

December 29, 2002 by Steve Brandon



Priorities for the New Year (part 1)

Acts 2:42

1. The Apostles' Teaching
2. Fellowship
3. The Breaking of Bread
4. Prayer

The year 2002 is quickly coming to a close, and this morning marks the last time that we will gather together this year. Just as we have done in the past several years, I would like to focus your attention upon the upcoming year and how you plan to live it.

Last year, precisely 364 days ago, many of you in this room were present as we examined 1 John 2:15-17, in which John writes,

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

John exhorts us to get our focus off of the present world and the things of this world for two reasons. He first exhorts us by telling us that affection toward the world is opposed to affection for the Father. John writes, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Affection to the world and affection for the Father do not mix. We cannot set our affections upon the things of this world, so as to find our fulfillment in the pleasures which they bring, while at the same time setting our love upon God. That does not work. Our love for the world will compromise our love for the Father. John exhorts us further by telling us that the world will soon be gone. The world will soon pass away. There will soon come a time when it will not be here any longer. It seems to me in my own life, that as I grow older, I see that the years are going by faster and faster and faster. I have no doubt that some of you feel the same way. As a child, the years seemed to drag by slowly. But with each new year it seems as if time has picked up the pace. It is hard to believe that it has been almost a year since we have met as a church in this facility at Rockford Christian High School. It is hard to believe that three years has passed since the big Y2K scare. I can remember back to when I was my son's age. He will soon be my age, and I will be my father's age. Time is flying by quickly. Soon, we all will be gone.

Last year, I exhorted you to make 2002 the year when you would really pursue hard after God. I exhorted you to live a life of personal holiness in the year 2002. Well 2002 is just about over, and it is time to evaluate where we stand. As you look back upon the year 2002, answer these questions. Did you love the world? Did you love the things in the world? Or, did you love the Father? How did you live? How well did you deal with temptations from the world? Are you pleased with your life this year? Three days from now, we will enter into a new year, 2003. This is your chance to begin afresh in your pursuit of God. Today, I want you to think about your priorities for the new year. What things will captivate your heart in 2003? What things will you devote yourself to? When we gather together a year from now on December 28, 2003, I will again ask you to look back upon the last year and evaluate it. Will there be some clear things to which you will devote yourself?

A few minutes ago, Elroy read for us the entire second chapter of Acts. We read of many things that took place that are of utmost importance in the life of the church of Jesus Christ. When Pentecost came, the Holy Spirit descended upon the church for the first time. God was performing the miraculous through the speaking in tongues. Peter preached what was perhaps the most powerful sermon that was ever preached. We read that 3,000 people were saved (verse 40). These people who were saved had received the words of Peter, repented of their sin, believed on Christ, and were baptized. Look at verse 41, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls." That is quite a huge growth for the church; it went from 11 men to 3,000 people in one day! At this point, we find 3,000 followers of Jesus Christ, literally knowing nothing of the church. They had no church building. They had never seen a church gather for worship. There were no models of other churches for them to follow. They did not have anyone teach them church methodology. They did not know that you were supposed to sing worship choruses, led by worship singers with overheads. They did not have any books on church growth, leadership magazines, or *Christianity Today*. They did not have any of these things, and quite frankly they did just fine. They responded to their salvation naturally, the only way that they could. When something comes close to hitting you in the face, your eyes naturally close. When you are about to get in a car accident, your body will naturally tense up. In the same manner, when you become a new creature in Christ, you will naturally desire to do the things we find these people doing in verse 42.

Luke recorded how the early church was devoted to a few key activities. Verse 42 lists those activities, and is very well known as one of those defining verses of a church. It has been described as the blueprint for the church in that it contains the things which ought to characterize a church. Many churches have centered their vision around the four activities described in this single verse. Verse 42 says,

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

There were four areas of focus within the early church: 1. the apostles' teaching; 2. fellowship; 3. breaking of bread; 4. prayer. These were the things that we find the early church "continually devoting themselves to." In the KJV and NKJV translations, we read that the church "continued steadfastly" (KJV, NKJV) in these things. The NIV and ESV translates it as the church "devoted themselves" (NIV, ESV) to these things. The Greek word describes a strong attention given to a particular task. It describes a readiness and eagerness to perform this activity. In Acts 10:7, it describes the household servants, who were in "constant attendance" to Peter, serving his every need. In Mark 3:9, it describes how Jesus' disciples were giving attention to Jesus' command to have a boat stand ready for Him, lest He need to get into the boat because of the multitude. So also was the early church giving strong, ready attention to these four tasks with great eagerness.

