

Devoted Believers

Acts 2:42-47

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We're living in a time when it's tough to be the church. What does it mean to be the church in this world, at this time? What do we do as the church in this world, at this time?

Think about some of the things that challenge us. Much of the world is polarized and divided. That leads to mistreating others, hatred, and violence. Some of the main issues in our culture converged in the massacre in Orlando last week. That one event included religious struggles and conflicts between cultures, the so-called culture war over sexuality, and the violence that happens all too often in our society. Reactions to it showed political divisions in our country. The whole area of national politics and what it's becoming is another challenge we face as the church in this time and place.

As the church, we sometimes make life hard for ourselves. There've been all kinds of scandals in many branches of the church, at nearly every level. The future is uncertain for our own denomination, the United Methodist Church, as it's possibly on the verge of dividing. A lot of people simply give up on "organized religion" and refuse to identify with any particular faith group. The number of people who claim no religious preference keeps increasing.

And yet, what a great time this is to be the church! We could be on the verge of another Pentecost. God loves to display power in weakness. When things seem hopeless and bleak, that's a great opportunity for God to do something amazing. In our time and place, maybe we're closer to what it was like for the church in the first few centuries.

As we continue to look at what the early church was and experienced and did, we find hope and insight for how we can be the church now. We see some things we can do in the power of God's Spirit. We've seen the power of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled those first followers of Jesus. We've heard the message of Pentecost, proclaiming Jesus. Now we see that Pentecost was not a flash-in-the-pan experience. Pentecost was sustained

in the early church's practices. The Holy Spirit rests on bodies (Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* 13-14). The Spirit of God is very interested in the material, physical world. The Holy Spirit's work is embodied in the church and the church's practices. Pentecost is sustained in believers who are devoted to God and devoted to living as God's people.

The 3000 or so people who responded to Peter's message by repenting and being baptized didn't drift away. They entered into a new kind of life. They became committed to do certain things that allowed the Holy Spirit to sustain them and grow them as the church. This passage is the first of several summaries of the church's life and growth Luke gives throughout Acts. He probably intended these summaries to be examples for Theophilus and his church. They're still examples for us of our life as the church.

The believers devoted themselves. They were committed. They held onto these practices. They persevered.

They devoted themselves to *the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers*. They were all together in this devotion. And God was at work among them doing signs and wonders and making the church grow.

One image of the church in the New Testament is "the body of Christ" (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 2:14-18; 4:12-16; Colossians 1:18). Luke doesn't use that phrase in Acts, but the idea of a healthy body, functioning and growing, helps us understand what he does say about the church.

Dr. Paul Brand was an orthopedic surgeon and missionary. He specialized in surgery on hands and he worked with many leprosy patients in India and in Louisiana. Dr. Brand partnered with Philip Yancey to write some books that apply lessons from human biology to life in the Spirit, life as the church. As we look at the four practices of the church listed here, we'll borrow insights from Brand and Yancey.

The people who believed in Jesus *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching*. Teaching and learning were vital for sustaining Pentecost, for embodying the work of the Holy Spirit. The apostles' teaching included the good news about Jesus that they proclaimed. It also included inspired

reflection on how to live the gospel. We've already seen some summaries of this preaching and teaching in the "seven pillars of Christian faith and life" (1:1-3) and in Peter's sermon (2:14-41). We remember that Christian faith is more than feelings and relationships. It has content. There are some things we are to believe.

Brand and Yancey compare the function of doctrine, basic beliefs, in the church to the function of bones in the human body (*Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* 67-110). Bones provide structure for the body and allow us to stand up and to move. Doctrine or basic Christian beliefs give structure to the church and to our lives. They allow us to move and grow and function as God intends.

An illustration like this is never perfect. The apostolic teaching, doctrine, basic beliefs also nourish us and help us grow. Sound, healthy doctrine is also like medicine for our souls. It also guides our thinking and gives us wisdom and direction. Are we devoted to knowing the Lord and learning about him and being taught by him?

The believers also *devoted themselves to the fellowship*. Like the Durant Lions are "one team, one family," the early church realized that they were one family in the Lord. The word translated fellowship here can also mean community, communion, and sharing. We're not believers in the Lord all by ourselves. Now, a hermit can be saved if they put their faith in Jesus. But, normally in the NT, when people are saved they become part of the community, the body of Christ, the church.

People in advertising talk about the "million dollar word," that word or phrase that makes the difference in selling a product. For example, think of the instructions on a shampoo bottle that tell us to lather and rinse. Someone thought to add the word "repeat" and shampoo use dramatically increased. That was the million-dollar word. Here in Acts, the million-dollar word is "together" (Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit* 33). At the beginning of the chapter, they were all together in one place (v. 1). At the end of the chapter, they are all together and have everything in common. They meet together for worship and prayer in the temple and they eat together in their homes (vv. 44, 46). They

praised God together. The kind of life they experienced together attracted more people.

In church we get together with other believers. Our identity is together as the body of Christ. Together in the church we encourage each other and we hold each other accountable. We face the challenges of life in this world together. We can't handle it on our own. Ben Franklin is reported to have said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "We must indeed all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately" (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Benjamin_Franklin#Attributed, accessed 6/16/16).

Again comparing the church to the human body, think about the trillions of cells that make up our body. Each one carries our DNA and they all work together. But there are different kinds of cells that have different functions. A skin cell and a nerve cell are different, but they're both necessary (see Brand and Yancey 15-62). They have different functions but they need each other and support each other.

One sign of the unity created by the Holy Spirit in the church was that the believers provided for each other. If one was in need, the others helped supply that need. They sold property and possessions in order to give to brothers and sisters who were in need. They obviously didn't sell their homes, though, because they continued to meet together in their homes. So apparently they opened their homes to each other.

