

The Significance of Fellowship in Acts

Act 2:42-47 is commonly described as a summary passage, showing the life of the Christians in Jerusalem.¹ It is part of a larger narrative that describes the foundation of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost. With 3,000 new members, the Christian community had expanded significantly, an expansion requiring a new form of social organisation. The early Christian movement differed considerably from other religious institutions at the time. One of the key points of distinction was the emphasis on communal life amongst the early Christians,² which is closely related to the thematic importance of unity in Christianity.³ The Roman Empire, amidst which the Christian movements formed, was a diverse, complex, and highly structured society. Therein, it often stood in tension with the beliefs of the early Christian communities. Luke's Acts portrays the apostles as oppressed by broader social structures, which mirrors this tension between the early Christian Church and the Roman Empire.⁴ In this context, it was vital for these communities to define their social values and structures via these types of summary passages.

In the passage, the apostles are described as responsible for providing teaching – from the Greek *didache* – to the believers, through which they are able to preserve and transmit history.⁵ As eyewitnesses of Christ, they are given special authority to pass on knowledge of his deeds and lessons to others.⁶ Luke here uses the phrase “the teaching of the apostles” rather than “the teaching of Christ”. This stresses the unique levels of authority and trust the apostles are given in these early communities.

¹ Lore Angeline B. Embudo, 'A Lukan Paradigm of Witness: Community as a Form of Witness', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 20.1 (2017), 19-35 (19); Benea A. Amakhungu, 'Re-examining the Summary Statements in Acts: A Biblical Response to the Enigma of Negative Ethnicity in Kenya: Towards Responsible Citizenship – SDG 4', *Impact: Journal of Transformation*, 1.1 (2018), 143-158 (143).

² Mphumezi Hombana, 'Early-church praxis: Selling land and possessions – A socio-historical study of Acts 2:45, 4:32–37', *Theological Studies*, 79.2. (2023), Article e8727 (no page numbers).

³ Matjaz Celarc, 'Narrative summaries in Acts of the Apostles. Reading of the first summary account (2:42–47)', *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*, 14.2 (2021), 145-163 (147, 158).

⁴ Hombana.

⁵ Embudo, p.20.

⁶ Ibid.

This level of authority is further strengthened by the apostles' associative link to Jesus Christ. The passage describes "the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles" (2:43). As Jeon has argued, these "wonders and signs" - *terata kai sēmeia* – reference the wonders and signs performed by Christ (*terasi kai sēmeiois* described in Acts 2:22).⁷ Likewise, Watley describes how the apostles' way of developing a following is reminiscent of the way Christ gained his followers through his transformational leadership.⁸ This link between the apostles and Christ established a clear hierarchy in the early Christian communities, providing the believers with the necessary spiritual leadership as their Church was starting to establish and define itself against their oppressive socio-cultural environments.

The believers' activities are presented in two pairs; the first one describes the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and the second describes the breaking of bread and prayer. No conjunction is used between the two pairs, indicating that they are thematically distinct.⁹ The activities describe two primary commitments: apostolic teaching and communal life.¹⁰ The first pair outlines activities related to cognitive practice, whereas the second has a more spiritual-sacramental dimension.¹¹

The passage's emphasis on fellowship – *koinonia* in Greek¹² – thereby demonstrates the importance of social cohesion at a critical point in the formation of the early Christian community. Jeon further notes that in Graeco-Roman literature, the term *koinonia* expresses "the mutuality and commitment characteristic of marriage".¹³ This associative reference stresses the extraordinary levels of closeness amidst the early Christian community and works in tandem with descriptions of the believers worshipping not only in the temple but also in the private sphere of the house.

⁷ Paul S. Jeon, *Collectivism and/or Christianity: An Exegetical Study of Acts 2:24-47 and 4:32-5:11* (2013), *Institute for Faith, Work & Economics* <<https://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Collectivism-and-or-Christianity-Acts-2-5-Jeon.pdf>>[accessed 10 October 2023].

⁸ Bruce E. Watley, 'Divine Empowerment: An Intertextual Analysis of Acts 2', *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, 5.1 (2012), 67-81 (77).

⁹ Celarc, p.154.

¹⁰ Jeon, p.2.

¹¹ Celarc, p.154.

¹² Embudo, p.20.

¹³ Jeon, p.2.

The passage describes rituals of communal eating as the believers “broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (2:46). The act of shared eating is described as a positive experience that is implied to strengthen communal bonds. The shared meal carries clear resonances with the Passover meal¹⁴ and Jesus’s declaration that he would not again eat with his followers until the arrival of God’s kingdom. The act of breaking the bread amidst the early Christian community thus symbolises their shared hope for Christ’s return and their commitment to the arrival of his Kingdom.¹⁵

Sharing supper in each other’s houses also allowed the early Christians to leave the formal boundaries of the temple, giving their religious community an intimate and familial character.¹⁶ Celarc proposes that the movement between the “house”, representative of the private sphere, and the “temple”, representative of the public sphere, emphasises the vitality and openness of the early Christian community.¹⁷ The fact that the “temple courts” are mentioned before the “house” (2:46) may depict the community’s movement from the public to the private sphere. Alternatively, it could be understood as a juxtaposition or even opposition between the two. Celarc argues, for instance, that “there is a shift. Whereas at the end of the Gospel, the apostles remain praying in the temple (Lk 24:52-53), in Acts the theme of prayer seems to be related to the upper room of a house (Acts 1:12-14)” (p.156). This can be understood in the historical context of the program of restoration emerging in Isaiah, specifically the Isaianic anti-temple prophetic tradition.¹⁸

For Luke, converting to Christianity is dependent on active community participation. Through communal and ritualistic activities, the early Christian communities were able to secure and sustain their members’ conversion,¹⁹ whereby ritual is considered essential for creating the necessary social conditions for conversation.²⁰ Jeon has argued that Luke’s main aim is to

¹⁴ Embudo, p.22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jeon, p.4.