I have entitled my message, "Priorities for the New Year." It is my intention to focus upon these four things. This morning, my line of reasoning is this: since the early church gave great devotion and paid much attention to these four activities, and since all of these activities are repeatedly mentioned in later Scripture as activities that ought to characterize our devotion to Christ, then, shouldn't we at Rock Valley Bible Church be doing the same? I want to look at the priorities for the New Year. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we cannot get through all four of these this morning, so we will look at three this week and one next week.

Let us begin by looking at the first priority:

1. The Apostles' Teaching

When those 3,000 people repented of their sin and believed that God made Jesus, whom they had crucified, "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36), their faith was based upon Peter's explanation of a few Old Testament texts (Joel 2; Ps. 16; 2 Sam. 7; and Ps. 110) as explained in the historical events of what happened to Jesus Christ. The only Bible that these people had was the Old Testament. The gospels were not yet written, and it would even be another 20-30 years before that would be accomplished. Paul's letters had not yet been written. In fact, Paul was not even a Christian yet! Every single book of the New Testament had yet to be written.

If you were a new believer who was converted today, you could read the New Testament to understand how it interprets the Old Testament Scriptures in light of Jesus and His work on the cross. The believers in the early church had no such luxury. Instead, it was important for them to learn from the apostles what Jesus had taught them and what Jesus had sent the apostles to teach. We see, in verse 42, that these early believers were devoted to the apostles' teaching. As the church in Jerusalem continued to increase in number, the apostles were being distracted from their work of teaching. To correct this problem, they assigned seven men to perform some of the needed administrative duties in order that the apostles could be devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the word. You can read this story in Acts 6:1-6. The apostles' teaching role was crucial to the spread of the early church; it could not be neglected. When the church was forced out of Jerusalem, many of the apostles initially remained in Jerusalem to continue to lead the church (Acts 8:1). However, they were quickly called to other regions to interpret what God was doing through those who had scattered. Peter and John were sent to Samaria to be with those who had received the Holy Spirit from Samaria (Acts 8:14). Then God sent Peter to Caesarea to meet with a god-fearing Gentile, Cornelius, to interpret how the gospel was to be spread to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews (Acts 10-11). At times, the apostles were summoned to come to an area where help was needed and to teach the new Christians. That was the reason Paul was called to come to Antioch. When matters of dispute arose, it was the apostles who decided upon the policies that the church would adopt (Acts 15). The apostles were also sent on missions trips to evangelize and teach those who had believed in Jesus (Acts 13:4-14:28; 15:39-18:22; 18:23-21:17). At times, Paul stayed in places for years to teach and train the people. In Antioch, he spent a year (Acts 11:26). In Corinth, he spent 18 months (Acts 18:11). In Ephesus, he spent three years (Acts 20:31).

I say all of this to point out the fact that the early church relied heavily upon the apostles and their teaching. But as the church spread, they needed help from others. Paul trained up Silas and Timothy and Titus. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to be a pastor there. Paul left Titus in Crete and instructed him to establish elders in the churches there. Peter and Paul wrote letters to many churches to help the leaders there. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all wrote about the life of Jesus. As they wrote from what they had seen, heard, and been taught, they wrote the pages of the New Testament. Today, we have the teaching of the apostles in our hands. There is no better way to be "continually devoted" to the apostles' teaching than to be students of the Bible. The Bible records for us what the apostles were teaching the churches! As we read and study the Bible, we are confronted with the teaching of the apostles. As we believe and follow the teaching of the Bible, we are obedient to the apostles. Other teachers are good. But they are good only to the extent to which they expound the apostles' teachings! This is what teaching verse by verse, phrase by phrase forces us to do. It forces me to bring out the intent and meaning of the apostolic writers. It forces you to deal with the truth of the Word of God as given by the apostles themselves.

