

Question #8: The phrase “breaking bread” is used in Acts 2:42, 2:46, and 20:7. Are these references to the Lord’s Supper or just a common meal?

The phrase “*breaking bread*” can be used to describe a common meal generally or the Lord’s Supper specifically, depending on the context in which it is used. The Lord Himself at His Last Supper introduced the emblems—the bread and the fruit of the vine to be taken as His body and blood by faith—at the Passover meal. As revealed in the Corinthian letter, the early Church regularly had a common meal along with the Lord’s Supper. Because of the problems exemplified at Corinth, over time the Lord’s Supper has been separated from a physical meal. Today congregations frequently have potlucks (physical “breaking bread”) separate and apart from the Lord’s Supper (spiritual “breaking bread”).

So, the usage and context of the passage in which one finds the phrase “breaking of bread” determines whether a common meal or the Lord’s Supper is being identified. I take it that Acts 2:42 refers to the Lord’s Supper. Notice that the other 3 activities commanded in the verse are spiritual in nature, so it follows that “*breaking bread*” would be the spiritual meal we know as the Lord’s Supper. Also, all peoples regularly eat common meals, so if Christians are described as “*continually devoting themselves*” or continuing “*steadfastly*” (KJV) to breaking bread it must be referring to the spiritual meal, the Lord’s Supper.

Acts 2:46, of course, refers to common meals, and would fall more under the heading of “*fellowship*” in Acts 2:42. The communal type of living that the first congregation of the Lord’s Church at Jerusalem experienced, as described in Acts 2:43- 47, was only temporary. After the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7) and the subsequent persecution of the Church, the Christians were scattered so that only the apostles were left in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

That Acts 20:7 refers to the spiritual “*breaking bread*” as the Lord’s Supper is substantiated by the context surrounding this verse. In Acts 20, Paul is traveling as an evangelist during what is often referred to as his “third missionary journey.” In Acts 20:6 the reader finds Paul and his companions sailing “*from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread.*” It took him 5 days to travel from Philippi to Troas, and there he “*stayed seven days*” (Acts 20:6c). Then Acts 20:7 states: “*On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread....*”

The rest of Acts 20:7-12 describes their assembly with the congregation at Troas. In Acts 20:13-16 details of Paul’s journey from Troas to Miletus are given.

Note, in verse 16 Paul was in a hurry: “*Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*”

If we do the math, Paul was trying to get from Philippi to Jerusalem in less than 50 days. Note: it is 50 days between the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost, and he left Philippi “*after the days of Unleavened Bread [Passover]*” (Acts 20:6). He takes 5 days from Philippi to Troas (Acts 20:6), then delays 7 days at Troas. Then he passes up Ephesus, the congregation he spent the most time establishing in Asia (Acts 20:16) to save time.

So why did he spend 7 days in Troas? We know that Troas was strategically important to the Church, as this was the port through which he entered from Asia to Europe during his missionary journeys. I believe that Paul was trying to catch the Lord's Supper assembly in Troas as he arrived from Philippi. At that time, the only way to interface all the Christians would be to make the assembly to break bread. He must have missed the assembly, so he waited a full week to make the next Lord's Day assembly. This is the only explanation that makes sense with the limited info we are given in the Acts 20 passage.

If the breaking of bread cited in Acts 20:7 were only a common meal, then it doesn't make sense that Paul would wait around in Troas for 7 whole days for this meal. But if it were the Lord's Supper, then it would make much more sense that he would wait to be there.

Acts 20:7 is a most important reference to the phrase "*breaking bread*"—as here the time frame for the Lord's Supper is noted. The context substantiates the Lord's Supper rather than a common meal, as described earlier. And this is the only place in the entire Bible where the day of the week and the frequency for the Lord's Supper is mentioned. In personal Bible study on this question I share that this information concerning the Supper being shared only once could mean one of two things. Either the Lord's Supper is not that important, or it was so well known by the 1st century church that it was not needed to be repeatedly written down. With Scriptures such as John 6:53-54 underlining the importance of the Supper, the second scenario seems much more likely. This is proven to be true by the large amount of proof texts outside of the Bible written in the 1st-3rd centuries that reveal the Lord's Supper was universally served in all congregations of the Lord's Church throughout the world on the first day of the week.

My personal favorite proof text comes from Justin Martyr, who wrote to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius in 140 A.D. In his First Apology he wrote about the church, hoping to turn back the Roman government's fierce persecution of Christians. Ultimately he lost his life for his efforts.

This is what Justin wrote in a section concerning "What we do at our weekly meetings":

"On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place. There the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read, for as long as time permits. When the reader is finished, the presiding brother verbally instructs us and urges us to imitate the good things that were read to us. Next we all rise together and pray. And as I related before, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought. In like manner, the presiding brother offers prayers and thanksgiving according to his ability. And the people assent, saying, 'Amen.' Then the bread and wine are distributed to each person, and each partakes. The servants [deacons] take a portion to those who are absent."

"...Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common meeting, because it is the first day on which God made the world, having worked a change in the darkness and matter. On this same day, Jesus Christ our Savior

rose from the dead. He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn. On the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the sun, he appeared to his apostles and disciples and thereafter taught them many of the things I have submitted to you for your consideration.”

We Don't Speak Great Things—We Live Them, “The First Apology of Justin Martyr,” from the translation of Marcus Dods, D.D. Scroll Publishing Company, Tyler, TX, 1989, p.94.

There are many more examples of the Lord's Supper being held by the early church on every first day of the week in historical data. But this should suffice for now. In personal Bible study, I have a file of historical quotes and references on this subject.

This question also alludes to Luke 24:30 as a cross reference given for both Acts 2:42 (spiritual breaking of bread—the Lord's Supper) and Acts 2:46 (physical breaking of bread—a common meal). I find this verse to be so exciting. This is the very evening of the resurrection day! Jesus sat down to a common meal with two of His disciples who were “*prevented from recognizing Him*” earlier (Luke 24:16). In the first “breaking of bread” after His resurrection, even the first time under the New Testament! And as He broke the bread, the disciples’ “*eyes were opened and they recognized Him*” (Luke 24:30-31). Notice the phrase is also used in Luke 24:35, as these disciples share their experience with the other disciples. Then Jesus appears in their midst, when the eleven apostles are gathered all together (Luke 24:33&36).

Do you think they had the Lord's Supper together that evening? I'm still working on these questions myself.

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