The lack of selfishness in their fellowship was a result of God's generosity. We're called to give up selfish clinging to possessions and to make them available to God so he can direct our giving. In light of Jesus' sacrifice we give sacrificially, generously, and joyously.

I came across a story about a church that had been praying for one of their members. John hadn't attended in years, though his wife Pat was there faithfully. They prayed and looked for ways to communicate their commitment to John and his family.

Then one Sunday morning, Pat told them through tears that John had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. Surgery was planned and the doctors were confident he would make a full recovery. The bad news was that John would be out of work for months. He drove a log truck and was paid by the

mile. There was no way he could recover while spending ten hours a day in a bumpy eighteen-wheeler. But if he didn't drive, he and Pat didn't get a paycheck.

The congregation sprang into action immediately. In an emergency business meeting that afternoon, one of the lay leaders, a trucker himself, asked, "How much can everyone give?" Some pledged \$50 or \$100 a month. One family committed to pay for utilities and another for groceries. That church took responsibility for one of its families. All bills were paid on time; there was a new supply of groceries on the front steps every weekend; some of the men made sure the lawn was mowed and other maintenance around the house was taken care of.

After all that, John rejoined the congregation. Months after his surgery, he testified that the church's tireless care of his family convinced him that the church didn't simply want another warm body in the seats or an extra dollar in the offering. But they were committed to sharing their lives and resources with him unconditionally (Brandon O'Brien, www.preachingtoday.com, "Holding All Things in Common"; accessed 6/15/2016).

The believers *devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread*. A little later it says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (v. 46). There's some debate over whether this is talking about "normal" meals or the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion/Eucharist. Probably the early church didn't make as big a distinction as we do between regular meals and the Sacrament. They were sharing life together, so sharing meals together came naturally. And remembering all the times they ate with Jesus, and especially that last meal when he told them to "remember me whenever you do this," probably came naturally as well.

In many cultures, eating together is a sign of friendship, commitment, and covenant. Even for us, sharing a meal is a sign of unity—and it helps create unity.

Garrison Keillor is about to retire from his radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*. He's been at it for more than forty years. I've enjoyed many of his stories. One of my favorites is about when he was young, growing up in the Sanctified Brethren church. They were a very conservative bunch who

did a lot of good things, but they also often divided over points of doctrine. One dispute had to do with the question of hospitality toward those in error, whether kindness shown to one who holds false doctrine implicates you in his wrongdoing. Garrison's Uncle Al had family and friends on both sides of the debate and he tried to get them together. The dispute was really between two men, Brother Wm. Miller and Brother Jas. Johnson, who had dragged others into it, and so, one fine August day, Uncle Al tried to make peace between those two. He arranged for them to meet at his and Aunt Flo's one Sunday, a few Millerites and a few Johnsonians, not to discuss the hospitality-to-error doctrine but simply to enjoy a dinner of Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken.

They trooped in, sat at the table, and Al invited them to pray silently to give thanks for the meal. Well, the prayer dragged on and on. Neither side wanted to be the first to quit. Finally, Flo just went into the kitchen, got the food and set it on the table. Johnson and Miller started weeping. Garrison concludes,

It's true what they say, that smell is the key that unlocks our deepest memories, and with their eyes closed, the smell of fried chicken and gravy made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and a mother's voice from on high said, "You two stop it and get in here and have your dinners. Now. I mean it." The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind, and the stony hearts of the two giants melted; they raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly peace was made over that glorious chicken. (*Leaving Home*, 155-157)

Luke tells us about one more practice that embodies the Holy Spirit's work. The believers *devoted themselves to the prayers*. "*The prayers*" probably means the daily times of prayer in the temple. In the next chapter, we see Peter and John going to the temple at a certain time of prayer. But this early group of Jesus followers who were filled with the Holy Spirit also prayed and worshiped and praised God together in many places at various times.

So prayer is one of the key practices that helps us be open to God, to talk with God, to receive guidance and strength and provision from God. We talk a lot about prayer. But are we devoted to prayer? Do we persist in it? I hope you're still praying the Lord's Prayer at noon each day. I hope you have other set times for prayer in your day. I hope you pray regularly for this church, for each other, for the staff (we need it!).

Glenn McDonald is a pastor who planted a church in Indianapolis. He had people in the church who were determined to pray for him and the church. A small group of these praying people began to arrive on the church property before anyone else on Sunday mornings. They walked all over the parking lot, hiked along the perimeter of the property, stepped into each classroom, and quietly moved among the chairs of the worship area. All the while they were praying for the opening of the hearts and minds of all who would be there that day. There was a real change. The congregation became more profoundly aware of God's presence. The thermostat of spiritual warmth had been adjusted upward (John and McDonald 70).

I was reading a blog by David Watson this week. He recommended a book called *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. The idea is that, with the internet and social media, we tend to multitask almost all the time. That doesn't hurt our "shallow work"—answering emails and signing forms. But it distracts from and takes energy away from "deep work"—our creative and meaningful contributions. I happened to read this blog when I was checking email while working on this sermon.

What if we get addicted to distraction? It becomes a compulsion and intrudes into the space where our best work could happen. "It is crucial, then, that we intentionally cultivate skills that will enable deep work to occur. We must develop habits that will build time for careful and focused thought into our weekly routine." The quality of our work will improve and we'll generally be happier (<https://davidfwatson.me/2016/06/13/are-you-addicted-to-distraction/>).

How about being a deep church? Devotion to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer will help us grow deep. And it will attract others who want to know the Lord.