Church family, I exhort you all this morning to "diligently devote yourself to the apostles' teaching" by diligently devoting yourself to reading, believing, and following the Bible. As we come upon a new year, I would encourage you to read through the Bible this year. I know that many of you have tried to do so in the past, but have failed. I have failed for many years in reading the Bible through. One of the difficulties that I have faced in the past was the difficult challenge of spending so much time reading the Old Testament. So, I have provided for you a Bible reading plan in your bulletins through which I plan on reading through the Bible this year. Last year, I read straight through the Bible. This year, I wanted to intersperse the reading of the Old Testament with the reading of the New Testament. This will help all of us not to get bogged down in some of the difficult books of the Old Testament, without any light at the end of the tunnel. If you have another plan for reading through the Bible this year, which you really like, and it works for you, then by all means, use it. Do not feel obligated to read through the plan I am presenting today.

Some of you will find that reading the Bible through each year is an easy thing to do. There are probably only a couple of you in this category. You like to read, so reading the Bible is easy. For others, I know that this will be more difficult for you for various reasons. One reason may be that perhaps your life is extremely busy, and you just do not have time for daily Bible reading. I do know that some of you are very busy, and I understand that. But are you too busy for daily Bible reading? Life is all about priorities. You will find the time to do what you really like to do. Even those of us who are busiest, can find time to do the things that are most important to us. If you do not have time to read the Bible, allow me to ask you a few questions this morning. Do you find time to watch television? If so, perhaps it is time to stop your cable service and get rid of your television. Do you find time to read the newspaper? If so, perhaps it is time to stop your subscription. Do you find time to surf the Internet? If so, perhaps it is time to sever your link to the Internet. There is nothing more important for you to do in your busy hours than to read God's word. God has not given us Bibles so that they can collect dust on the shelves in our homes.

Some of the men in our church have been reading Practical Religion by J. C. Ryle. One of the chapters we have read is entitled, "Bible Reading". I would like to read a passage from this book about the importance of Bible reading, because Ryle nails the issue right on the head in regards to priorities. He steps back to look at your life and your death. Ryle wrote,

"The Bible is the only book which can comfort a man in the last hours of his life. Death is an event which in all probability is before us all. There is no avoiding it. It is the river which each of us must cross. I who write, and you who read, have each one day to die. It is good to remember this. ... Other mistakes may be corrected or retrieved, but not a mistake on our death-beds. As the tree falls, there it must lie. No conversion in the coffin! No new birth after we have ceased to breathe. ... It becomes every thoughtful and sensible man to consider calmly how he is going to meet death. Gird up your loins, like a man, and look the subject in the face. ... The good things of the world cannot comfort a man when he draws near death. ... Relatives, loved friends, and servants, cannot comfort a man when he draws near death ... The pleasures of the world cannot comfort a man when he draws near death. ... Books and newspapers cannot comfort a man when he draws near death. ... There is but one fountain of comfort for a man drawing near to his end, and that is the Bible. Chapters out of the Bible, -- texts out of the Bible, -- statements of truth taken out of the Bible, -- books containing matter drawn from the Bible, -- these are a man's only chance of comfort when he comes to die. I do not at all say that the Bible will do good, as a matter of course, to a dying man, if he has not valued it before. I know, unhappily, too much of death-beds to say that. I do not say whether it is probable that he who has been unbelieving and neglectful of the Bible in life, will at once believe and get comfort from it in death. But I do say positively, that no dying man will ever get real comfort, except from the contents of the Word of God. ... Surely it is no light matter whether you read that book or not." (*Practical Religion*, pp. 124-129).

This is what priorities are all about. We need to think about the ends of our lives, and then do the things today that we will not regret at the end of our lives.

