

## 9. Ministry in the New Testament Church (3Q 2019—The Least of These)

**Biblical material:** Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; Matt. 25:38, 40; Acts 9:36; 2 Cor. 8:7–15; Romans 12; James 2:1–9; 1:27.

### Quotes

- The early church was strikingly different from the culture around it in this way—the pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. A pagan gave nobody their money and practically gave everybody their body. And the Christians came along and gave practically nobody their body and they gave practically everybody their money. *Timothy Keller*
- The early Church was birthed and sustained in almost constant persecution and pressures. *Greg Gordon*
- The early church didn't experience explosive growth in the face of relentless persecution for believing the resurrection was a metaphor. *David D. Flowers*
- Let no one grieve at his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again; for forgiveness has risen from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free. He has destroyed it by enduring it. *John Chrysostom*
- We who formerly hated and murdered one another now live together and share the same table. We pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us. *Justin Martyr*

### Questions

Does the church seem very different today compared to the early church? What would you want to change, and why? If the real church is the people, what's my relationship to those around me at church? Doctrine can seem a heavy term. But what the early church believed (=doctrine) turned the world upside down. How does that work?

### Bible summary

The New Testament church had everything in common and took care of each other (Acts 2:42–47). Acts 4:32–37 records how the early believers sold land and property to help each other. Matt. 25:38, 40 is a reminder of Jesus' words that acts of grace and mercy done to others are the same as doing them to him. "In Joppa lived a follower called Tabitha, (Dorcas in Greek). She was always doing good and helping the poor." (Acts 9:36 FBV). We are called to excel in the grace of giving (2 Cor. 8:7–15). As living sacrifices we dedicate ourselves through the gifts of the Spirit to the Lord's service (Romans 12). We are to love our neighbors and not show favoritism (James 2:1–9). "In the eyes of our God and Father, religion that's pure and genuine is to visit orphans and widows in their suffering, and to keep yourself from being contaminated by the world." (James 1:27 FBV).

### Comment 1

The New Testament church had many challenges—persecution, societal opposition, misrepresentation and all the rest. But they held on to each other and the

fundamental principles shared by Jesus, most significantly of showing kindness and love to all in the most practical ways. This was the ministry of the early church.

Sadly this began to change. The corrupting influence that we begin to see with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) damages this essential Christian witness. Ultimately the church is transformed into an all-too-human organization. In the words of Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “It is not God that is worshipped but the group or authority that claims to speak in His name. Sin becomes disobedience to authority not violation of integrity.”

The problem is that the organization becomes self-serving, and those reliant on it are willing to sacrifice themselves and their ideals for the organization. This is how the organization swallows up the message. It takes it over and distorts it because it must survive in the present and rely on the physical rather than the supernatural and spiritual. The early church believers held everything in common—compare this to the medieval church. Jesus’ words about his Father’s temple being turned into a den of thieves are relevant here. The organization morphs from church to corporation. Satan neuters the message through such organizational processes, giving it a form of godliness but denying the power thereof. The right words are said, but they are not meant.

This is why early Adventists rejected the bulk of church organization, wanting to return to the New Testament model of goodness and charity. They wanted to avoid the creeping curse that strangles spirituality in the name of order. So the question comes: what can we do to return to such a spiritual experience of generosity demonstrated in the New Testament church?

## **Comment 2**

One of the things that happened when the church moved from meetings in homes to having purpose-built buildings beginning before, but accelerated during, the Constantinian era, is that while the church itself was becoming less Jewish in character, it began to apply a more and more Old Testament hermeneutic to its discussions about church, ministry, and sacraments. The church began to be seen as a temple or basilica, the Lord’s Supper began to be seen as a sacrifice, and naturally enough the ones offering the sacrifices, just as in Leviticus, were seen to be priests. There was the further move in this direction when Sunday began to be seen as the Sabbath, another example of this same sort of hermeneutic. There were considerable problems with this whole hermeneutic from the start, since nowhere in the New Testament is there set up a class of priests or clerics to administer any sacraments. Indeed, nowhere was there a clear separation between life in the home and life in church. What has often been missed in the discussions of the effects of all this is that it ruled women out of ministry in the larger church and indeed ruled them out of celebrating the Lord’s Supper as well, since in the Old Testament only males were priests and only priests could offer sacrifices. Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper*.

## **Ellen White Comments**

She [Dorcas] had been a worthy disciple of Jesus Christ, and her life had been characterized by deeds of charity and kindness to the poor and sorrowful and by zeal in the cause of truth. Her death was a great loss; the infant church could not well spare her noble efforts. . . . {WM 67.1}