out that others are reaching out to Gentiles as well. In verse 26 we discover that believers were first called Christians in Antioch. If I remember correctly, the term Christian is only used about three times in the whole NT. Christians are more often referred to as believers or disciples.

In 11:27 we see that there are people who prophesied in the gatherings (most of the prophecies in the NT that we have any detailed knowledge of have to do with foretelling future events). In verses

28-29 we see believers pooling their resources for a special collection for famine relief in another region.

In verse 30 we have mention of elders. No details are given as to the role of these men. They are simply mentioned in passing.

### Prayer

In Acts 12:12 we see believers gathered together at someone's home for prayer. Prayer is mentioned frequently as something believers engage in.

### Prophecy and Teaching

What else did these early believers do when they got together? Acts 13:1 seems to indicate that prophecies were made and teaching took place. In verse 3 we see fasting, praying and laying on of hands. In verse 5 we are back in the synagogues where evangelism is taking place. In verse 14 we see the believers meeting together with their Jewish brothers in the synagogue again. And in 14:1 we see them there again, "as usual." A lot of time was spent in the synagogues on the Sabbath.

### Elders

The church continues to evolve. We've seen elders in Jerusalem but now we have Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in more churches (14:23). Prayer and fasting are associated with these appointments.

### Part One Summary

We're half way through Acts now. What have we seen so far about what Christians did when they got together?

1. They prayed
2. They prophesied

3. They taught about Jesus
4. They worked miracles, healed and exorcised demons
5. They pooled their material resources to help needy people
6. They broke bread
7. They read scripture
8. They met in synagogues and worshipped with people who did not believe in Jesus
9. They met in homes
10. They met in the Temple
11. They refined their leadership and organization to meet new challenges
12. They praised God
13. They met frequently (not limited to just Saturday or Sunday)

It's pretty basic. Most of the teaching to the Jews focused on Jesus as the Messiah. The Gentiles were encouraged to turn from idols and serve the true God who saved us through Jesus (Acts 14:15). Meetings had a "vertical" element in the praising of God and a "horizontal" element in the strengthening, encouraging, healing and instruction of believers. No huge revelations here. Nothing particularly prescriptive has surfaced in regard to what MUST take place at a Christian gathering. Believers got together to encourage one another, remember Jesus, learn more about their new life in Christ and praise God. Wait until we look at the last half of Acts. We will see some things there that may be quite different from what we would expect of Christians and their "rituals." We'll pick up in chapter 15 next time (part 2). Part three will look at the letters of the NT and what they reveal about Christian gatherings.

Steve Curtis