Concerning the Bible, Ryle wrote further:

"The Bible does not profess to teach the wisdom of this world. It was not written to explain geology or astronomy. It will neither instruct you in mathematics, nor in natural philosophy. It will not make you a doctor, or a lawyer, or an engineer....But there is another world to be thought of, beside that world in which man now lives. There are other ends for which man was created, beside making money and working. There are other interests which he is meant to attend to, beside those of his body, and those interests are the interests of his soul. It is the interests of the immortal soul which the Bible is especially able to promote." ... The Bible is 'able to make a man wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. iii. 15). ... The man who has the Bible, and the Holy Spirit in his heart, has everything which is absolutely needful to make him spiritually wise. He needs no priest to break the bread of life for him. He needs no ancient traditions, no writings of the Fathers, no voice of the Church, to guide him into all the truth. He has the well of truth open before him, and what can he want more? Yes! though he be shut up alone in a prison, or cast on a desert island,--again,-- if he has but the Bible, he has got the infallible guide, and wants no other." (*Practical Religion*, pp. 111-113).

Perhaps you are so busy that you can read only one book this year. Please make that book be the Bible! If you have been involved in reading J. C. Ryle's book, Practical Religion, and it has consumed too much of your reading time, so that you have been caused to neglect the Bible. Then do not read J. C. Ryle! Read the Bible! Make the Bible your reading priority. Did you know that you can read through the entire Bible by reading out loud for 15 minutes every day?

While time may be an issue for some of us who have busy lives, there's another reason why you may not be reading the Bible. Perhaps you simply do not like reading very much. Maybe you are not the studious sort of person. Perhaps you have not had a lot of schooling. I know that reading is a very real struggle for some people. If this is a problem for you, please consider this: God gave us a book. He did not give us a video. He did not give us an audio cassette. He did not give us a CD. He gave us a book. Apparently, he wants us to be readers. Down through history, Christians have always pushed for literacy because God gave us a book. Do you read anything? Perhaps you read novels, or cooking magazines, or computer magazines, or business journals, or sports pages, or newspapers. I have seen professed non-readers devour books in which they are interested. If you say, "I don't like to read," could it possibly be that you are simply covering up the fact that the content of the Bible fails to interest you?

Some of us will need help in the matter of reading. Husbands, help your wives read by reading to them. Wives, help your husbands read by reading to them. Read through the Bible systematically with your children. I will tell you that what has most helped my family's Bible reading is when we started on a reading plan to read through the entire Bible in our daily family worship time. For years, in family worship we would sort of flip from here to there in our Bible reading. Several years ago, we started on a reading plan that is roughly equivalent to what I placed before you today (click [here](#) to access the plan online). We are about half-way through that plan for Bible reading as a family. My desire is to read the whole Bible in the hearing of my children before they leave the home. At our present pace, each child will probably hear the Bible read several times before they leave our home. You might be surprised how much they like it. On Friday night, we finished reading through Romans and Carissa jumped up and said, "We're finished with Romans!"

Will reading the Bible be one of your priorities in 2003? Will you continually devote yourself to the apostles' teaching?

Let's look at the next priority of the early church:

2. Fellowship

Acts 2:42 says, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, [to the breaking of bread and to prayer]." Many people have a misunderstanding about fellowship. In the church I grew up in, the name of the big room in the basement of the

church was called, "The Anderson Fellowship Hall." I think that there was even a little sign on the top of the doorway. Many people think that fellowship consists of standing around in a church basement, drinking red punch, eating stale cookies, and talking about life and things such as children, sports, cars, and cooking. Fellowship can (and does) occur in church basements while people are drinking red punch and eating stale cookies. But there is more to fellowship than this.

The Greek word translated, "fellowship" in the Bible literally means, "sharing." This is the best understanding of fellowship: "The sharing of lives with one another." In the case of these believers, it meant that they were sharing their whole lives together. Look at verse 44, "And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common." That is, they shared everything they had. This word translated "common" comes from the same root as the word for "fellowship." Fellowship means sharing. Continuing on, we see how this was working itself out. Luke records that:

"They began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people." (Acts 2:45-47)

The picture here is one of unity. Notice that nobody was instructing them on how to have fellowship with one another. We do not see any special courses or Bible classes being taught. The believers simply had the desire and recognized the need to continue to share with one another. They desired to spend time together, share resources needed for each other, share meals together, and worship together. Their sharing all of their property was an evidence of their love and service toward one another. This morning, I am not advocating a communism, whereby we should all sell everything we have and live at the same level of income. Nowhere in the New Testament are we commanded to sell our property and give it to others. But I am advocating that you all ought to prioritize your love, devotion, service, and help for each other within this church, which quite possibly manifest itself in selling some worldly possessions to meet the needs of others. As the early church spent time together, gave of their resources to each other, shared their meals together, and worshiped together, so I am advocating that you share your life with others in this church.