¹⁷ Celarc, p.150.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.151.

¹⁹ Embudo, pp.27-28.

²⁰ As discussed in Fenggang Yang and Andrew Abel, ‘Sociology of Religious Conversion’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.140-164 (142,144), cited in Embudo, p.27.

“stress the profound unity and intimacy this community shared through the spirit”.²¹ The summary passages emphasise the all-encompassing openness of this community through phrases such as “everyone” (2:42), “[a]ll the believers” (2:44), “anyone” (2:45), and “together” (2:46). This emphasis on community stood in stark contrast to the religious and cultural practices popular across the Roman Empire, which were often marked by exclusiveness.²² At the same time, the portrayal of the community in the summary passage may have been inspired by the Graeco-Roman ideal of friendship.²³ Likewise, the passage’s depiction of the strengthening of social bonds over shared meals may have been inspired by Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern social practices.²⁴

Hombana notes that Luke’s Acts is marked by an emphasis on universality, whereby Luke is likely to have written with a wide audience in mind.²⁵ Celarc likewise suggests that the passage is aimed at the general public, inviting them to react with either fear or favour to the communal life depicted therein.²⁶ However, the passage does not therein lose sight of the individual emotional basis for faith. This can be noted in the phrase “[e]veryone was filled with awe” (2:43). Here, the emphasis is on how every individual was feeling and how these feelings inspired their faith. The word “awe” can therein be understood to carry both connotations of fear and wonder, an ambiguity that once again leaves room for differences between the experiences of individuals.

Luke outlines how members of the Christian community redistributed their property as required: “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (2:45). As summarised by Hombana, the Greek word for “possessions” used here is *ktémata*, which describes “property or possessions acquired through effort of labour”.²⁷ This emphasises that

²¹ Jeon, 2013, p.2.

²² Hombana.

²³ A. Friedl, ‘The Reception of the Deuteronomic Social Law in the Primitive Church of Jerusalem According to the Book of Acts’, *Acta Theologica*, 23 (2016), 176-200 (185).

²⁴ Wayne R. Sass, ‘Acts 2: An Example of the Divine Empowerment of Leaders’, *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, 5.1 (2012), 36-56 (46).

²⁵ Hombana.

²⁶ Celarc, p.147.

²⁷ Perschbacher, W.J., *New Testament Greek syntax: An illustrated manual*, English, Ancient Greek and Ancient Greek Edition (Chicago: Moody Publisher, 1995), p.249, cited in Hombana.

giving up these possessions was a significant sacrifice for members of this community. As Embudo argues, the passage assumes that even though the believers have “all things in common” (2:44) they came from different socio-economic strata, given that the rich had to give their possessions to the needy.²⁸ This can be interpreted as the actualisation of Christ’s message to the rich man in Luke 18:18-23, who was asked to give charity to the needy (Ibid). Depicting the Christian community as living by the tenets of their faith provides the summary passage with a utopic, aspirational feeling that would likely have inspired fellow believers. The sharing of resources by the early Christians once again stood in significant contrast to the way in which Graeco-Roman society prioritised individualism and the acquisition of wealth.²⁹ The redistribution of possessions should be understood within this context as a voluntary act of charity rather than an early attempt to abolish private property.³⁰ This is further emphasised by the fact that the apostles do not command this act of charity, but it seems to be born out of voluntary social care.³¹

Friedl and Uhlenbruch have summarised the utopic elements of the bible, with the former describing the summary passages as reminiscent of social utopias.³² Although Acts describes the past, it expresses a social desire aimed at the future, mirroring Christianity’s desire for social change.³³ The early Christian community in Jerusalem becomes the prototype of a “community of salvation”, “the ecclesiological-pneumatological concept of a normative prototype that is intended to encourage believer”.³⁴ Therein, the summary passage allows the early Christian communities to define themselves and their social values against the traditions of the Roman Empire. It presents a utopic vision of life amidst the believers aimed at recruiting, converting, and retaining members of the Christian faith, aimed at a general audience and / or readership. At the same time, the passage also addresses questions specific

²⁸ Embudo, p.20.

²⁹ D.L. Bock, *Acts. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids Baker Academic: Baker Publishing, 2007), p.152, cited in Hombana.

³⁰ Cf. Hombana.

³¹ Cf. Jeon, p.3; Celarc, pp.154ff.

³² Friedl, p.180; F. Uhlenbruch, *The nowhere Bible. Utopia, dystopia, science fiction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), cited in Friedl, p.180.

³³ Friedl, p.181.

³⁴ Ibid, p.182.

to the organisation of worship that would have been specific to existing members of the Christian communities. These include questions about the authority that was given to the apostles as teachers and effective stand-ins for Christ, and the location of worship, which seemed to move public to private spheres. In conclusion, summary passages such as this played an important historicising and messianic function for early Christian communities.

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