

## **The Four Pillars of the Divine Service**

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Some years ago as I was fishing on a jetty I was accosted by an earnest young man clutching a New Testament. He came up to me and asked me whether I was a born-again, Spirit-filled Christian. I assured him that I was indeed. Then without further ado he asked me whether my church followed the apostolic way of worship. When I asked him what that was, he said that it was taught in 1 Corinthians 14:26; it consisted of sharing a Spirit-inspired song, message, revelation, tongue and its interpretation. I told him that my church did not do so, but, instead, followed the Pentecostal pattern of worship given in Acts 2:42. That was the end of our interaction. But I saw that after he had put some distance between us, he stopped and opened up his New Testament.

In Acts 2:42 Luke gives us this report about what happened after Pentecost: “They (those who had accepted the gospel and been baptized) devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and prayers.” This was the basic pattern of worship for the mother church in Jerusalem. These four elements were, and still are, the pillars of the divine service, the service that the three thousand converts and the one hundred and twenty original members of the congregation in Jerusalem devoted themselves to, the service that is part of our ecumenical heritage.

These four activities, these communal enactments, are listed in pairs of things that belong together. They describe the congregation’s reception of word and sacrament and its consequent reaction to receiving them. Thus devotion to “the teaching of the apostles” is coupled with “the fellowship” and “the breaking of the bread” is correlated with “the prayers”. Each of these is qualified by a definite article to show that they are familiar, technical terms which do not require any further explanation by Luke for his readers.

The first of these congregational activities was communal devotion to the teaching of the apostles. This term includes two things – the reading of selected passages from the Old Testament, and their use to teach about Jesus as the crucified and risen Christ and the reception of divine pardon through repentance and faith in him (cf. Lk 24:27, 44-47). Readings

from the gospels and the epistles were later added to the readings from the Old Testament. All this is what we now include in the service of the word.

The second congregational activity that was associated with the proclamation of God's word by the apostles was, in Greek, *koinōnia*, a noun that describes a common possession, a common relationship, or, as in this case, a common activity. I maintain that in this context it describes the presentation of a common offering. That is how it is used elsewhere in some places in the New Testament (eg. 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Heb 13:16), just as its corresponding verb *koinōneō* refers to participation with fellow Christians in giving a communal gift (eg. Rom 12:13; Gal 6:6; Phil 4:15). This interpretation is backed by the subsequent note in Acts 2:44 that all the believers had all things "in common" (cf. Acts 4:32).

The third congregational activity was "the breaking of the bread". For Luke this was the technical term for the communal celebration of Lord's Supper as a unique sacrificial meal (Lk 24:35; Acts 2:42; 20:7; cf. 1 Cor 10:16). This name for that meal refers to a distinctive part of it to describe the whole of it. It recalls what Jesus did when he instituted the sacrament (Mt 26:20; Mk 14:27; Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24), and how he still hosts every celebration of this meal as its unseen host (Lk 24:30). Taken together with the mention of devotion to the teaching of the apostles, it recalls Luke's description in 24:13-35 of how the risen Lord Jesus made himself known to the two disciples on the eve of Easter Sunday in two stages, first by his proclamation of himself from the Old Testament, and then by serving them as their host at their evening meal.

The fourth communal activity was the devotion of the congregation to "the prayers" that flowed from and were associated with "the breaking of the bread". The use of the rather unusual plural indicates that this does not just refer to a single act of communal prayer in keeping with Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2:1-6; it alludes to the full range of prayer that includes the Lord's Prayer, the chanting of psalms, and the singing of hymns, prayer for the whole church, all people and even the enemies of the church. So from its very beginning the mother congregation in Jerusalem devoted itself to common prayer in their common worship in response to Christ's offering of his body and blood to them (Acts 1:14; 4:23-31; 6:1-6; 12:12).

The result of their devotion to these four activities was that “awe came on every soul” (Acts 2:43). They surprised those who witnessed them because they were communal enactments rather than personal acts of devotion. Inspired as they were by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the whole congregation did what was normally done by individual people for themselves and their families. Counter-culturally, all the members of the congregation received corporate instruction, presented a communal offering, enjoyed a congregational holy meal, and offered common prayers for themselves and others. What they did was awesome because they were part of a corporate service that was accompanied by supernatural signs and wonders.

Well what then is the basic pattern of worship that goes back to the Early Church? What is the shape, the deep structure of the divine service that we have in common with all orthodox churches? It is the order of service with its four pillars that is found in Acts 2:42, an order that enacts what Christ has instituted for us by his word in the New Testament. With it we match what we give to God with what we receive from Him.

Dr. John W. Kleinig