

They Devoted Themselves: The Church Gathered

If someone asked you, “What is a church?” what would you say? Pastor Jeff Vanderstelt says, “Actually, ‘what’ is the church is the wrong question because the Bible uses the word church to describe a group of people. So we really should be asking, ‘who,’ not ‘what.’”¹

This week in our study of our Faith Affirmations, welcome to #7 which carries the title, “The Church.” It says in part:

We believe in the universal Church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members. We believe in the local Church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work and fellowship...

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It appears 114 times in the New Testament. It’s a compound word from the word *ek*, meaning “out of,” and the word *kaleo*, which means “to call.” Literally then, the Church is “a called-out group.” But called out from what and called out to what? That’s the perfect question because the answer shows us the two-pronged purpose of the Church, which is to be a Gathered People and a Scattered People. This week we’ll study the Church gathered and next week the Church scattered. To fulfill its God-given mission, both of these purposes must always be alive and activated.

Our Acts 2 passage today begins with these words...

And they devoted themselves ... (Acts 2:42a)

What does it mean to be devoted to something or someone? The Greek word means more than an emotion. It means to be “continually steadfast.” In our Scripture today we see ways that the early Church was demonstrating its devotion to Christ. Let’s see what those were and in doing so, let’s measure our own level of devotion. First, we see...

I. The Heart of the Devoted Church

Throughout the nearly 2,000-year history of the Church, its purpose has been debated by well-meaning and devoted believers. One group has insisted that its purpose is to teach and to worship. They focus on Jesus’ own words in Matt. 28:19-20

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” ...

Another wing of devoted believers has insisted that while that is one assignment of the church, a higher value must be placed on evangelism. If there’s no evangelism, there won’t be anyone to teach! They also cite Matt. 28:19 but like Mark’s version better, which says ...

... “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved ...” (Mark 16:15-16)

So, which is it? Does the Church exist to evangelize or to teach and worship? Well, both sides are half right and half wrong because making disciples must include both evangelism and worship, and edification. Dr. Gene Getz of Dallas Seminary coined the phrases, “The Church gathered and the Church scattered” to describe these two wings of the church plane. Both must be present in any church with a truly devoted heart for it to “take off.” This week, we’re focusing on the Church gathered.

So then, what are the necessary elements of the Church gathered? Acts 2 clearly describes three elements. Those three elements are the apostle's teaching, fellowship, and worship. It's not mentioned first, but let's examine worship first, because teaching and fellowship spin off of worship.

In Acts 2 verse 46 it says that they were daily "*attending the temple together.*" Why were they going to the Jewish temple? Because they were mostly Jewish Christians and the only place they knew to go for worship was the temple. Remember, no one but the priests and Levites could actually go into the temple building. But common Jews would worship out in the courtyard, which was huge. So, these early Christians were in the temple courtyard, often more than once a week, to worship.

And what did their worship look like? Other passages describe the elements of first century worship, such as 1 Cor. 14 and Acts 4 and while the order of the elements isn't prescribed, most of us would recognize them. For example, Scripture was read, hymns were sung, the people prayed, and someone preached or taught how the Scripture could be applied to their daily lives. But the power of worship isn't really in the ordering of the pieces, is it? The power of worship is in what happens in your heart.

Lamar Boschman writes: "When I worship, I would rather my heart be without words than my words be without heart."

Eugene Peterson writes: "Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God – it whets our appetite."

Saint Augustine prayed: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

A.W. Tozer writes: "Sometimes I go to God and say, 'God, if You never answer another prayer while I live on this earth, I will still worship you as long as I live and in the ages to come for what You have done already.' God's already put me so far in His debt that if I were to live one million millenniums I couldn't pay Him for what He's done for me."

Richard Foster writes: "Today God is calling his Church back to worship... It is as if God is saying, 'I want the hearts of my people back!' And if we long to go where God is going and do what God is doing, we will move into deeper, more authentic worship."

John S. Mills writes: "Humanity was born of God's desire for worship. Worship is the doorway to God's love and provision. When we become worshipful people, the floodgates open and God enters our lives."

In the Bible some of the most incredible things happened while people were worshipping God...

- While the disciples were worshipping, the Holy Spirit came with tongues of fire.
- While the Church was worshipping God and praying for Peter, he was released from jail by an angel.
- While the Church was worshipping in Antioch, the Spirit directed them to set apart Barnabas and Paul to go on their first missionary journey to the Gentiles.
- While Daniel the prophet was worshipping and confessing his sin and the sin of his people, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and revealed how the world would end.
- While the apostle John was worshipping God on the Lord's Day, Jesus appeared to him and revealed everything that we now call the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Do you see what this is? Genuine worship is the trigger for God's amazing acts! Dr.

Robert Webber writes:

“... worship stands at the center of the church’s life and mission. It’s the summit toward which the church moves and the source from which all of its ministries flow. It’s the most important action the church is about. Worship informs the church’s teaching, gives shape to its evangelistic mission ... and compels the church toward social action. Worship is the context in which the true fellowship of Christ’s body is realized and where those who participate can find real healing ... A vibrant worship life will glorify God, edify the faithful, and engage the seeker.”

The early Church, and every healthy church since, has demonstrated a devotion to authentic, heartfelt worship.

And I’m going to give you an opportunity right now to worship God with the tangible sacrifice of your offering. And let me say first how moved I am by your generosity in these challenging financial times. Though we haven’t been able to meet in person for over a month, your giving has enabled us not to fall further behind. In fact, with both our General Fund and our World Outreach Fund, we’ve actually made up some of the deficit. I urge you now, to worship God with your tithes and offerings.

