

Devotional Service

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(These topics harmonize with the chapters of our Bible Study text-book, "The Life of Christ," which is advertised in this paper.)

JAN. 15.—"THE LIFE AND FELLOWSHIP OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH."

Acts 2, 41-47; 3, 32-35; 6, 1-7.

(STUDY 2. APOSTOLIC CHURCH.)

How simple and satisfactory is the life of the early Christian Church! How far some churches and some individuals have departed from it! But to the New Testament Church is an injunction much needed even where evangelical methods appear to prevail.

THE DOOR OF ENTRANCE.

The qualification of membership in the early Apostolic Church was conversion at the outset. The church was to be made up of regenerated men and women. This was a new thing. In the Jewish Church one came into membership by being born of the flesh. To enter Christ's Church one must be born of the Spirit. At the beginning of the Christian Church, the Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, set as conditions of membership, true conversion and public confession of a sound faith.

CONDUCT WITHIN THE CHURCH.

Consider how this large company of believers grew in grace and acquired strength in the Spiritual life. The means employed were four—every one essential to Christian progress.

1. "Steadfast continuance in the Apostles' doctrine." Christianity is a religion based on facts, all of which embody vital and eternal truths. And this is even one of the most indispensable methods of nourishing the soul in piety and holiness. We must study the truth as it is in Jesus, and be built up into Him in all things. Moreover, there must be "steadfast continuance" in this work. Never will the time come for even the most studious to say, "I have learned it all." If a Paul could say, "I count not myself to have apprehended," there is no chance for a reasonable boast with any of us that we have attained all and are perfect in knowledge. The more we know truly the better we shall become.

2. The second means of edification is "fellowship." By this I understand friendly intercourse of believers with each other as brethren and sisters in Jesus Christ. Their faith had united them in a new and holier sympathy. One Divine Spirit pervaded their hearts. Fellowship is one of the essential conditions of a healthful, happy and vigorous existence. The church that does not take pains to cultivate it is untrue to itself. Disintegration by reason of class-distinction or mutual jealousies and rivalries or personal alienations is weakness, is destruction. Let it be avoided by all means. The "communion of saints" should be no dead article of our creed, but a living fact.

3. The breaking of bread" is the third specific. This expression may be taken in a broader sense to denote the love-feasts of the earlier time, or it may be restricted to denote simply the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, with which the love feast was always concluded. And how important the observance of the Lord's Supper is to the development of the Christian life need not be largely insisted upon. It brings us, we all know, into special communion with our Lord in the mystery of his great sacrifice in our behalf. Sacramental seasons are therefore the church's festival seasons. They should be so celebrated, and mark as they come the stages of its enlargement.

4. "In prayers" is the fourth quali-

fication. Whether are intended here public or private supplications, the essential thing is "the offering up of the heart's desires for things agreeable to God's will in the name of Christ." Such prayer is the breath of the Christian life. No soul that has been quickened to feel its own ignorance and weakness and perverseness, that has been awakened to discern the beauty of holiness, and see what it ought to become, that has learned something of the glory of God's Kingdom, and what a renovation it was destined to effect on earth, can live without prayer. If Christians would grow in grace they must pray for grace.

5. A church thus alive and edified will be likely to exhibit some fruits of its new life. What fruit the early Church bore the text tells us. First, there was the largest liberality. The time was one which called for special sacrifices on the part of believers resident at Jerusalem. A large number of people had come from a distance to attend the feast of Pentecost, and, expecting soon to return to their homes, they had not provided for a long stay. And the need was heartily supplied. In the first fervors of their love and joy all selfishness seems to have melted away. No one could aught he had his own, but they had all things common. Generosity is one mark of a true Church. Let no person deem himself a Christian who does not exhibit something of it. Other fruits were gladness, singleness of heart, praise. Indeed, to such an extent did these fruits abound that one would infer that the early days of the Church were one continuous festival season. The new life burst forth at once in full beauty and fragrance as a spring-time, and all hearts blossomed with joys and gushed out in song. How could it be otherwise? This is the natural effect of that religion, the object of whose worship is a God of love, and whose spirit breathes love into every believing soul. Love is gladness, love is musical.

