

Devoted to the Fellowship

Acts 2:42

(Series: Re-Imagining Church; Message 8)

***42**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

Message

We're in Acts trying to reimagine a church in the 21st century in light of the church from the first century. Last month we were focused on the Holy Spirit - preparing for him by waiting and praying, welcoming his presence to take up residence in our life, allowing him to empower us and complete us.

This month we are focused on the early Church's Rule of Life - their practices that kept them close to God. Last Sunday, we talked about disciples being *devoted* (sold out, totally committed) *to the apostle's teaching* - that is, to the Gospel, to God's Word, to being a people *devoted* to the Text. This morning we're going to be looking at being *devoted* (sold out, totally committed) to the fellowship, to the community, or to what the Greek language coined as *koinonia*.

(Scripture Reading) Acts 2:42 is the first century church's *rule of life* - "*They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*"

Some years ago, Robert Bella wrote a book entitled, "Habits of the Heart." He underscored that instead of embracing genuine community, our culture has increasingly embraced pseudo-community (i.e. fake or false community) or what he called, "lifestyle enclaves."

He noted people are primarily devoted (committed) to pursuing their preferred lifestyle - overwhelmingly one that provides them the essentials of leisure and consumption. They want the right house, the right car, the right furniture and to go on the right kind of vacation; they want a life that provides comfort, enjoyment, and security.

Since it isn't as much fun to pursue this alone, they look for others who are socially, ethnically, culturally, and economically similar to themselves to pursue the lifestyle with them so they "enclave" together.

"Enclaves" (from the French, "*to enclose or seal off*") have no vision or benefits for those who live outside the enclave. Outsiders are irrelevant to insiders; ironically, many of the names of these "enclaves" include the word "community." But Bella says, "*They are not communities, just exclusive bands of individuals pursuing their own agendas.*" People spend their entire lifetime saving up their money so they can live in one.

The classic example of a “lifestyle enclave” is a gated community. (Let me say, I’m not opposed to gated communities; they often provide an additional layer of security) (I say that specifically, because if anyone of you live in a gated community, I don't want to get in trouble).

But “gated communities” have “gatekeepers.” They hire security personnel. They have strict rules designed to **keep people out.**

I tried to get in one once. I pulled up to this little booth. They didn't look like they were too happy to see me. Two guards came out to interrogate me: Name, address, SS#, IQ, Credit score, purpose and length of visit. I think I had to leave one of my sons as collateral.

That was Sandy Pines - on a morning I was scheduled to preach in their chapel. (Just kidding - don’t text me!). (But I was a Cru Headquarters in Orlando, a couple years ago having passed security earlier in the day. Steve Douglass had invited a few prayer leaders from around the country to consult on the *GO2020* evangelism initiative and I had an hour of free time. I decided to go for walk on their beautifully manicured grounds. It didn’t take long before two guards in two separate golf carts arrived to check my credentials and interrogate me: Did I belong there?)

The tendency of such communities is to forget those **outside** of their enclave.

Sadly, this often happens in other religious communities as well... I read it on the side of a building: “Keep Out. Beware of dog. Trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.” And underneath - “Sisters of Mercy”

God did not call his church to be a “lifestyle enclave” or a “gated community.” After Pentecost, he didn’t invite his disciples to continue hanging out in the Upper Room for their comfort and protection but reminded them it was “GO” time. Christ’s community was called to “go” (to be incarnational and inviting) and “bless” the (whole) world by proclaiming the good news of salvation to all people.

DEVOTED

“Devoted” is one of Luke’s favorite words. He used it in **Acts 1:14** where the disciples committed to meet together for prayer. He uses it in **2:26** - “*Day by day they devoted themselves to meeting in the temple.*” He uses it here in **Acts 2:42** - “*They devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.*”

Devotion is a “*binding promise or pledge.*” They were a people of promise; they had bound themselves to God and each other. By contrast, our culture today is low commitment - “If it meets my needs, I’ll stay. If you do it my way, I’ll keep coming. If you don’t, I’ll move on” (We apply that to our marriages, our families, our job, and our church...).

Devotion is an **enduring** stick-with-it-ness - even when it’s not easy, comfortable, or pleasing. Now, with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, our stickiness increases; we’re able to complete our promises

Devotion is an essential and powerful tool in **building a lasting **community**.**

Have you ever woken up on a Sunday morning and instead of jumping out of bed to get ready for worship, you thought seriously about simply rolling over and going back to sleep? Let's have a show of hands? Has the thought ever, even fleetingly, occurred to you?