Many of you are familiar with the "one-anothers" of Scripture. There are more than fifty times in Scripture where we are exhorted to care for "one another" in one way or another. Allow me to read and comment on a few of them. The verses I have chosen illustrate perfectly how we are meant to "share our lives with one another" which is the essence of what is meant by this word "fellowship."

Mark 9:50 - "**be at peace** with one another." When you share with one another intimately, as I have described, it must descend into the heart. This is where you will be at peace with each other. Genuine fellowship is never accomplished on the mere external level.

John 15:12 - "This is My commandment, that you **love** one another, just as I have loved you." This is the heart of genuine fellowship: a love for one another. When your love for others is expressed, it will be expressed in fellowship.

Romans 12:10 - "**Be devoted** to one another in brotherly love; **give preference** to one another in honor." This verse describes a willing submission of your desires to the desires of others. Imagine that you are with a friend, and you have two options placed before you. Your friend wants to do one thing, but you want to do something else. When neither of the options are wrong (i.e. sinful), you will show your love by choosing the desire of your friend. This is fellowship.

Romans 14:13 - "Therefore **let us not judge** one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." You are not the sin police, denying your love to others, because of their sinfulness. Rather, in love you will put down your preference so as not to cause another to stumble. It means that you might not talk about certain subjects with certain people, because you love them. It means that you might not do certain things with certain people, because you love them. You share the things that help, and withhold the things that hurt.

Romans 15:7 - "Wherefore, **accept** one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." Constantly put before your mind your sin and how God has accepted you. Then, using the same standard, you ought also to turn around and accept others in the same way, warts and all, as you wait for their sanctification to progress. This is fellowship.

1 Corinthians 12:25 - "There should be no division in the body, but that the members should **have the same care** for one another." You are not to lift up the rich among us and give them preferential treatment. You are not to exalt the talented or extremely likable people and give them special favors. Rather, you are to care for all people regardless of any of these circumstances. Fellowship knows no preferential treatment.

Galatians 6:2 - "**Bear** one another's **burdens**, and thus fulfill the law of Christ." The picture here is of a weight being carried by another. When the football player who is injured and needs assistance in walking off the field, the trainer "bears his burden." When you notice that things are difficult for others, come along side them and help them out. This is fellowship -- sharing the load.

Ephesians 4:32 - "And **be kind** to one another, **tender-hearted**, **forgiving** each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Our attitudes in fellowship are of utmost importance. This is especially put to the test when others have sinned against you, and have genuinely hurt you. To have genuine fellowship is to exhibit kindness and a tender-heart toward one who has sinned against you.

Philippians 2:3 - "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you **regard** one another **as more important** than himself." Dying to self is the only way that genuine fellowship will be accomplished. It is only accomplished when everyone considers themselves as slaves to everyone else. You will be looking for ways to serve others because you regard them as more important than yourself.

Colossians 3:9 - "**Do not lie** to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices." Fellowship must be transparent with

each other. It is not manipulative. It is not seeking to hide anything. It is not putting on your nice Sunday face along with your Sunday clothes. It is looking to be open and honest with each other.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 - "Therefore **encourage** one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing." I remember when our kids were just learning to walk. We had nothing but praise and encouragement for them. We would urge them on, saying "Come-on, you can do it! One step at a time. You can take a step. Yeahhhhh!" This illustrates encouragement. And as we constantly are encouraging each other in the things of the Lord, we will experience fellowship.

Hebrews 10:24-25 - "Let us **consider how to stimulate** one another **to love and good deeds**, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging** one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." Imagine yourself not only loving others and doing good deeds, but earnestly trying to get others to love others and to do good deeds. Genuine fellowship is so focused on others that we greatly desire to see others be involved in sharing in and producing fellowship as well. When your thoughts are focused toward trying to encourage another member of the body to be loving and engaged in good deeds, you have fostered the spirit of fellowship.

James 4:11 - "**Do not speak against** one another, brethren." Fellowship will seek the good of others, not the bad. It is impossible to share your life with someone whom you are trying to destroy. You can destroy others with words. So fellowship will not speak against another.

