

The Ministry of the Church

Acts 2:40-42

There is no set rule for how many verses to cover in any particular sermon. I have known men who most often preach through long texts, large numbers of verses, usually whole chapters or at least whole paragraphs. Others seem always to select very short texts, perhaps even a single verse. Sometimes, several sermons can be preached from just one verse. The point is, there is no precise rule that fits every situation.

If you pay attention to my pattern, there is, of course, a variation. I will preach on a whole chapter at times, especially when that whole chapter is a self-contained, historical narrative. Many Old Testament chapters lend themselves to that practice, such that each individual verse might not receive as much focus or equal attention since the important message is in the narrative as a whole. I will also preach, at times, on just a single verse or maybe a couple of verses, when the significance of the text is in the details. For me, it is the text itself that defines its length. It is the message and exposition of the text that determines, for me, how many verses to include in any one sermon.

It is also the significance of the event or the topic presented that determines the length of the text. Some events are quite important, foundational even, to the whole of our faith. So it is appropriate to devote more time and attention to them. For example, the resurrection of Jesus. Or a particularly practical text such as a text focused upon family relationships or a text about electing elders.

In that context of important events, this morning will be my fifth sermon based on Peter's great Pentecostal sermon, the fifth week we have looked at a portion of that sermon. And that

doesn't include the previous sermon on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost or the next couple sermons on the result and response to that sermon. So that emphasis, for weeks now, is intentional, and my texts each week have been deliberately short because of the significance of this great day in the life and history of the New Testament church. There is just a great deal here for us to recognize and seek to understand, and so this sermon by Peter is of such profound significance that in my own ministry, we will have at least six sermons devoted a single sermon preached by Peter.

Clearly, that doesn't mean that I have so much insight and wisdom that I can expound upon one sermon by Peter with six of my own. Rather, it means that this one sermon by the apostle is so profound, so world-changing and epoch-defining, that it will take us many weeks just to gain the fullness of the benefit which God would have for us. So today, we will study just three verses, and I should even note that I could have separated verse 42 further, and preached a full sermon on each of those four things mentioned instead of simply covering them as four items in the third point of this sermon, as I have chosen to do.

So, let's look at these few verses that describe for us what Luke the historian observed from Peter's preaching. Remember the occasion. After Jesus ascended into heaven, all the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem, and God poured out the Holy Spirit such that the revelation of the gospel could go to all the nations of the world, in all their own languages. That was the gift of tongues, the prophetic, revelational gift of being able to preach the gospel in what was, for you, an unknown language—the language of those who were gathered together. And so the message preached as that the gospel was for all the nations.

v.21 “And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.”

Peter preached Jesus, both God and man, who, in his humanity was raised from the dead, bringing an end to the power of death itself. And the conclusion to his sermon was very straightforward.

v.36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Jesus is Lord! And when the people responded so appropriately, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”, Peter answered,

v.38 “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the [forgiveness] of sins.”

Repent, turn from your sins. And profess your faith outwardly, demonstrating your faith outwardly with the sign of baptism. Our text today adds some commentary by Luke, as we read,

v.40 “And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.”

And so, front and center in the work of the church, is,

I. THE MINISTRY OF SALVATION.

The preaching of salvation. As we read in verse 40, “he testified and exhorted.” Or, in the ESV, “he bore witness and continued to exhort.” And don’t skip over the beginning of that verse, “with many other words.” With many additional words. Luke isn’t recording everything that Peter said when he preached. So now, rather than quoting Peter as he did in the previous verses, he summarizes what Peter said.

And he defines what preaching is all about. It is testifying, bearing witness. And the word in the Greek is very intense, very focused and definitive. There is a clearly implied sense of

exhortation, of solemnity, of earnestness. He wasn’t just communicating knowledge. He was pressing upon his hearers an extremely important, life-changing message. And he exhorted. He continued to exhort. Exhortation has reference to emphasis seeking a response. A good word to define it might be to implore! Or to beseech. To admonish, even to beg. It is a method and manner of speaking that calls for a response. To use the word today in the best possible way, it means to preach!

Preaching isn’t a lecture. It doesn’t consist merely of the transfer of information. Peter “testified and exhorted them.” As Paul would describe the same thing in,

2 Tim. 4:2 “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

And what did Peter preach? What was so important as to be the subject of this great sermon at Pentecost? Luke tells us that it is nothing less than,

A. The clarion call of the gospel.

v.40 “Be saved from this perverse generation.”

Gospel preaching must focus upon that very exhortation. Be saved, be saved from this crooked, perverse, wicked evil generation. And this is how Jesus put it,

John 5:34 “Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved.”