I'm sure you're heard the story of the mother who woke her son up on a Sunday morning and told him he had to get ready for church. He protested: "I'm not going and I'll tell you why. They don't like me and I don't like them!" Mom said, "You are going to go and I'll tell you why...you're their pastor!"

It's always easier to stay where it is comfortable. There is always something else to do... But we got up anyway; we encountered God in worship, (or) we sensed God was speaking to us in the message, (or) we received a word of encouragement when we were discouraged, and we thought, "What if I'd missed that?" Spiritual growth takes effort and devotion. There can be no community without some suffering, sacrifice, and selflessness.

Everyone is devoted to **something**; no one can be devoted to **everything**; so we need to choose what and we you are going to devote our life to.

Luke, Jesus, the Spirit and Scripture suggest devoting your life to being increasingly Christ-like and helping create a Biblically functioning welcoming community. Christ's community is built on our devotion; that is, on his promise to us and our promise to God and to others (again, like marriage, family...)

Are you devoted to this fellowship? If not, what is holding you back? It has never been easy - especially when it didn't/doesn't go the way we want it to; but if you're waiting for it to get easy, you'll wait forever. It is your decision!

TOGETHER

Luke reminds us in Acts 4:32 - "*All the believers were one in heart and mind.*" By **Acts 4**, there are thousands of people in this new community and yet, Luke says, they were "*of one mind and soul*" (Often hard to say that of my own family).

Life in this community is to be marked by a deep commitment to **unity**, oneness, **togetherness**, and harmony... Life in this community is to be marked by a refusal to tolerate unresolved **conflict**, constant **complaining**, personal attacks and/or resentment and **bitterness**. Life in this community is to be marked by selflessness, **grace**, love, and **forgiveness**.

By contrast, in lifestyle enclaves, if I want to complain about someone outside the enclave, I can - in fact, it's encouraged. I can be angry at the guy next door; hostile to the person in the next office. Relationships can be easily discarded; relationships are designed to be replaced. So I'm good!

In the church, unity is a precious gift. God takes it very seriously. Its importance is actually impossible to overstate. God is so **jealous** about unity because it is his "**dream**" for his community (cf. John 17) and in fact, for the entire human race.

Human beings were created in God's image; so it's possible for us to know oneness as God within Trinity knows oneness. Oneness is God's essence; and it's part of what it means to be created in his image. But we messed up, sinned; so oneness is an ongoing challenge. Sadly, the Church is now known for often fighting like spoiled kids!

God is so jealous about unity because he sent his **Son to die** for us so the debt sin left could be paid and we could be declared right with God and get right with each other. Paul talks about Christ coming to destroy the "*dividing wall of hostility*" - the wall between Jew and Gentile - so his family could be one (**Eph. 2:14**)

God is jealous about the unity of his church because it was purchased at an incredible price - the blood of His only Son. So, literally, when people violate the unity of the church they are thumbing their nose at the death of Jesus and are rebuilding walls Jesus and his Spirit broken down - that's serious!

In the Scripture, in the *Apostle's Teaching*, Paul pleads for unity...

Ephesians 4:18 - "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*"

I Corinthians 1:10 - "*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you may agree with one another, so that there may be no divisions among you, and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*"

2 Corinthians 13:11 - "*Finally brothers and sisters, aim for perfection, listen to my appeal. Be of one mind. Live in peace.*"

When and where little or no attention is given to the *Apostle's teaching*, and to constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up with their minds shaped by whatever social pressures are most persuasive and prevalent, with Jesus relegated to some pale influence or lost memory. When people ignore the (apostle's) teaching, and then the common life, the unity of the Christian family, they become isolated, find it difficult to sustain their faith, and lose their impact on the world.

The oneness of the body of Christ requires our devotion to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship. It doesn't happen by accident. It requires hard work. It requires full devotion. It doesn't take very many to rip a church apart in bitterness, hostility, and disunity.

Is there unresolved **conflict** between you and anyone else in the body? Do you ever **speak negatively** about someone who is your brother or sister in Christ? Are you involved in a relationship that has grown **cold** and **hostile**? Do you lack **empathy**? Are you verbally critical? Do you freely offer **forgiveness**?

