

# THE APOSTLES' FELLOWSHIP

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Peter Hay, prepared for word ministry, 6 September 2020

Transcription of recording, slightly edited

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## The four dimensions of grace

Today, our focus in this Bible study session is on the second dimension of grace that is foundational to the body of Christ - the apostles' fellowship.

Let's remind ourselves of the passage from where we take these four foundations.

'Then those who gladly received Peter's words were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.' Act 2:41-42.

It is helpful to note that Luke, in the book of Acts, didn't separate 'doctrine' from 'fellowship'.

He wrote, 'the apostles' doctrine and fellowship', making the point that both of those things belonged to the *apostles*.

Then, of course, he spoke of 'the breaking of bread' and 'prayers'.

## Connection to a presbytery; fellowship with the Godhead

The apostle John made this same point in the opening of his first epistle.

We've read this Scripture a couple of times in the course of our sessions, but it's worth it, in the scheme of 'the apostles' fellowship', to remind ourselves of this point.

'That which we.' We have made the point that John was not writing on behalf of himself here. He was writing as part of a presbytery. That's why he spoke from the basis of a collective.'

'That which we [as a presbytery] have seen and heard, we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship [remember, this is the apostles' doctrine and fellowship], truly our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.' 1Jn 1:3.

Another way of saying this is that there is no fellowship with the Father and the Son, by the Holy Spirit, *without fellowship with a presbytery*.

We can't claim to have a relationship with the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit if we are disconnected from a presbytery.

That might sound a little confronting and dogmatic, but I am really just stating what John said.

He said, 'We are proclaiming the word to you so that you might join our fellowship; and our fellowship is with the Father and the Son.'

John was saying, 'If you don't join that fellowship, you have no fellowship with the Father and His Son.'

## The apostles' fellowship – the basis for our participation in the community of Christ

This means that the apostles' fellowship is the basis for our participation in the community of Christ.

This is a key point.

We have made this point in relation to *firstfruits* – that the sons of God grow and bear fruit *because* they have a tangible participation and expression of love in a Christian community.

So, every person who claims to be a Christian, which means they should be a son of God, must have a connection to a community in which they are laying down their life for their brethren.

The point is that there is no *expression of sonship*, which is the *life* of God - because sons are *born* of God - unless they are joined to a *community*?

And that community is called 'the apostles' fellowship'.

## THREE KEY ASPECTS OF OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

Now, in relation to this foundation, we can identify three inter-dependent aspects of our participation in the community of Christ *as firstfruits believers*.

Now, there may be a lot more, but this is my endeavour to try to summarise this massive subject in the Scriptures. In fact, we have written many books purely about *the fellowship of offering*.

So, today, we are going to focus on what it 'looks like' as part of a community of Christ.

I have summarised it into three key aspects. These aspects are completely interdependent; there cannot be one without the others.

The first is *fellowship in the word of present truth*.

The second aspect of our participation in the apostles' fellowship is *the fellowship of offering*.

And the third aspect is an *agape meal*.

Now, 'the agape meal' might be a term that is somewhat new to you. So we will take time today to explain this principle of an *agape meal*, remembering that the word *agape* is the Greek word for 'love'; and it is specifically used to describe *the love of God*.

### **I. Fellowship in the word of present truth**

Let's look at this first aspect, which is 'fellowship in the word of present truth'.

Our fellowship in the word of present truth, which is the apostles' doctrine, is the practice of *sharing* the word together, *testifying*, and *walking* with one another in the *light* of the word.

So, the word is proclaimed; we hear it; it is received into our heart, and it is in our mouth; and we share it with one another.

We bear testimony of it and, as we are walking in the way, in the course of life, that word is 'a lamp to our path' and 'a light to our feet'.

And we walk that way *together*. So, this is the *fellowship* element of the word.

As we have noted in relation to John's letter, this aspect of fellowship, as in 'fellowship in the word of present truth', is the *foundation* of *all* fellowship in the body of Christ.

So, if we don't have a tangible commitment to participating in the fellowship of the word, all the other aspects of fellowship are merely religious practice.

