

# Devoted: Becoming the Church Christ Has Redeemed Us to Be (Part 1)

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

### What Is the Church?

- A. I wonder, if someone walked up to you on the street out of the blue and asked you: “What is the church?”—what would you say? How would you define it?
1. Is it a building? “Look at that church, it’s so pretty with all that stonework and things.”
  2. Is it a gathering or service you attend? “Come on kids, get in the car, church starts in 15 minutes.”
    - a. What would you say?
- B. In our Covenant Membership Class, if you’ve ever taken it, I try to define the church for us. Let me give it to you here up front and then I’ll explain it briefly: “The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.”
1. There’s one assembly, with three distinct aspects.
- C. Now, you may notice, I’m using somewhat broad language and terms. For example, I don’t even have Jesus in my definition, or the gospel, or the cross.
1. But I do so self-consciously, intentionally, because I want to help us see that the church, in the deepest sense, is not merely a NT reality—as if it were born on the day of Pentecost.
  2. Instead, I think the church is actually something that God has been after with us from the very beginning.
    - a. The NT church isn’t the introduction of something altogether new; it’s the restoration and realization of all that God was aiming for with humanity from the start.
    - b. Redemption and creation go together.

- c. That which Christ redeems us to be by way of the cross is organically connected to what God originally created us to be in Adam (cf. [Rom. 5:12-21](#); [1 Cor. 15:20-23, 45-49](#)).

## The Church in Genesis 1

A. So, if I might be so bold, I would contend that the church, in one sense at least, really begins all the way back in [Gen. 1](#).

- 1. Humanity was created by God to be this “blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.”

B. Just think about it with me now for a moment . . .

- 1. Regarding the first aspect, presence—Adam and Eve were set up in that Eden sanctuary, where they were to live with God, in his presence. They were created for fellowship with him.
- 2. Regarding the second aspect, people—when it was just Adam at first, do you remember what God said? “It is not good that the man should be alone” ([Gen. 2:18](#)). We were created for community, to be a people in his presence.
- 3. But, even more than that, regarding the third aspect, we see that God gives them a purpose. Eden wasn’t to be some sort eternal vacation home, as it were. They were given work to do and a vision for the world.
  - a. The first man and woman were to rule with God over his creation. They were to subdue and have dominion over it. They were to bear fruit, multiply, and fill the earth with more human beings made in God’s image and reflecting His glory ([Gen. 1:28](#)).
    - i. By this, it seems, they were to expand the boundaries of Eden so that, one day, God’s glory might fill the earth like the waters cover the sea—with all humanity existing in his presence, as his people, living for his purpose in the world.

C. In this sense, again, then, humanity was created, from the start, to be the church.

- 1. But, of course, we would not have it! In our pride, in our rebellion, in our sin, we turned from God’s presence; we broke fellowship and divided off from one another; and we started living, not for the purposes of God, but for ourselves.
  - a. We lost it. Every aspect. What we were created to be.

D. The opening pages of Genesis aren’t just some fairy tale or dusty myth. This is reality. This is the world we live in. Look around you. Turn on the news. Consider your own heart, perhaps.

1. The absence of God. The animosity between fellow image-bearers. The conflict. The brokenness. The ego. The self-infatuation.
  - a. It's the fall on repeat. We're not in Eden anymore. We are a million miles off from what we were created by God to be from the start.

## The Church in Acts 2

- A. Ah, but here now we come to [Acts 2](#). (Perhaps you've been wondering where I'm going with all this. Well, here now I hope it all is soon to get clear.)
  1. You see, in [Acts 2](#), as we're given this summary of the early Christian church here—what they were doing, what they were like—we see it, right on the surface of the text: God is redeeming us to be in Christ what we were at first created to be but lost in Adam.
    - a. It's as Paul writes in [1 Cor. 15](#): “<sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.<sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. . . .<sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (vv. 21–22, 49).
- B. Jesus is redeeming us. Jesus is renewing us. Jesus is restoring us. And he's doing so along the lines of those same three aspects: presence, people, and purpose.
  1. So in our text we get this sense that these early believers are being brought back into God's presence and they're developing that relationship with him.
    - a. So they're committed to his Word—here referred to as “the apostles' teaching” (v. 42).
    - b. And they're regularly participating in “the breaking of bread” (v. 42)—which, as we'll discuss more later, likely refers in part to their partaking of the Lord's Supper. They have this sense of communion with God, relationship with him again.
    - c. So there's also mention of them being devoted to “the prayers” (v. 42). They're not just hearing from God in his Word, and eating with him around the table, as it were, they're also talking to him, engaging with him through Christ.
      - i. There's this upward momentum to it all.
  2. But, of course, we also see that their relationships with one another are being repaired as well, right? They're being restored as God's people in God's presence.
    - a. So we're told that they're devoted, not just to things pertaining to their relationship with God. They're also devoted to “the fellowship” (v. 42).
    - b. And then this devotion to one another is put on magnificent display for us there in [vv. 44-46](#), where we see this radical, almost even alarming, generosity: “[T]hey were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (v. 45). This is a world apart from the fractured relationship between Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and all that spiraled out from there—where everyone

