

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #77: BREAKING BREAD

By John Temples

“Breaking bread” is a quaint, old-fashioned term you don’t hear much anymore. It conjures up images of a family or group of friends gathered around a table by a warm fire, sharing a meal together and enjoying each other’s company. It’s also a Bible term (in fact, the Bible is the source of the term), so it is worthy of our study.

THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM “BREAKING BREAD”

Bread was a staple food in Bible land households. Its importance can be seen in the fact that the word “bread” occurs 346 times in Scripture (NKJV). It was the centerpiece of most Jewish meals. It could be prepared relatively quickly and easily, and it kept well for traveling. It was made from wheat, barley, spelt, or millet (see Ezekiel 4:9 for an interesting bread recipe), and could be seasoned with olive oil or herbs. It could be leavened or unleavened. Bread in Bible times was not in loaf form like today; rather, it was usually prepared as a flat disc like our modern pita or flatbread. When it was served, it would be blessed, torn or broken, and then distributed to those partaking of the meal. Jesus followed this exact procedure at the last supper: “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body’” (Matthew 26:26).

Bread was so important to people of Bible lands that it came to symbolize the whole meal, or everything necessary to sustain life. So “give us this day our daily bread” means “give us everything we need to sustain our bodies.”

“BREAKING BREAD” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

“To break bread” meant (and still means) to share a meal, and in many Bible passages this is its meaning. But it also came to be used to refer to the communion or Lord’s supper. So, we find these two usages in the New Testament:

- A common or shared meal

- The Lord's Supper

It's important to correctly distinguish between the two meanings as we study God's word, especially in the book of Acts. Let us therefore examine the five occurrences of the term "breaking bread" in the book of Acts.

ACTS 2:42-46 (TWO OCCURRENCES)

42 "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

Here we see both usages of the term "breaking bread" within the same context. Breaking bread in verse 42 refers to the Lord's Supper; the term in verse 46 means a common meal. Failure to recognize this distinction has led to erroneous teachings and practices regarding the Lord's Supper.

So how do we know that breaking bread in verse 42 means the Lord's Supper?
Several reasons:

- The term occurs in a list of activities all of which are connected with worship: the apostles' doctrine or teaching; fellowship (which means joint sharing of resources, including the Lord's day offerings, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), and prayers. Since three out of the four items in the list are items of worship, it is logical to assume that the fourth one--breaking bread--also refers to an item of worship.
- The use of the definite article ("the breaking of bread") points to a specific bread-breaking. Brother Eric Lyons points out, "The use of the article in this verse also leaves the impression that a particular event is under consideration, rather than a common meal where 'food' (Greek *trophe*, a

word never used of the Lord's Supper—Barnes, 1956, p. 59) is served for the purpose of gaining nourishment (e.g., Acts 2:46; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:33-34).”

(<https://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=11&article=1548>)

What about verse 46? The fact that the bread was broken “from house to house” suggests that a common meal is meant. Wayne Jackson: “The term ‘breaking bread’ in this passage does not refer to the Lord’s supper; rather, it denotes a common meal. This is evidenced by the fact that they are paralleled with ‘eat their food’ in the same clause. The word ‘food’ translates the Greek *trophe*, which essentially means nourishment (Danker, et al., Greek-English Lexicon, 2000, p. 1017). The term (employed some sixteen times in the Greek New Testament) is never used of the communion, for such was not designed to nourish the physical body.”

(<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/634-did-the-early-church-observe-the-lords-supper-on-a-daily-basis>)

ACTS 20:7-11 (TWO OCCURRENCES)

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. 9 And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. 10 But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, “Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him.” 11 Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed.”

It's obvious that the breaking of bread in verse 7 refers to the Lord's Supper. Some reasons for this conclusion are:

- This “breaking of bread” was on a specific day, the first day of the week, the day Christians meet for worship.

- This “breaking of bread” happened within the context of a church assembly (verse 7).
- Paul waited seven days in Troas so he could attend this meeting and break bread with the brethren. If verse 7 refers to a common meal (or “potluck”), there would have been no need to wait seven days.

But in verse 11, “breaking bread and eating” is apparently a reference to a common meal. This would have been after midnight, hence on Monday morning. If this were a reference to the Lord’s Supper, the church would have been partaking of it on the wrong day. Brother Burton Coffman points out, “...the ‘breaking of the bread’ in this place has no reference at all to the Lord's supper but to the satisfaction of their hunger, as plainly implied by the verb ‘eaten.’ It was now long past midnight, and the Lord's supper had been observed on the Sunday when they came together for that purpose.” Albert Barnes agrees, saying: “Acts 20:11, Had taken refreshment. As this is spoken of Paul only, it is evidently distinguished from the celebration of the Lord's Supper.” (from Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database Copyright © 1997-2014 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

To avoid the conclusion that the Troas brethren partook of the Supper after midnight on Sunday, some have proposed that the church was using Jewish time, in which the day began at 6 pm and ended the next day at 6 pm. If so, their assembly and the taking of the Supper would have been on Saturday night. However, it’s most likely that the church at Troas, a Gentile congregation, used Roman time; so their days began at midnight and ended at midnight, just as ours do. It’s also likely that they did not begin their meeting until late Sunday, because that day would be a regular workday. Here is a possible chronology of the events of Acts 20:

- Paul arrives in Troas on Monday and waits seven days (verse 6) to be able to worship with the saints on Sunday.
- 7 pm Sunday--the church comes together and begins worship.
- 7:30 pm Sunday--the church observes the Lord’s Supper, this being the main purpose for their assembly.
- 8 pm Sunday--Paul begins his sermon, with the intention of having a fellowship meal with the brethren afterward.

- Midnight Sunday (beginning of Monday)--Paul is still preaching. Sometime after midnight, Eutychus falls and is killed. (Some think that he was merely unconscious, but Luke, a doctor, says he was “taken up dead,” verse 9.)
- 1 am Monday--Paul raises Eutychus from the dead.
- 2 am Monday--Paul and the church enjoy a fellowship meal. After the meal, Paul resumes teaching (verse 11). You have to admire his stamina!
- 6 am Monday--Paul departs. (Verse 11 states that he left at daybreak.)

This scenario fits all the details of the text; has the Lord’s Supper taken on Sunday, its proper day; and avoids the strained assumption that a Gentile congregation was using Jewish time.

ACTS 27:35

“And when he had said these things, he [Paul] took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves.” This “breaking of bread” occurred on a ship carrying Paul and bound for Rome. It involved the crew and passengers of the ship and obviously had no connection with the Lord’s Supper; it was a meal taken simply for nourishment.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Breaking bread” is a Biblical term originating from the fact that in Bible times, bread was torn or broken (not cut) as part of the experience of sharing a meal with others.

“Breaking bread” can have two meanings in the New Testament: a common meal or the Lord’s Supper. It is important to correctly discern which is meant in several passages to avoid erroneous conclusions related to the Lord’s Supper.

Breaking bread together is good! The Jerusalem church members shared their resources and time with each other on a daily basis. They “ate their food with gladness and simplicity [sincerity, NASV] of heart” (Acts 2:46). One of the many casualties of the COVID pandemic has been the fellowship meals of our churches.

Let us pray that we can soon safely resume “breaking bread” together. --John
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