

Lesson 4

Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

Acts 2.42a

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Introduction

Acts 2.42 begins a paragraph that summarizes the ideal picture of what God intended the church to be. The newly saved Christians rejoiced in the forgiveness they had received as well as the receiving of the gift of the Spirit. Everything in these verses suggests a level of devotion to the Lord that seemed to be missed in the generations to come. These verses tell us what made up the most important aspects of the life and worship of the early church and provides a very important model for us to follow.

Their life consisted of:

- a sense of awe and heartfelt unity.
- selling their belongings and taking care of the needs of others.
- assembling daily.
- breaking bread together at home, with glad and generous hearts.
- praising God.
- having favor with all the people.

For them, Christianity was much more than a once-a-week occurrence. It enveloped every aspect of life. It *was* life!

This is seen in the use of the word devotion at the beginning of verse 42. The CSB and ESV renditions of the verse may not express it as clearly as the NASB:

They were **continually** devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.¹⁵

Devoted as used here is defined as to “persist obstinately in,”¹⁶ “to hold fast to, continue in, or persevere in.”¹⁷ The idea conveyed is a steadfast and single-minded focus to a certain course of action. Over the course of the previous college basketball season, my favorite team, the Arkansas Razorbacks, led the SEC in the percentage of free-throws made. It wasn't even close as the next team in the conference was almost 40 places behind in the rankings. When Arkansas comes to the line, you can almost always count on the

¹⁵ *New American Standard Bible*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020.

¹⁶ Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p.1515.

¹⁷ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 881.

player making the basket. How do they make it look so easy? By being *continually devoted* to their practice.

Christians must adopt the same principle as they engage in their day-to-day practice or spiritual lifestyle. Each of us should ask if our focus on these areas (teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer) is as critical to us today as they were when the church began. Are we as *devoted* as they were?

Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

The teaching given out by the Apostles' served as the basis of their fellowship together. Apostolic teaching was considered authoritative because it was given through the Holy Spirit. Subsequent generations came to depend on the written words of the Apostles' that were circulated among the churches. A strong commitment to the Apostles' teaching is essential for the spiritual growth and long-term health of every congregation.

Their teaching was considered the standard. As the gospel spread into Gentile areas, Paul told the Corinthians he had sent Timothy to them for the purpose of being a reminder of *my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church*, 1 Corinthians 4.17. The Apostles' teaching set the basis for doctrinal unity: the same thing was taught among all the churches. Anything other than the apostles' teaching was to be rejected. *We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception*, 1 John 4.6.

There is truth. There is deception. One way is right. Any other way is wrong. Erroneous ways and teachings are to be strictly avoided, Galatians 1.6-9; 2 Thessalonians 3.6. Paul instructed the Romans: *watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned*, Romans 16.17.

The Apostles' teaching serves as the God-given standard by which everything else must be measured. We are to:

- *Hold fast to it*, 2 Timothy 1.13; 1 Corinthians 11.2; 2 Thessalonians 2.15.
- *Guard it*, 2 Timothy 1.14.
- *Contend for it*, Jude 3.

Apostolic Teaching is to be Followed

The Apostles' teaching was designed to serve as a prototype, sketch, outline, example, or standard.¹⁸ Paul calls it a "pattern" in 2 Timothy 1.13. This word describes "a blow," which was used to describe the impression left by a horse's hoof, a sea, or an engraved mark. It conveyed the image of a model by which one could "maintain the sameness of a thing."¹⁹ Once we have followed the great commission and made disciples, Matthew 28.19, there is more to do. *Teaching*, Matthew 28.20, is the second half of the great

¹⁸ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 1042.

¹⁹ Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. 8, p. 125.

commission. Newly converted saints are to be instructed to *observe everything* Jesus commanded. his great thanks that the Roman Christians had *obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over*, Romans 6.17-18. The gospel message impacted the Roman Christians to the core of their being. *From the heart* describes a very personal decision one makes, by his own volition, to surrender to God. But Paul's words go farther. He is not speaking of superficial or coerced obedience, but rather something deeply felt and deeply motivated from deep inside someone.²⁰ The Christian reality is a matter of the heart.

A Heartfelt Response to Doctrine

In the Romans 6 passage quoted above, Paul said when a person becomes a Christian he or she is *handed over* or "placed under the authority of" Christian teaching ... the expression of God's will for believers. It is not that the teaching has been handed over to us ... we have been handed over to it. *The teaching* serves as the standard to follow. Biblical doctrine molds and forms those who have been handed over to it.

In this way, apostolic teachings can be likened to a mold, like a form for concrete.²¹ When concrete is poured, it sets up around the form created for it. The form holds it in place and makes it distinctive. When we do what the apostles did to form churches in the first century, we will plant the same type of churches today. Thinking doctrinally, when we follow the New Testament, we will teach the same form of teaching the apostles used. Following the apostles' teaching facilitates our spiritual stability and growth. *Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit*, Ephesians 4.14. Christians are rooted in the apostles' teachings, which is stable, secure, and unchanging.

What are some of the specific doctrines taught by the apostles?

