

Acts 2: The First Christian Church

An Exhortation to Repentance and Baptism [vv.36-40]

v.36: Peter's sermon closes with a strong appeal to the conscience by summarising the argument of his preaching. In Greek, the statement literally reads, "Assuredly, therefore, let all the house of Israel know, that both Lord and Christ did God make him – **this Jesus** whom ye did crucify." Given all the evidence Peter has presented, they could 'know for certain' (assuredly) that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed Lord and Christ. "God hath made" signifies that God has 'established' (appointed) Jesus, in position, as **Lord** and **Christ**. He was always Lord and Christ (cf. Luke 2.11), but now occupies a position which befits His person. "These things were ever His, but now He is officially installed as such, as the risen and glorified Man." Peter's use of the word "Lord" (*kurios*) is significant. It means 'master' or 'sovereign' and often translates **Jehovah** in the Greek version of the OT (LXX). Jude uses *kurios* to refer to "Jesus Christ" (Jude 4), then, in the very next verse, uses *kurios* to refer to the "Lord" who delivered Israel from Egypt (Jude 5). Clearly, in Jude's mind, Jehovah of the OT was the *kurios* of the NT. **v.37:** The impact of the statement caused those who were listening to be "pricked (pierced) in their heart". The verb "pricked" means to 'strike violently' or to 'stun'. This was the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in each of their hearts. The word was used in secular Greek to describe horses pounding the earth with their hoofs. With a deep sense of their own guilt, and enormity of their sin, all they could do was cry out "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Deep conviction of sin is a part of every genuine conversion.

v.38: The apparently simple imperative of Peter has been much discussed and debated. First, this verse does not teach *baptismal regeneration* (baptism as a requirement for salvation). Forgiveness of sins is based on faith alone (John 3.16; Ephesians 2.8-9). Even Peter's preaching elsewhere in Acts suggests the same (Acts 3.19; 5.31; 10.43; 13.38-39; 26.18). Second, some Greek scholars translate the preposition "for" (*eis*) as *on account of*, rather than the word's normal meaning of *aim* or *purpose* (cf. Matthew 3.11; 12.41). In this case, Peter would be calling for baptism, not for the purpose of forgiveness, but on the basis that their sins were *already* forgiven through repentance. Third, perhaps the best view takes note of the different singular and plural verbs and nouns in the sentence.¹ This suggests 'being baptized' is a *parenthetical* statement. Constable says, "According to this view Peter was saying, 'You [all] repent for [the purpose of] the forgiveness of your sins, and you [all] will receive the Spirit.' Then he added parenthetically, 'And each of you [singular] be baptized [as a testimony to your faith].'" Forgiveness is therefore conditioned on repentance of which baptism is the outward symbol. It is worth noting each clause of this statement:

- **Repent** (*metanoia*). The idea in Greek is an urgent call to 'change the mind' (or heart), to reconsider. In Hebrew, the thought is to 'turn', indicating a change of direction. Repentance transforms a person's thinking *and* conduct. The Jews had crucified Jesus of Nazareth – now they should recognise Him as *Lord* (deity) and *Christ* (promised Messiah).
- Though there is no mention of faith here, genuine faith always involves repentance, and vice versa. They are two sides of the same coin. "The people he was talking to had obviously already believed that Jesus was indeed both Lord and Christ. If not, they would not have been asking what to do." (David Gooding)
- **Remission of sins**. Repentance would result in the "remission" (release from debt) of sins.
- **Gift of the Holy Spirit**. The gift of the Spirit is also conditioned on the repentance clause, not water baptism. As a free gift (*dorea*), He cannot be earned, purchased, or merited.
- **Be baptised**. Being baptised was the public *display* of their repentance. *Profession* is one thing; public *confession* is another. There are many Christians around the world today whose public confession of Christ in baptism came at great cost. It was the same in first century Palestine. Baptism would mark a public break with Judaism and identification with Jesus Christ as Lord. **JD Pentecost** writes, "The confession of their faith in Christ and of their identification with him by baptism would demonstrate their separation from the nation. They would be put out of the synagogue and lose all identity in the nation. Baptism terminated their identity with the nation so that they could escape its judgment." Such a drastic public act would help weed out any conversions which were not genuine.
- Baptism was "in (*epi*) the name of Jesus Christ". Those baptised were aware of the significance of the name and confessed that which the name implies – the One who they crucified (Jesus) was indeed the Christ (Messiah).

v.39: The "promise" likely refers to the promise of the Spirit (v.33), even the entire package of salvation that reception of the Spirit effects – including forgiveness (v.38). This promise was not *exclusive*, but for their "children" (offspring) and "all that are afar off". In Peter's mind this would have included diaspora Jews (cf. Isaiah 57.19) and allowed for the

¹ Toussaint: The verb "repent" is plural and so is the pronoun "your" in the clause so that your sins may be forgiven (lit., "unto the remission of your sins"). Therefore the verb "repent" must go with the purpose of forgiveness of sins. On the other hand the imperative "be baptized" is singular, setting it off from the rest of the sentence.