[Break for Katalin and Sophie music]

In our Scripture today we don’t only see the Heart of the Devoted Church but...

II. The Hands of the Devoted Church

Back to Acts 2:42 which says...

... they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship ...

The Greek word again means, ‘to continue steadfastly.’ In other words, these disciples “continued steadfastly” to believe the teaching of the apostles, which for them was spoken and for us is written. Do we have that kind of devotion to the New Testament teaching?

According to the Barna Research Group, the majority of American adults (57%), say knowing what is right or wrong is a matter of personal experience. And the younger you are, the more strongly you believe that. 74% of Millennials agree that, “Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know.” What’s even more disturbing is that, if you ask that same question of practicing Christians of all ages, 41% say they agree.

Jesus said that the Church is to be salt, something that preserves the health of the culture. But He also said that if the salt loses its saltiness, it’s no longer good for anything. (Matt. 5:13) So, if you think our culture is heading in the wrong direction, your first prayer should be that the Church regain its devotion to the absolute truth of the apostles’ teaching.

But this devotion in the Acts 2 church was equally placed on *fellowship*. The Greek word for “fellowship,” is *koinonia*, which is a very rich word. Fellowship doesn’t really get it all. For us, fellowship could be a tea party or a very surfacy gathering marked by small talk and superficial relationships. That is NOT biblical *koinonia*. *Koinonia* has four important elements:

- Close relationships (like husband-wife, brother-to-brother close)
- Generosity (like “shirt-off-my-back” generosity)
- Unity (like “blood-brother” unity)
- Participation (like “share-my-suffering” participation)

Have you ever been part of a group that had those four characteristics? Maybe it wasn’t even in a church! For example, are you aware that every year of the Iraq war, a larger and larger percentage of the American soldiers chose to re-up? More every year, why? The number one reason they gave was because they want to stay with their unit. They were willing to go back to “hell on earth” because they wanted to stay connected to a group where they could experience

“brother to brother” relationships; “shirt off my back” generosity, “blood-brother” unity, and “share my suffering” participation.² Have you experienced all four of those elements here at Valley Avon or Valley Simsbury? Until these four elements are available to every person who calls Valley their church, we can’t say we are a “devoted church.”

So, let me ask you: Which of those four *koinonia* elements have you demonstrated to someone in this church recently? Who do you know who could use one of those elements right now? Devotion is not an emotion, it’s an action. Lastly, I want us to see...

III. The Unity of the Devoted Church

God, teaching us through Paul, shows us that the human body is a perfect illustration of how church unity should work. Verse 12:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Cor. 12:12)

Then, God goes on to illustrate in verses 14 through 26 exactly how it works. What’s His point? Every part is distinct. There is no interchangeability. Ears can’t be substituted for eyes.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? (v.19)

There is no interchangeability of roles, but that doesn’t mean that the parts are not equal.

... on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor ... (v.23)

In the Church there is to be distinction of roles but full acknowledgement that each role is essential and equal in worth.

When every part of your body is doing its part, you’re basically unconscious of it, aren’t you? But as soon as one small part isn’t working, your whole body is completely distracted. Have you ever broken your baby toe? I did once in college. It completely changed my life! How can that be? I had nine others! Why couldn’t they just take over? But no, suddenly it took me twice as long to get to class. And because of the pain, I had a hard time studying. Some things that I wanted to do, like sports, I couldn’t do at all! It changed everything!

You see, some people say, “I’m not very gifted. No one will notice if I don’t use my gift in the church. Nobody even notices me now anyway. I’m like a baby toe.”

Dear friend, we will notice. One non-functioning part in the body can change everything. And think of this, whose body is this, anyway? Is it not Christ’s body? When I broke my toe, I didn’t say, “My toe broke itself?” No, I said, “I’ve got a broken toe.” So, if I’m refusing to allow God to manifest His Spirit through me by expressing whatever giftedness He’s placed in me, could not Christ say, “I’m sick?” And He’d say it because of me. Do we understand what an honor it is just to be associated with Christ, to carry His name?

In the town of Stepanavan, Armenia, there is a woman who is known by everyone as “Palasan’s wife.” Now, in America, the feminists would go nuts to hear that a woman would allow herself to be degraded with such a title, but this woman is not ashamed. In fact, she is proud of this name.

You see, years ago a devastating earthquake hit the town of Stepanavan around noon on a work day. Palasan was at his job. He immediately rushed to the elementary school where his son was a student. The front of the school was already crumbling, but he ran into the school and began pushing children out. He had saved 28 children when a strong aftershock struck and completely collapsed the building, killing Palasan inside.

So, to this day, the people of that town honor his memory and his young widow by calling her “Palasan’s wife.” She carries his name with pride.³

Do we understand whose name we carry? This is the one who rushed to the cross to save all who would come to Him. Just to bear His name should humble our proud hearts. Yes, we should willingly use our individual gifts but far more importantly, we should be proud of the rare privilege to be identified as a Christian. We carry His name! If that is our attitude and the focus of our devotion, it will be impossible for the enemy to divide us, for we will truly be One in Christ. Amen.

¹ www.desiringgod.org/articles/who-is-the-church

² "GIs in Iraq Choosing to Re-Up," Amy Scott Tyson, Washington Post, Dec. 18, 2005

³ www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/october/3445.html