is just fending for his or herself. Here now they are starting to sacrifice of themselves for the good of the others.

i. There's this inward momentum to it all.

3. And then, of course, the last note struck there in [v. 47](#) reminds us that it isn't just the first two aspects that are being restored in Jesus, it's this third aspect as well. They have a purpose, so much bigger than themselves. It's not just about establishing a "holy huddle" composed of our good Christian buddies or whatever. They are to bear fruit, multiply, and fill the earth yet again, this time though it's with disciples, with people renewed in the image of their Creator by way of Jesus and the gospel.

a. So we see this evangelistic accent there at the close, where Luke tells us that God gave this early church "favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" ([v. 47](#)).

i. There's this outward momentum to it all.

## The Local Church of Mercy Hill

A. Now, if you've been around Mercy Hill for any time at all, you likely know that we've taken these three aspects, in some sense, and tried to integrate them into our mission statement and what we call our three core values.

1. The bottom line is this: whatever it is God has created and redeemed us to be, that's what we want to be, that's what we want to be all about in this place.

- a. So, with regard to presence, we talk about the core value of Faith—where we try to push upwards and pursue that relationship with God through Christ.
- b. And, with regard to people, we talk about the core value of Community—where we try to push inwards and develop relationships with each other in the church around the cross.
- c. And then, with regard to purpose, we talk about the core value of Mission—where we push outwards towards the city and world around us in love with the gospel.

B. And I reiterate all this now because that's how I'm going to break up this text, and it's how I plan to organize what I imagine will be my two or three sermons dealing with it.

- 1. So this morning, we're just going to consider Faith and this movement upwards.
- 2. In the next week or two we'll tackle Community and Mission.

C. Now, as we consider Faith and our upward momentum back towards the presence of God in Jesus, I want to look with you in more detail at the three different ways we see this at work in the summary of the early church we're given here in [Acts 2](#).

- 1. I've already identified them for us, but just to list them out once more. We see that they were devoted to: (1) The Apostles' Teaching; (2) The Breaking of Bread; and (3) The Prayers.

## (1) The Apostles' Teaching

- A. We're told at the start of v. 42 that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ."
- B. The word in the Greek translated "devoted" here [Gk. *proskartereō*]  
—it means to persist or persevere in, to busy one's self with, to hold fast to. That sort of thing. So it's a very strong word, expressing a deep commitment to something.
  - 1. And in this first case, it's a deep devotion to the "apostles' teaching." They're hanging on every word. "Tell us more about the gospel and the cross of Jesus Christ and what it means for me."

### Spirit of God + Word of God

- A. And I love that Luke's summary starts here because it makes crystal clear, I think, the connection between the Spirit of God and the Word of God.
  - 1. For, just before this, we see that the Holy Spirit is given in grace to these new believers (v. 38).
  - 2. And then immediately we're told the sort of effect it had on them: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ." (v. 42). The Spirit of God leads them straightaway to the Word of God.
- B. You see, sadly, mistakenly, we so often pin the two against one another.
  - 1. So there are some who would say they're more into the Spirit. "We follow him wherever he blows. It's riveting. You never know what the day will bring. We love prayer and impressions and the gifts and all this."
  - 2. But then there are others who would say they're more into the Word. "It's more stable and reliable. We like a good Bible study with the brothers and sisters. We like doctrine and theology. We read systematics for fun."
- C. And the two groups are often set at odds with each other, right?
  - 1. So against the first group, the second might say: "Ah, those 'Spirit-filled' people, they're like ships tossing around at sea without an anchor. There's a lot of feeling, a lot of foam, but nothing to ground it. There's a lot of heat, but no light."
  - 2. But against the second group, the first group would fire back: "Ah, those 'Bible thumpers,' they've got their own version of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Bible people. They replace the Spirit with the Word. It's dead orthodoxy. Oh sure, they have the doctrine down, but they don't have the heart, the passion, the power of God. It's cold. There's a lot of light, but no heat."
- D. But, again, in our text we see it quite plainly, I think: Though we may be prone to pin the Spirit of God against the Word of God, the two always form a dovetail with each other.