James 5:9 - "**Do not complain**, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged." Nothing destroys fellowship faster and more completely than by complaining about others. When you complain about others, you are raising yourself above them, judging their sin, and you are building walls between you and them. This will devastate fellowship.

James 5:16 - "Therefore, **confess your sins** to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Whenever a group of people live closely with each other, conflicts and sin will occur. You cannot escape it. Your honest confession of your sins will restore the oneness necessary for fellowship to take place. Your refusal to acknowledge your sin will destroy the oneness that fellowship needs.

1 Peter 4:10 - "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in **serving** one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." God has gifted each one of us in different ways. Your service to others will be distinctly different than my service to others. As God has given you abilities and gifts, use them, for the purpose of helping and serving others. This will foster fellowship.

1 John 4:11 - "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to **love** one another." Love is the epitome of all of fellowship.

This week, I spent some time reading about fellowship. I want to share with you a passage I read that exemplifies the type of attitude we need to have in order to experience true fellowship here at Rock Valley Bible Church.

"I want you to know that I'm committed to you. You'll never knowingly suffer at my hands. I'll never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. I'll always in every circumstance seek to help you and support you. If you're down and I can lift you up, I'll do that. Anything I have that you need, I'll share with you; and if need be I'll give it to you. No matter what I find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, my commitment to you will never change. And there's nothing you can do about it. You don't have to respond. You don't have to say anything. I love you, and that's what it means" (source unknown).

On several occasions, I have been asked, "How can I serve at RVBC?" My answer is usually much the same. I will say something such as "There are many opportunities to help with our Sunday morning activities. Just look around, and you certainly can find something to help out with. You can come to help set up. You can sign up for the nursery, or help with refreshments. ... But if you really want to serve the body, get to know the people here so that you will sense their needs, and then meet their needs." I believe that this type of attitude is what was being experienced in the early church, as they were "continually devoted ... to fellowship" (Acts 2:42). The people were living close enough together to see the needs of others, and then they were willingly meeting the needs of others.

When you realize that this is the picture that God has given to us concerning the church, it will have great impact upon your church attendance. Church attendance is not about hearing the greatest preaching, enjoying the greatest music, being stirred in your emotions, or being served by others. Church attendance is all about fellowship. It is about coming to love and serve other people. For you to have this as one of your priorities will mean sacrifice on your part. You need to do what it takes to share your lives with others in a deep fashion so that your needs are easily made known to others.

I know that as Rock Valley Bible Church grows larger over the years, the influence that my family and I can have personally in this area will continue to decrease in proportion to the number of people attending. My vision, as I believe the Bible exemplifies, is that the church ought to be filled with so many people who have this attitude, that needs will be met, people will be cared for, and burdens will be shared. Many of these things may happen of which I am not personally involved, and I may even know little or nothing about them. In order to accomplish this here at Rock Valley Bible Church, your priorities for this church needs to be one of continual devotion to fellowship. Something like this must have happened in the early church, where there were 3,000 believers (see verse 41).

Will this be one of your priorities in 2003? Will you continually devote yourself to fellowship?

The third priority of the early church was:
3. The Breaking of Bread

In most Bibles, you will notice that in Acts 2:42, the word "and" does not appear before the phrase "the breaking of bread." Luke writes, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This has caused some to say that Luke was defining fellowship here as "the breaking of bread." This priority is so connected with fellowship that many have

argued that Luke wanted to give only three priorities of the early church: 1. the apostles' teaching; 2. fellowship (which is really, the breaking of bread); and 3. prayer. But, I believe that fellowship (which is genuine sharing) has much more application than simply eating together (i.e. the breaking of bread), as I explained in my previous point.

This phrase, "the breaking of bread," is somewhat an elusive term for us. It is used 18 times in Scripture. (Click [here](#) for a detailed usage of these words in the Bible). It can simply mean some sort of symbolic act done before a meal. For instance, when Jesus fed the multitudes of people, he took a few loaves of bread in His hand, looked up toward heaven, blessed the food, and then broke the loaves of bread and passed them out to His disciples to feed the multitudes (See Matt. 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6, 19; Luke 9:16). Paul did a similar thing on a ship filled with Roman guards and prisoners (Acts 27:35). He broke bread, and then distributed it. This week, our family visited some friends in town. We were quite rushed to get out the door, so my wife simply brought a freshly baked loaf of bread. Each of us broke off a portion of the bread to eat as a make shift lunch. In this way, we were "breaking bread" in that we were breaking some off to eat.

