

“Church Relationships”

21 February 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come, People Of The Risen King

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Sermon:

The early Church were devoted people. If we say we are devoted to someone or something, we are saying that we love that person or that thing (devotion in caring for sick relatives, devotion to a hobby or sport or music, the devotion of romantic love, the devotion of principle and ideal). It is also a religious word - profound dedication; we often speak of “devotions”.

Last week, we saw that God poured out on the Apostles and the other believers the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of the prophecy given to Joel: *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”* They, the Church, were a Spirit-filled people. Therefore, when we study the early Church and its characteristics, we study the characteristics of a Holy Spirit-filled life. It is the life of every believer in every generation and from every nation (all people); it is the experience of the Church.

The early church was by every parameter a remarkable movement (v.41). Three thousand people who believed the message of the gospel were added to the group of 120; in other words, they became 25 times bigger in a single day - incredible church growth. This Spirit-filled collection of people were devoted to one another, loved what they were doing and were committed to it; they embraced it wholeheartedly. There was spontaneous voluntary commitment, no need for coercion. They had passion and enthusiasm.

I want us to see that this devotion comes from understanding the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. They understood how devoted God had been to them in Jesus, forgiving their sins and welcoming them into His family, and they, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, devoted themselves to Him and His people. The fruit of the Spirit is love - they were in love with God and they assembled with others who loved God. The most prominent characteristic of these Spirit-filled people was love, and as we explore this passage, we will see what they were devoted to and the consequences that resulted in, for them and others. Those first four words - *“they devoted themselves to”* - are significant. They signal the reality of hearts filled with the Holy Spirit.

So, before we start to look at this remarkable church, we perhaps need to take a moment to examine our hearts and confess how cold our hearts are towards God, or how controlled and how non-committal we often are. Such an honest recognition of our sin and need for love moves us to pray for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. Now, let’s explore the early Church and what they were devoted to.

I. Devoted to the Apostles’ teaching

This is not “teaching” in the sense of knowledge alone, but of knowledge about their Saviour Jesus. Can you picture the church members saying, “Tell us about Jesus. What was He

like? What did He do? What did He mean by . . . ? What does He want us to do in this situation?" Their devotion moved them to want to know as much as possible about Jesus, about God and all that He said about them and life. It is really theology, teaching about God!

Note that having the Holy Spirit didn't mean they already knew everything they needed to know or that they taught themselves. No, they collectively devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching. The Apostles were with Jesus and heard His teaching; they learned from Him and they passed that on to the Church. Their teaching is left to us in the Word of God, the New Testament of our Bibles. A Spirit-filled life will be one that loves the Bible, because it teaches us about Jesus. The Holy Spirit fills us with a love for Jesus and that is expressed in devotion to the teaching of the Bible. We are therefore an Apostolic church when we listen, submit and follow the teaching of the New Testament.

Jesus was called Teacher (John 13:13). The Apostles then took His teaching and passed it on; they recognised others whom God had gifted to teach (Ephesians 4:11-12) and they were appointed elders (1 Timothy 3:2). Some elders were paid and set aside to teach (1 Timothy 5:17). The overall point and organisation of the Church is that teaching of the Scripture is important and we share the devotion of the early church when we are similarly devoted to the Scriptures.

Note too how the teaching is given to the Church: (*they*, plural) the assembly, the people of God. We receive the word of God in community with others. (It means that virtual church is not the way forward, and we should continue to lament this being our only means of receiving instruction.) We are relational; we are accountable to each other. How I respond affects others positively in obedience and negatively in disobedience. God's desire is to build a house, an army, a family, a community, and that is done in devotion to the Apostles' teaching. This is the desire of your elders, that all of us will engage, discuss, and receive the Word of God in community. 3D Groups and our Lenten Devotionals are a simple attempt to enable and engage us in reflection on God's Word through Lent and come to pray together on Sunday.