They are dead works, because the word is Spirit and life. To be of the Spirit and to obtain His life, we have fellowship in the word.

### **Sons called into fellowship, enabled by the Holy Spirit**

Now, this fellowship, which is in the word of present truth, is only possible *by the Holy Spirit*,

who enables us to be one Spirit with the Lord and with one another.

The apostle Paul - in fact, all the writers of the New Testament - made this point. But Paul was quite clear, in the same way that John was overt in his explanation of our need to be connected to a fellowship in the word of present truth.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, saying, 'God [God the Father] is faithful, by whom you were called.' 1Co 1:9.

We have made the point previously that the word 'called' or 'calling' is specifically related to our *sonship*.

'Beloved, now are we the sons of God'; it's to do with our calling as sons of God.

So, in saying, 'You were called', Paul was referring to your sonship *into* the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul was saying, then, 'The Father has called us as sons, and that expression is in the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

### **Speaking by the same Spirit of faith as Christ, joined in one Spirit**

'I *plead* with you, brethren.' 1Co 1:10.

Obviously, Paul saw this as an important point, and said that it is critical that we understand and receive it.

'I *plead* with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

This is actually the key to understanding what it means to be 'two or three in the name'

'I *plead* with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all the *speak the same thing*.'

So there is a 'conversation' that we are all to have as those who are the sons of God and are called into the fellowship of the Son.

'I *plead* with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgement.'

So, how are we 'perfectly joined together'?

It is in *one Spirit* by the Holy Spirit.

To 'speak the same thing' is to *speak by the same Spirit of faith*.

Speaking the same thing is not merely having the same doctrine.

Paul explained this in his second letter to the Corinthians.

'And since we have the same Spirit of faith.' 2Co 4:13.

It's actually the same Spirit of faith as *Christ had*, which He received from the Father; we are to have the same Spirit of faith as Him.

'Since we have *the same Spirit of faith*, according to what is written, "I *believed* and therefore I *spoke*", we also believe and therefore speak.'

Paul was saying, 'I am pleading with you that you all speak the same thing.'

Another way of saying that would be, 'I am pleading with you that you would receive My word [ because faith comes by hearing that word], and have the same Spirit of faith because we are committed to the same word.'

We are all connected to the same 'conversation'.

And when we have the same conversation, there is no division among us, because the Holy Spirit is joining us together in one Spirit.

### **Fellowship in present truth – receiving both the word and the fellowship of the presbytery**

We have the same Spirit, *because we have received the word of faith* from Christ through His messengers. Faith comes by hearing and receiving this word. Rom 10:17.

Evidently, we fellowship in the word of present truth when we receive both the *word* and the *fellowship* of the presbytery from house to house.

In the first instance, this fellowship is stewarded, or administrated, by the presbytery.

Remember that Luke and John, and Paul noted, 'This is the fellowship that belongs to the presbytery, and we are bringing it to you so that you can join it.'

So, it is stewarded, or administrated, by the presbytery as part of their accountability to care for and 'feed' those who are in the house of the Lord.

### **Grace for life multiplied**

Remember that the apostles' fellowship is one of the foundations, or dimensions, of *grace*.

So, having received faith, you obtain your 'introduction into *grace* in which you stand'. And, as a participant in this fellowship in the word of present truth, you will desire to *multiply* that fellowship beyond a programmed conversation in the word.

It is not either *one* or the *other*, as though our own conversation in the word is an alternative to the apostles' fellowship.

Rather, because we are joined to and have a tangible participation in *that* fellowship, we will delight and have an initiative of faith to multiply fellowship and life.

So, outside of a programmed initiative from the presbytery, there will be a desire *in our houses* to *share* the word devotionally; but, also, when our friends come over to our house and when we spend time together.

It is an *overflow* of the very life that we are receiving, because we are tangibly established in the fellowship that belongs to the Father and the Son.

### **The nature of fellowship in the word of present truth – a programmed reality**

Now, what will the fellowship in the word of present truth 'look like'?

In the first instance, we have said that it is 'programmed'. There is an initiative of the presbytery to deacon a fellowship, from house to house, in the word of present truth.