1. The Spirit of God leads to the Word of God. The Word of God leads to the Spirit of God. There's a synergy, a vital partnership between the two.

a. And if you have one without the other, it's likely you don't truly have either.

E. I remember my own testimony.

1. When I was finally broken down under the weight of my idolatry; when I at last repented of my sin and placed my faith in Jesus; when I was born again by the Spirit of God; do you want to know what happened?
2. Well, many things, of course. But one of the more remarkable effects is I suddenly had a deep hunger and longing for the Word of God.

a. All at once, that which had previously seemed irrelevant or boring to me became the most precious thing in all the world. I couldn't get enough.

i. I would read and read and read.

ii. I would listen to sermon after sermon after sermon.

iii. There was one time where I was going to three services in a single Sunday at three different churches. My friend and I called it the "trifecta." It was a wonderful time.

b. But why would I do such a thing? Just go to church, listen to one sermon (better not be too long, pastor), check the box, be a good "Christian" and then go get on with your life, man!

i. But don't you see: Jesus became my life. And so I wanted to hear from him. I wanted to grow in my relationship with him. So I wanted all the Bible, all the "apostles' teaching," I could get.

## An Ongoing Emphasis

A. This devotion to the apostles' teaching we see kickstarted by the Spirit here in [Acts 2](#) will remain the major emphasis of the Christian community from this time forth.

B. It's what we see as they begin here in Jerusalem:

1. In fact, they're so devoted to it, in a sense, we're told in [Acts 5:28](#), that these apostles, in spite of official opposition from the religious authorities, they'd "[filled Jerusalem with \[their\] teaching . . .](#)"
2. And when the church starts growing even more and the apostles are being pulled in one direction and the other, they have to identify: what has to remain our main priority, and what can we let go of? Well, here's what they conclude in [Acts 6:4](#): "[\[W\]e will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.](#)"

- C. And, of course, this accent on the apostle's teaching carries on as they move outside of Jerusalem and begin to reach into the Gentile world:
1. So we're told of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Antioch: "For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people" (Acts 11:26).
  2. Or later, regarding Paul's ministry in Corinth, we read: "And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11).
  3. Or, of his ministry in Ephesus, we're told that he was " reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup>This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:9–10).
  4. And then, about a year later, when he's still in Ephesus and he's finally about to depart, he tells the elders of the church there: " <sup>31</sup>[F]or three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup>And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:31–32).
- D. There was a devotion to the apostles' teaching from beginning to end, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.
1. And it's no surprise, of course. For this is precisely what Jesus had first commissioned them to do: " <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>teaching them . . .'" (Matt. 28:18–20).

## Through the Ages

- A. And we know that this emphasis on the apostolic teaching and doctrine, it didn't stop even when the apostles had run their course. The church has continued through the ages to be known for its devotion to the Word of God.
- B. This is why the birth of the NT church here ultimately gives rise to an utter explosion of NT manuscripts. People begin copying the gospels and the letters into Greek and other languages and spreading the copies round the globe.
1. Do you realize that, when it comes to Greek manuscripts of the NT (either fragmented or complete), we have well over 5,800 that we've discovered and catalogued—some of them likely go all the way back to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.
  2. If you throw in manuscripts of the NT that had been translated into other ancient languages (e.g. Latin, Syriac, Armenian, etc.), we have about 25,000 manuscripts in total.
- C. You might wonder: how does the NT compare with other ancient books?
1. For many ancient books, there are often a few dozen existing manuscripts, and sometimes even a few hundred.
  2. Homer's Iliad is second only to the NT, but it's second by a remarkable margin. At last count there were maybe some 650 manuscripts.

