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**Characteristics of a Healthy Church
(Acts 2:41-47)**

By: [Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M.](#)

41 So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added. 42 They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and held everything in common, 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and distributing the proceeds to everyone, as anyone had need. 46 Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, sharing their food with glad and humble hearts, 47 praising God and having the good will of all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved.¹

Introduction²

A number of years ago, my wife Jeannette and I visited Bill and Marilyn McRae at their home in Ontario, Canada. They live on beautiful Loon Call Lake. We were there in the Fall, just in time to enjoy the flaming red beauty of the turning leaves, and it was a most beautiful place. When Bill and Marilyn informed us that they get several feet of snow in the winter, I was almost ready to hear the "Moosadonian Call."³ I told Bill and Marilyn I would love to spend the winter there. A native Canadian standing nearby took all this in, about spending the winter there, before he gave me a look and said, "You've never spent a winter here, have you?" Nope, I hadn't. He knew that only someone very naïve would ever say anything so foolish (after all, almost everyone leaves when it gets that cold).

Many of us have exhibited this same naïveté regarding the events of Acts 2. We are tempted to think of the first church in Acts 2 in the same way we think of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. We are tempted to think of the church as perfect, pristine, and untouched by sin and later corruption. The difference between Genesis 2 and Acts 2 is that Genesis 2 comes before the fall of man; Acts 2 comes after the fall. The church in Acts is not perfect; it is simply pursuing the right things.

To use another analogy, Luke's description of the church in Acts 2 is more like the honeymoon, but sooner or later it must end, and the real world of marriage (with lawns to mow, garbage to put out, clothes to wash, jobs, kids' dirty diapers) must begin. The honeymoon is a wonderful time, and we should enjoy it while we can, but life does go on from there.

To use one last analogy, two of my married daughters are pregnant. Both have gotten sonograms and have come home with pictures of the child in their womb. The doctor has told both our daughters that their child is perfect. That means that they are in good health, but they are not fully developed. They do not yet have all the necessary hardware to survive. They must continue to develop and to mature.

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That is what the church is like in Acts 2:41-47. It is a wonderful church, populated with a very large number of new Christians. Only 120 members of this church of 3,000 have trusted in Jesus for a longer period of time. The church is not perfect, but it does exist, and it is moving in the right direction. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of some ways in which the church has not come to maturity.

What the Church Is Missing in Maturity

While the church here seems to gather daily (Acts 2:46), this practice will not continue indefinitely. How could it? Later on, we see that the church gathered weekly (see Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). This church seems almost totally dependent upon the apostles (Acts 2:37, 42-43; 4:33). Later on, we will see elders and deacons and a diversity of spiritually gifted people functioning as a body. Here we read of the saints selling their possessions and laying the proceeds at the feet of the apostles (Acts 2:44-45; 4:33-37). Later on, people will set money aside on the first day of the week, as they are able (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; see 2 Corinthians 8-9).

Evangelism is certainly taking place, but most of this seems to occur through the preaching of the apostles. It seems obvious that there is no formal missions program. The church in Jerusalem will never really be a missionary church, like Antioch will be (Acts 13:1ff.). The church in Jerusalem was a Jewish church. There may have been some proselytes, but can you imagine what would have happened if some Gentile saint showed up to one of their common meals with a bacon and tomato sandwich?

There was no such thing yet as church discipline (it first appears in Acts 5). The saints in Jerusalem did not yet grasp the fact that the church was to be made up of Jewish and Gentile saints who are now one in Christ (Ephesians 2 and 3). Gentiles would be added after the death of Stephen, when the gospel was taken to Samaria (Acts 8). Gentile evangelism would occur in Acts 10 and 11, and especially in chapter 13 and beyond. Right now, the church is not ready to embrace Gentiles. In Acts 15, we will read about the Jerusalem Council and its watershed decision regarding the alleged necessity of circumcision. In Acts 2:47, we are told that the church had the good will of all the people. The church was respected and esteemed. It won't be long before the church will be persecuted (Acts 7ff.). As said previously, this is not a perfect church, nor is it a fully mature church. Maturity requires time.