Even more personally,

John 10:9 “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more

abundantly.”

And Paul would preach the same to the Philippian jailer,
Acts 16:31 “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

That is what must sound forth clearly when God’s word is preached. The clarion call, I put it. That which is announced with the blast of a trumpet for all to hear, declared with fervency and earnestness for all to hear. And to receive! That’s what Luke emphasizes in this great chapter of the book of Acts,

B. The necessity of receiving the word.

Verse 41 identifies those who “gladly received his word.” The oldest manuscripts don’t include the adjective “gladly,” but it was likely added as a note or a commentary to later manuscripts, and it gives the right sense of the word for “receiving.” They received the word, with the obvious implication of the fullest sense of that word. It was begrudging or hesitating. It was, rather, enthusiastic, earnest, sincere. In the language of Psalm 119, the word would be hidden in their heart! They received it! It is the same idea as Paul’s praise to the people of Thessalonica, when he wrote of them,

1 Thes. 2:13 “...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

So that’s the ministry of salvation, the gospel as it is proclaimed in the church, and received. And when that happens, that means that those who receive the gospel are saved. And with the profession of their faith, they are publicly acknowledged as members of the household of God, which is now the church. And that is the function and purpose of their baptism. So we read

that wonderfully encouraging verse,

v.41 “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

Then we come to verse 42, and before we look at the four aspects of the ordinary work of the church, I want to note what Luke describes as,

II. STEADFAST DEVOTION.

v.42 “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

The ESV translates it “they devoted themselves...” In the NASB, we read, “They were continually devoting themselves.” So that gives you a good sense of the meaning of those words. The root idea of the Greek word is to be steadfast or to persevere. Steadfast devotion, as I put it. Such devotion clearly refers to,

A. Faithfulness in the church.

The people were faithful. That’s why some English translations use the word “continually.” As I read in the NKJV, “They continued steadfastly.” They kept at it. And the Greek word also refers to the object of their devotion, they were devoted with reference to the whole work of the church. They were devoted to the ministry of the church, beginning with the apostles’ teaching and fellowship.

Such faithfulness is to be a hallmark of Christian living and Christian life. This faithfulness began immediately, from the very beginning of the church on this day of Pentecost, Peter emphasizes the practice and the habit of faithfulness. We will see next time what that looked like as we study in more detail,

v.44 “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and

divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

Let me stress just how significant this faithfulness was. It was not simply a habit or a duty, it was simply going through the motions, for the idea of faithfulness overrides that merely superficial or outward habit. The exhortation to such faithfulness comes to us in the plain language of Hebrews 10, where we are given great encouragement in the confidence and boldness with which we can come before the Lord in his presence when we worship.

Heb. 10:22 “...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

That’s the faithfulness to which we are called as God’s people, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” And the writer of Hebrews notes what is certainly still true today, “as is the manner of some.” So here is the example which we are exhorted to follow. Here is the steadfast devotion that is to describe and define God’s people in his church. Here is the demonstration of faithfulness, that we “continue steadfastly” in assembling together, that we continually devote ourselves the ministry of the church, to gathering together.

There are some among us, today as every week, who are

unable to gather together, typically because of sickness or physical infirmity. I’m always encouraged when I hear many of those people comment on how helpful it is to be able to watch the livestream, so great is their desire to be here that when they are actually unable to do so, they still attend to the preaching of the word and observe the worship service itself. There are also those who do neglect and forsake assembling together, and I pray that this marvelous example in Acts 2 will be appropriately challenging to those whose steadfast devotion might be lacking, whose faithfulness might be faulty in a very evident and obvious way. So please “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some.”

And will also emphasize that devotion in terms of this whole day which is scheduled for us as a church body, specifically the opportunity to gather again to worship God in the afternoon, following lunch. There is a reason that the Session schedules two worship services for us as a church body, two opportunities to assemble together for worship. The most direct reason is simply that two is better than one. Historically, traditionally, faithful churches would meet together morning and evening, framing the whole of the sabbath day in terms of that priority of worship. We have chose to meet in the afternoon rather than the evening since so many of you travel a significant distance, and as we study this example of God’s people in Acts 2 “were continually devoting themselves” to assembling together, please let that example be both a challenge and an encouragement to you to exercise such faithfulness with reference to both the morning and afternoon worship each Lord’s day. I would urge you to “continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

With this encouragement as well, that it not be a merely

outward habit, but a commitment of personal intensity. I believe this rich Greek word also refers to a significant measure of,

B. Intensity in the church.

By intensity, I mean heart-felt devotion and faithfulness. When we read in verse 42 that “they continued steadfastly...”, the Greek word means they were earnest. They attended assiduously, ardently, enthusiastically, purposefully, eagerly. It wasn’t just a duty to fulfill, but it was the delight of their heart. So they did it with devotion of the heart, steadfast devotion not only outwardly, but also the devotion of the deepest commitment of their soul. They gave themselves to it, they were steadfastly attentive and continued in their faithfulness with the fullness of diligence and effort. This single Greek word includes all of that, and that is what the saving power of the Holy Spirit accomplished in the lives of God’s people on this great day of Pentecost.

