

DEVOTED TO THE FELLOWSHIP

Open your Bible with me to Acts 2. A few years ago, I played goalkeeper for a soccer team in a fairly competitive division. Each Monday night we arrived a few minutes before the match began to warm up. We exchanged ‘hellos’ and got to work. Our team was comprised of a diverse group of different ages, ethnicities, and skills, all gathered for one common mission: to win. We really enjoyed our time together; sometimes we bled together. But when the match was over, we recapped for a minute, said goodbyes, and went home. Our sense of “community” was suspended until the next Monday night when we played again.

There are multiple layers of similarities between my Monday night soccer league and how many Christians in North Texas approach their relationship to the church. We arrive a few minutes before the service begins. We exchange hellos and worship. We really enjoy our time together, but when the service is over, we recap for a minute, say our goodbyes, and go back to our lives. Our sense of ‘community’ is suspended until the next Sunday morning when we gather again. I want to pause right here and acknowledge that this is not how I experience The Trails Church. Many of you have meaningful discipleship-oriented relationships. I thank God for that. Yet, if we are not careful, our understanding of the church will default to looking like any other team, organization, or board we belong to rather than the vision of a God-centered, Christ-exalting, life-giving, sin-fighting, faith-building, kingdom-advancing ‘community’ presented in Scripture.

Last week we began to look at this picture of the first Christian church in Acts 2. What frames this ancient family photo are four primary values the group was committed to: the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Through this

descriptive account of a church, we find a prescriptive pattern for us to follow today.¹ Our mission statement says that we exist to glorify God by making disciples through the gospel, in community, and on mission. It is the “in community” part of this phrase that we will circle our thoughts around this morning as we explore this thrilling paragraph in the book of Acts. As we do, let’s till up the soil of our church culture and plant more seeds of truth so that we might produce more gospel fruit in the years to come. As we count down the weeks to moving into a new church building, let’s be reminded that our aim has never been to build a church building – but to build up the body of Christ. So, today let’s ask this question together, “*In what ways am I devoted to biblical community?*”

Sermon Summary

Acts 2:42-47 presents a flourishing vision of biblical community. One of the primary characteristics of New Testament Christianity is fellowship with other believers. Our faith comes with a family. Today we will look at this early snapshot of the church once more and learn what it looks like to be “Devoted to the Fellowship.” There are three realities to this fellowship I want us to understand: *1. The Commitment of the Church, 2. The Community of the Church, 3. The Commission of the Church.*

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.

The Commitment of the Church

The first aspect of their devotion to the fellowship is seen in *The Commitment of the Church (2:42)*. The words ‘devoted’ and ‘committed’ are synonymous. Both mean to attach

¹ Brian J. Vickers, James M. Hamilton, and Jay Skylar, eds., *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 361.

oneself, to be faithful, and to persist. For our purposes this morning, we will summarize how these early Christians were attached to, faithful toward, and persistent in fellowship with God and those in the family of God.

Fellowship with God and One Another

Before we explore their fellowship with one another, the most striking thing we cannot overlook is their *Fellowship with God*. It is no small thing to have fellowship with God. The word translated as fellowship is the well-known Greek word *koinonia*. *Koinonia* describes a partnership, a sharedness, a harmony.² This word is used nineteen times in the New Testament to describe the unique sense of sharing that Christians have with God and with one another.³ The primary reality that we have shared in is the salvation of God, the new life we have experienced in Christ, the baptism of the Spirit. It is fellowship with God that we want to see first, and I put before you two verses. The first is 1 John 1:3 where the Apostle discloses that he is writing his letter, “so that you too may have *fellowship* with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The second passage is 2 Corinthians 13:14 where the Apostle Paul writes, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” So, as we hold both of these beautiful Scriptures in our hand we come to understand that Christians have been given the overwhelming gift of fellowship with God. How did that happen? Through Christ. We were chosen by God before the foundations of the earth were laid to know God. The Father ordained our salvation. The Son purchased our salvation. The Spirit sealed our salvation. In our salvation, we have shared in the goodness of God and been united to Christ himself. He didn’t hold anything back so that we might have fellowship with God.

² Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1002.

