

In The Temple Courts
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
June 6, 2021- AM Service
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Acts 2:42-47

Acts 2 is a passage that the church comes back to again and again. Especially in times of crisis, or when we feel like we are losing our way as a community, we go back to Acts 2 because it seems to describe the church as it was meant to be. It seems to describe the glory days of the church. The church before grouchy meetings and minority reports. That's also why Acts 2 comes up in just about every church plant. When a church planter imagines the new community he or she is going to form they say, "Man, it's going to be like Acts 2. It'll be pure and beautiful, man!" Everyone senses that these verses show the church at its best. Everyone seems to agree that these verses show the heart of the church.

And that's something we're all looking for right now. Before the pandemic, the North American church was already asking itself hard questions. Now after the pandemic those questions are even sharper. How will we be changed? Will people come back? Will 15 months of absence from in-person worship cause harm? As we begin again, where should we focus our time and energy?

As we face these questions, Acts 2 is a pretty good place to go. In these verses we see the Holy Spirit forming the church through 5 basic practices. These practices don't just show up in Acts 2, the church continues to follow them throughout the book of Acts. Let's call them the 5 devotions of the church. That title comes from verse 42. Verse 42 tells us 4 of the 5 basic practices, and Luke says that they were devoted to these practices. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and prayer." The Greek word there is *proskartereo* which means to move towards something with strong intention. These 5 practices were not hobbies. They were not things that people got around to when they had the time. They were at the center of their passion and imagination.

Let's look at each of these 5 devotions, and let's hold them up against our own church habits and our own individual habits. As a community, as individuals, are these 5 practices things at the center of our passions and imaginations? Are we devoted to them?

The first devotion is right up front in verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Right from the beginning, the early church devoted itself to growing in knowledge. Right from the beginning the early church was doing theology. The early church was not anti-intellectual, right from the beginning the early church pursued knowledge of the things of God. The Holy Spirit makes you intellectually curious, and a healthy church wants to grow in its knowledge of God's things.

Notice what was at the top of the educational curriculum. The people devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The people disciplined themselves, submitted themselves to a tradition, to a received body of knowledge. That tradition came from Jesus. When Jesus was with his disciples, he taught them many things. Now that Jesus has ascended into heaven, the disciples pass what they have learned from Jesus onto the new believers. It's a kind of early catechism class—the Jesus catechism.

If we look at the rest of Acts, we have a pretty good idea about the content of the apostles' teaching. If you look at the sermons preached by Paul and Peter and Stephen, they teach a fairly consistent set of truths. Jesus was the Son of God sent by the Father, the whole Old

Testament points to him, that he offers salvation through his death and resurrection, that he's coming again to judge the living and the dead. Read the book of Acts and that's what the apostles teach. Can you hear the Apostles' Creed in there? The Creed had not been formulated yet, but many elements of the Creed show up in that early teaching. And the people devoted themselves to it.

Here is what the people didn't do. The people didn't think they could educate themselves. They didn't think that a man alone with his Bible could figure things out for himself. Individual Bible study is powerful. It's essential. But it's not sufficient. There is a modern tendency for people to say, well the way I read my Bible, this is who my God is and who are you to tell me any different. That individualistic way of approaching Scripture comes more from the enlightenment than the New Testament. It's more Thomas Paine than Simon Peter.

The church is a community of people deeply curious about the things of God. Does that curiosity live in this community? Could you name a Psalm that points to Jesus? Do you know why Genesis 12:1-4 is really important? Could you explain to a 13-year-old why it makes a difference to believe in God as a Trinitarian being? And if you can't answer these questions, are you at least curious about them?

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. They also devoted themselves to fellowship. The Greek word here is *Koinonia*. That's a word you might know. *Koinonia* is a specific kind of fellowship. It's not casual fellowship, it's disciplined fellowship. When the new Testament talks about *koinonia*, they aren't talking about pot luck supper or Klondike bars on the lawn after church, as great as those things are. No, *koinonia* was something far more gritty and intentional. I think most of you know that in monastic communities, they develop a rule for communal life. They write out a whole set of practices that govern how they will live together. They don't just let community happen. They pursue it. They devote themselves to it. That's *koinonia*.

We get a sense of what was gritty and intentional about their fellowship right in this passage. They devoted time to the community. Luke tells us that they met together in the temple courts every single day, and they ate at one another's homes with glad and cheerful hearts. They devoted money to the community. They held everything in common and gave to each other as each had need. Jesus said where your treasure there your heart is also—the people's heart and their treasure were with their community. This community was the center of their lives. Their fellowship had discipline and intention.

Of all the 5 family practices, this is the one that concerns me the most. We have room to grow in all of these areas, but fellowship is the practice where we have the most work to do. When I grew up the church was the center of my family's life. It was our primary community and that was pretty typical of other church members. Nowadays, the church is much more peripheral to people's lives. The church has become a kind of Spiritual snack bar. You come when you feel a need, you come when you are hungry, but the rest of the time we are there to meet your needs as needed. We cater of course. If you have a wedding or a funeral we're available to help you with that too. This is not the vision of the New Testament. This is not *koinonia*.