The Structure of Our Text

Acts 2:42-47 is the first of several assessments of the state of the church.⁴ We should first note that our text⁵ begins and ends with a statement about the unusual growth of the church. Verse 42 lists four of the activities to which the church devoted itself; verses 43-47 serve to further define these four activities. We will therefore consider each of the four activities, along with Luke's further description in verses 43-47.

The Activities of a Healthy Church

The four activities of the earliest church are introduced to us as priorities of the church. These are the four things to which these saints devoted themselves. These were not options. These were the fruit of a genuine conversion and of life in Christ.

The Apostles' Teaching

We would suppose that "**the apostles' teaching**" was the same subject matter that we find in Peter's sermons in Acts 2 through 4. In other words, the content of the apostles' teaching was the gospel. No doubt there would be a good deal of emphasis on the fact that the saving work of Jesus was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. Jesus had to be rejected, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead.

We should bear in mind that the apostles still had a great deal to grasp themselves. It is apparent from Acts 10 and 11 that Peter did not understand that God had set aside the old Jewish food laws (as per Mark 7:19). They had not yet grasped that the church would

be composed of Jewish and Gentile believers, now “one new man” (Ephesians 2-3). The issue of circumcision and law-keeping for Gentiles was to be tackled in chapter 15 (the Jerusalem Council). Many points of theology were yet to be defined and refined in the centuries to come.

I believe that at this moment Luke wants us to focus on one aspect of the apostles’ teaching: their proclamation of the gospel was recognized as authoritative, due to the authentication of God through miraculous works:

Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles (Acts 2:43).

Just a short while before, Peter had reminded his audience that the teaching of Jesus had been divinely accredited by the Father:

22 “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man clearly attested to you by God with powerful deeds, wonders, and miraculous signs that God performed among you through him, just as you yourselves know— 23 this man, who was handed over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you executed by nailing him to a cross at the hands of Gentiles” (Acts 2:22-23, emphasis mine).

We see evidence of this in the Gospel of Mark:

They were all amazed so that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him” (Mark 1:27).

Jesus did not merely speak *as though* He had authority; Jesus spoke with authority. His words of teaching were emphatically underscored by the miraculous works God did through Him. The same kinds of miracles were now being accomplished by the apostles (Acts 2:43), as would happen later with Paul:

9 But Saul (also known as Paul), filled with the Holy Spirit, stared straight at him 10 and said, “You who are full of all deceit and all wrongdoing, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness—will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 Now look, the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind, unable to see the sun for a time!” Immediately mistiness and darkness came over him, and he went around seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, because he was greatly astounded at the teaching about the Lord (Acts 13:9-12).

These miracles, performed by the hands of the apostles, served to accredit the apostles as those who spoke for God with full authority:

1 Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. 2 For if the message spoken through angels proved to be so firm that every violation or disobedience received its just penalty, 3 how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first communicated through the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard him, 4 while God confirmed their witness with signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:1-4).

The apostles’ teaching has been preserved in the New Testament Scriptures, so that we have their instruction as well as the early church. One can hardly over-emphasize the importance of sound, biblical teaching. The Word of God is the foundation and starting point for every aspect of the Christian life.

Fellowship

The term Luke uses for “fellowship”⁶ in our text is a much broader term than our English word. Essentially, “fellowship” means “joint participation” or “sharing something in

common.” It is thus a kind of partnership. In Philippians 2:1, the term is used of a common sharing in the Holy Spirit. In Philippians 3:10 and 1 Peter 4:13, it is used of sharing in Christ’s sufferings. In Galatians 2:9, it appears to be a sharing together in ministry.

The Christian should not only seek to actively partner with fellow-believers, but he should also guard against partnering with those outside the faith. Thus, the Christian should not be unequally partnered with unbelievers in Christian endeavors (2 Corinthians 6:14). We should not support or welcome those who preach a false gospel (2 John 11). And we should not become partners with the immature and untested individuals who fall because we have prematurely laid hands on them (by appointing them to the office of deacon – 1 Timothy 5:22).