As in any relationship, there will be differences of opinion and struggles with what the apostles teach. Devotion to the Apostles' teaching means that we submit, we wrestle, we talk things through with each other and ultimately accept what God says. Our culture, our upbringing, our past, will influence us. There will be struggles, but our collective devotion to the Apostles' teaching means we stay connected, honestly engage, seek clarity and explanation, and in all but the essential gospel issues we agree to disagree. As a Presbyterian Church, we hold certain lines on important issues, for example church life, leadership, and baptism, founded on and agreeable to the Word of God. Having determined these, we devote ourselves to what we believe the Apostles say, what Jesus said; this is the source of our unity. This is never passive or unthinking; rather, it requires that we test it against the Word of God ourselves. One of the best little books on practical devotion to the apostles' teaching (as listening to sermons) is Christopher Ash's "*Listen up!*" I recommend it and have a few copies if anyone would want a copy.

II. Devoted to each other

Their devotion was to the fellowship, the people of the Church. The Greek word used is *koinonia*, which has two significant ideas attached to it, as seen within the early Church. At heart, *koinonia* means 'common', in the sense of together and sharing. What holds the fellowship together is their common faith, their understanding of God, and their agreement

on the teaching of the Apostles. The foundation of fellowship is our understanding of God, our faith in Him. *Koinonia*, a common faith. As noted in our last point, our common faith is based on a common understanding of the Apostles' teaching, the Word of God.

They shared a common meal, called the breaking of bread. There is debate about whether Luke is referring to a family type meal with others (v.46), where at the start of the meal bread is broken in thanks to God, or a more formal communion meal. The first meal (at-home scenario) is what we call hospitality. Inviting each other into our lives and homes and sharing over a meal the lives we lead in Jesus. We need this, particularly when the culture around us is hostile to our faith. The idea behind 3D groups and the Lenten devotionals is to encourage fellowship, talking and sharing with each other regarding our faith, and God-willing we will soon be able to meet in person. Barbara had a significant birthday yesterday and it was great to see members of the church involved in celebrating that event via Zoom. Let us practice hospitality in the name of the Lord.

Another incredibly challenging aspect of *koinonia* is noted in v.44-45: the commonality, or sharing, of their possessions and wealth. The word "*koinonikos*" means generosity. The believers were generous; they held lightly to their possessions; they knew the needs of each other and were willing to share. This only happens when we are open and honest with each other, humble and desiring to be generous. The early Church had examples of common ownership. They had observed Jesus and His attitude to possessions. In their culture, the Essenes had a common ownership policy, and some are definitely called to this kind of living, such as the rich young ruler. There have been many attempts to move the Church in this direction (e.g. the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation), and in our day, people like Shane Claiborne have written about and urged a radical, countercultural approach to ownership. The reason the Reformers didn't make this a rule of the Church was because the description of the early Church's practice in Acts notes that the giving of possessions and wealth was voluntary. Ownership was still acceptable and giving occurred as needs arose, not as a general policy. However, it was, as we shall see in Ch. 6, an important element of church life.

God has already challenged us on this when Kevin Hargaden spoke on this passage on the 10th March 2019. His point was that the Holy Spirit had possession of the early Church, whereas our possessions have a hold on us today; this disordered relationship is wrong. He highlighted the huge inequality in the world. He showed how this way of living dovetails with Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and he asked us, 'What are we working for? Status? Security?' He asserted how that was literally killing us and made an argument that this factor alone, the sharing of possessions, was the huge missing piece in today's church. We are too like the world, we are possessed by our possessions, and that was the reason we were seeing so few come to faith. Sharing, generous fellowship! This is love, and we love because God first loved us. They were devoted to each other.

(For further reading on this topic: Rosaria Butterfield's *Openness Unhindered* or perhaps Shane Claiborne's *The Irresistible Revolution*.)

III. Devoted to God

The Church is a worshipping community. We meet together to praise God. It is vital that we do not lose sight of that in the reality of the busyness and activities of life. Every one of these activities - listening to teaching, praying, communion formal and informal - must be God-centred. He is the source and reason behind everything. Their relation to God was a

daily experience: it was within their homes and in public, it was formal and informal, it was joyful, and it was reverent.