6. Lastly, we see the influence which this exhibition of the Christian spirit had upon the multitude. The new converts "found favor with all the people." And this, too, was a legitimate result. The Gospel, truly acted out, commends itself to every man's conscience. It creates a blessedness which wins admiration. "The Lord added to the Church daily." This is the way every church must grow and spread. It must aim to make itself attractive by catching and reflecting the beauty and the glory of its risen Lord. There is no community on earth that has in itself the possibility of exercising such an all-conquering power over mankind as the Church possesses.

POINTS FOR THE PRESIDENT.

The four elements of growth in the Primitive Church are referred to in the foregoing exposition. 1. Doctrine. 2. Fellowship. 3. Lord's Supper. 4. Prayer.

Select four members of the League each to develop one of these essential elements in a five-minute paper or address. The President might open the study of the topic by a brief talk on "the door of entrance." Bear in mind, you are studying the methods of the church in its early and formative period, and its purest and most unalloyed form. Drink deeply of this apostolic spring, and may you be refreshed and stimulated thereby.

JAN. 22.—"EARLY PERSECUTION: ITS CAUSATION AND RESULTS."

Acts 4, 1-4, 8-22; 5, 40-42.

(STUDY 3. APOSTOLIC CHURCH.)

The apostles in jail! A strange place for preachers of the Gospel to be. But so it was. There are reasons for it, and results that follow.

TIME OF THE ARREST.

At the very moment when their usefulness appeared to be at its height, when their work seemed to be entering into the hearts of the people, the apostles were arrested. One would have thought that the hand of Providence would have kept the persecutors in church, at least till Peter's sermon was closed; but no, these enemies of the truth were allowed the freest scope to carry out their ill designs. Divine wisdom is perfectly able to outwit the cleverest of Satan's schemes, and therefore never needs to be in a hurry to hinder man's prospects or thwart his purposes. When Peter's sermon was probably near its termination, and when it was too late for Peter and John to be put on trial before the Sanhedrin, they were "put in hold." So that the people had heard of what most of them Peter intended to say in his sermon, and, on the other hand, the two apostles had leisure to reflect on the situation before being called into court to answer for their conduct. There is always some mitigation or compensation even in the worst lot.

THE PRIME MOVERS.

The priests engaged at the time in the temple were among the chief instigators of the persecution. The division of the priesthood into twenty-four orders originally made by David (1 Chron. 24, 3, 2 Chron. 8, 14), was revived after the exile. If the Feast of Pentecost had not yet terminated, a larger number than usual of these religious officials may have been present on this occasion. A pitiful mistake it is when ministers of religion leave their proper work to become instigators of persecution. This has been often done, our own Wesley and his fellow-laborers suffering greatly from the clergymen of the period.

The world grows slowly towards toleration. The captain of the temple took a hand in it. He was the priestly commandant of the Levitical troops, whose business it was to preserve order in and about the sacred edifice. Though the captain little thought of it, what looked to him like disorder was really in accordance with the highest order of the temple. It is not always safe to judge by appearance. Then the Sadducees joined the mob. They were the rivals of the Pharisees, probably the rationalists of the day. They were the first bitter enemies of Jesus, and it was no wonder they were among the prime movers in this hostile action against the two apostles. The men who took part in killing Jesus were not likely to be scrupulous in consigning his disciples to prison.

MOTIVES FOR THIS ACTION.

There were at least two motives that led to this persecution. There was, first, indignation at the apostles for teaching the people. Strange that the priests should have been sore troubled at the apostles for doing what they themselves should have done, but possibly the consciousness of neglected duty had rendered them uneasy. That the Sadducees should have objected to the education of the vulgar crowd whom they despised as the scum of society, was surprising. In the second place, the head and front of the apostles' offence in the eyes of the Sadducees was promulgating the doctrine of the resurrection. To preach that Jesus, whom they had hunted to death, was risen, and that all who believed in him should eventually rise like him, and by virtue of his power—this teaching was to lay the axe to the root of the favorite dogma of these Sadducees for they taught that this life was the whole of man's existence. Such preaching on the part of the apostles was, of