The most common expression of “fellowship” in the New Testament is that of sharing financial resources – giving:

Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality (Romans 12:13, emphasis mine).

Now the one who receives instruction in the word must **share** all good things with the one who teaches it (Galatians 6:6, emphasis mine).

And as you Philippians know, at the beginning of my gospel ministry, when I left Macedonia, no church **shared** with me in this matter of giving and receiving except you alone (Philippians 4:15, emphasis mine).

One can “fellowship” with fellow believers in a number of ways, including the partaking of meals and engaging in prayer. If Acts 2:44-45 is Luke’s further description of what fellowship looked like in the newly-born church in Jerusalem, then his emphasis would fall on the fellowship of sharing one’s material goods with others.

44 All who believed were together and held everything in common,⁷ 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and distributing the proceeds to everyone, as anyone had need (Acts 2:44-45).

While the actual term is not used here, we see a further example of this kind of *koinonia* (fellowship) in Acts 4:

34 For there was no one needy among them, because those who were owners of land or houses were selling them and bringing the proceeds from the sales 35 and placing them at the apostles’ feet. The proceeds were distributed to each, as anyone had need. 36 So Joseph, a Levite who was a native of Cyprus, called by the apostles Barnabas (which is translated “son of encouragement”), 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and placed it at the apostles’ feet (Acts 4:34-37).

In previous teaching on this passage (and chapter 4), I tried to show that selling all of one’s possessions was not a command to all saints for all times, even though it was the practice of the early church.⁸ While this is true, I should also point out that what we read here sounds a lot like our Lord’s teaching on the use of money:

17 He said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 18 “Which ones?” he asked. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.” 20 The young man said to him, “I have wholeheartedly obeyed all these laws. What do I still lack?” 21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 22 But when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he was very rich (Matthew 19:17-22).

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide yourselves purses that do

not wear out—a treasure in heaven that never decreases, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys” (Luke 12:33).

“In the same way therefore not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33).

I am not suggesting that every Christian should follow the example of the early church in Jerusalem. I am suggesting that their actions were not “foolish” as some would suggest, but were the evidence of God’s gracious working in their hearts.⁹

The Breaking of Bread

I have always assumed that the expression, “**the breaking of bread**,” used here in Acts 2:42 referred to the observance of the Lord’s Table, or Communion. Now I’m not quite as certain. Often “**the breaking of bread**” does refer to observing Communion:

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, “Take, eat, this is my body” (Matthew 26:26; see also Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-24).

Breaking bread is not always a reference to the observance of Communion, however. The expression may simply refer to the eating of a meal:

After he said this, Paul took bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat (Acts 27:35).

One should observe that in this instance Luke is describing what took place when Paul and many others were caught in a devastating storm. “Breaking bread” here refers to all the ship’s passengers eating something before they struck shore. This is certainly not a Communion service!

Sometimes in Luke’s writings it is hard to know whether he is referring to the simple eating of a meal, or to partaking of Communion as a part of the meal:

30 When he had taken his place at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. . . . 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how they recognized him when he broke the bread (Luke 24:30, 35).

7 On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul began to speak to the people, and because he intended to leave the next day, he extended his message until midnight. . . . 11 Then Paul went back upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he talked with them a long time, until dawn. Then he left (Acts 20:7, 11).

Given the fact that this expression can be used with somewhat different meanings, we must ask what sense Luke intends for us to understand it in Acts 2:42. I believe Luke’s further clarification in verse 46 is the key to finding the answer to our question:

Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, **sharing their food with glad and humble hearts** (Acts 20:46, emphasis mine).

Luke does not appear to be calling attention to the remembrance of our Lord’s death, as much as to the simple sharing of a meal with fellow believers. Even if Communion was observed, this is not what Luke wanted to emphasize. We should recall that in the New Testament the Lord’s Table was celebrated as part of a meal.

