

The Church: Fundamentals

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Preacher: Ali Sewell

- [0 : 0 0] The Fellowship of the Believers 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 favour with all the people.
- And the Lord added to their number, day by day, those who were being saved. Amen. Thanks be to God for his word. Thanks very much, Joel.
- Well, let's dig into that passage then. As I said, we're looking this morning kind of at the fundamentals of the church. What is at the heart of that pattern of the church that the Bible lays down for us?
- [1 : 1 3] We might think of it a little bit like a car, I suppose. You know, what makes a car? A car has wheels, a car has an engine, a car has seats for people. And so cars come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes, and yet at the heart, they share these fundamental characteristics.
- In the same way, the Bible doesn't give us a one-size-fits-all picture of the church. It doesn't say that all churches should look just the same. It doesn't say that all churches should be this kind of certain size.
- But it does give us these fundamentals that are at the heart of every true church and to be worked out in various different ways. And we see those in these verses at the end of Acts chapter 2 here.
- And really what we're looking at in these verses, what's being described here, is the beginning of the New Testament church. So far in chapter 2, the apostle Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, gives this incredible kind of sermon that makes up the rest of the chapter.
- He speaks about Jesus' death, his resurrection. He shows that Jesus is the Lord and the Christ. He tells people to repent, that they need this forgiveness from Jesus.
- [2 : 2 3] He really kind of lays out the gospel of Jesus, which is the foundation of the church. And we see the result of that, the verse just before our passage, verse 41. And there were added that day about 3,000 souls.
- So this is this massive response, Jesus opening people's eyes to the truth of the gospel. Thousands of people added to this community of believers.
- And that's what the church is, remember. It's the collection, the community of people who believe in Jesus. One of the things I want to be really kind of careful of over these next few weeks is that I don't slip into speaking about, talking about church as just a kind of a Sunday, that you guys don't slip into hearing what I'm saying as only speaking about a Sunday.

This kind of gathering is so important as a church, but that's not what the church is. The church is the people. We don't stop being the church on Monday morning. We don't stop being the church when we're not in a building together.

The church is the people. And that's what happens. That's what we're seeing described here in Acts. These people are brought together to form this church, this new community united by the gospel of Jesus.

[3 : 35] And really this is, again, as I say, kind of the first church, the start of the New Testament church, if we were able to draw like a family tree back through every local church that's ever existed, we'd be able to kind of trace Haddington Community Church back to this first church in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, one way or the other.

And I'm sure our church would look very different, and that's okay. But what we want to find here is almost kind of like the DNA of this first church and the priorities, the fundamentals that defined this community of believers.

And that's what we're given here in these verses. We're told, verse 42, that this is what they were devoted to. And that devoted is such a strong word. These weren't things they kind of got involved in now and then if they fancied it, or these weren't kind of side interests that they had that they did along with other stuff as the church.

No, these were the non-negotiables. We're looking this morning at the very heart of the church, and so we want to share that heart. We want to have that same devotion in our church today.

So let's run through, I think, four things that are kind of highlighted, and we'll see how God used and continues to use that kind of church today. And the first thing they were devoted to, we see it right there, and this is all going to be kind of pretty plain from the passage.

[4 : 53] We see it right there, the start of verse 42, and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Number one, they were devoted to the apostles' teaching.

That's what had formed this church, the apostle Peter, preaching about Jesus, and that's what continued to be at the heart of, continued to be fundamental to this new church.

They devoted themselves, this ongoing commitment to the apostles' teaching. In verse 43, we read, many signs and wonders were being done through the apostles.

And I think the point there isn't particularly that those signs and wonders continue, but I think actually what is happening there is that that is the authentication of these apostles by God as the real deal.

God doing these miracles through them is his way of saying, look, these are my guys. These are the people to listen to. These are the people to follow as they bear witness to Jesus.

[5 : 52] And so this first church was rightly and confidently devoted to the apostles' teaching. And obviously the question for us then is, where do we find the apostles' teaching?

We find it in God's Word, the Bible. So for us, to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching is to devote ourselves to God's Word, the Bible, to devote ourselves to Scripture.

And to have the apostles' teaching as fundamental to the church is to have the Bible and its message of Jesus Christ as the very foundation of the church. That's the Bible's teaching of the gospel would be where we put our confidence.

That it would be what we trust in both to bring people to know God and also to grow us in our relationship with God. The Word of God does the work of God, as it's often been said.