possibility of Gentiles, though he would require some convincing of their inclusion (cf. Matthew 28.19; Acts 10)! In Ephesians 2 the expression clearly refers to Gentiles (vv.13, 17). This is therefore a *universal* vision of salvation. The “called” (those who respond to the message, cf. 1 Corinthians 1.24) is a further reference to Joel 2.32, “the remnant will be those whom the LORD will call”. Any response to the message is therefore qualified as resulting from the activity of God. Once again, *human responsibility* (v.38) is presented alongside *divine sovereignty* (v.39). **v.40:** Peter clearly had much more to say than Luke records here. The *imperfect* tense implies he “testified” (eye-witness evidence) and “exhorted” his audience *again and again*. The nation’s rejection of the Messiah proved they were an “untoward” (crooked) generation, a strong term referring to a morally twisted (corrupt) people (cf. Deuteronomy 32.5). Judgment was therefore the nation’s due, but individuals could be divinely delivered through faith in Christ. Hence, the phrase “save yourselves” is a *passive* command – “let yourselves be saved” – by God. He would respond to their repentance!

The Expression of the First Christian Church [vv.41-47]

v.41: These few verses are fundamental to a proper understanding of the character and activity of the first local church in Jerusalem. If we would seek to follow the original and scriptural pattern of local church gathering, we do well to heed their teaching. There were *four priorities* of the new Christians and *four pillars* of their gathering.

Formation of the Assembly (v.41)

- **Priority 1: Acceptance.** They “gladly received his word”. Receiving the message is another way of describing the act of “calling” (v.21) and “repentance” (v.38). They *welcomed* the message by accepting it.
- **Priority 2: Association.** They were “baptized” in the name of the Lord Jesus (see comments on v.38). Though about “three thousand souls” responded to the preaching, the implication is they were all *immediately* baptized. There were plenty of pools and “numerous Jewish *mikvahs*, large baptistry-like facilities where Jewish worshipers would immerse themselves in ritual purification before entering the temple” (MacArthur). Thus, there was no shortage of water for baptism by total immersion.
- **Priority 3: Addition.** They were “added” (joined) – but to *what* or to *whom*? The verb is *passive*, indicating something that God had done. A different form of the same verb is used in v.47, where those being saved were “added” to the church. Such is probably the case here, the 3,000 being added to the company of believers in Jerusalem, that is, the 120 (Acts 1.15). It should be noted that many of these converts would likely have been visitors to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, and soon returned to their native lands. The fact that “three thousand” souls were added is significant given the same number who were slain at the inauguration of the Law – a ministration of death indeed (see comments on Acts 2.1). The individuals are called “souls”, a word used by the Greeks to refer to the non-flesh or immaterial aspect of a person. In scripture, the soul is presented as the seat of *emotion* and *feeling* (Matthew 26.38), *will* and *purpose* (Ephesians 6.6). This is the first of *ten* progress reports recorded by Luke (cf. 4.4; 5.14; 6.1, 7; 9.31; 12.24; 16.5; 19.20; 28.30-31).
- **Priority 4: Attention.** They “continued steadfastly” in the four pillars of v.42. The verb is very expressive, literally meaning ‘strong towards’ and is elsewhere translated “to wait on” (Mark 3.9) or “give oneself to” (Acts 6.4). The thoughts of *ongoing devotion*, *persistence* and *perseverance* are foremost. They did not busy themselves in other things! Let us not become so strong on peripheral things, that we neglect these major matters.

Focus of the Assembly (v.42)

v.42: This verse presents the noticeboard of the first assembly in Jerusalem. These four pillars of assembly testimony have been called “The Jerusalem Quadrilateral” (JM Davies). The Greek divides the *four* statements into *two* pairs, each employing a definite article. Thus, ‘the fellowship’ of the saints was based on ‘the apostles’ doctrine’. The fellowship was then expressed in ‘the breaking of the bread’ and ‘the prayers’.

- **Pillar 1: Apostles’ Doctrine.** New believers need teaching. In Jerusalem there were great rabbis accredited in the corridors of academia, but these teachers were fishermen! But fishermen that had spent time in the presence (school) of Christ and were taught of the Spirit (John 16.13). The apostles’ doctrine therefore consisted of the verbal teaching of the twelve apostles. In its widest sense, this refers to the full body of teaching preserved in the NT, all of which was written by apostles or close associates of apostles. Jude calls this “the faith... once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). More specifically, in the Acts, the apostles clearly taught and emphasised specific fundamental truth in relation to the person and work of Christ – His deity and perfect humanity, sin-atonement, death, bodily resurrection and second coming. They also emphasised the person and work of the Holy Spirit, baptism, inspiration of Scripture and the great doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, not by works. Each believer in this first local assembly therefore persevered diligently in, and adhered closely to, Bible doctrine. This presupposes they were *taught* the truth, *grasped* the truth, and *cherished* the truth.
- **Pillar 2: The Fellowship.** Fellowship describes a *partnership* (implying contribution) in the spiritual activities and privileges of the assembly. Paul *glued* or *cemented* himself to the believers so much so that he was with them coming in (worship) and going out (service) at Jerusalem (Acts 9.28). This is not a social fellowship (though the word

also implies the *company* and *care* that comes from belonging to the same spiritual family), but a doctrinal fellowship. The apostles' doctrine *formed* and *informed* the fellowship they enjoyed. "*Fellowship was not something they agreed to have: it was something they had because they agreed; and their theological unity enabled them to have meaningful practical unity*" (Michael Penfold). Doctrine does not divide – it should unite!

