

Acts 2:42-47 (1984 NIV)
Priorities in Deeper Body Life

Acts 2

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

43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.

45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Introduction

When we look at the New Testament church painted for us in Acts 2:42-47, we can say a few things about it.

- First, it was a young church. Young in the sense that these were only beginning days when those who professed faith in Jesus Christ assembled together constantly to do what they were doing. Also, young in the sense that many of them were new believers in Jesus Christ, having responded to Peter's powerful preaching on the Day of Pentecost not too long ago.
- Second, we remember that those who responded in faith to Peter's preaching that day numbered about 3000 (Acts 2:41). This means that the total number of believers in this New Testament church must be at least 3000. Even by today's standard, a 3000-strong church is considered a church of very substantial size.
- Third, we can say something about the founding leaders of this New Testament church. Who were they? Well, none other than the apostles themselves. It's like having a "who's who" line-up in your pastoral team.

Yes, this New Testament church painted for us here was very much a spiritually vibrant and growing church. But as we look at this church more closely, we can see that the implied reasons for its vibrancy and growth are not because it was a young church of recent history and of predominantly new believers; not because it boasted a size of at least 3000 members; not even because it was led by the apostles of Jesus Christ.

A careful study of our text today would impress upon us that the reasons for the spiritual vibrancy and growth in this New Testament church were related to how these early Christians committed themselves to certain priorities.

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The early church is still a good example for us today not because of its perfection, but because the early Christians had demonstrated to us what some priorities in deeper Body life should be.

I. Verses 42-43, 46-47a

Verse 42 says: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Verses 46-47a repeats the idea and pattern this way, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

It is easy for us to mistakenly think that the early Christians engaged themselves in a flurry of religious activities as if life was not already busy enough. But what is described of them here is that they committed themselves to building and nurturing their relationship with God—not in isolation, but together with one another.

Verse 42 tells us that they “devoted” themselves to certain practices, disciplines and activities—things that would help them grow unto Christlikeness and create a Christlike community together. The word “devoted” can be translated as “continued steadfastly”—i.e. to do and keep on doing. We may think that it is easier for the early Christians to do what they were doing because there were less distractions and complexities in New Testament times. But the fact that they devoted themselves to what they were doing certainly suggests that even in those days, there were enough distractions and complex issues in life to stray them away. Hence, they had to devote themselves to constantly and intentionally keep those practices, disciplines and activities going.

Let me say something about their devotion to the apostles’ teaching. Their devotion does not mean that they sold themselves to the mere words and opinions of the apostles. Rather, it means that they allow their thoughts and actions to be shaped and guided by the message of the gospel as taught by the apostles.

At that time, they didn’t have the Bible like the one you have in your hands this morning. The apostles only had the Old Testament and their eye-witness stories of Jesus’ life and ministry. So their teaching was telling the gospel message by telling the story of Jesus Christ and that He was the Messiah whom the Old Testament had been pointing to. It was all about Jesus. If you look carefully at Peter’s great sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2:14-41, it was all about Jesus.

Some of you may be saying, “But I have been hearing about Jesus Christ

since I was a small kid.” Perhaps, but you can never hear enough about Jesus Christ and what He has done and is doing. This is because as you hear and learn the life and teachings of Jesus, God is always teaching you something. And when you hear God prompting you to change as you learn, it means He wants you to obey. That’s why this kind of learning is life-long because God is always calling you to live out what you have learnt.

Many things may be very important to you right now—work, family, finance, sports, studies, boy-friends, girl-friends, etc. But they are not so important that you can put Jesus Christ out of your life. He must continue to be the centre that holds all things in your life together. When Jesus Christ is the centre of your life, He will guide you to place your family, church, work and other concerns in their appropriate order of importance according to the situation at hand.

That’s what it means to be devoted like the believers in the early church.

- You continue to be involved in church life.
- You continue to study and apply the Bible.
- You continue to let Jesus Christ be the centre that holds all things in your life together—you will never grow old enough as a person or as a Christian to be independent of Jesus Christ in your life.

I believe our church is a Word-centred church where preaching, Sunday School and Bible studies are regarded as important to spiritual growth and living. Yes, all these are indeed important, but there is a caution to heed simply because of the danger of being too familiar with the Bible.

Indeed, merely being familiar with Bible verses, stories, truths, and even Christian hymns cannot do any good unless we allow them to be put to right use in our lives. Yes, while I am all for preaching, Sunday School and Bible studies, I must caution that familiarity with these can keep us at where we are if we are not careful—i.e. just learning and not living out.