This is actually part of the teaching of the word from house to house, so it will be a programmed reality for us.

And, when we gather together, it will involve us discussing the word that we have heard from the communion table.

We will be sharing points of *illumination*. We will be sharing *testimony* of the word impacting on our life, and we are able to bear witness to that reality in our life.

It will involve further *study* of the word from the Scriptures. The Christians in Berea were an example of this.

Luke said that they were more noble-minded, because they received the messengers and then went and searched the Scriptures. So they were multiplying the word.

Now, it will also involve *questions*.

It's interesting that when Jesus was in the temple, He was twelve years old. He talked with the priests and the leaders in the temple, and He was asked questions. He said to His parents that He was 'about His Father's business.'

Now, the point is that questions are part of this conversation - but they are not questions based in cynicism or skepticism.

These are the questions of people who are seeking, asking and knocking for *understanding*. In reality, they are the questions of people who have been illuminated and are saying, 'As the Lord has been speaking to me, I'm understanding "this" about the word. Is that an implication or understanding that is consistent with what we have been hearing?'

If, however, it is a cynical or skeptical question, this is *the words of deceit*.

We know that we are to *guard our heart*, so we have to put those types of questions and conversations far from our lips.

But, also, let's not get caught up in those questions when they are asked by another person. Let's be those who are committed to simplicity and sincerity in relation to the word.

## **2. The fellowship of offering**

Let's now look at the second aspect - 'the fellowship of offering'.

This is a large subject, so we are going to look at some key aspects of it.

And, of course, there is plenty of scope for us when we are discussing the word together to understand these principles much more broadly.

In addition to easy and enlightened discussion concerning the current word, the evidence of embracing the apostles' fellowship is our commitment to *the fellowship of offering*.

Our participation in the fellowship of offering includes our tithes and financial offerings, as well as our practical participation in the service areas of the church.

'With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

'Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and the apostles distributed to each as anyone had need.' Act 4:33-35.

### **The expression of the offering life of God**

Now, I want to begin by making a very important point.

The fellowship of offering is *not* a commune, where selling our worldly possessions and giving all our money and having all things in common is a condition of fellowship in the body of Christ.

So, it's *not* a commune.

Neither is it *trading*, where we give because of services rendered - because we are getting some benefit and we believe that the benefit is worthy of some return.

Nor is it because we desire a blessing in return, as in, if I give financially or if I give my service or participation in the body, I will be blessed by God. That is not the culture of offering either. That is the culture of trading.

Rather, offering is *the expression* of the *life* of God.

It is the *motivation* of those who have been born of God, and who have joined the fellowship of Yahweh.

Why do we know that?

Because God is *love*. *He lives by offering*.

So, if you have been born of God, your motivation and desire will be to live the way that God lives - and He lives by offering.

### **A deceitful appearance of commitment to fellowship**

We will consider the apostle Peter's interaction with Ananias and Sapphira, because it gives us illustrates our participation in the fellowship of offering.

'But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.' Act 5:1. We read later in Acts that it was a block of land that they sold.

‘And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

‘But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?

‘While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

‘Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.’ Act 5:2-6.

We know, of course, that the same thing happened to Ananias’ wife, Sapphira.

Now, this is the principle that I want to address out of this passage.

Ananias and Sapphira’s land and the proceeds of its sale did *not* belong to the church. The church had no right over them; no expectation that Ananias and Sapphira would sell the block and give the proceeds.

There *was* a call to make offering from the apostles, and I will explain why they did that in relation to this scenario.

But, Peter said to Ananias and Sapphira, ‘While the land was yours, and even after you sold it, the proceeds belonged to you. It didn’t belong to the church.’

Now, those proceeds were theirs to keep or to give. The issue was not that they only gave a percentage of the proceeds. It wasn’t even about the volume.

Rather, the issue was their desire to *appear* as though they were engaged in committed fellowship and offering in the community of Christ.

It was their deceit. It was their lie. It was the desire for the appearance, while still loving the wealth of the world. They loved money, and they loved having a profile in the church.

Their mouth was full of deceit, wasn’t it?

On the one hand, they were saying, ‘Yes, we are committed to a fellowship in offering’ but, on the

other hand, they were *deceptive* in the way that they were seeking to engage in fellowship.

### **The feet of the apostles – offering and judgement**

‘The feet of the apostles’, which is now ‘the feet of the presbytery’, was the place of *judgement* and of *offering*, where ‘the eyes of the Lord’ were searching their hearts.

We know this because of the words of Jesus to the seven churches in the book of Revelation.

‘These things says the Son of God.’ Rev 2:18.

So, how is the Lord speaking to His churches? He is speaking through those whom He sends – His *messengers*.

Jesus noted this in the Gospels.

In the Gospel of John, ‘If you receive Him whom I send, you receive Me and you receive Him who sent Me’. So, where Jesus said, ‘These things says the Son of God’, He was saying them through *His messengers*.

‘Who has eyes like a flame of *fire* [to search the thoughts and intents of the heart], and His feet like fine *brass*.’ Revelation 2:18.

Now, the feet ‘like fine brass’ refers to the brasen, or bronze, altar where they carried out the burnt offerings. *Fire* ‘enfolded’ this place of offering.

So, it is both a context for *judgement* – because we have eyes as a flame of fire - and a context where we make *offering*. It is the same context.

### **Lying to the presbytery, to God and to the Holy Spirit**

Here, Ananias and Sapphira lied to Peter. They came to him and said, ‘This is the sum of money that we sold our property for. Put it at the feet of the apostles.’ They lied to Peter.

However, Peter said that they had not lied to men, but to *God*, and had violated the sanctified ground of their sonship, which had its expression on the ground of the presbytery.

He said they were not lying to him, as though he was the bastion of all truth. He said, in effect, ‘You are lying to God because you are seeking to do this on the ground that belongs to the Father and His Son.’

Then he went further, saying, 'You have *lied to the Holy Spirit*', because *the ground of fellowship is sanctified by the Holy Spirit*. It belongs to Him.

### **The Holy Spirit establishes the ground of fellowship**

So, they had violated the sanctified ground of their *sonship*, which has its expression on the ground of the presbytery. And this was a sin against the Holy Spirit. Now, this is an amazing point!

I don't know about you, but I have always wondered what is the sin against the Holy Spirit, remembering that Jesus said that, for every sin, there is an opportunity for repentance, except for a sin against the Holy Spirit. Mat 12:31.

I am keen to know what that one is in order to avoid it, because there is no coming back from there, is there?

Remember, Peter had spoken the words to Ananias and said, 'You have done this', and there was not even an opportunity for Ananias to turn. He heard the word and, as soon as he heard it, he was dead. He just fell down.

That is the sin against the Holy Spirit, because it is the Holy Spirit who *establishes the ground of fellowship*.

Where we transgress that fellowship, we are sinning against the Holy Spirit. And there is no opportunity for recovery.

So, they were bringing their corruption onto the holy ground of Yahweh's offering, and this prompted swift resistance, rebuke, and death, by eternal judgement. And, that was by Christ, Himself.

So, while those possessions were in the hands of Ananias and Sapphira, it belonged to them. It was theirs to give, and they could have given a portion of it. The issue wasn't the volume.

The issue was *the deception*; they were lying.

They sought to maintain their connection with the wealth of the world, while having the *appearance* of being connected to the community of Christ.

And, Peter said, 'You might be lying to me but, in the end, you are transgressing the sanctified ground of offering, which belongs to the Holy Spirit.'

### **Presbyters must be established on this ground of offering**

It is helpful to note that, in relation to this 'ground' on which we are all to participate – because that is where the grace is – the presbyters themselves have been established in this culture of offering.

So, there is not a presbytery group who expects everyone *else* to make offering, while they themselves are not doing so.

They are presbyters because they *exemplify* this culture of offering. They have demonstrated it themselves, and continue to live it – that is the mode of the fellowship to which we are all being called to joined.

We see this in many places in the Scriptures.