And devoted to the apostles' teaching. And perhaps this all sounds pretty basic. Kind of so far, you're hopefully not overly surprised by this. You know, we talk about the centrality of the Bible as one of our values as a church.

[7 : 00] We try and keep the Bible front and center as many churches would. So I suppose let me kind of push a little bit here to help us feel the challenge of this.

Who is it in these verses who are devoted to the apostles' teaching? I mean, the apostles themselves obviously were. But actually, this passage is speaking about the people who made up that church being devoted to that teaching.

And the point, I suppose, is this. That kind of fulfilling this verse, matching this pattern, doesn't just mean that as a church we have written down somewhere the centrality of the Bible as a kind of value on a website.

It doesn't just mean that whoever's speaking, teaching from the front, takes the Bible seriously, works hard at that, tries to get that message across. Those things are all important. But actually, to kind of live out this verse, it means the people who gather, the people who make up the church being devoted to that word, being eager to hear more, eager to go home thinking about it, talking about it, putting it into practice in their lives.

And remembering here, we're not just talking again about, in these verses about a Sunday service. This verse 42 doesn't say from 1045 to 1145 they were devoted to these things. It's describing, isn't it, a way of life.

[8 : 27] The church is this community of people, sometimes scattered, sometimes gathered, but always holding on to these fundamentals that the Bible and all it teaches is something that is foundational to all of our lives, all of the time.

That is the Bible's pattern for the church. I was thinking, I suppose, of the devoted football fan. Think of the fan who travels at the length and breadth of the country to watch the games, goes to away games, goes to European games.

Everything else is made, isn't it, to fit around that priority. And then I was thinking, well, in between the games, what do these people talk about? They talk about the football, don't they? That is their life.

That's the kind of devotion that this passage is talking about, that we prioritize those opportunities that we have to gather around God's word. That's so important, whether that's a Sunday service, whether that's a kind of a small group Bible study, whether it's reading the Bible in our homes with other people, whatever it is, that we prioritize that.

But also that we take that into our day-to-day lives, into our relationships, into our homes, into our conversations. A church of people, whether gathered or scattered, devoted to God's word.

[9 : 43] That's the first thing we see here. How do we actually get to be that? We can only do that, actually, when we remember just how good news, the good news is, just how good God's word is.

There's not a lot of point in me kind of standing here telling you, you must be devoted to this. It doesn't really matter. I don't think how loud I shouted, I don't think would particularly make a huge difference. What we need to be convinced of, reminded of, is how exciting that is.

The apostles' teaching. The Bible tells us about a God who is all-powerful, and yet knows and loves each one of us. It tells us about how he rescued us through Jesus, through the cross, that he purchased the church with his own blood.

The Bible shows us the incredible value that God places on us. It tells us we're brought together as his people. It shows us in his Ten Commandments and various other places how to live as his people.

There is nothing more life-changing, nothing more exciting, nothing worth devoting our lives to more than that. So there's number one, devoted to the apostles' teaching.

[10 : 55] Number two, let's carry on again. We see in that first verse, they devoted themselves, it says, to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship. They devoted themselves to the fellowship.

This idea of togetherness, of community, was something of central importance to this church. They were devoted to the fellowship.

And what this looked like is unpacked slightly more in the later verses. The breaking of bread, it says in verses 42 and 46, that some people would say that's to do with communion.

Possibly it could be. It's certainly an important part of the life of the church. But I think certainly in verse 46, it's simply speaking there, and that was a word that was simply used to speak about sharing meals together.

It was about eating in one another's home. It was about sharing life together. And again, I hope that's something that we can do as a church. I think it's something at times we do quite well, but also certainly something not to take for granted.

[11 : 59] But, you know, having people over, eating together, dropping in to see people, making a phone call or sending a text to find out how people are getting on, that was something that, I mean, they didn't send a text, but that kind of thing was something that the whole of this church congregation was involved in with one another.

That emphasis that this wasn't a one-day-a-week church. It was a community of people united by the gospel. That's fundamental to what the church is.

And perhaps, again, that's a question we could each ask ourselves. How do I increase my interaction with my church family during the week? You know, who could I reach out to?

Who could I invite over? Who's perhaps on the outside of things slightly that I could connect with? What is just one thing I could do that would grow the togetherness of our church?

The church doesn't have to become very big before it's impossible to think that we're all going to kind of see each other all of the time every day. And yet it's very easy for us to just default to the opposite and not see anyone and just have church as this kind of one set time a week.

[13 : 11] What's the one thing we could do that would help grow the togetherness of our church? And remember here, the word is devoted. They were devoted to this.

That means not just that it's important, but I think also carries that sense that it takes work. You know, in our very individual kind of compartmentalized world, we don't just fall into meaningful community.

It takes effort. And yet again, it's something that we see here that is fundamental to the church. And as well as effort, we see here perhaps it takes sacrifice as well.

Have a look at verse 44 and 45. They were together. They had everything in common. They were selling their possessions. They were giving to those who had need. I don't think that's suggesting, you know, we all need to kind of sell everything we have and move into like a commune together or anything like that.

Although if anyone wants my children for a while, they could give that a go. But I think it's more what we're getting at here is having that attitude that asks, what do I have that I could share?

[14 : 15] Where is there a need that I could fill? And you know, that is hard, isn't it? That's sacrificial just as it was here in the church in Acts chapter 2.

They weren't saying, you know, what do I have spare? They weren't saying, okay, bearing in mind I need to do everything that I want, you know, now what's left over? I could do that for someone. And they're saying, what has God given me that I could give to help others?

What has God given us in terms of time or possessions or abilities? Who can we see that might have needed those things, be served by those things? And that might be hard.

It is hard. It might be sacrificial. It is sacrificial. And yet that's what devotion to fellowship, to togetherness looks like here in this pattern of the church.

And again, just one last word here before we move on. We'll actually come back next week, I think, to some of this stuff when we look at belonging. But it's important to mention here, what is the grounds for this fellowship?

[15 : 15] What is the grounds for this community? You know, why should the church be any different? Or why should the church be any better at this than the bowling club? And the point is this, and it's so important we get this.

The point is that in the gospel, we are united. The point is that in the gospel, we are brought together. That we are brothers and sisters in Christ. That Jesus unites us to God, but also unites us to one another.

And so actually what's going on here is we devote ourselves to fellowship. We're putting into practice, we're fleshing out what is already objectively true about us.

We're not trying to kind of manufacture some kind of community. In the gospel, we are united. And so it's fundamental for the church to live that out, to live out who we are, not just individually, but collectively.

The people of God brought together through Jesus. And by this, people will know you are my disciples, Jesus says, that you love one another. And that's what this devotion to fellowship is all about.

[16 : 24] Putting that love that reflects Jesus' love into action. That the community itself is a great witness to the great love that God has shown us in Jesus.

And again, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, as always, we're so delighted that you're here with us. We're delighted to see you. And again, I'm really keen that as we talk about the church, you don't hear that as kind of insider talk, something that you're not part of or whatever.

Like this is some kind of members-only club. But we want you to experience that genuine community that the church is striving to be, to experience that genuine love that the church is striving to show.

But more than anything, we want you to recognize that that is just a pale shadow of the incredible love that God has for you.

That invitation that's held out to you that through Jesus, you can have a relationship with God, that perfect relationship with the perfect God who will never let you down, which is the foundation and the truth behind that devotion to fellowship, to community, to one another, which is so fundamental to the church.

[17 : 37] We see that the pattern of the church who are devoted to the apostles' teaching as it reveals the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness. We see that worked out in this community.

That is, we're united to God. We're united to one another. And we want to show that in real, practical, flesh-and-blood kind of ways. And thirdly, we see that in all that, there is this continual devotion to prayer.

At the end of verse 42, they were devoted to the prayers, a devotion to prayer. You might note there how it says, the prayers. It could be that there are certain set prayers that this church prayed.

It could be it speaking about certain times of prayer that they were devoted to. Or it could just mean a devotion to prayer in general. People who know a lot more of Greek than I do kind of can go back and forward on that.

And that's fine, because it doesn't really matter, does it? The point is, the point is that prayer, the point is that coming and speaking to God, demonstrating their dependence on God, expressing that personal relationship with God as their father, bringing their joys, their sorrows, their worries to their heavenly father together, was a fundamental part of this early church.

[18 : 56] Prayer was something that this church community was devoted to. And again, to be a church following God's pattern, to be a church devoted to prayer, to be a church following God's pattern is to be a church devoted to prayer.

It doesn't just mean prayers on a Sunday service, although it's important that we pray on a Sunday, but it means a community of people where prayer, again, is right at the top of our list of priorities. I know for me personally, that's a real challenge.

And it can be so easy for that to kind of slide down. And yet, that's why it's so important, isn't it, that we keep coming back to the Bible as our pattern, to say, actually, what does the church look like?

What do God's people look like? And that commitment to prayer, we see it time and time again, right up there as a headline. Charles Spurgeon, a really famous preacher from the 19th century, whenever he was asked about the success of his preaching, the secret of his ministry, would reply with the answer, my people pray for me.

My people pray for me, he would say. That church devoted to prayer was the power, that was the boiler room, he used to call it, behind the incredible blessing and growth that they experienced.

[20 : 13] An American contemporary of Spurgeon called D.L. Moody said, every revival can be traced to a kneeling figure. He was saying that every revival, every great turning of people to God, that begins with people in prayer.

And again, that's what we see here in Acts chapter 2, this church devoted to prayer, it is blessed as it continues to grow and grow. And we see that here at the end of chapter 2, we see that throughout the book of Acts, that God continues to do his work, as his people continue to depend upon him in prayer.

And I suppose, again, the challenge for us, are we devoted to prayer? Are we as devoted as we should be? I think perhaps often we're not. And I wish I had an easy answer to that.

I'm sure if I did, I would be being kind of invited to churches across the country to give the secret to generating devotion to prayer or increasing attendance at prayer meetings or whatever it would be.

I don't think there is a kind of a secret. There isn't a switch we can flick. There isn't a single thing that we can just say, and that'll be us devoted to prayer. And yet I do know that it's here.

[21 : 22] It's in black and white. It's in the Bible's description of a church, that devotion to prayer as a mark of God's people and a characteristic of the church.

Again, in light of the great love that God has shown us, in light of the fact that we don't pray to try and reach up to God, but we pray to a God who has come down to us.

We pray to a God who we can call our heavenly father. And it says we are devoted to him that we become devoted to prayer as we communicate and depend on him, not just individually, but as a church, as a congregation as well.

And so those are the three kind of key areas of devotion that we see in verse 42. And I think verse 42 really is the headline, which we've seen those following verses kind of unpack a little bit.

But one other thing I'd want to highlight, down in verse 46 and into verse 47, the final verse, it says, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with the people.

[22 : 26] And I just find those kind of verses, they're so encouraging, that there's just this genuineness, isn't there, about the first church. You can't come away from this kind of reading thinking that they all found this a little bit of a chore or that this was just a kind of a tick list of stuff they wanted to get out of the way with.

No, that they're all in, that they're fully committed. It affects their lives and people see that, recognize that. This was a joyful and a grateful church community.

And where did that come from? What led to this joyful devotion? How is it so real? I think it was because, as it says there in verse 47, that they recognize it was all to this end of praising God.

That they were praising God in all they were doing. And that all of this was in response to that great mercy that he had first shown them. And that all that they were doing, they recognized, they understood, was for God's glory.

And again, it's something so important for us to keep front and center as a church, to keep front and center as we make our way through this series over the next few weeks, that all of this is for God's praise.

[23 : 37] You know, as a church, why do we want to align ourselves with the Bible's pattern for the church? Well, because that's how God is most praised. As we think about belonging, about growth, about leadership, about mission, why are they important?

Well, ultimately, it's so that God is praised, that God gets the glory he deserves. Some of the stuff that we've spoken about this morning is hard.

And it's a challenge to be devoted to these things. It requires sacrifice and commitment. It's not always just the most kind of comfortable or smoothest road. And yet it's worth it.

And we can do it gratefully and joyfully because God is worth it. Because he deserves the glory. And the church is a community brought together for his glory.

And so let's strive then with God's help on that foundation of the gospel to be that church which is devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to fellowship, devoted to prayer, and doing all of that thankfully, joyfully for God's praise.

[24 : 44] And as we close, we see that that is the kind of church that God uses to build his kingdom, isn't it? And that final sentence of chapter 2, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Every day new people were being brought into this church. Every day God was bringing new people to see what he'd done for them through Jesus. And we want to be a church which people are being added to.

And we want to be a church where actually we don't know everyone and we're not just kind of comfortable with the same people who we see week by week. We want to be a church where people are being brought in, where people are being saved, where God is building his kingdom.

And all of us have a part to play in that, connecting with our community, sharing our faith, listening to others. But ultimately, above all that, we need God to be at work. And we trust God to be at work as we strive to be a church according to this pattern that he's given us.

Living as his people for his praise. Let's pray together.