

## Waking the Sleeping Giant - 9

### *Devoted or Disinterested?*

**Acts 2:42** *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."*

The members of Parker Memorial Baptist Church in Silver Spring Maryland (USA) had an amazing vision: They saw a new Worship Centre seating 1,500 people rising in a former cornfield they had purchased at a bargain price. Residents of nearby homes had another vision: hundreds of cars clogging their narrow, once quiet and peaceful streets. They opposed the Congregation's plans and the local Council rejected the Development Application.

Churches were once considered community assets. But across America, UK and Australia, houses of worship now are joining chemical plants and landfills as frequent targets of the NIMBY syndrome. Do you know what that stands for? *Not in my back Yard!* There is no doubt that Churches are experiencing less acceptance in our communities today. Our society has changed a lot over the last fifty years. The Christian Church used to be regarded as not only a legitimate but necessary part of every community. No longer. Today's culture is far too pluralistic for that. Now you may want to debate the merits or flaws in the current course of our society, but instead of focusing on society, let's focus on the Church.

While there is no doubt that Churches are not being treated with as much respect as they once were, we should note that the early Church, after it became strong, was violently opposed by many. It became a threat to the whole society as they knew it and it was not welcomed at all. Rather than being considered a *community asset*, the Church was considered counter-cultural because it stood for a standard of righteousness the community did not desire.

Perhaps we should be upset in the Church when we are not opposed for our stand for righteousness. It could mean that either we do not stand for the right things or that our stand is not made known. Jesus warned us when He said, *"Woe to you when all men speak well of you"* (Luke 6:26). The character of a person is known not only by his friends but also by his enemies.

However, in spite of the animosity directed towards the early Church, it grew at a breathtaking pace and had a huge impact on the society around it. Why is that? What made the early Church stand out from its culture? We have already seen how the early Church got its start with an amazing encounter with the living God on the Day of Pentecost. Thousands were brought to faith in Christ that day and were added to the Church there in Jerusalem. But their faith not only changed their destiny, but it also changed their lives.

As I am sure you already know, **what you believe - affects how you live**. This was certainly true of the first Church. Their lives were transformed by this encounter with God. Their priorities suddenly were changed. Think about it. They had come to Jerusalem for the great feast. They had taken this time out of their lives for this religious observance, but they were not just a bunch of homeless, jobless people with nothing else to do. They were ordinary people with families to support, work to pursue etc. However, all that changed for them.

Before this momentous transformation, they may have been focused on their jobs, their social relationships, their recreation and a host of other things. Now they were focused on Jesus Christ and His church. Their behaviour changed to reflect their new priorities. They made time for the things that were important to them. We all do this. