

WORTHY TRAITS OF THE FIRST CHURCH

ACTS 02:41–47

Introduction

This is the first look at the early church. It shows us the traits that characterized the daily lives of believers. It should prick the conscience of the modern-day church.

- I. A people who received the Word — gladly (v. 41).
- II. A people who were devoted (v. 42).
- III. A people who stirred everyone with a godly fear (v. 43).
- IV. A people who were together — sharing in ministry (vv. 44-45).
- V. A people who were unified (v. 46).
- VI. A people who worshipped and praised God — daily (vv. 46-47).

I. *Acts 02:41 Receiving the Word of God*

The early believers were a people who received the Word gladly.

1. This is the basic trait, the very first trait of a true church. It actually defines a church. A church is a people, a body of people who have received *the Word of God*. They were not receiving...

- a set of ideas
- a set of rules and principles
- a position
- a man's thoughts
- a human philosophy
- a religion

They were receiving the Word of God, the very revelation of God Himself. God had revealed Himself in Jesus Christ to His disciples. And Peter, the spokesman for the disciples, was proclaiming the Word about Jesus Christ. God had spoken to the world through His Son Jesus Christ, and the early believers had received His Word. (See *The Word*, Jn. 1:1-5.)

2. Note the word “accepted.” A true church, a true body of believers, does not just hear and listen to the Word. They are not just present to join the crowd and see what is going on. They do not sit with wandering minds and closed hearts. A true church receives the Word of God; they...

- welcome it
- hunger for it
- practice it
- hold on to it
- take it in
- experience it
- believe it
- joy and rejoice
- share it

3. Note the statement: “Those who accepted his message.” Not everyone present accepted it. Some were there for the wrong reasons and others were closed-minded and disinterested. Still others simply refused to believe and rejected the Word. But they who received God's Word became the very first body of believers, the first church.
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4. Note that they were baptised: the idea is immediate baptism (see *Baptism*, Acts 2:38). Note also the large number: three thousand “were added” to the 120 disciples.

Acts 4:4 But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

Acts 6:7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Rom 10:18 But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

1 Th 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

II. *Acts 02:42 Devotion and Steadfastness*

The early believers were a people who were devoted, steadfast in four things. (See *Devoted*, Acts 2:42; *Teaching*, Acts 2:42; *Fellowship*, Acts 2:42; *Lord’s Supper*, Acts 2:42; and *Prayer*, Acts 2:42.)

ACTS 02:42

DEVOTED; CONTINUED STEADFASTLY (PROSKARTEROUNTES)

To continue, persevere, endure, stick, persist. A person does not quit, back off, fade away or slip back. He continues on steadfastly. □

ACTS 02:42 TEACHING; DOCTRINE (DIDACHE)

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 02:42

The teaching, the instruction of the apostles. The teaching would include both what Christ taught and His actual death, resurrection and ascension (or exaltation). It would be the same teaching and instructions...

- that are shared in the New Testament
- that the disciples wrote to various churches and bodies of believers

The teaching would be no different. There is only one message, only one Word, that saves, roots and grounds people in the Lord — the Word of God Himself, the message of the New Testament. On the day of Pentecost, the persons who were saved needed to be grounded in the faith. The only message that could ground them was the message found in the New Testament. It was that message, that doctrine they were taught.

Mat 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Luke 24:45-48 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

Thought 1. Note a striking fact: we can be saved, rooted and grounded in the *very same message*. God has given us the very same doctrines and instructions to root and ground us. We can have a true, dynamic apostolic experience and maturity in the Lord. We can grow and know the Lord as intimately as the early believers knew the Lord. In fact, we come short if we do not, for we have the very same doctrine, teachings and instructions that they had. □

ACTS 02:42 FELLOWSHIP

The fellowship wrought by the Spirit of God means more than the association existing in secular groups such as civic clubs and community bodies. There is a vast difference between *community participation* and *spiritual participation*. *Community participation* is based upon neighbourly association. *Spiritual participation* is based upon a spiritual union wrought by the Spirit of God.

The distinctiveness is this: the Holy Spirit is within the Christian believer. The Holy Spirit creates a spiritual union by melting and moulding the heart of the Christian believer to the hearts of other believers. He attaches the life of one believer to the lives of other believers. Through the Spirit of God, believers become one in life and purpose. They have a joint life sharing their blessings and needs and gifts together. Note several things about fellowship that are taught by this passage.

1. Fellowship is being experienced by the new believers because they join other Christians in learning the Scriptures (apostles’ teachings) and in worship (prayers and celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Acts 2:41-42).
2. Fellowship forbids an unattached Christian life. Their fellowship is maintained because they “are devoted” in the Scriptures and in worship. An unattached Christian life is just impossible.
 - a. Christianity is first an individual matter, but then it becomes a social matter. The Christian is attached to Christ individually, but he is also attached to other believers. He walks with other believers in the Scriptures and in worship.
 - b. Christianity is first a spiritual organism, but then it becomes a spiritual organization. The Christian has an *inward life*, but he also takes on an *outward*

form of life. He becomes a living organization with other Christian believers. He sits at the feet of the apostles listening to their teaching and joins right in with other Christians as they worship together.

- c. Christianity makes the true believer a saint (one who is set apart unto God), but Christianity is made up of *saints* — plural. Christianity is not just one person; Christianity is many persons — *saints*. The word is often used in the New Testament, but it is never used in the singular. Christianity is Christianity because the saints *study the Scriptures together* and *worship together*.
- d. Christianity demands that a believer personally live out such virtues as kindness, long-suffering and love; but the believer can do this only in association with others.
- e. Christianity means that the Spirit of God has entered the believer's life, but it also means that the Spirit of God has placed the believer into a corporate body (the church), into Christian society itself. The Spirit of God indwells the corporate body of believers as well as the individual (see 1 Cor. 3:16).

3. Spiritual fellowship faces two dangers.

- a. Fellowship and society can be over-emphasized — to the point that individual salvation is missed. An individual must “accept His message” (Acts 2:41).
- b. Individual salvation and individual worship, whether through nature or by any other means, can be overly stressed — to the point that Christian fellowship and society can be missed (Acts 2:42; see Heb. 10:25).

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Rom 12:5 So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

1 Cor 10:17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph 4:13 Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Heb 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Psa 119:63 I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. □

ACTS 02:42 LORD'S SUPPER

The phrase “breaking of bread” means the early believers observed and remembered the Lord’s death. They set aside some time to observe what churches call communion, or the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist. Note they observed the Lord’s Supper daily (v. 46). Why did they observe it so often?

1. The Lord’s Supper was the one ordinance Christ had given to symbolize His death. And it was His death that had saved them. Because of His death, they were now...
 - reconciled to God
 - in fellowship with God
 - made a new creation in God
 - in-filled with the Spirit of God
 - bearing all the fruit of God (Gal. 5:22-23)

All they now were and had was due to the death of Christ. They wanted to remember and thank God for His great love demonstrated in the death of His Son, and to do it often.

2. The Lord had commanded His followers to observe the Lord’s Supper often.

Thought 1. What an indictment against so many of us who observe the Lord’s Supper so little! We can, of course, remember and concentrate upon the death of Christ without the symbol of the Supper. *But* Christ gave us the ordinance and commanded that we use it as the primary symbol to show His death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

Luke 22:19 *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”* (1 Cor. 11:24-25)

1 Cor 11:26 *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*

Mark 14:22-24 *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. □*

ACTS 02:42 PRAYER

The early believers were a people who persevered in prayer — the idea is church prayer, united prayer with the whole body of believers.

1. Through prayer they were brought into the most intimate fellowship and presence of God. They could get no closer to God than when they were *drawing near* to God through prayer.

Psa 145:18 *The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*

Psa 73:28 *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.*

Heb 7:19 *(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*

Mat 18:20 *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

2. Through prayer they received things from God. They received His provision for both their souls and lives.

Mat 21:22 *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

John 16:24 *“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”* □

III. **Acts 02:43** *Awe and Godly Fear*

The early believers were a people who stirred everyone with a godly fear. Fear or awe (phobias) does not mean terror or fright. It means...

- a godly fear, a fear of God, of His displeasure and judgment
- a holy sense of God’s presence
- a consciousness that God is working
- a reverence for God and for what is happening
- a sense of awe and wonder

Note what it is that stirs the public to be so aware of God: the signs and wonders being done by the *apostles*. And note: there were *many*.

Luke 1:50 *His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*

Acts 10:35 *But accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.*

Psa 25:12 *Who, then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him.*

Psa 31:19 *How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.*

Isa 50:10 *Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.*

IV. **Acts 02:44–45** *Church Unity, Ministry*

The early believers were a people who were together and who shared in ministry. It is critical for the church to pay close attention and heed what is being said in this point.

1. The *professing believers* were true believers.” (see *Believe*, Jn. 2:24 shows that true belief is the commitment of all one *is and has*).
2. The believers were *together* (*esan epito auto*). This means they were together in the same place *because they were of the same call, mind and purpose*. It does not mean just being in the same location and place. They would not have been *together* unless they had been of the same spirit and purpose. This is critical to God’s call.
3. The believers sold their possessions and goods and used the money to minister to the poor and needy. Now note:
 - => Why would they go to such a drastic extreme to minister? There is one critical reason: Christ commanded it. The church too often denies and ignores it, but denial of the truth does not do away with the truth. (See *Stewardship*, Acts 2:44-45. Also see notes, Mt. 19:16-22; 19:23-26; 19:27-30.)
 - Now note: Who are the rich and who are the poor?
 - => A rich person is anyone who has more than what others have, more than what the vast majority of the world has.
 - => A rich person is anyone who has anything to put back beyond meeting the true needs of his own family.

This is exactly what Christ and the Bible say time and again (see also Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:14; Acts 4:34-35; etc.).

In a summary statement, who is rich? A rich person is anyone who has anything beyond what he needs. What Christ demands is that we give all that we *are and have* to meet the needs of those in such desperate need. We are to hold back nothing. This is often the great complaint against Christians, that we just do not believe, not really. The evidence of our unbelief is seen in the insistence of Christ, the demand that we give all we have to feed the starving and meet the desperate needs of the poor and lost of the world. But we don’t. Gandhi, the great leader of India’s independence, is said to have never embraced Christianity for this very reason. How many others have rejected Christ because of our hypocrisy?

Mat 19:21 *Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

Mat 19:29 *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”*

Mat 6:21 *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Mat 22:39 *“And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”*

Luke 12:31-34 *“But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”*

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Luke 19:8 *But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

John 13:35 *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

John 15:10 *“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”*

1 Cor 10:33 *Even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.*

2 Cor 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Eph 4:28 *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

1 Th 3:12 *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*

Heb 13:5 *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*

A final matter is this: Christ demands that we give *all we are and have* if we are to follow Him (see *Cross and Discipleship*, Lk. 9:23). Any attempt to *water down* what He often said fails miserably before an honest heart reading His Word.

Thought 1. Just imagine how long ago the world would have been reached with the gospel if *professing* believers had been honestly committing their *total* lives to Christ, giving all they were and had to His cause of world evangelization!

ACTS 02:44–45

STEWARDSHIP, COMMITMENT, SELF–DENIAL AND POSSESSIONS

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Acts 02:44–45

Christ demands that we give Him *all we are and have* to enter heaven. This is the reason the early believers gave what they had to meet the needs of the world. Christ had demanded it of the rich young ruler and of *His disciples* (see notes, Mt. 19:23-26; 19:27-30).

In our struggle to protect the glorious truth that man is saved by grace and grace alone, we often forget and neglect another great truth: to follow Christ is to serve and minister to our neighbour. To *follow* Christ is to deny self completely, all that we are as well as all that we have (see *Cross and Discipleship*, Lk. 9:23). When we love our neighbour as ourselves, then we show that we truly love God. If we do not love and minister to our neighbour (above self), then we do not love God.

When we deny self by giving all we are and have (1 Jn. 4:20), then and only then do we receive heaven and the treasure of heaven. To deny self, to give all we are and have is a hard saying, but Christ demands it. Our attempts to soften it do not annul His demand (see *Errors of Man*, Rom. 3:3).

It is love of the world that makes us unwilling to give up the possessions we have obtained (comfort, esteem, recognition, power, position). By refusing to take and give what we have, we make the fatal mistake of showing (demonstrating)...

- that we love the things of the world more than we love people; that we prefer hoarding and extravagance, living sumptuously and comfortably to helping those who are so needful, so desperately needful. (See note, Lk. 16; 19-21 for what happened to the rich man who lived sumptuously.)
- that we love the world more than we love the hope of eternal life.
- that we love the position, recognition, esteem and power of the world's possessions more than we love Christ.

Now note a critical fact that we must heed: this subject is often made a matter of controversy. Men use every explanation possible to ease their consciences and to keep from having to give everything. There is a reason for this, and it is this that is so critical. Possessions pull a person away from God. It is difficult for a person who has possessions to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Why? There is a lure, an attraction, a force, a power, a pull that reaches out and draws any of us who look at or possess wealth. There are pulls so forceful that they will enslave and doom any man who banks and hoards and fails to turn and embrace God.

1. Possessions create the big "I" (see Mt. 19:16, 20). The man who *has possessions* is usually looked up to, esteemed, honoured and envied. Possessions bring position, power, recognition. They boost ego, and make a person self-sufficient and independent in this world. As a result there is a tendency for the rich person to feel independent and self-sufficient, that he needs nothing. And in such an atmosphere and world of thought, God is forgotten. It is forgotten that there are things that money cannot buy and events from which money cannot save. Peace, love, joy — all that really matters within the spirit of man — can never be bought. Neither can money save a person from disaster, disease, accident or death — the trials that are sure to come upon all.

2. Possessions tend to make one hoard (see Mt. 19:21). The Bible lays down the principle of handling money for all men, even for the poor:

Eph 4:28 *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

Mat 19:19; 22:39 “‘Honour your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbour as yourself.’”

The world reels in desperate need. People are starving, sick, homeless and unclothed by the millions. Teeming millions are spiritually lost and without God in this world, and they are doomed to die without ever knowing Him. When any of us sit still and objectively look at the world in its desperate plight, we ask: “How in this world can any man hoard and not help — even to the last available penny? Why would any man keep more than what he needs for himself and his family?”

As God looks at any man who banks and hoards, He is bound to ask the same question. In fact, His questions are bound to be more pointed and forceful. This is exactly what Christ said to the rich young ruler:

Mat 19:21 *Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

Riches tend to make a man selfish. For some unexplainable reason, the more we get, the more we want. When we taste the things of this world and become comfortable, we tend to fear losing our possessions. We struggle to keep what we have and to get more. True, many are willing to make contributions, but only a certain amount, an amount that will not lower their overall estate or standing or level of comfort and possessions. There are few who give all to Christ, all they are and all they have to meet the needs of the world.

As Christ said, it is very difficult for the rich (meaning those who have anything in comparison with most of the world) to enter heaven. If we do not have compassion and take care of our brothers (fellow man) when they are in desperate need, how can we expect God to have compassion and take care of us when we face the desperate need for heaven? It is foolish to think that a loving and just God will meet our need for eternal life when we would not meet the need of our fellow man for physical life. The rich (all of us who have anything in comparison with the rest of the world) have the means to help and to save human life, if we only would.

3. Possessions attach a person to the world (see Mt. 19:22). Possessions enable a person to buy things that...
- make him comfortable
 - please his taste

- *stir his ego*
- *stretch his self-image*
- *expand his experience*
- *challenge his mental pursuit*
- *stimulate his flesh*

If a man centres his life upon the things of the world, his attention is on the world and not on God. He tends to become wrapped up in securing more and in protecting what he has. Too often, he gives little if any time and thought to heavenly matters. Wealth and the things it can provide within this world can and usually do consume the rich.

Luke 12:33 “*Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*”

Acts 20:35 *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

Rom 12:13 *Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

Gal 6:10 *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

1 Tim 6:18 *Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.*

Heb 13:16 *And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. □*

V. Acts 02:46 Unity of Believers

A people who continued with one accord. (See *One Accord*, Acts 1:14.)

VI. Acts 02:46–47 Church that Worshipped

A people who worshipped and praised God every day. Note five things.

1. The believers were worshipping in the temple, praying and attending the regular hours of worship and prayers (see Acts 3:1).
2. The believers were worshipping in their homes, moving from home to home. They were sharing together in fellowship meals and in observing the Lord’s Supper, remembering their Lord’s death. (See *Home Evangelism*, Lk. 9:4 for the home was to be the centre of ministry.)
3. The believers were worshipping with gladness and singleness of heart. The word *sincere* (apheloteti) means earnest, without hardness. Their hearts were soft and tender, easily touched and giving. There was no selfishness or withholding on their part. Where there was need, they gave.

Note that their attitude was *gladness*, joy and rejoicing. They were more than glad to worship and minister as the Lord had instructed.

Thought 1. Just imagine the radical, transformed behaviour of these early believers. What could have caused such radical behaviour? The proclamation of the *pure, unadulterated Word of Christ*. The giving of all we are and have is absolutely demanded.

Luke 9:23 *Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

Acts 11:23 *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*

4. The believers were praising God.

Mat 5:16 *"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*

Rom 15:6 *So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Cor 6:20 *You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*

5. The results were twofold: they gained favour with the people, and the Lord added souls to the church. Note the word *saved* (*soteria*). It is in the present tense, "those who were being saved." Salvation is a present experience of the believer as well as past and future (see *Salvation and Perishing*, 1 Cor. 1:18). The idea is that those who were being saved were being added to the church day by day.

Acts 4:4 *But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.*

Acts 5:14 *Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*

Acts 6:7 *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

Acts 11:21 *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. ■*