



# The Community of Believers

## Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 2E

### Key Concepts:

- Four activities of the earliest church are described in Acts 2:42-47:
  - (i) listening to the Apostle's teaching,
  - (ii) Fellowship,
  - (iii) Breaking bread,
  - (iv) Prayers.
- The Apostle's teaching (Greek: **didache**) was at a time when Christians used the Hebrew Bible. The distinctive Christian message was conveyed orally.
- The earliest Christians were Jewish, attended the synagogue and then met with other Christians to reflect on the Apostle's message: the resurrection of Jesus, the message of repentance and the power of Christian community.
- Fellowship is from the Greek: **koinonia**, meaning communion or participation. The earliest Christians believed that material possessions should be held in common.
- Were they 'communist'? There appears to be no philosophy of communism; they are sometimes described as having private possessions (Acts 12:2). Yet, they did embrace a form of **communal** living.
- Breaking of bread could be either a reference to the **Eucharist** or to the **Jewish practice** of breaking loaves of bread, with a blessing, before a meal.
- It seems that sharing meals in each other's homes was an aspect of this vibrant, new community.
- The main activities of churches today:
  - (i) Worship: what makes Christian worship unique is that God is approached through Jesus. **Justin Martyr** (2nd c. CE) says this included readings, a sermon, prayers and the eucharist. Differences today exist between churches which

use art and architecture to convey identity and groups like **Quakers** focusing on the inner spirit in plain structures.

(ii) **Sacraments**: '...an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace' (Augustine). The Roman Church has 7, most protestants have 2 (baptism and communion); Quakers have none. There is disagreement about whether the power of God comes through these directly or if they are **symbols** of that experience of God's power.

(iii) Religious teaching: The Church now has the **canon** and sometimes organizes its readings according to a **lectionary** where the entire Bible is worked through in a cycle. Some churches have catechisms (summaries of teachings) and/or didactic sermons and/or home Bible study groups.

(iv) Mission: in Matthew 28:20 Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations. '**Evangelise**' = 'good news telling'. Mission has sometimes been credited for **humanitarian** contributions or discredited for extending **cultural imperialism**.

(v) Service: Jesus taught his followers the principles of servant leadership in **John 13:1-7**. Many churches view deacons, priests and bishops as servant leaders. Some churches stress, however, the '**priesthood of all believers**', noting that the church is strong when all are viewed as leaders.

(vi) Outreach: acts of service outside the church which may include humanitarian efforts of the World Council of Churches (**WCC**) and the work of 'para-church' organisations such as **Christian Aid** and World Vision.

(vii) Fellowship has as its purpose the growth of Christians to be like Jesus. This may be anything from **monasticism** to **pietism** (investigate these terms). The communal sharing of goods by Christians as in Acts 2 is rare.

### Key arguments/ debates:

Some churches believe their key role is in conveying Christian teaching to tackle dangerous ideas in the world that need the correction of the Bible. However, some point out that the Church's main role is sacramental – empowering Christians to live the Christian life. Others say that the main role is humanitarian: to live out the love of Jesus rather than merely talk about it.

Some believe Acts 2 can be a model for the church since today's lifeless churches need vibrancy and close fellowship. Others note that the New Testament contains diverse messages about the role of the Church and that we must not romanticise the early church; a church which had its share of problems (see I Corinthians 1:11-12).

### Key questions:

- How has the church changed from its original Jewish setting?
- Are some aspects of contemporary worship complementary (or not) to early Christian worship? What is the role of human creativity in worship?
- Is there a difference between the Apostle's teaching and the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels?

### Key words:

Didache | koinonia | communal | Eucharist | Jewish practice | Justin Martyr | Quakers | Sacraments | canon | symbols | lectionary | Evangelise | humanitarianism | cultural imperialism | John 13:1-7 | priesthood of all believers | WCC | Christian Aid | monasticism | pietism

### Key quotes:

'The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.' (J. Calvin)

'Friars should preach by their deeds.' (Franciscan Rule)