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

The focus here is on their *Fellowship with One Another*. Verse 42 says that they devoted themselves *to the fellowship*. Their commitment was not just to Christ, but to all those who had also repented and believed in Christ. We get a sense of this in how often they were together by the word ‘together.’ Verse 44 is careful to detail, “they were together.” They loved meeting in the temple not only on the Lord’s Day, but “day by day” to worship Jesus and night by night eating together in homes. Their lives were intertwined as a community of faith. The church was not an add-on to an already packed schedule; it was the family that they belonged to. See how they loved caring for each other. There is an overwhelming sense of mutual care that we see in this church as they made sure one another’s needs were met. They had fellowship with one another.

One of the churches I belonged to as a boy had a Fellowship Hall. (I thought it was called “Fellowship Paul” named after the apostle, but that was wrong.) The fellowship hall was a large, outdated room where people could eat together. The idea of Christians eating together is good and even biblical, but let’s not think that just because we are with another believer that we have experienced true fellowship. We may have just had cake. No, true Christian fellowship has a purpose to it. A Welsh preacher named Geoff Thomas said it like this, “Christian fellowship is aimed at a growing fellowship with God.”⁴ It is conversation about Christ. Not talking about the world, or politics, but talk of Christ and wanting to build one another up in the faith. This kind of committed, attached, faithful, persistent *koinonia* is meant to help others grow in their faith as you grow in yours.

Recommitting

Are you committed to that? A devotion to the kind of fellowship where you are helping others grow in their relationship with God? Part of what I hope happens in this season of our church is that we might *recommit* to what we have already as members of The Trails Church.

⁴ Geoff Thomas, *They Devoted Themselves To The Fellowship*, 2015, <https://geoffthomas.org/index.php/gtsermons/they-devoted-themselves-to-the-fellowship/>.

At the heart of that, I pray that we would be more committed than ever to know God and to help others know Him. Let us remain devoted to the Word of God and to one another as members of the body of Christ who seek to help each other grow in our faith. In their commitment to God and one another we see *The Commitment of the Church*.

The Community of the Church

The second aspect of their devotion to the fellowship that shines from this text is *The Community of the Church*. Before social media existed, the only way to look into someone's home and understand its culture was to be invited into it. You would sit down and share a meal with a family and get to know them. As we read this description of the church in Jerusalem it is almost like we have been invited over to share in learning who they *really are*. So, let's take a brief walk around their home to see what we find. What kind of community was birthed from their commitment to one another? Even more, what kind of culture was established? John Stott described this community as a learning church, a loving church, a worshiping church, and an evangelistic church.⁵ These descriptions help us understand the kind of community that was cultivated in Jerusalem.

Life Together

The first thing we see in their life together is *I. A Learning Church*. We saw last week that the foundation of everything else that followed began with devotion to the apostles' teaching. The teaching of the apostles is understood to have been a combination of the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus during His earthly ministry, and what the apostles authoritatively taught of Christ (what we now call the New Testament). To say it differently, they were devoted to knowing God and knowing Him in His Word. Before Luke details any other characteristics that mark this remarkable church, we see that they were a learning church.

⁵ 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), 82–87.

2. *A Loving Church*. It struck me this week with fresh understanding how woven into the fabric of the Great Commandment to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength is stitched the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Here we see a living example of what that looks like. It was love for one another that compelled them to gather and worship day by day, love that placed them around dining room tables night by night, love that led them to sell their possessions and give to people in need, love that was attractive to an onlooking world. The word love is not explicitly mentioned in this passage but it is seen in every verse. 3. *A Worshiping Church*. By calling this series “Devoted” I want us to get a sense of how devotion to God is at the center of their life together. I believe that every characteristic and activity we see in verses 42-47 could fall nicely under the category of worship. Specifically, we see acts like gathering publicly to worship Jesus, to pray, to read and preach Scripture, to sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, to baptize and share in the Lord’s Supper. The church was made to worship and here we see that they were a worshiping community. And in all of this we see 4. *An Evangelistic Church*. We will hold onto this idea and cover it under our third heading, but for now just note how the church grew and grew. How did that happen? Well, the way Christians loved one another shined like a light in the night. It was an apologetic defense. Francis Shaeffer once wrote, “Christian community is the final apologetic.”⁶ What Shaeffer is getting at is that the final proof that the gospel is real, that Christ is risen, that sin has been defeated, is the love the body of Christ has for one another. It is a supernatural way of living and loving. A lost world saw how the gospel of Jesus turned the lives of these people upside down and how it revolutionized the way they lived together in community.