If you have been taking time each night to work through the Lenten devotionals (going to the website is a great way to do that), you've been reading and meditating on Psalm 84. I was struck afresh by v.2: *"My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."* The psalmist's desire for God, his need for relationship, exposed the coldness and dullness of my heart; it gently led me to repent and ask for more of God. *"Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you"* (v.4).

These folks were busy with Church, but they were delighted to spend time in God's presence with joy and thanks for all He had done for them in His grace and mercy. *"To be in Your presence, to sit at Your feet, where Your love surrounds us, and makes us complete: this is our desire, O Lord, this is our desire."* They were devoted to God in worship.

IV. Devoted to others

We need to be careful not to think the Church found it easy to relate to those around them. Chapters 3-5 will show us that the Jewish authorities struggled with the new movement, its leaders and members. We must also remember that all the Church does happens in the context of the surrounding cultures and religions, in their case Judaism. We must also be aware that even though we have spoken about all that they did together, they were not hunkered down behind closed doors. There were ongoing miraculous signs and wonders, authenticating healings, casting out of demons, people disciplined for defying the Holy Spirit. It was an unusual time of supernatural activity, they were being talked about and people were filled with awe (2 Corinthians 12:12 - the things that mark an apostle).

The selling of their possessions and giving to others no doubt extended outside of their circle. They were generous to others and that would have been talked about. They were visible at the temple every day! If you think about this, it can seem unusual. The place of priests and sacrifice, the relationship with their former religion was complicated and in the following chapters we will see something of this. In fact, understanding and working through the relationship with Judaism would be an important area of discussion and thought as time unfolded. They went to the temple to pray at the three designated times for prayer - morning, noon, and night - every day (3:1). They most likely taught there - evangelistic, apologetic, warning and pleading with their fellow Jews to be saved.

Their attitude to life? They had glad and sincere hearts. They were joyful, honest, open, generous people and people were attracted to them. They were an outward-looking, engaging people who spoke about and lived for Jesus. Outreach was part of who they were; they were evangelistic - people of good news, driven by the Holy Spirit's missionary zeal.

Though all this is true, we must note v.47: *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* God is the one who saves. He is the one we ask to bring conviction and understanding of His word and knowledge of the gospel. He alone raises the spiritually dead. He alone forgives and makes us new creations. Therefore, it is imperative that we ask Him to do this. Prayerful dependence on God is not optional; it is essential.

Those added to the Church are those who accept the message (v.41). They are being saved - that is, saved, but in a process of being saved. Salvation is a progressive experience. You belong when you are saved and not before. There are different opinions about how best to integrate people within the Church. Some believe that people should participate before

belonging and we can debate that; but someone does not truly belong to the Church, the family of God, until they are saved.

This happened daily. People came to saving faith as the Church lived out its life before and among the people they worked with, lived with, and played with. Evangelism is an ongoing activity. It is not holding a mission annually or every four years. The fruit of mission is daily interaction with those who, as yet, do not know God and therefore have not been saved by God. Yet what rich reward and excitement there is when God adds to our number! The blessing of seeing people saved and becoming members is great and, of course, is something that lasts for eternity.

Our emphasis in ARPC must be the same as the early church. We need the Holy Spirit and we must be devoted to the apostles teaching, to each other, to God and to others we live, work and play with, and with those who live, work and play around the church building in Dublin 2. In a fractured and individualistic world, let's strive to be a radical, countercultural, community who are in *koinonia*. Let us ask God to fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit to enable us to be devoted people with joyful and honest hearts. Surely that is a great vision to devote your life to.

Praise: IPH 147 Lord Of The Church, We Pray For Our Renewing

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: IPH 485 Knowing You (All I Once Held Dear)

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

What personal stories of devotion remind you of what's most important in your life?

Possessed by the Holy Spirit or possessed by our possessions? Discuss.

Choose one area of church life mentioned in the passage/sermon. How can you pursue increased devotion in that area this week in a practical way?

(Check out the lenten devotionals for week 1 and week 2 for some suggestions.)