'Then Peter said [so speaking to Jesus], "See, we have left all and followed You".' Luk 18:28.

Peter was saying, 'We heard Your word. We heard Your call to follow, and we have forsaken everything for that to follow You.'

'So He [Jesus] said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no-one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life".' Luk 18:29-30.

Another example is: 'And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement) [That is a beautiful name to have received from others, isn't it – Son of Encouragement?], a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.' Act 4:36.

And, of course, Barnabas then was set apart by the Holy Spirit to a specific work – ministry work with the apostle Paul to establish the Gentile church.

It is interesting that this passage is actually the very preceding verses to the Ananias and Sapphira account.

It is as though Luke was contrasting these two initiatives and activities on the holy ground of offering, which is at the apostles' feet.

### **Financial offering to enable participation in the four dimensions of grace**

Now, in terms of the monies that the people brought - they were selling their possessions, bringing it to the apostles; and then the apostles were distributing it to everyone who has need - in the first instance, that is not a *commune*.

But the second point that is important to understand is that the church was not just a *charity*.

They did not distribute the money simply because they were being charitable or were trying to solve society's ills by dealing with poverty.

The distributions of monies from offering were not an exercise of charity; nor were the apostles addressing poverty in society.

The *purpose* for the financial offerings was to enable every *believer* - it wasn't just for anyone; this was for the community of Christ - to maintain their daily participation in the four dimensions of grace as part of the community of the church.

The distribution of these funds was specifically for the effective ministry of the gospel as a lampstand church.

We know this because, when Luke wrote the book of Acts, he recorded that, as they were all established in these foundations and continued in one accord, the outcome was that 'the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved'.

During this very important stage of the development of the New Testament church, an entire administration, fellowship, or economy, of offering was in place.

This enabled the provision for every member's participation in the four foundations - the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

As a result, every believer was able to have an active participation in these foundations, through which the gospel was being proclaimed to the community.

### **Provision made for all to participate**

In this situation, we need to understand that the apostles were not simply distributing the proceeds of what was sold, so that they could deal with poverty within the Jewish community.

It was specifically for the sake of servicing these four foundations.

It was necessary for them to do this because not all the people who were saved on the Day of Pentecost were from Jerusalem. Many of them were from surrounding areas, and were disconnected from their normal contexts of employment. Consequently, they didn't have the capacity to support themselves financially, in order to participate in this new and vital aspect of church life.

With regard to our own situation, most of us have employment by which we are able to provide for ourselves, thus enabling our continued participation in the fellowship of these foundations.

This daily provision within the Jerusalem church community was designed to allow every member to continue to be established in the gospel through fellowship with the apostles and with one another.

### **Offering of financial support**

In our context, financial offerings are still called for, and given, for the sake of facilitating every believer's participation in the four foundations of fellowship. Offering in this way is an expression of a son of God, not under compulsion, but by *faith*.

This was the reality for the church in Jerusalem, and it remains the case today.

Offering within the church was not instituted to cure society's ills or to service poverty.

It is to enable those who are born of God to participate as part of that administration. This is a completely different mindset from giving or making donations in the worldly sense.

The notion of the church's primary focus to deal with societal need is, indeed, fleshly, and arises from the perspectives of natural man.

### **The true nature of offering**

The actual context of the church is a *spiritual fellowship*. That is where offering is made; the offerings are for *that* administration.

In our context today, the offerings are still called for and given, for the enabling of every believer's participation in the four foundations of fellowship.

This then allows for the true nature of giving financially, where offerings are directed toward that administration in which we are *all* called to participate.

Offering is not only about finances. It equally describes our participation in the operation of the contexts in which we meet, publicly and from house to house. This includes the call to offer practically in the facilitation of meetings and other aspects of administration such as the maintenance of facilities.

The point is, offering is primarily for the sake of the edification of the body.

Our offerings are still symbolically brought 'to the feet of the presbytery' who oversee and deacon the church and distribute the finances according to need.

### **Financial support according to need**

So, finances continue to be distributed to everyone who has need.

That need is determined by the practicalities which need to be in place so that we that can all gather together; so that we can all partake in the bread and wine; so that we can all participate in receiving the apostles' doctrine.

This includes our engagement in, and expression of, the life, according to sanctification.

### **Other avenues of financial allocation**

This also includes the development and maintenance of facilities in which congregations are able to meet publicly and from house to house.

As well, finances are directed to support ministry initiatives and travel to the congregations where we have a fellowship connection, along with the financial demands of administrating the church.

This would include communication, materials, and the ongoing daily management of what is a large and organic community.

### **Caring for the practical needs of the church family**

While charity was not the focus of the early church, and is not the focus of our own fellowship as disciples, we have the scope and capacity to care for the practical needs of those who are part of the fellowship.

We are not saying that we don't provide support to those who are in need - of course, we do.

The point is that various forms of support are offered when obvious needs arise within the church community. This is to support those in need of assistance, as they look to the Lord for their unique participation as a *member in particular* of the body of Christ.

So, this is not charity. In reality, it is support offered to individual members to enable them to seek the Lord in order to participate in the unique manner in which the Lord has called them.

### **Making a faith response in offering**

At times, the presbytery will *call* for an offering to be made to meet a particular need.

It might be for a building project, for maintenance, or for specific needs that have arisen in other congregations.

At such times, each person is able to make a *faith* response to this call as a feature of their participation in the apostles' fellowship.

### **Paul's call to the Corinthian church to make offering**

We will read some passages of Paul, addressing the Corinthian church on this matter. The Corinthians were, for the most part, a wealthy church. They were a large congregation who were able to gather together and, generally, they were quite financially stable and well provided for.

Paul addressed them and called them to participate in an offering that was being made for the saints in Jerusalem because of a famine.

As well, he encouraged them to understand *the culture of offering* by testifying of the Macedonians, who were the complete opposite to the Corinthians. In financial terms, they were extremely poor.

His address to the Corinthians was, 'Your capacity to participate in this culture has nothing to do with the volume you have. It has to do with your *connection* to Christ Himself, and your *desire to participate* in this fundamental foundation of the community of Christ.'

### **The apostolic authority to initiate offering**

'Now concerning the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, *so you must do also.*' 1Co 16:1.

We recognise that this is the word of an apostle. This is an apostolic authority, an overseer of the

house, with the authority to call for such an offering.

He then said, 'This is how you will participate.'

'On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem.' 1Co 16:1-3.

They had to carry their gift down to Jerusalem.

But the point is that Paul had called for this offering, and he said, 'Do it *this way*.'

'On the first day of the week, set aside a provision which will be gathered up and taken to care for the saints in Jerusalem.'

### **Our commitment to offer**

In his second letter, having called for this offering, and having received word that they were very keen to be involved, Paul then needed to remind them of their commitment.

'Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.' 2Co 8:1-2.

It sometimes seems that the more we have, the less we're willing to give, doesn't it? I'm not saying this as a principle for everyone, but it certainly was for the Corinthians.

### **Commitment to give all freely**

Paul said that the Macedonians had nothing, yet they were absolutely committed to giving *everything*.

'For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing.' 2Co 8:3.

If something is beyond your ability, it has to be of *God!*

This refers to people who have obtained grace for giving. They are standing in grace, and it has multiplied beyond what they could naturally contribute.

'Imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the

ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.' 2Co 8:4-5.

### **Faith - an introduction into the grace in which we stand**

We see that this is faith obtaining 'an introduction into a grace in which we stand' - 'standing' simply means 'participating'.

'So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well.' 2Co 8:6.

Paul said to the Corinthians, 'I've sent a messenger to you so that you will begin, or continue, to fulfil this participation.'

'But as you abound in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us - see that you abound in this grace also.' 2Co 8:7.

### **The giving of the tithe**

I will make a quick statement about tithes, because the fellowship of offering includes financial offering and tithes.

The giving of tithes is the fundamental response of a believer who acknowledges the lordship of Christ in their life, and His initiative to priest to them a participation in the fellowship of His offering and sufferings.

Do you see that our tithes are not being given to the church; our tithes are being given to *Christ*.