The early Christians devoted themselves to hear and learn God’s Word (as taught to them by the apostles) with the view of taking the next step in their walk with God—from devotion to the apostle’s teaching to fellowship, breaking bread and prayer. In their learning, fellowshiping, breaking bread and praying, they enjoyed these as Christ-centred, shared experiences. They came together to help one another take the next step forward in their walk with God both individually and corporately.

Verse 43 goes on to tell us: “Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.”

What does this mean for us today? Well, it means that when we similarly devote ourselves to constantly take that next step in our walk with God; to seek to grow into a Christlike person and community, God can do His great

and mighty works in and through us. We don't have to force God to bring about His great and mighty acts. We don't have to suppress them when God so chooses to act. When they do happen, we accept them reverentially as acts of God's power in and through us. We take that next step in our walk with God, and we let God take care of His own great and mighty acts.

Perhaps, God is challenging you this morning, "Would you take a step or two forward in your walk with me?" What then is that next step forward you can take? Some possibilities:

- It is to say "no" to some person, some pleasure, or some ambition because you know you have long compromised your Christian position.
- It is to start looking for opportunities to serve rather than to be served.
- It is to help someone grow in the Word because you already have been taught so much of the Bible.
- It is to take up that dust-covered Bible and start reading and studying it again.
- It is to stop wavering and start acting in faith.
- It is to pray more consistently and be more God-dependent in your decisions.
- And as a church, it is to move forward by devoting to the things that unite us, not the things that divide us.

Whatever that next step may be, you need to obey and do it now. Otherwise, it will forever be your next step. It may not be easy but God will help. Hence, the best time to start taking that next step in your walk with God is NOW—TODAY!

One Sunday, I was having lunch with an elderly lady in a coffee shop after church service. She told me about her suffering from eczema. It was so bad at one time that she even thought of suicide. Some point during our conversation, she paused, looked at me intently and asked, "John, have you suffered from eczema before?"

I said, "No. Why do you ask?"

She replied, "But I sense a certain oneness with you even as I talk with you. I have told many people about my suffering but they would always reply, 'Why you complain so much? It's only eczema, not cancer!' I really feel that my suffering has been belittled by them. But you seem to feel very personally the suffering I have gone through."

I then told her how my own mother had suffered from that condition and how I too had felt deeply her suffering as her son. Indeed, shared experiences can bond people together in a very deep and personal way.

The early Christians had demonstrated to us what some priorities in deeper Body life should be. One of them is this: *Be committed to Christ-centred, shared experiences that will bond us to take the next step in our walk with the Lord.*

All the ministries we have in our church must be directed at allowing us to participate in Christ-centred, shared experiences that will bond and move us forward as a church.

There's a second priority for us to consider.

II. Verses 44-45, 47b

Verses 44-45 say: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

Many opinions have been given about this action of the early Christians.

- Some say it was a form of Christian communism enforced by the early church.
- Some say it was voluntary giving but only an isolated experience in the early church—such extraordinary generosity is not the norm for Christian living and church life.
- Some say that the mindset of the early Christians was the reason—they keenly expected the end to come soon. Hence, they saw no point keeping their material possessions; so just give them away!

But I believe the early Christians were able to do what they did with what they had because they had understood well God's view of the church. God sees the church as His family of people here on earth.

I believe the early Christians had grasped well this understanding of the church. And it was this understanding of the church that helped them define who they were. They saw themselves as called to serve God by giving to one another in the family of God. And this kind of serving God and giving to one another is not in the context of voluntarism, but in the context of fellowship (*koinonia*). It stems from the recognition that in Body life, we need God and we need one another. We serve God by serving or ministering to one another not as volunteers in church, but as fellow servants or ministers in Christ.

Many people today say they don't need the church to be a Christian. This is a mistaken view of the church. When God saves us, He puts us together with other Christians. He puts us together to experience *koinonia*.

He puts us together so that we can learn to love one another, encourage one another, be devoted to one another, build up one another, be kind to one

another, accept one another, serve one another, have concern for one another, and so on.

The fellowship or *koinonia* spirit we see in the early Christians here is not the spirit of people who viewed themselves as volunteers, but the spirit of people who viewed themselves as serving God by giving to one another in Jesus' name. The fellowship or *koinonia* spirit we see in Acts 2:44-45 is not a mere form of generous voluntarism, but a powerful way of other-centred giving.

