

Vital Signs

Acts 2:42

Doctors and nurses must know how to check a patient’s “vital signs.” We call these signs “vital” because they measure the status of the body’s life-sustaining functions. Is the person breathing? Is their temperature normal? Do they have a pulse? Is their blood pressure right?

The basic premise behind these vital signs is that *living things prove that they are alive*. The same is true on a spiritual level. God brings the church, as a living organism, into existence. And when he does, the church has (so to speak) a temperature, breath, a pulse, and blood pressure. Obviously, the “vital signs” of the church befit its nature as a spiritual (not a biological) organism, and Luke records those four signs in Acts 2:42—

*And they devoted themselves
to the apostles’ teaching
and the fellowship,
to the breaking of bread
and the prayers.*

There is another way in which these four activities are like vital signs: they are integrally connected to each other. Just as a person’s breathing will affect their pulse and blood pressure, so these four activities of the church are organically related.

It is helpful to summarize these four vital signs under the following statement: A thriving church is devoted to (1) *learning* the truth, (2) *proving* the truth, (3) *celebrating* the truth, and (4) *praying* the truth, where “truth” stands for the good news about Jesus the Messiah, that is, the apostles’ doctrine.

1. The Apostles’ Doctrine: Learning the Truth

The newborn church was devoted to learning “the apostles’ doctrine,” which simply means what the apostles taught about Jesus and his ministry, as Jesus had instructed them (Acts 1:8). It included the historical events of Jesus’ life (his life, death, resurrection, and ascension), what those events *mean* (he is the Lord and Messiah), and the response it calls for (faith and repentance, see 1 Corinthians 15:1-11).

Why would something so simple as the gospel be worth *devoting* ourselves to? Because the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is God’s anointed Messiah, the King of kings, changes *everything*. Every problem in the church—from legalism to laziness, from arrogance to despair, from fighting to drifting apart, may be traced to a misunderstanding of, or failure to live in line with, the gospel. Like DNA, the gospel ought to give shape to every component of a believer’s life.

2. The Fellowship: Proving the Truth

“The fellowship” (Greek, *koinonia*) refers to a deep relationship in which people *share in* (what they have in common) and *share out* (what they have individually). We can observe both concepts by imagining a family sitting down for a meal together. They *share in* eating together, as they *share out* the food among each other. As it relates to the early church, the believers *shared in* a relationship with God as their Father, all the benefits flowing from Christ as their Savior, and the Spirit as the one who indwelt them. And flowing from what they *shared in*, they

shared *out* what was theirs. That is why, in a temporary, transitional time of the church's life, they "had all things in common" (2:44).¹

We often cheapen the word "fellowship" by applying it to anytime Christians "hang out" together, but the word is far more robust than that. In fact, the fellowship of believers is their way of proving that the life of the Messiah is really at work in us. Jesus had said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Fellowship is the basis of true community, and the Christian community constitutes a powerful premise that the gospel is not just words, but power.

Implied in Christian fellowship is a tenacious commitment to (1) being with each other (see Acts 2:44) and (2) opening up to each other (2 Corinthians 6:11; James 5:16; Ephesians 4:15).

3. The Breaking of Bread: Celebrating the Truth

"The breaking of bread" is an early description of the Lord's Supper. It flows perfectly from the apostles' doctrine and the fellowship, for it celebrates Jesus' work of salvation and the benefits we enjoy together because of it.

A church that does not regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper, or does so in such a way that fails to honor the true significance of it, will soon lose its awe over the gospel, its grip on holiness, and its joy of fellowship.

4. The Prayers: Praying the Truth

"The prayers" refers to the public prayers of the early church, which they offered when gathered together. We may call these prayers "praying the truth" (i.e., the apostles' doctrine) because they were done in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14), for the sake of Jesus, and because of the work of Jesus.

But isn't it sufficient to spend time in private prayer? While private prayer is assumed (1 Thessalonians 5:17), public prayers are also necessary because they bind the believers together in a common bond, as they *together* call God "our Father" (Matthew 6:9). An example of "the prayers" may be seen in Acts 4:24-30, where the believers pray to God in response to persecution. No mention was made of their personal needs (sicknesses, etc), as important as they are, but the central focus of the prayer was the mission to which Christ had called them (4:29). A church that minimizes this kind of public prayer loses its grip on its mission and forgets its complete dependence on Christ for everything (John 15:5-7).

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever thought that the gospel (the apostles' doctrine) is too simple to be the object of such constant attention as described in 2:42? If so, what was our understanding of the gospel then?
2. Discuss how the gospel deals a blow to your pride, hypocrisy, self-centeredness, isolation, anger, lust, or other vices. Likewise, discuss how the gospel provides true (not hypocritical or forced) motivation for humility, sincerity, genuine love, forgiveness.

¹It is important to note the difference between 2:42 and 2:43-41. 2:42 is to be linked with the first evidence of spiritual vitality following that first large-scale conversion (2:37-41). Its principles apply to us today, since we find teaching about the importance of Christian doctrine, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer, throughout the rest of the New Testament. The following section (2:43-47), however, describes a temporary, transitional phase of the church during its first few months in Jerusalem, before persecution scattered the believers. As a historian, Luke simply records what happened in the early church, and does not deliver commandments for how the church ought to operate. Thus, for example, Luke is not commanding Christian communism (2:45, a transitional period), but we should derive principles of radical generosity (a timeless value). Likewise, Luke is not commanding daily attendance at the temple/church and daily shared meals (2:46), but we should derive principles of the importance of frequent Christian gathering and generosity.

3. How has the description of “fellowship” changed your understanding of what it truly means?
4. Frankly rate your level of devotion to “the fellowship,” whether in being present in gatherings, or opening yourself to others. What common excuses do we give for not gathering, or, when we gather, for not engaging in fellowship?
5. Given your unique strengths and weaknesses (introvert? extrovert? hurt in the past? etc.) the unique strengths and weaknesses of Trinity Baptist Church (frequency or infrequency of gatherings, perceived friendliness or unfriendliness of people, etc.), which aspects of this genuine fellowship do you find most difficult, and what steps might you take to overcome these obstacles?
6. What are practical ways you can prepare yourself to make our observation of the Lord’s Supper more meaningful?
7. Frankly rate your devotion to “the prayers,” as described above. What are some practical steps you can take to improve this?

Recommended Resources

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009.s

Bridges, Jerry. *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2018.

Hansen, Collin, and Jonathan Leeman. *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021.

Jameison, Bobby. “How the Lord’s Supper Makes a Local Church.” 9Marks. <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-the-lords-supper-makes-a-local-church/>.

Jamieson, Bobby. “Understanding the Lord’s Supper.” 9Marks. 2021. <https://www.9marks.org/books/understanding-the-lords-supper/>.

Stott, John. *The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994.