- Note. Scripture speaks of two kinds of fellowship. There is family fellowship (invisible) in which every believer shares eternal life in common with one another, the apostles, and indeed God Himself (1 John 1.1-3). But, in a more technical sense, this verse is speaking of assembly fellowship (visible). Whilst *new birth* brings a person into family fellowship, a believer is formally *received* into assembly fellowship. It is clearly conditional on salvation, baptism and an adherence and devotion to the apostles' doctrine. Note that ex-communication from the fellowship of a local church was for *gross moral sin* (1 Corinthians 5) or *fundamentally false doctrine* (1 Timothy 1), so a person could not be received on the same basis, after all, the assembly is temple of God and the pillar and ground of the truth!
- **Pillar 3: The Breaking of the Bread.** Though this phrase can refer to eating a common meal (see v.46; Luke 24.35), the definite articles and context of this passage make it clear the Lord's Supper is in view (Acts 20.7). It would be strange to say that they continued steadfastly eating their meals! Thus, the remembrance of the Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread and drinking of the cup was an essential expression of the fellowship of these early believers (cf. 1 Corinthians 10.16-17). Remember, scripture does not teach reception to the breaking of bread. One is received to the fellowship of the local church.
- **Pillar 4: The Prayers.** Just as the church began in a prayer meeting, so it *continued* in collective prayer. It was an expression of their constant dependence on God to maintain their spiritual life and testimony. We need the Lord's help! A neglected prayer meeting indicates little recognition of one's true need. In Acts 4, when the apostles were released from prison, they at once sought out "their own company," and together they gave themselves to prayer (Acts 4.23-24). *Fereday: "It is sorrowful to see saints, who are regular in their attendance at the Lord's table, indifferent to the prayer-meeting. What can be said of their condition of soul?"*

Functions of the Assembly (vv.43-47)

v.43: The word "fear" refers to an attitude of awe and reverence. The presence of God was so real in their midst that fear came on "every soul", probably including those *within* and those *without* the church (cf. Acts 5.5, 11), This was partly due to the "wonders and signs" done by (*dia*) the apostles. The Lord continued to confirm the word with "signs following" until the end of the apostolic era (Mark 16.20; 2 Corinthians 12.12). Thus, the assembly functioned as a *testimony*, for they were under scrutiny in the community. **v.44:** The believers were a spiritually united family. This was expressed by having "all things common" and selling "their possessions and goods" distributing to each as they had need (**v.45**). This is not an example of socialism or communism, for their giving was voluntary (Acts 5.4) and they did not sell *all* their goods and houses (cf. v.46; 12.12; 17.5; 18.7). The verbs of vv.44-45 are imperfect, meaning "the sales of real estate and of personal property were made by the owners *from time to time* and the distribution was made on the basis of need *as the need developed*". Nevertheless, conversion had changed their appreciation for the material – they did not look upon material possessions as their own, but held them lightly, ready to use at any moment for someone else, as needs arose (4.32). All this was strong testimony to the unity of the gathered company that had been formed.

v.46: Christ, and fellowship with other believers affected every aspect of their lives. They continued 'day by day' to gather in the temple courts with one mind and one purpose – *praise* God, *pray* (cf. 3.1), and *witness* to the gospel (5.42). Public church buildings were unknown until the third century. They convened by the colonnades in Solomon's portico, where rabbis often spoke (3.11; 5.12). The area, in the eastern part of the outer court, was roughly 200m long and 15m wide, with two rows of columns 12.5m high. Both here and in their private homes, the believers shared meals – an indication of a common commitment to one another. This they did with "gladness" (rejoicing) and "singleness (free from rocks, smooth) of heart", being sincere and genuine in their affections for God and one another. This was a *glad* assembly! **v.47:** Luke closes his progress report by describing the believers as a *grateful* and *growing* community. They were "praising God" – speaking of His wonderful works and attributes. Initially at least, they grew in "favour with all the people" – the character and behaviour of the believers was clearly attractive to others, resulting in daily conversions. The "Lord", as risen Head, was adding to the church "those who were being saved" (NET) or "the saved ones" (Newberry). In summary, the first local assembly was a *guided* (v.42), *gathered* (v.42), *gifted* (v.43), *generous* (v.44-45), *gospel-oriented* (v.46), *glad* (v.46), *grateful* (v.47) and *growing* community (v.47). Is ours?