The priority practiced by these early believers then, and for us today, is this: *Be committed to give in order to touch lives in Jesus' name, not to merely fulfil duties or get results.*

But let's be honest. The culture today does not really encourage such other-centred giving and relationships. The church faces two dangers when all the giving is about duties and results, and not about touching lives in Jesus' name.

- First, we become very focused on forms and programmes. We then lose sight of touching and changing lives. We focus on knowledge, skills, and methods. We then end up with people who exhibit some external behaviour, but with no inner transformation.
- Second, we use people to serve the church. Supporting the church becomes the end and people are just means to that end. Attendances at church events are used as indicator of people's walk with the Lord. The end becomes numbers and not depth. The church then becomes an institution in which people are made into disciples of that institution, not of Jesus Christ. People become merely good at running or attending programmes. But they may not be living a close relationship with the Lord.

The selling and giving of possessions and goods to those who were needy was only important because it is a means by which Christlikeness was produced in people. They learnt to give like Christ—with all grace and compassion. This kind of other-centred giving imitates the unconditional love that God has given in Jesus Christ. It is not only capable of accepting the shortcomings of others, but also capable of influencing their shortcomings and changing them into something better.

You have different ministries in church—worship, small groups, youth, Christian Education, prayer, etc. When you give time and effort to be part of these, don't do it just to fulfil a duty or add to the number. Ask God to let you be there to touch a life, or to be touched by Him through another.

A few things you can do to help you carry out other-centred giving:

- One, give your courage. Encourage the fainthearted. Put courage into those who are fearful. Walk with them in their hours of darkness.

- Two, lend your strength. Help the weak. These are the ones who are completely exhausted and drained. They cannot go on anymore. They need someone to hold on to them, to carry them along.
- Three, train your patience. Let time deal with people. For those who are slow to respond, be slow to give up on them. For those who are refusing to respond, be slow to be angry with them.

Verse 47b says that the “Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved”. Many churches today would be very glad if some decisions are made for Christ in some of their special events held during the year. But in the case of the early church, we see decisions for Christ made daily—every day!

Interestingly, I find the passage today describing a church very much engaged in activities within their own community. I asked myself: “How could such an inward-looking church win so many people to the Lord? How could such a church find so much favour in the eyes of those outside it?”

This is my answer: “As the early Christians committed themselves to Christ-centred, shared experiences that bond them to take the next step in their walk with God; and to other-centred rather than duty-bound or results-oriented giving, they experienced God in a powerful way. They were excited with God, and it was this excitement that attracted others not only to them, but more importantly, to the Lord. When you have this kind of witness, outsiders will invite themselves on their own to come to you. If you don’t have this kind of witness, outsiders will not come even if you invite them, or they may come and then go away quickly because they find no good reasons to stay on.

The great saint of early Christianity, Francis of Assisi, said to his followers one day, “Let’s go to the village and preach.” As they went, they met a man who was greatly burdened. Francis was in no hurry and listened carefully to his sad story.

When the village was reached, Francis talked with the shopkeepers, spent time with the farmers at their fruit and vegetable stalls, and played with the children in the streets. On the way back, they met a man with a load of hay, and Francis stopped to befriend him. The morning was gone and the group reached the monastery from where they had first set out.

One of the followers was greatly disappointed and said to Francis, “Brother Francis, you said you were going to preach. The morning is already over and you have given no sermon.”

The saintly Francis replied, “But we have been preaching all the way.”

Often times, the message we have is powerful not so much in the words we say, but in the life we exhibit. Powerful words often just connect head to head. But a powerful life connects heart to heart; life to life. The early believers were

attractive to those outside of them because of the power in their life together. They did not just do things to fulfil a duty or to get a result. They did them to touch life with life; to connect heart to heart. And that's why their message was so powerful, their life together so attractive, their faith so contagious, and God so real in and through them.

Conclusion

The church today can make an impact for Christ through its experience and expression of Body life. And we can have a great impact on the world when we commit ourselves to some basic priorities:

- Seek God by constantly helping one another to take the next step in our walk with Him through Christ-centred, shared experiences.
- Serve one another by touching lives in Jesus' name and not merely fulfilling duties or producing results.

I believe you will not be offended when I say that our church has great potential but certainly not a perfect church. God loves our church, and He wants to use our church for His own glory.

So, let's commit to priorities that will lead to deeper Body life so that the Church of Jesus Christ can be a stronger Body and witness for Him.