

DEVOTED TO THE WORD

Open your Bible with me to Acts 2. The well-worn idiom tells us that a picture is worth a thousand words. As I was praying for our church this week, I looked through some pictures that tell so many stories of God's grace and faithfulness over these first five years. Some of my favorites are from September 9, 2018, the day The Trails Church was born. I saw pictures of the Boswell kids on that day and marveled at how much they have grown. I found photos of our first worship service of people worshiping, serving, and hugging, and marveled at how our church has grown. I don't just mean numerically, I mean spiritually. This adventure has been filled with a supernatural sense of unity, the sharing of smiles and sorrows, following Jesus together, growing as disciples, seeing people come to know Christ. I have loved every step.

If we were to take a picture of The Trails Church this morning, it would be yet another recording of God's grace and faithfulness – beginning with the way our congregation hungers to know the Word of God. From the start we sought to build our church on the foundation of Scripture and to know God in His Word. We knew this was no autopilot setting in the life of a church, but a practice that must be continually cultivated. A snapshot of our church today would show so many prayers answered: men and women who love the Word, boys and girls learning how the Bible points to Christ from beginning to end, junior high and high school students becoming students of Scripture, small groups spending time together applying truth to their lives, Bible studies meeting to enjoy expositional conversation. I'm witnessing firsthand the Word of God do the work of God by the Spirit of God in the people of God to the glory of God. So, what I aim to do this morning and through the coming weeks is not much different than what the apostle writes in 2 Peter 1:12-13, "I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have... to stir you up by way of reminder." The things I want to remind us of spring from the pages of Scripture and are seen in the life of the first New Testament church, and I believe are true of all gospel-centered, discipleship-focused, mission-advancing churches throughout time and around the world.

The picture of the early church found in Acts 2 is worth more than a thousand words. This portrait is painted with just 113 words that portray the “inner life of the Jerusalem church.”¹ We first turned to this passage as a church plant and planted seeds found in this passage in the soil of our new congregation, praying that we might see a gospel-centered, discipleship-focused, mission-advancing culture established at The Trails. Now, as we stand just a handful of months away from moving into our first building, and having grown so much, and now arriving at this passage in our study of the Book of Acts, I felt we had to stop, till up the soil of our church a bit, plant more of these same seeds – and allow the Spirit of God to water them so that we might continue to bear fruit. My prayer is that this text that has long been a great help to local churches would now encourage and challenge us at this critical point in the life of our church. It begins with this question, “*Are you devoted to growing in the Word of God?*”

Sermon Summary

The opening eight words of Acts 2:42-47 highlight the primary characteristic of the first church in the New Testament. Every other detail about their life together followed from their devotion to the apostles’ teaching. From this starting point we will seek to understand what it means for us to be a church “Devoted to the Word.” We will show that this early church – and by extension every healthy, biblical, church – must be devoted to *1. Knowing the Word of God, 2. Loving the Word of God, and 3. Living the Word of God.*

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

¹ Patrick Schreiner, *Acts* (Brentwood, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2021), 140.

Devoted to Knowing the Word of God

The first aspect I would like to draw to your attention is how the church was *Devoted to Knowing the Word of God*. Luke records how these early disciples of Jesus “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” Men and women were quickly immersed in a life of study and discovery. They became a community of learners. John Stott commented, “One might say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day; its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed; and there were 3,000 students enrolled in the kindergarten.”² The lessons of the apostles were not comprised of a new manmade curriculum, rather they taught others what was first taught to them by Christ himself.

While we don’t find the table of contents to an early book of a systematic theology they worked through with new believers, we gather from the New Testament writings that the church was trained in the nature of salvation, the person and work of Christ, and a new way of living in the kingdom of God.³ We have one of the many summary statements of what was taught in Peter’s sermon just preceding this passage. Acts 2:24 proclaims:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

There we find the blazing center of Christian doctrine, the gospel itself: good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know full well what some of the apostles taught from their writings that became the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew demonstrates how they taught Christ from the Old Testament. The letter of 1 John unpacks lessons taught by Jesus in His earthly ministry. The instructions given in 1 and 2 Peter teach Christians certain realities to expect in the Christian life. These men were entrusted with the teachings of Jesus and

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, The Church & The World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 82.

³ Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1998), 120.

intentionally passed them on to others, who continued to pass them on, even to us today. As the gospel was preached, minds were transformed and renewed by the truth. So, before Luke tells us of any of the other characteristics that mark this amazing church, we learn that “the community was constituted on the basis of apostolic teaching.”⁴

Expositional Preaching and Listening

The first lesson we learn is that if we are to be a church devoted to the Word of God, we must study it and know it. One way we are committed to Scripture being the center of our life together is seen in the way we preach the Bible. The practice of preaching we use at The Trails is known as *expositional preaching*. Expositional preaching is where the task of the preacher is “to bring out of the text what is there and expose it.”⁵ That is exactly what we saw Peter do in his sermon: he brought out what was in a passage and helped people understand. We follow in that same tradition of saying what Scripture says, explaining what it means, and encouraging the church in how we might live in response to it. So, we preach through Scripture chapter by chapter, verse by verse, sometimes even phrase by phrase, because we want to know the Word of God and to know God in His Word. The place this begins is with our Bibles open. Early on, my practice became to begin each sermon with words, “Open your Bible with me.” Then, I announce the text we are studying that day as we hear the rustling of the leaves: pages of Scripture turning all across the room. That sound is the sound of God’s people at work. And this is what we want: to be students of the Word, disciples of Jesus, humble learners sitting at the feet of Christ himself. We want the Word of God to be the foundation of our church. Let’s pray that we might be *devoted to knowing the Word of God and knowing God in His Word*.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Rev. ed., [Repr.], The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2009), 73.

⁵ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 125.

Devoted to Loving the Word of God

The second aspect I put before you is that the church in Jerusalem was *Devoted to Loving the Word of God*. You might not see this so obviously at first until you circle your thoughts with me around the word ‘devoted.’ They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. To be devoted is “to attach oneself, to be faithful, to persist.”⁶ The disciples attached themselves, were faithful to, and persisted in the teaching of the apostles. To truly know the Word of God we must also love it. Think about the word *devoted* for a moment to get a sense of what I mean. When we would say at a eulogy that the man who has died was a “devoted husband and father” we don’t mean that he just was a husband and father on paper. He didn’t take his wife on dates because he was contractually obligated. He didn’t go to sports games and provide for his children because his name was on the birth certificate. We mean that his heart was *all in*. So, to get a sense of Luke’s description, we must see that the disciples were both convinced in their minds and devoted in their hearts. They were *all in*. These hearts that were cut to the quick during Peter’s sermon were the same hearts that were made new by the gospel, and now are those hearts growing in love for Christ.

All the knowing, and studying, and memorizing, and gazing at the Word of God does us absolutely no good if we do not grow in our love for the truth. The Scriptures sing about this kind of love. In Psalm 1:1 we hear, “Blessed is the man... whose *delight* is in the law of the Lord. In Luke 24 as Jesus teaches a couple of men walking from the Old Testament, their *hearts burned* within them as he spoke. Psalm 119:32 says, “When you enlarge *my heart*, I will run in the way of your commands.” The affections are vital in a healthy Christian life. There is an inseparable connection between knowing and loving the commands of God: the head and the heart, doctrine and devotion. Charles Spurgeon gets to the heart of this when he wrote:

Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to

⁶ Schreiner, *Acts*, 142.

recollect the poetic expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.⁷

Have you eaten into the soul of the Bible? Has Scripture done a work in your heart so that you don't even talk the same anymore? Is your very life flavored with the truth of the gospel?

Growing in Love for the Word

Brothers and sisters, let us not merely grow in knowledge, but in our love of knowing God. Some of you might say, "Well, I know I am supposed to know Scripture, but I just don't like to read." Or, "I know I am supposed to love the Bible but it just doesn't affect me when I read it." Here is what I want to do: I want to write you a prescription from an Old English Baptist called Andrew Fuller and summarize what he would say to you: *1. Embrace every opportunity to read the Bible.* Keep your Bible open and keep reading. *2. Read parts of Scripture that apply to your situation.* Ask others to recommend books of the Bible that speak to where you are in your life right now. *3. Pray as you read.*⁸ And ask that God would speak to you: that He would move in your heart and cause you to delight in His Word, that your heart would burn within you, and He might enlarge your heart so that you might love Him more and more. Pray:

Divine instructor, gracious Lord,
Be Thou forever near;
Teach me to love Thy sacred Word,
And view my Saviour there.