- a. One scholar puts it memorably: “A stack of existing manuscripts from the average classical writer would measure about four feet high. Yet the New Testament manuscripts would stack to more than one-mile high.” That’s a lot of manuscripts!
- D. But why? What accounts for this? Because Christians are “devoted . . . to the apostles’ teaching . . .” The Word of God as delivered to and through the apostles is central to the Christian movement.
- E. That’s why, in the Koran, when referring to Christians, do you want to know what they called them? “People of the Book.”
- 1. It seems in the context, it may have been meant as an insult.
  - 2. But I would take that as a precious compliment were it said of us here at Mercy Hill. Oh how I long to be known as the “People of the Book.”
    - a. Who cares what Nick or Joey or anyone else has to say in this place.
    - b. I want to know: what does God have to say? What has God said through the apostles as recorded in Holy Scripture?
- F. So I wonder, can this be said of us? Or perhaps more pointedly, can this be said of you?
- 1. Are you a “[person] of the book”? Are you devoted to the apostles’ teaching? Are you in the Scriptures, building your life on it, growing in your relationship with God through Christ?

## (2) The Breaking of Bread

- A. The next thing we see of these early Christians is that “they devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread” (v. 42).
- B. What is meant by this phrase is somewhat up for debate.
- 1. I like the way one commentator sums it up. When considering whether this “breaking of bread” is referring to some larger fellowship meal in general or the Lord’s Supper in particular, he simply concludes: the phrase “likely covers both” (ESVSB). And I would agree.
    - a. In fact, what we know from history is that the two often already did go together.
      - i. They would break bread and remember the new covenant—Christ’s body broken, his blood shed for the remission of their sins;
      - ii. and then they would enjoy the fruits of that covenant, as it were, by spending time with each other around the table sharing a fuller meal.
- C. So far as clues in our text go:
- 1. On the one hand, the definite article “the breaking of bread” here seems to place the emphasis on the more formal meal of the Lord’s Supper at this point.



2. But, on the other hand, later down in v. 46 when it says of the early Christians that they are “breaking bread in their homes . . . [and receiving] their food with glad and generous hearts . . .” the emphasis seems to clearly be placed on the fellowship of the saints as they enjoy a good meal together.
  - a. The former we shall deal with today since we’re concerned more with our core value of Faith.
  - b. The latter we shall consider next time as it accords more with our core value of Community.

## A Sermon for the Senses

A. So then, these early Christians were devoted to partaking the Lord’s Supper together.

1. You remember how Jesus established this meal for them on the night he was betrayed. In Luke 22:19-20 we read that “<sup>19</sup> he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’<sup>20</sup> And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”
  - a. He says: “Do this in remembrance of me” (v. 19). So it’s no wonder, then, that this early church is devoted to such a practice. He told them to do so, and do it often.

B. But why?

1. Let me come at it this way. Have you ever tried to teach kids—maybe in kids ministry, or homeschooling, or something?
  - a. If you have, then you know, when they’re young especially, if you’re trying to teach them something a bit more abstract, they’re just going to get lost.
  - b. They need something tangible to reinforce the lesson. They need a craft or a project. Something they can touch and see and interact with.
    - i. So you don’t just tell them about trees, you take them outside where they can look at them and climb on the branches and play in the leaves.
    - ii. You don’t just talk about addition, you break out the beans or the candies or whatever and you add things that way. They can feel the truths of it.

C. Well, that’s why Jesus gives us the Lord’s Supper.

1. I love how N.T. Wright puts it: “When [Jesus] wanted fully to explain what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn’t give a theory. He didn’t even give them a set of scriptural texts. He gave them a meal.”
  - a. And now why? Because sometimes it’s not enough just to hear that God loves you. You need to see it. The Lord’s Supper is gospel show and tell. It’s a sermon for our senses. It’s forgiveness you can feel.

- i. It's the love of God coming at us in a way we can see, touch, taste, and experience.
- D. Jesus knows that he's soon going to be departing and they're not going to see him any longer. He knows that you and I are not going to see him.
  - 1. We have his word. And we're devoted to it, yes.
  - 2. But sometimes we need to see something, feel something, to get it into our hearts.
    - a. And that's what this is. He wants you to know: he loves you, he accepts you, he has you, he's given his life for you, and he's right here even now. So he gives us a meal. It's a tangible way of reminding us of these deeper gospel realities.

