

Mission 242: Teaching and Prayer

Acts 2:42-47

A People Who Belong to God

Peter offers a grand description of the church when he writes in I Peter 2:9

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priest, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”
(I Peter 2:9)

And I might add, *“Don’t you ever forget it.”* This is who we are.

We are called out, called together, and called to go forth.

God has always had a people. Even if persecuted and forced underground, God’s people have persevered.

Even when marginalized and maligned, as is the case more and more in this country, the church still stands.

Worldwide Christians are suffering on account of their faith in record numbers.

A recent report by the Roman Catholic sponsored, *Aid to the Church in Need*, states that *“the persecution and genocide of Christians across the world is worse today than at any time in history.”*

The report asserts that *“the treatment of Christians has worsened substantially in the past two years compared with the two years prior, and has grown more violent than during any other period in modern times.”*

“Not only are Christians more persecuted than any other faith group, but ever increasing numbers are experiencing the very worst forms of persecution, even death.”

Yet in spite of that the church perseveres.

Whether marginalized, maligned, or martyred the church still stands. This is due in no small measure to the dedication of those who make it up and the very power of God to sustain them.

Wholly Dedicated to God and One Another

Dedication is a common thread woven throughout the history of the church.

Whenever those who make up the church have committed themselves to Christ, regardless of the cost, the church has prospered.

That was certainly the case for those who made up the Early New Testament Church.

There was nothing half-hearted about their commitment to Christ. There was not a lukewarm response. They were certainly not on again off again when it came to their faith.

They held strong. Their faith would not be swayed. They would hold fast come what may.

They were dedicated not only to Christ, but to one another and their common ministry together.

Deeply Devoted

Acts 2:42 puts it succinctly. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

Everyone, those inside the church and outside it, were awestruck by the many signs and wonders that were being performed in their midst.

The power of the Holy Spirit was evident for all to see.

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47)

Last week, in an effort to call ourselves back to the basics of what it means to do church, we highlighted that great passage from Acts 2:42.

In an age where the church makes every effort to do whatever to win people over, Acts 2:42 offers a simple blueprint for what church should be about.

Last week we talked about *“fellowship”* and *“the breaking of bread.”*

“We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” These things characterize our fellowship above all else.

Last week as we celebrated Holy Communion, we were reminded to *“break bread together on our knees.”*

A lot of really great fellowship goes on whenever we sit down to eat together, just ask those who attended our last potluck dinner.

That sort of fellowship certainly takes place when we come around this table to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

We share not only a sweet communion with one another, but with God.

This morning we consider two other traits of the Early New Testament Church.

Those who were a part of that church were not only devoted to “*fellowship*” and “*the breaking of bread,*” but to “*the apostles’ teaching*” and to “*prayer.*”

Right Teaching

The Apostles were those who had experienced Christ firsthand.

They witnessed with their own two eyes the signs and wonders he performed. They heard with their own two ears the things he taught. They had experienced for themselves the life changing power of Jesus.

The things they taught were born out of that experience and those who were being won to Christ couldn’t get enough of what they had to say.

Right teaching, particularly teaching that issues from a life that has been deeply touched by Christ, has always had its place within the church.

Today that teaching is best done against the backdrop of scripture, which contains much of the apostles’ teaching and the account of those who followed them.

The Bible stands front and center when it comes to church and is the basis for every bit of teaching that goes on within the church.

Our teaching should never stray from the essential message of scripture as much as we may be tempted to do otherwise.

In the teaching I do I try to start with scripture, end with scripture, and stay true to it everywhere in between.

The book of Hebrews states, “*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*” (Hebrews 4:12)

At Awana last Wednesday I had one of the third grade girls in my class ask about the Bible and it being active and alive.

I agreed that it is like any other book if we simply keep it on a shelf gathering dust. It is unlike any other book though if we open its pages and begin to read. It is then that the Spirit begins to move and reveal the very things God wants to say and in that it is very much active and alive.

How will we ever know what God wants unless we open his Word and let it speak?

In age where Biblical illiteracy and spiritual starvation prevail, the Bible still stands as God’s guidebook for life.

At Awana we rehearsed these things with the kids the past couple of months. We’ve said:

- The Bible is true.
- It helps us know God.
- It should be carefully studied and shared.
- It teaches us about people from the past and about ourselves today.
- It teaches us how to live.
- And above all, the Bible is powerful and active in every way.

We'd do well to remember these things, whatever our age.

God's Word never returns void.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

In seeking to do church, we need to let the scripture speak. God's Word never returns void.

We'd do well to tune out all the other voices that seek to chime in, and they are many these days, and let God speak through his Word.

Faithful Prayer

Not only were those who made up the Early New Testament Church wholly devoted to the apostles' teaching, but they were deeply devoted to prayer.

Their prayers kept their hearts and minds right where they needed to be, stayed upon God.

As I have gone along in ministry I have found that there is a direct correlation between the vitality of a church and the vitality of the prayers of those who make it up.

I know there are times for every one of us when it seems as though God is a million miles away. We need to stay at our prayers.

Keep praying. Those who made up the Early New Testament Church did and so should we.

By praying, we will soon find that God hasn't gone anywhere. If anything, we are the ones who have strayed.

Prayer has a way of waking us up and helping us see the good work God is doing around us.

Let me ask you to pray. Pray for each other. Pray for the church. Pray for me, for goodness sakes. Pray. Pray. Pray. Offer your prayers to the Lord Almighty and then marvel at the great things he will do.

Francis Chan in his book *Letters to the Church* offers a challenging word at this point. *“If prayer isn’t vital for your church, then your church isn’t vital. This statement may be bold, but I believe it’s true. If you can accomplish your church’s mission without daily, passionate prayer, then your mission is insufficient and your church irrelevant.”*

“The early church devoted themselves to prayer. They knew they couldn’t exist without it. If God didn’t come through, they could never fulfill the mission he had given them. So they were constantly on their knees.”

From Acts 4:31 we read, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Devotion to Right Teaching and Faithful Prayer

Devotion to right teaching and faithful prayer were no doubt hallmarks of the early church. They are the same for those who make up the church of today.

I have been around a lot of really great lay people in my day. Some have inspired me to no end by their commitment to Christ and his church.

Some of you remember our dearly beloved Harold Smith. He was a stalwart around here for years.

Harold woke up every morning before the sun came up, not to tune into the morning news, but to read his Bible and to pray. He did so every morning without fail.

You might say he was a guy deeply *“devoted to the apostles’ teachings and to prayer.”*

Harold’s witness lives on well-beyond his life here on earth.

Many were won to Christ by Harold’s witness. Hundreds received a copy of the scripture because of Harold. This church was sustained in large measure because of his selfless leadership and undying service.

Every church could use a few more like Harold Smith.

Do we dare dream of a church where everyone is a Harold Smith—*“devoted to the apostles’ teachings and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer?”*

Now that’s something to think about, something to pray about, and something to consider how that might apply to your own life.