Devoted to Living the Word of God

The final aspect we find is the church *Devoted to Living the Word of God*. Verses 42-47 show us that the disciples were not only committed to knowing and loving the truth, but it

⁷"Mr. Spurgeon as a Literary Man," in *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from His Letters, Diaries, and Records by His Wife and Private Secretary*, vol. 4, 1878-1892 (Curtis & Jennings, 1900), p. 268.

⁸ Andrew Fuller, *Backslider* (Peterborough, Canada: H&E Publishing, 2018), 63–64.

affected their entire lives. There was a connection between the head, the heart, and the hands. The early church lived in the Word and lived out of the Word.

Living In and Out

One of the exercises I love to lead in membership class is to read through Acts 2:42-47 and describe together the characteristics we find in this first church. It is remarkable! As we widen the lens together for a moment and look at our primary text in the context of verses 42-47 what we notice are some characteristics taught throughout Scripture. We learn that the church was not just “making it up as they go along” but living out what they had been *taught*. Their culture was shaped by what they had learned. Look with me at just a few. I will list a characteristic I see, and then trace it back to a Bible verse where we see it taught. For homework with your family or with your community group this week, you might keep at this and expand on this list, but here is a brief one. The church was: *Committed* to one another, which we learn in 1 John 3:16, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” They are *united*: Philippians 2:2 says, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” They *prayed* together as taught in Romans 12:12, “Be constant in prayer.” They *praised* God together: Hebrews 13:15, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” They *bore each other’s burdens*: Galatians 6:2: Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. They *worshiped* together: Hebrews 10:25, “Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together.” They *practiced sacrificial generosity*: 1 Timothy 6:18, “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.” They were *committed to making disciples*: Matthew 28:19-20, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In each of these characteristics we can see that this early church was devoted to *living the truth*. They grew in knowing the truth, in loving the truth, and in living the truth. The church in Jerusalem is a compelling vision of any local church. But don't be mistaken – Luke is not giving us a utopian view of this where things are just hugs and high fives until Christ returns. We have to roll up our sleeves and *work* for this. We have to bow our knees and *pray for this*. Is this easy? No, it's difficult. Charles Spurgeon told us, "There are difficulties in everything, except eating pancakes."⁹ But is it worth it? Yes – because the result is a local church devoted to glorifying God in how we handle His Word.

Living In and Out of the Word

We will be discussing gospel culture in the coming weeks but let me say this for now: the things that inform our head must not only transform our hearts, but also our lives. If the truth of the gospel and the wisdom of Scripture never changes the way we live in the world as the body of Christ, then we haven't truly understood it to begin with. Test after test awaits us in the years ahead as we navigate our lives. Because there will be thoughts that we have that war against the Word of God. There will be desires in our hearts that rise up in us that fight against the authority of God's Word. There will be a pull toward apathy, and isolation – sin that is still present in us. And in those moments, we must pray for God's grace that we will walk in obedience to His Word even when our minds think otherwise, and our hearts feel otherwise, and our lives act otherwise.

Conclusion

Here we find an antique picture of the first Christian church. If you can, dream with me what a picture of our church might look like five or ten or twenty years from now. We wouldn't be able to see it all, but I pray if the Lord tarries that we will see a group of disciples who have continued to grow in our devotion to Christ and His church. That we would be

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Pictures* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1880), 143.

continually devoted to knowing, loving, and living in response to the infallible, inerrant, Word of God, ever aware that the reason we are devoted to Christ is because He was first devoted to us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce, F. F. *The Book of the Acts*. Rev. ed., [Repr.]. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Fernando, Ajith. *Acts*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1998.
- Fuller, Andrew. *Backslider*. Peterborough, Canada: H&E Publishing, 2018.
- Schreiner, Patrick. *Acts*. Brentwood, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2021.
- Spurgeon, C. H. *John Ploughman's Pictures*. London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1880.
- Stott, John. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, The Church & The World*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994.