We have work to do. Even when they want it, many people struggle to find connection here. Some of us feel connected, but here's a diagnostic question for you connected folk: Are your connections with people you know through work, or people who went to school with you, or people in your own family? Are your connections LaGrave connections, or are they prior connections? Don't get me wrong, these prior connections are good, but for people who come to

church without these prior connections, they can be experienced as a barrier. The only way we can make sure these prior connections don't become a wall is if those of us who are on the inside are intentional about inviting people in and establishing relationships. It's not enough to say, 'Of course our Bible study is open to everyone!' you need to move toward the outsider and intentionally invite them to join. That's what devotion to koinonia looks like.

They also devote themselves to the breaking of the bread. Most interpreters say this is a reference to the Lord's Supper, and so it shows that the community devoted itself to the practice of regular worship. Regular worship is a big part of what the church does in Acts, and regular worship is a big part of the life of a healthy church. I'm not going to spend much time on this devotion, because we have devoted quite a lot of energy to worship over the years here at LaGrave, and most of us LOVE worshipping here, singing our songs in this beautiful place. I will say that we as leaders worry that the pandemic has changed even this habit of community. Has the 15-month pandemic caused some of us to fall out of the habit of regular worship? Or will we come back more devoted than ever?

The fourth devotion is prayer. The early church devoted themselves to prayer. The church of Acts is a praying church. You see it throughout. The prayer is of two types. You have the routine prayer. It's pretty clear that the disciples continued to follow the Jewish hours of prayer. Right after this passage, you have the story of John and Peter healing the lame man at the temple. Why were they at the temple? They had come at the time of prayer-three in the afternoon. Jews prayed three times a day-morning prayers, afternoon prayers and evening prayers. Peter and John were there for the afternoon prayers and given what our passage says-that they devoted themselves to prayer and met regularly in the temple, it's pretty clear that the early church was praying the Jewish hours of prayer. The prayers that the Jews prayed at those prayer times were not extemporaneous prayers; they were written out and recited. Christians clearly continued this sort of ritual prayer in the early church. The *Didache* is a second century Christian document that gave instructions about worship and formation. The *Didache* told Christians to pray the Lord's prayer three times a day-just like Jewish prayer.

Acts also describes other kinds of prayer. You have spontaneous prayer that bursts forth out of emotion and out of the spontaneous movement of the Spirit. When Peter and John are released from prison in chapter 4, the believers spontaneously pray together, and as they pray the Holy Spirit shakes the house. In Chapter 12, the whole church meets to pray for Peter to be released from prison, the prayer is personal and passionate and effective. In Acts 20, you have this marvelous scene where Paul and the Ephesian elders, in tears and falling to their knees on the beach, they pray and embrace one another as Paul prepares to leave for Jerusalem where he will face great danger. When the church devoted itself to prayer, sometimes that prayer is ritual and rote, and sometimes that prayer was passionate, personal and extemporaneous. The Spirit uses both kinds of prayers. Both kinds of prayers are important for the life of the church.

This speaks to a larger pattern for the Spirit in Acts. As the Spirit leads the church sometimes it does it through the surprising and spontaneous things. Sometimes the Spirit bursts forth with something unexpected and wonderful. Pentecost is like that. It's a miraculous outburst. The vision Peter has on the rooftop, a surprising and bold move of the Spirit. When the Paul sees a vision calling him to go to Macedonia, same thing. But the Spirit also leads the church through things that are planned, routine and institutional. The church has a problem with widows and so they call a council meeting and come up with the idea of deacons. The church is wondering what to do about the influx of Gentile believers and so they hold a huge council meeting in Jerusalem. It results in a memo. The church appoints elders, it commissions missionaries, it schedules

offerings. Put these two things together and you can see that life in the Spirit-led church is a mixture of the planned and the spontaneous. It's not one or the other. It's both the rush of feeling and the discipline of committed habit.

The last devotion is Outreach. Unlike the other 4 devotions, this one is not mentioned in verse 42, but it's definitely mentioned in the rest of the verses, and it's definitely central to the church's purpose in the rest of Acts. In Acts, the worship and the fellowship is never just for the members, it's in service of the mission Jesus gives them at the beginning of the book. "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." "You will go out and make disciples of all nations." So in our passage everyone in the community speaks well of the church and the Lord adds daily to their number. Read the book of Acts and the other New Testament books and it's clear that the word, the charity, and the care of the church community was not limited to members of the group, the word, the charity, and the care went out to the glory of God. In a healthy church community, the word, the charity, and the care is not limited to the church family, it must go out into the world, for the glory of God.

Those are the five devotions of the church. Those are the five habits and practices that the Spirit put at the center of the vibrant church of Acts 2, and as we emerge into our new, post-pandemic reality, those are the habits and practices that the Holy Spirit is forming in us. May I say that these five devotions remind me of our sermon series of five years ago. Five years ago, in the fall of 2016, the staff came up with a list of five basic practices that characterize healthy Christians and healthy churches. We even had a fancy acronym to help you remember those practices. Do you remember the acronym? It was POWER. A little corny I admit. But it works. P Prayer. O Outreach. W worship. E education. R relationship. It's exactly the same practices we see the Spirit forming at the heart the church in Acts 2. If you remember that acronym, good for you. It's a useful way of measuring Spiritual health. If you don't remember, that's okay too. Because the POWER for the church isn't in your ability to remember, it's not in my ability to declare, the power is in the love of God, in the sacrifice of Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. In these uncertain times, we work to be faithful, we do our best to grow in these five devotions, but we take our refuge in Him.

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