Our example for this is Abraham - 'the father of all who believe'. Abraham was the father of *faith!*

### **Christ priests to us our participation in the communion table**

'Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High.' Gen 14:18

Christ, our great High Priest, priests to us the bread and wine, which we know, from Paul, is a participation in the body of Christ and in the pouring out of that life one to another.

Our connection to the community of Christ is through the Lord's table. It is Melchizedek, Christ Himself, who priests to us that participation.

### **The tithe given as a provision for the stewards of the Lord's house**

'And he blessed him [Abraham] and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he [meaning Abraham] gave him a tithe of all. 2Co 8:19-20.

A tithe is a tenth, or ten percent. For Abraham, it was a tenth of everything that he had. For us, as a general principle, the tithe is the ten percent of the Lord's provision to us through our income.

The Lord gives the tithe as provision for those whom He has called to serve fulltime as stewards in His house.

We give our tithes to the Lord because we are raising our hand to the Lord Most High, and we are confessing His lordship in our life.

We are also acknowledging that He is priesting to us our participation in the fellowship of His offering and sufferings, as a member of His body.

The tithe is an acknowledgement that *all* we have belongs to the Lord, and He has given us *provision* for life. It signifies that our life is fully connected to His offering and sufferings. This is why we give the tithe.

The Lord Himself has set some over His house to *steward* His house, and He's given that portion - the tithe - to them as their provision. It is actually a part of their inheritance, to provide for them as they care for His house in a fulltime capacity.

### **Tithes given to the Levites who administered the life of the temple**

We see this principle in relation to the tithe being given to the Levites under the Old Covenant.

'Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.' Num 18:21.

The tithe was not specifically for the priesthood only; it was for the Levite tribe, who were to administrate that temple.

The temple was the focal point, or the 'house', of Israel. It was the place where the offerings were made, and it was the administration point of the nation of Israel. The work of the Levites was to administrate that temple.

### **3. The *agape* meal**

We will move on to the third aspect of the apostles' fellowship, which is the *agape* meal.

The reference in Acts about the seven deacons being appointed to administrate tables (we made the point a couple of sessions ago that it was specifically connected to the breaking of bread) explains that a daily provision of food was in place to enable everyone to be cared for, so that they could be part of the community of Christ.

This meal, which we have entitled 'the *agape* meal', was a fellowship meal to which the breaking of bread was *added*.

This type of meal, which is part of the facilitation of ministry from house to house by the apostles, is different from people getting together socially in their homes; that is, Christians enjoying one another's company around the dinner table. This is not an *agape* meal.

### **The *agape* meal is a deaconed initiative of the presbytery**

This form of interaction is not what the *agape* meal is about. The *agape* meal is part of a deaconed initiative within the church.

The nature of this specific form of eating together was demonstrated by Christ in His arranging and hosting of the last supper.

It was also demonstrated by the apostles as they made provision for the disciples who gathered to participate in the daily administrations of the early New Testament church.

### **First love demonstrated in hospitality**

In our gathering together for an *agape* meal, fellowship is enjoyed through our extension of hospitality to others. It is an expression of first love, which becomes our culture as we receive and walk in the light of the gospel of sonship.

This was exemplified by the Christians in Jerusalem.

'So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.' Act 2:46-47.

## **Two elements of 'eating together'**

In this passage, there were two actual elements of eating referred to.

The first element is 'the breaking of bread from house to house'. This specifically refers to participation in the *communion*.

The second element is 'eating food with gladness and simplicity of heart'.

Both aspects of a 'meal' were connected with 'continuing daily with one accord in the temple'.

## **Continuing in one Spirit, one accord, in the temple**

There is an administration of the word through which everyone has a participation in the action of 'continuing in one Spirit', receiving the teaching of the word, publicly and from house to house. This is the reality of being a functioning member of the 'one accord in the temple' dimension.

Because of this, 'they were breaking bread from house to house' (participation in the communion meal) – the first element of a 'meal'.

As well, they were 'eating their food with gladness and simplicity of heart' (participation in the *agape* meal).