However, most often in the Scriptures, this phrase implies a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Remember when Jesus was on the road to Emmaus and was talking with several of His disciples? This event occurred after His resurrection, but at the time the eyes of these disciples were "prevented from recognizing Him" (Luke 24:16). The disciples were downcast because their leader, Jesus, had been crucified, and their hopes that He "was going to redeem Israel" had been crushed. Jesus said, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Then Jesus explained to these men "the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). But their eyes were still prevented from recognizing Him. We are told that their eyes were opened to recognize Him when Jesus reclined at the table with them, blessed the bread, broke it, and then gave it to them (Luke 24:30-31). Jesus must have broken the bread in such a way that they remembered what He had done on the night in which He was betrayed.

The church in Troas gathered together on the first day of the week with the purpose in mind of "breaking bread" (Acts 20:7). This church gathering consisted of a "breaking of bread" and then some type of meal afterwards (Acts 20:11). As we read about the breaking of bread in the Scriptures, it is sometimes difficult to discern exactly what is taking place. For instance, verse 46 says, "And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together." What exactly does the phrase "breaking bread" mean here? Are they eating? Are they partaking of the Lord's Supper? I would guess that it is indeed referring to the Lord's Supper, because "breaking bread" is mentioned in the same sentence as "taking their meals together." This may imply that these are two separate, though related, events. Likewise, in this context, I believe that "breaking of bread" probably refers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

This early church "continually devoted themselves to the breaking of bread." We celebrate the Lord's Supper here at Rock Valley Bible Church every 4 to 6 weeks. Perhaps to "continually devote" ourselves to this, we need to celebrate it more often! I know some churches celebrate it every Sunday they worship together. Yet, what is the most important thing about celebrating the Lord's Supper? Is it eating and drinking? No, it is **remembering**! Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." As we eat of the bread and drink of the cup, we are forced to think back 2,000 years and **remember** Jesus upon the cross. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are forced to remember everything that Jesus accomplished on the cross for us. If you trust in Jesus Christ's atoning work on the cross, here is what Jesus accomplished 2,000 years ago:

- Jesus demonstrated the fulfilment of God's electing love upon you, Who chose you to be in Christ, before you were even born (Eph. 1:4).
- Jesus bore the punishment for all of your sin (Rom. 3:25).
- Jesus turned away the wrath of God from you (Rom. 3:25).
- Jesus fully satisfied God's righteous demands (Rom. 3:25).
- God has granted you redemption in His blood (Eph. 1:7).
- God has made you alive in Christ (Eph. 2:4,5).
- God has given you "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3).
- All of your sins have been forgiven (Col. 1:14).
- You are now considered to be as righteous and pure as Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).
- You are no longer a slave to sin (Rom. 6:18). Paul writes, "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption."

As we remember the death of Christ, you ought to be astonished at what a wondrous thing occurred there. The hymn-writer once wrote:

The perfect righteousness of God
is witnessed in the Savior's blood.
'Tis in the cross of Christ we trace
His righteousness, yet wondrous grace.

God could not pass the sinner by,
his sin demands that he must die.
But in the cross of Christ we see
how God can save us righteously.

The sin is on the Savior laid,
'tis by his blood the debt is paid.
Stern justice can demand no more,
And mercy can dispense her store.

The sinner who believes is free
And says "the Savior died for me."
Can point to the atoning blood,
And say, "This made my peace with God."