May such intensity and devotion be yours, that you also might continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

Let’s look somewhat briefly at what each of those refers to. Four items which we could rightly describe very simply as,

III. THE ORDINARY WORK OF THE CHURCH.

The ordinary activities of the church. The ordinary means of grace, as we identify those activities by which God communicates his grace to us. The ordinary things that the church should be doing.

We can do other things together, this is not an exhaustive list of all that we might do together as a church. But it certainly is a list of those primary, fundamental things which we must do, and which must be the emphasis of our ministry. Beginning with,

A. The ministry of teaching.

But not just any teaching, not just any subject matter, but specifically “the apostles’ doctrine.” Sometimes it is translated “the apostles’ teaching.” The reference is the content of what it was that the apostles’ taught. So whether you use the English word “doctrine” or “teaching,” the meaning is the same—it is the body of content which was established by the apostles as the foundation of the church. It is the objective content of what the apostles taught, what the Bible teaches. Thus Paul says this of those who would later become elders in the church, describing them as men...

Titus 1:9 “...holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

Similarly, Paul exhorts Timothy,

2 Tim. 4:2 “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Sound doctrine, teaching. We are to be steadfastly devoted to faithful, biblical teaching. We as a church as to be committed to that body of teaching, that doctrine, which is revealed to us by the apostles and prophets in the word of God.

But the ordinary work of the church is not only teaching, not only doctrine. Not only that which we learn with our minds, but also the experience of doing that together. In other words, fellowship.

B. The communion of fellowship.

Now actually, those words are synonyms. They mean the same thing, but I put them together so that you might more fully understand. The communion of fellowship. Communion means sharing our lives together. That's fellowship. It means we live together. Again, as I noted already, we'll look at that more closely when we study,

v.44 "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

That's the ordinary work of the church, the ordinary ministry of the church. It happens only when we live together, assemble ourselves together "with gladness and simplicity of heart." The opportunity to do that is, of course, the great benefit of our schedule on Sundays when we have the occasion to each a meal together. We even call that a fellowship meal, which, again, simply means that we share it together. We do it together. We participate together! We join together as an association. We are a body, aptly illustrated by the human body in which each member performs and accomplishes his own individual task. That's the ordinary work of the church.

The ministry of teaching, the communion of fellowship, and then,

C. The blessing of the sacraments.

I'm quite convinced that the reference to "the breaking of bread" in verse 42 is to the Lord's supper, rather than to a more broad reference to eating an ordinary meal. Those two things are

not absolutely separated, however, as our spiritual fellowship and communion in the sacrament is represented by a rather ordinary symbol of food and of drink, the bread and the cup. But the phrase "breaking of bread" had already become, I believe, a reference to the Lord's Supper. For example, after Jesus' resurrection, we read this account,

Luke 24:30 "Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. 32 And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" 33 So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, "The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" 35 And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of bread."

We also read of the institution of that sacrament with Jesus' words in,

Luke 22:19 "And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 20 Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

Thus the sacrament is clearly in view when Paul writes,

1 Cor. 11:23 "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in

remembrance of Me.”

So it is that the ordinary work of the church would focus upon the blessing of the sacraments, which is why we observe the Lord’s supper every week, half the time in the morning worship service and half the time in the afternoon. So as you would be devoted to the practice of celebrating the Lord’s supper together, as a means of God’s grace for the blessing and benefit of his people, do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together when we do so to worship both morning and afternoon.

And then, the fourth element of the ordinary work of the church,

D. The exercise of prayer.

The commitment to pray, and to pray as a body, together.

Surely there is great virtue and devotion in private and personal prayer, to which we are all called. But there is also this pentecostal pattern of gathering together for “the prayers.” And the word there is not a verb, to pray, but a noun. It is the object and activity to which we must be committed, just as are teaching, fellowship and the sacraments. We are to continue steadfastly in activity of prayers, praying together as the body of Christ.

It was in that ordinary work that the early church experienced the blessing of God in rich measure.

v.47 “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

May it be so for us, in every way. May these words in these few verses be a well-deserved description of the ministry of this church, as we seek to be faithful to that which God has revealed to us in his word.