The sharing of a meal was perhaps the most intimate form of fellowship one could have with fellow believers. In the ancient near eastern world, when a guest was invited to a meal with his host, it was incumbent on the host to provide protection for this guest. This partly explains the actions of Lot when the men of Sodom want to do harm to his

guests (Genesis 19: 1-8). The eating of a meal is also used as a description of our fellowship with God:

9 Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up, 10 and they saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear like the heaven itself. 11 But he did not lay a hand on the leaders of the Israelites, so they saw God, and they ate and they drank (Exodus 24:9-11).

4 Even when I must walk through a dark ravine,
I fear no danger, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff keep me calm.
5 You prepare a feast before me in plain sight of my enemies.
You refresh my head with oil;
my cup is full of wine.

6 Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord's palace for the rest of my life (Psalm 23:4-6).

36 "Be like people waiting for their master to come back from the wedding celebration, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom their master finds alert when he returns! I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, have them take their place at the table, and will come and wait on them! (Luke 12:36-37; see also Revelation 3:20; 19:9)

The Prayers

I'm puzzled why a number of translations have chosen to set aside a literal rendering of verse 42 in chapter 2 in relation to the fourth element of prayer:

They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42, NET Bible).

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42, NASB).

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

The ESV reflects the Greek text, noting both the definite article ("**the**") and the plural form of prayer ("**prayers**"):

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and **the prayers** (Acts 2:42, ESV, emphasis mine).

Two clarifications help us identify that to which Luke is referring in Acts 2:42:

. . . praising God and having the good will of all the people. . . (Acts 2:47a).

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple **at the time for prayer**, at three o'clock in the afternoon (Acts 3:1, emphasis mine).

I am therefore inclined to think that Luke is telling us that in its very early days the saints in Jerusalem diligently persisted in the observance of the stipulated times of Jewish prayer at the temple. These were newly-saved Jewish believers who were just beginning to grasp the significance of the things they had done as Old Testament Jews, even though they were unbelievers at the time:

16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days— 17 these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ! (Colossians 2:16-17)

The Attitudes and Relationships of a Healthy Church

As I looked over my sermon on this text from a number of years ago, I felt that something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. Now that I see it, I can't understand why it wasn't more obvious to me earlier. This text has been used by many (including me) to describe the essential functions of a church.¹⁰ The danger is that this becomes a "to do" list of activities. If we are doing all these things, then we feel that we are obedient. Worse yet, we may even be proud that we are so biblical.

The test of a "New Testament church" is not just doing the right things; it is more a matter of having the right attitudes – having the right heart – and maintaining right relationships. It wasn't just what the church in Jerusalem did that Luke is trying to convey here; it was how and why they did these things. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemned charity, prayer, and fasting that was done in the wrong spirit, and for the wrong reasons (Matthew 6:1-18). Very impressive works were claimed by people whom our Lord said He never knew:

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of heaven—only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers!' (Matthew 7:21-23)

These new believers were like newlyweds – they just couldn't seem to be apart from one another. The activities named (teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers) were all corporate activities, things the church did together. The competitive "me first" attitude of the disciples (Mark 9:34, 46; 10:35-40) is gone; now these believers are generous and are not claiming anything as their own; they are disposing of personal property to meet the needs of others. This is not just "togetherness;" this is unity. This is not just human affection; this is genuine love.

Beyond this, there is a deep sense of awe, inspired to some degree by the evidences of God's power and presence through the many signs and wonders He was performing through the apostles (Acts 2:43). They knew that their Lord was still with them. They knew that He was powerfully at work among them, and this was particularly evident in the miraculous deeds our Lord accomplished through the apostles.

In recent days, many in our church, along with many others around the world, have been praying for those who are serving God in very dangerous places. We have seen numerous answers to prayer, and we have marveled at how God has protected His servants. I believe there is a genuine sense of awe in our church regarding God's work in distant places. I hope and pray that we might also have this same awe with regard to God's working in our church, and in our city. I would greatly desire to see us fervently praying for powerful evidences of God's presence among us.