Both the communion meal, and the *agape* meal were *because* the disciples were 'in one accord in the temple'.

## **The uniqueness of the *agape* meal**

This second element, the *agape* meal, was a feature of the committed participation in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship.

It was part of every believer's provision for life to which the breaking of bread (or the communion) could be added.

So, they continued daily with one accord, and eating this meal, which was distributed by the apostles, so that *everyone* was provided for in relation to their participation in these four foundations.

And the communion meal could be added to this *agape* meal.

Previously, we have described this expression of first love as enjoying an *agape* meal together. As I mentioned earlier, *agape* is the Greek word for

'love', and it is specifically in relation to *the love of God*.

We need to remember that there is no expression of the love of God apart from within the community of Christ. An *agape* meal, therefore, has a specific connection to that *community*.

It does not simply refer to the activity of Christians getting together for a meal which, in itself, is great, and which we should do.

This meal, specifically, was connected to an administration which was teaching publicly and from house to house.

This is the key point, and will be quite fresh for many of us.

## **The *agape* meal and communion inaugurated during the final Passover meal**

Jesus established this principle at the last supper, or Passover meal. In this, were the elements of an *agape* meal, to which communion was being added.

The Passover was a nationally deaconed event which celebrated the deliverance of the Israelites from their captivity to Egypt. They didn't merely decide to 'get together and have a Passover meal'!

The Passover meal was part of the culture of that Jewish community which Jesus honoured - remembering that the New Covenant had not yet been established. This celebratory meal was part of the Old Covenant, and Jesus was fulfilling it.

## **The two elements of communion**

While they were eating the Passover meal, Jesus instituted another meal.

He took the bread and said, 'This bread is "that".'

Then He took the cup (actually *after* the meal) and gave it to them saying, 'The cup is "this".'

He implemented the two elements of the communion, adding it to what was an existing and deaconed gathering, in terms of being administered by the Jewish leaders - adding the communion to the Passover meal.

## **The *agape* meal – a deaconed fellowship event**

The *agape* meal is more than simply our desire to get together socially as Christian households.

The *agape* meal is an essential aspect of our participation in the deaconed program of the

church. This is an area in which we will be able to grow.

The most typical example of a deaconed fellowship meal enjoyed by us as a congregation at present is our Sunday morning tea. We come together on Sundays for our combined meeting as believers, and we have morning tea together. This somewhat demonstrates the principle of an *agape* meal.

We have this morning-tea meal together. It is part of our program of gathering house to house. The communion meal later on in the morning is also part of this gathering together.

Thus, we have two types of meal happening – the morning tea, and the communion.

Looking ahead, the *agape* meal will also be part of our programmed gatherings from house to house, particularly when our capacity to meet together in one place for communion is limited.

Such hospitality, house to house, is an opportunity for *thanksgiving*, for *testimony*, and for further *discussion* in the word of present truth which has been ministered as part of the communion.

### **Household fellowship between families**

Naturally, Christian households will desire to meet together for fellowship and friendship beyond the deaconed program of the church. This too can be an expression of first love hospitality and care for one another.

We are not saying that all gatherings for hospitality and expression of love are under the program of the church.

We *are* saying that there is an *agape* meal which is part of the apostles' fellowship.

Then, those who are well-established in that fellowship will *love* to get together and be hospitable and caring, generous and kind to others in the body of Christ - and outside the body of Christ as well.

This form of fellowship becomes an *overflow* of the grace of life because we are standing in the grace which we have obtained by receiving the apostles' doctrine, which is the word of faith.

In following this course of action, we are not narrowing down everyone's participation in

hospitality. On the contrary, we want to see it *multiplied*.

### **Conclusion**

Most importantly, we do need to recognise that the Lord is calling us to participate in this *agape* fellowship meal, which is part of the apostles' fellowship, to which a communion meal can be added.

Our dedicated participation in the *agape* meal will serve as an overflow of that style of fellowship from house to house, and into the community as well.

This is the apostles' fellowship, which embraces the fellowship of the word of present truth; the fellowship of offering and the *agape* meal.

In our next session we'll look at 'the breaking of bread'.