The tragic irony is that resentment/hostility will not only wound your relationship and injure the body of Christ, it will ultimately kill you. Disunity is a cancer that left unattended will destroy everything in its path. Do you have work to do? Pray, ask for help, make the call, write the note; do whatever you need to do to build unity in Christ's community. God is very serious about the togetherness of his church.

INTERDEPENDENT

The irony of “gated communities” is they are merely collections of gated homes. People covet privacy and anonymity; visitors and guests are an intrusion in their lives; relationships are superficial and often considered more effort than they’re worth.

Likewise, many people covet an individualized brand of Christianity that makes few demands yet meets their needs; churches are, for them, places to go on Sunday to worship, to be “entertained,” and then to leave rather than communities welcoming the lost, embracing the “outsider,” and making fully devoted disciples.

But from the beginning, God designed his “Church” to be a **devoted fellowship**...not an organization we join, pay dues, vote, and sit back and count our blessings...but a community to **belong** to, put down roots, develop relationships, **worship** God side by side, **care** for others and be **cared** for (**Eph. 2:19 LB** - “*You are members of God’s very own family...you belong in God’s household with every other believer*”).

- 1) By God’s design, when we believe we belong
- 2) By God’s design, no believer can function effectively in isolation
- 3) By God’s design, we need each other’s care, encouragement, prayers, and spiritual gifts

A fully devoted fellowship is a family where we **encourage** each other to become better followers of Jesus.

A fully devoted fellowship is a shelter where we come as we are - **imperfect**, needy, **hurting**, vulnerable, lost - and we are welcomed, loved, **embraced**, encouraged, built up in the faith, and held accountable.

We are built up when we’re together - in worship, in prayer, in small groups, in children, student and adult ministries, in serving together. We need each other!

So what can we do to make this a **reality** (in our lives and this church)?

First - do some **loving**: “*We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must love his brother also.*” (**1 John 4:19-21**)

Second, do some **forgiving** and forgetting. Jesus said to Peter who’d already forgiven his brother seven times and felt that was enough, “*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven* (i.e., without limit) (**Matthew 18:22**). (Put another way - don’t sweat the small stuff)

Third, do some **waiting** before you jump to conclusions; that is, **always think** the **best** of others - especially your brothers and sisters in Jesus. Jesus said, “*Do not judge by appearance...*” (**John 7:24**). James says we should be “*quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger*” (**James 1:9**)

Fourth, do some **joining**. Recent surveys in the CRC indicate less than 40% of adult members are involved in a meaningful relationship at church to help them grow in their faith. That means more than 60% are trying to go it alone. That is a prescription for disaster (In the average evangelical church in the United States, the number involved in a meaningful relationship at church is actually 20% higher. Why is that?)

What are you doing to nurture your **soul** and to develop intentional spiritual relationships to assist the spiritual growth of others?

Fifth, and finally, while the first four challenges are for those already inside the community, the last one is focused on those outside. Do we really care about the destiny of your neighbor, of the lost? Do we care enough to do something about it?

Spend some time figuring out how to enhance the lives of those **outside** this faith community so they too can be blessed and become a **part** of Christ's community. Then grab a few community members and do it. They will come...when Christ's community functions biblically (**Acts 2:47** - "*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*")

Every church has gatekeepers (That's us). By the sharing of our **faith** (or not), our **openness** (or not), our **grace** (or lack of it), and our **hospitality** (or not), we declare the gates of this church **open** (or not).

It starts within the body; we get to practice it right here because here we're marked by grace. Right? If we can't do it *in here*, it will never happen *out there*.

Imagine with me for just a moment a gated community where the gates are up and open (24 hours a day, 365 days a year) and the guards are there... But instead of huddling in their guardhouses and interrogating would-be guests, they're out in the streets flagging people down and inviting them to come in. They're inviting people to a banquet that's been prepared - bountiful and free (fully paid for). That's the definition and mission of Church!

Jesus says that's what his community is designed to be. In fact, Jesus said something about the church battering down the gates. It is actually not coincidental that it is actually hell that has gates; the church is to batter those gates down and claim those who are locked inside.

It's the gates of darkness, hatred, fear and sin - that are to be no match for the Church.

Together, in the power of the Spirit, we can build his **community** (city) on a **hill**, a city devoted to God and devoted to each other that the **whole world** can see. And nothing will prevail against it!

By Pastor Doug Kamstra on October 11, 2020
Covenant CRC
7171 Willard Ave SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49548
(616) 455-5120 | info@covenant-crc.org