A New Testament church is a church in which God is present through His Spirit, and in which He is powerfully at work to glorify Himself by manifestations of His power and grace. A New Testament church is a church where the fruits of the Spirit are as evident as the manifestations of His power. That is the kind of church we desire to be.

The church in Jerusalem was characterized by joyful celebration in all that they did:

46 Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, sharing their food with glad and humble hearts, 47 praising God and having the good will of all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).

These new believers were not begrudgingly giving up their possessions nor sharing their meals with others. There was a constant mood of celebration in all that they did. How this spirit of joyful celebration praises and pleases God. This is the spirit we want to see in all of our activities and in all of our gatherings.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, Community Bible Chapel has been known as a church that teaches the Word of God. We never want this to change. A healthy church is one that is founded upon the person and work of Jesus Christ and His infallible Word, the Bible. The first three chapters of the Book of Ephesians deal with essential Bible doctrines. Paul's appeal to these saints to live godly lives in the last three chapters is rooted in the sound doctrine of chapters 1-3:

1 I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4: 1-3).

Notice that the subject matter of the last half of Ephesians has to do with relationships, primarily relationships in the church. In the first half of chapter four, Paul makes his appeal for unity and growth. Then, in the last half of this fourth chapter, Paul shows how faith in Christ requires a radical change in the way the believer relates to others. Relationships were an important part of Paul's teaching, and they should be important in our teaching and church life as well.

The church that is described in Acts 2:41-47 is a Jewish church, worshipping as we would expect of a group of new Jewish converts. It is a church of very new believers, who exhibit the vital signs of new life in Christ. This is not a church that has "arrived;" it is a church that has a good start and is moving in the right direction. It is a church that loves God and others. It is a Spirit-filled church that is moving toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But it is not a perfect church.

What does this church have to teach us, to teach our church? I have always been troubled by the words of our Lord to the church at Ephesus as recorded in Revelation 2:

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write the following: "This is the solemn pronouncement of the one who has a firm grasp on the seven stars in his right hand—the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 'I know your works as well as your labor and steadfast endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil. You have even put to the test those who refer to themselves as apostles (but are not), and have discovered that they are false. 3 I am also aware that you have persisted steadfastly, endured much for the sake of my name, and have not grown weary. 4 **But I have this against you: You have departed from your first love! 5 Therefore, remember from what high state you have fallen and repent! Do the deeds you did at the first; if not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place—that is, if you do not repent.** 6 But you do have this going for you: You hate what the Nicolaitans practice—practices I also hate. 7 The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will permit him to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God'" (Revelation 2: 1-7, emphasis mine).

What does our Lord mean when He says that the saints at Ephesus have "**departed from their first love**"? And what are the deeds they did at first?

I believe our text in Acts 2 greatly helps us discern the answer to these questions. To lose one's first love is to cease to love as you once did, at the beginning. Acts 2:41-47 describes the church's first love, and thus it describes the deeds that one who has lost his first love must once again do. The early church in Jerusalem may not be the perfect pattern for all that we do as a church today, but it is an excellent example of a church that is marked by love – love for God and love for others. I would pray that our church would not only do the right things, but that it would do them as acts of genuine love, for God and for others. May we be characterized by the devotion, awe, generosity, and joy that we find in the early church, to the glory of God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: www.netbible.org.

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³ Another Canadian friend, Paul Furseth, introduced me to this expression. It is the "call" to serve God in a beautiful place where you've always wanted to live.

⁴ Ajith Fernando lists 8 such summaries in Acts: 2:43-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20. Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 122, fn. 15.

⁵ I am including verse 41 as a part of our text.

⁶ The term found in our text is a noun, from the Greek term *koinonia*. The verb form, *koinoneo* is also used in the New Testament.

⁷ The related adjective *koinos* is used here, and rendered "**in common.**"

⁸ http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2127

⁹ We should remember that the actions of these early believers made it much easier for them to flee Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-4; 11:19-21), and thus to avoid the horrors which accompanied Rome's sacking of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

¹⁰ I can now see that some functions are missing (or not clearly identified), such as worship and evangelism.

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