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are drawn back again to remember Him. There are many benefits to doing so. Again, I refer to a book by J.C. Ryle that many of us have been reading. It has been very practical and beneficial. On the subject of the benefits of celebrating the Lord's Supper, Ryle writes:

1. Right reception of the Lord's Supper has a *humbling* effect on the soul. The sight of these emblems of Christ's body and blood, reminds us how sinful sin must be, if nothing less than the death of God's own Son could make satisfaction for it, or redeem us from its guilt.
2. Right reception of the Lord's Supper has a *cheering* effect upon the soul. The sight of the bread broken, and the wine poured out, reminds us how full, perfect, and complete is our salvation.
3. Right reception of the Lord's Supper has a *sanctifying* effect on the soul. The bread and wine remind us how great is our debt of gratitude to our Lord, and how thoroughly we are bound to live for Him who died for our sins.
4. Right reception of the Lord's Supper into hearts, has a *restraining* effect on our soul. Every time a believer goes up to the Communion rail he is reminded what a serious thing it is to be a Christian, and what an obligation is laid on him to lead a consistent life. (J. C. Ryle, Practical Religion, pp. 152-153).

Celebrating the Lord's Supper benefits our soul greatly. But it is not simply here in church, when we take communion that we can derive such benefit. We derive such benefit when we really think and reflect upon Jesus and His work on the cross. As the early church continually devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, so likewise did they continually devote themselves to reflecting upon the work of Jesus Christ done on their behalf.

Will this be one of your priorities in 2003? Will you continually devote yourself to the breaking of bread? Will you continually devote yourself to reflection upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

We are exhorted in Scripture to examine ourselves before we participate in the Lord's Supper, so that we will not "eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:28). The one who does approach the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner "shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27). In other words, this person will be guilty not because the bread or the cup are the body of the Lord, but because they represent the body of the Lord. When someone burns an American flag, he or she does far more than release hydro-carbons in the air. Since the American flag represents the United States of America, then by burning the flag, this person is showing his or her lack of respect for the country. Likewise, when you eat the bread and drink the cup, to do so in an unworthy manner is to spit upon Jesus' body, as He was dying upon the cross.

What does it mean to eat and drink in an unworthy manner? Here are a few things I thought of.

1. Unbelief

One thing it means is to eat and drink without faith in Christ. If you are not trusting in Jesus alone for your forgiveness, but yet still take communion, it is as though you are saying, "Jesus, I want the benefits of your work on the cross, though I want nothing of You." Or you could say, "I want everything that You will give me, but don't think that I'm going to do anything for you." If you are not trusting in Jesus alone, please do not take of the elements.

2. Sinfulness

You eat and drink in an unworthy manner if you are harboring sin in your life. If there is sin in your life for which you are unrepentant, and you still take communion, it is as though you are saying, "Jesus, I know I need forgiveness of my sins, but I love my sin. I'm not willing to give it up, but I want forgiveness. Hopefully I can get it by eating and drinking." If this describes you, please do not take of the elements.

3. Wrong Priorities

You also eat and drink in an unworthy manner if you have no desire for the priorities of the church that we read in Acts 2:42. Those priorities consists of the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. If you do not really want to read the Bible, to share your life with those in your local church, to remember the life of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's supper, to spend time in prayer, and yet you still take communion, then it is as if you are saying to Jesus, "I don't have a desire for the things which naturally come from being born again, but, I do like the religious things that are happening here. I like feeling religious." You are demonstrating that you know nothing of genuine religion. If this describes you, please do not take of the elements.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 29, 2002 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

A Word Study on "Breaking of Bread"

In the current context, it is used two times:

Acts 2:42 - Breaking of bread (current context).

Acts 2:46 - Breaking bread from house to house (something different than taking meals together)

When used in regards to feeding the multitudes, it appears six times:

Matt. 14:19; Mark 6:41 (told later in **Mark 8:19**); **Luke 9:16** - Jesus broke the five loaves to feed the 5,000.

Matt. 15:36; Mark 8:6 - Jesus broke the five loaves to feed the 4,000.

It is used one time to refer to eating:

Acts 27:35 - On the ship full of non-Christians, after 14 days of not eating, Paul encouraged everyone to eat. Paul took bread, gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat.

It is used nine times in reference to the Lord's Supper:

Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24 - Lord's supper

1 Cor. 10:16 - The breaking of bread is a sharing in the body of Christ.

Luke 24:30, 35 - Jesus breaking bread with the disciples after His resurrection. It was this act which opened their eyes to recognize Jesus.

Acts 20:7,11 - The early church on the first day of the week "gathered together to break bread."