The Table of Showbread

Mike Davies 21 October 2025



In the Holy Place of the tabernacle stood the table of showbread (Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9), which held twelve loaves of bread, arranged in two stacks of six, and placed continually before the Lord. These twelve loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel, showing that God's covenant people are to come before Him together, united in His presence. As the priests ministered in the Holy Place, therefore, there was a constant reminder of the fact that there was one people of God, one Holy nation (1 Peter 2:5) made up of twelve tribes, each with its own distinctive characteristics. Each tribe was distinct, yet all were represented on the table.

Each tribe would lay claim to its own inheritance, which they would need to take if the nation as a whole was to walk in the fullness of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12) and the other patriarchs. These loaves formed one offering to God, speaking of unity and fellowship. God's people are many yet called to one body in Him (1 Corinthians 10:17; Ephesians 4:4-6). Only the priests could eat the bread (Leviticus 24:9), foreshadowing the New Testament truth that all believers are now a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) with access to God's presence. Fellowship and service are for those set apart in Christ, yet they act together. In fact, the Greek word used for church, ekklesia, speaks of a people set apart for a purpose (just as the priests were), while Paul often uses the word koinonia, which speaks of fellowship or partnership, a joining together in a common cause.

There is also here a foreshadowing of the Lord's supper. Jesus' words at the last supper highlight the deeper meaning of the bread: "This is My body, given for you" (Luke 22:19) while Paul reinforces the unity of believers in partaking of one bread: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:17). Just as the priests ate the bread, so we now, as priests (those set apart), partake in the bread that represents the body of Christ. Furthermore, just as the twelve loaves continually stood before the Lord, our fellowship and shared life in Christ are continual, not occasional (Acts 2:42-46), while our unity is centred around Him. True unity does not come through consensus or compromise but from devotion to Jesus.

The twelve loaves remind us that we are many members, but one body, called to live and serve together (Romans 12:4-5), with Christ, the bread of life at the centre (John 6:35). The bread was replaced weekly, reminding us that fellowship with God and with one another is ongoing, not one-time (Leviticus 24:5-9), and that we should not forsake the gathering of the saints on a regular basis (Hebrews 10:24).

So, we see that the description of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 reflects the centrality of this principle within the life of the church, just as the table of showbread was central to the life and ministry of the tabernacle priests. They were devoted to breaking bread and fellowship, and met daily in their homes and the temple courts. This table was part of the detailed instructions given by God to Moses, with the warning to build exactly according to the pattern shown to Him. Likewise, today, as we build according to God's blueprint, we must ensure that these truths are at the heart of our lives and our churches.