### (3) The Prayers

- A. The last thing we notice, so far as Faith is concerned, is that these early Christians “devoted themselves to . . . the prayers” (v. 42).
- B. Here again, similar to what we saw with the breaking of bread, I think there's both a more formal and informal aspect to this.
  - 1. When we see that definite article here, “the prayers” it does seem it's probably referring to some sort of structured prayer that they would have. Perhaps it's referring to the hours of public prayer that would be there at the temple during the morning and evening offerings.
    - a. For example, in Acts 3:1 we're told that “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer . . . .”
      - i. So they had some sort of structured, set times of prayer it would seem.
  - 2. But then we know that they also had some sort of informal, ongoing, all-the-day-long kind of prayers as well.
    - a. That's certainly hinted at down in vv. 46-47 where we read that “<sup>46</sup> day by day . . . they received their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God . . . .” They're just giving thanks and talking with him all throughout the day.
      - i. It's interesting that same word translated “devoted” in our text [Gk. *proskartereō*], it shows up again and again in connection with prayer:
        - (1) So Paul says in Rom. 12:12: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant [Gk. *proskartereō*] in prayer.”
        - (2) And in Col. 4:2, he writes: “Continue steadfastly [Gk. *proskartereō*] in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
- C. And what we learn from all this is that, for the Christian, prayer should be both formal and informal. It should be both scheduled at certain points and spontaneous at others. It should be both

structured and free flow. We should set apart certain times to give ourselves to prayer in a more focused fashion, but then we should also be praying continually all throughout the day.

D. Bottom line: God has opened up the line of communication between us.

1. It's not just one-way communication. Top-down. He talks, we listen, that's it. Like maybe the relationship you have with your boss or something. Nope.
2. This is a relationship. He gives us his word. That's first. But then we respond and relate. He doesn't just want us to fall in line. He wants us to share our hearts and our lives.

E. We really try to prioritize prayer as a church. You may have noticed it: we pray a lot even throughout the course of our services.

1. We pray at the outset of our gathering.
2. Then the service director comes up and he prays again.
3. Then we had a member of our GO! Team come up and she prayed.
4. Then we installed a new deacon and we laid hands on him and prayed.
5. Then I read our text for this morning and prayed before the sermon.
6. In a little bit, I'm going to close out our time in God's Word by praying.
7. Then after we've sung a few more songs, someone will come back up and end our service with prayer.
8. And, of course, before all this even began this morning, some of us gathered at 9:40am in the Family Room over there and we prayed.

F. Why?

1. Because we believe God hears us. Because we believe nothing's going to happen without him. Because we believe that in Jesus the line of communication between God and man has been opened back up.
  - a. We're not orphans going about our lives in our own strength: "It's up to us!"
  - b. No, we're God's children. We ["have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'"](#) (Rom. 8:15).
    - i. The Spirit is given to us. And he doesn't just open our ears to hear the Word of God, the apostles' teaching; he also opens our mouths so that we cry out like kids in prayer to God. We can have relationship with him. We can talk with God!

G. So are you? You're not an orphan. You're his kid. Are you living like that? Are you praying like that?

1. Not just in the service—at structured times when we tell you to;
2. but all the time—in the morning, in the evening, and as you go about your day?

## Conclusion

- A. As we close here I'd like to return full circle now and just remind us that, in all these things, what's happening is we're being restored to God's presence. That first aspect is firing again.
1. But how?
    - a. Why do we get to hear from him in his Word?
    - b. Why do we get fellowship with him around the table?
    - c. Why can we cry to him and he actually hears and attends to what's on our hearts?
      - i. How can this be? We don't deserve this. We left him. We broke it off. How is it that we can have it all back?
- B. Put simply: Jesus. I'll say it one more time: God is redeeming us to be in Christ what we were at first created to be but lost in Adam.
1. We get the grace, because he took the judgement.
    - a. We get to hear the Word of God, because he got God's silence as he hung there on that cross.
    - b. We get fellowship with the Father around the table, because his body was broken like bread and his blood was poured out like wine.
    - c. We can pray with confidence that God hears us, because Jesus prayed in Gethsemane and God turned his back.
    - d. We can be restored to God's presence, because Jesus was booted out from it: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matt. 27:46).
- C. If you're not a Christian in this place, you were created for relationship with God and the offer of redemption is on the table. Repent and receive what Jesus has done for you freely by faith. You can know God.
- D. If you are a Christian—oh, brother, sister—let's with these early Christians, ask God by the Spirit to help us be devoted afresh to *"the apostles' teaching,"* to *"the breaking of bread,"* and to *"the prayers."*