Gospel Doctrine Gospel Culture

As we listen to this description of the Jerusalem church it may seem too good to be true. Some of us have never even seen this before – but I pray in time all of us would experience

⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downer’s Grove: IVP Books, 1977), 171.

this together. Don't you long for it? To be part of a learning church, a loving church, a worshiping church, an evangelistic church? Should the Lord tarry, and give us strength and length of days, doesn't this sound like something amazing to build together? This is what I want to spend the rest of my days building: a church where our Bibles are open as we navigate life together, where genuine love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is palpable, where we see all of life as a response of worship unto God, where we witness many people joining us in this experience. Where the gospel is the blazing center of everything and the life of the gospel teems outward. How can one church be all these things? We need an unwavering gospel doctrine where we know and stand on the truth, and an unapologetic gospel culture filled with grace. Do you long for that? Would you pray with me that we would know this kind of community?

The Commission of the Church

The final characteristic of their devotion is seen in the shared *Commission of the Church* (2:47). These Christians were committed to Christ and one another, built a community with a thick gospel culture, and shared a passion to invite any who would believe on Christ as Savior to join in on all the fun. We highlighted how devoted these new followers of Jesus were to growing as disciples and growing together as a church. Yet, that commitment didn't lead them to become an insular group of "us four, no more." Rather, their community spurred them onward and outward to fulfill the Great Commission.

We see evidence of how God worked through them as they proclaimed the good news of the gospel. Verse 43 says, 'awe came upon every soul.' The awe came from the signs and wonders of the apostles as evidence of the power of the gospel. Today, the evidence of the power of the gospel is seen primarily in the supernatural way the gospel transforms lives, and then sweeps through a group of people revolutionizing their life together. Our life together is meant to make people stand in awe of God! Verse 47 tells us that "the church had favor with all the people, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." This

mixture of awe and favor and salvation is all the hand of God. It was not “the church” who was adding to their number, it was the Lord.

Our Commission

The commission is clear that we are both to *be* growing disciples of Jesus, and we are summoned to go and *make* disciples of Jesus. Some churches look at this passage and focus on verse 42. They say, “See how devoted to doctrine and the church they were?” Yes! Other churches fixate on verse 47 and say, “See how devoted to the mission they were?” YES! Both are true then, and both are true now. It is important for us to see that they kept the external focus of the church in view as they also cared for internal health. They wanted to grow deeply in Christ, but not so that all the learning and fellowship would terminate on the church itself. It was always conducted with the advancement of the gospel in view. “The first Christians were not so pre-occupied with learning, sharing, and worshiping, that they forgot about witnessing.”⁴ A church’s devotion to God is evidenced in their devotion to one another, and in their devotion to the advancement of the gospel in the world. As the gospel spread, local churches were planted; and as local churches were planted, the gospel spread.

In all this talk of the church, I don’t for a moment assume that all of us are in the church. Let me explain that this room is not full of people who were good enough to get in on this, we are here by grace. But let me be clear as we think about the household of God there is no back door. There is only a front door. If you are curious about Christianity and knowing more of who Jesus is, I would encourage you to read Acts 2:1-41 where you will hear a sermon where Peter presents the life, death, resurrection of Jesus – which is the good news of the gospel. He explains how Jesus lived in the place of sinners, and died in the place of sinners, yet rose to life again on the third day. Then he invites them to deal with the resurrection. Each of us must deal with the message of Jesus. Either we reject it and spend an eternity apart from Him, or we receive it and come home into the family of God.

Conclusion

As we continue to look at this picture of the early church let us not be misled. This is not an antique photo in an old history book reminding us of an extinct species. Rather, it sets an example for us to follow as we seek to grow as a learning, loving, worshiping, evangelistic church that is wholeheartedly “Devoted.”

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