- The inspiration and authority of Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 2.13.
- The deity and humanity of Christ, Philippians 2.6-7; Colossians 1.15-16.
- Atonement, Romans 3.25-28; 1 Peter 1.18-21.
- Justification by grace through faith, Romans 4-5.
- Baptism for the remission of sin, Acts 2.38; Colossians 2.11-14; 1 Peter 3.21.
- The organization of the church, i.e., elders, deacons, and saints, Philippians 1.1.
- The Christian lifestyle, Philippians 2.15-16a.
- Worship, *in spirit and truth*, John 4.24.
- The Lord's Supper, Matthew 26.26-30.

²⁰ Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 1-8*. Vol. 38A. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988, p. 343.

²¹ Wharton, Edward. *The Church of Christ: The Distinctive Nature of the New Testament Church*. Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1997, p. 14-15. Wharton uses the analogy of a mold, cast, or form for Christians to follow so that they can "identify the saved from the lost, and consequently give the church its distinct identity as the saved body of Christ."

- Jesus' return, 2 Peter 3.8-10; 1 Thessalonians 4.11-16.
- The resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15.
- The judgment to come, Hebrews 9.27.
- Eternal life or eternal condemnation, Matthew 25.46.

“One Faith”

In Ephesians 4.3 Paul makes a call for unity. The desire for *peace*, driven by our love for Christ and one another keeps us together. Beginning with verse 4, Paul lists several areas where Christians are to hold common conviction: *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*, Ephesians 4.4-6.

A few verses later Paul says that we can come to a knowledge and unity of *the faith*, 4.13. In this case, we are referring to faith in a noun sense, i.e., a system or thing to be identified and contrasted to other things. The term is singular. A search of the New Testament where *the faith* is used reveals that it is to be:

- *Preached*, Galatians 1.23.
- *Obedied*, Acts 6.7.
- *Continued in*, Acts 14.22.
- *Strengthened in*, Acts 16.5.
- *Contended for* together, Philippians 1.27.
- *Be grounded and steadfast in*, Colossians 1.23.
- *Established in*, Colossians 2.7.
- *Nourished by the words of*, 1 Timothy 4.6.
- *Fought for*, 1 Timothy 6.12.
- *Contended for*, Jude 3.

It can be *departed from*, 1 Timothy 4.1; *denied*, 1 Timothy 5.8; and a person can go *astray* from it, 1 Timothy 6.21.

The New Testament knows of only one faith. *The faith* is something objective and absolute. We are expected to unite around it. Where we do not agree, we must apply the principles of Ephesians 4.2-3, i.e., we practice *patience* and *humility*, and we *bear with one another in love* for the purpose of maintaining the unity God has given. A divisive spirit is foreign to New Testament Christianity.

How We Follow

With Gratitude

Paul's teaching in Colossians also emphasizes the need to become established firmly. But also, he does not neglect to mention the motivation of the heart: *So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught*,

and overflowing with gratitude, Colossians 2.6-7. The thought of what has been done on our behalf should never be too far from our minds.

This naturally follows to our possession of a spirit of gentleness, humility, and love. In 2 Timothy 1.13b, Paul told Timothy to hand off what he received in the same way he had received it: *in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*.

How one holds on to the sound words is also of vital importance.

With Humility

When we communicate these concepts, speaking with clarity, certainty, and exclusivity, we must check our attitude. We must never give off an impression that the churches of Christ are perfect, have arrived, and have no more work to do in study and practice. Our work and understanding of Biblical teaching is never finished. We must always teach and exhort with the strongest sense of humility: *For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*, Romans 12.3.

We can, in the spirit of humility and love, make the distinction between what has been divinely revealed as truth and that which is of human origin. We have not been called to compromise or negotiate with beliefs that set themselves up against what has been revealed. Instead, we are to, as Paul taught in Romans 6.17, *submit ourselves to the form of teaching to which we have been handed over*. God's revealed truth is that by which we are molded. We should unashamedly call upon our religious friends to unite with us in the pursuit of God's truth as revealed by Christ and His apostles.

In Faith

We are to hold on to it *in faith*, i.e., earnestly believing that what we have received is in accordance with God's will and revealed word. *The faith*, or the teachings we have received have power. It has changed our life, and we want it to change others.

With Love, Optimism, and Joy

As *the faith* was given to us *in love*, so we transmit it in the same way to others. As we teach, we must never be dismissive of or disregard someone's heart, implying that they are a bad person. Instead, we teach *in love*, optimism, and joy, highlighting how these teachings have the power to truly transform a person into the image of Christ.

Now, think of each of the points just mentioned: gratitude, humility, faith, love, optimism, and joy as you reread Acts 2.42-47. Does this not describe how the early church operated?

What does it mean to be devoted? How strong is yours? How can you improve from where you are today?

What sets the basis for doctrinal unity?

Is the Apostles' teaching intended to be as a mere suggestion? Or something else? Explain.

What does Paul mean when he says we have been handed over to a form of teaching?

How many faiths are there?

Why is it so important to understand *how* we follow the Apostles' teaching?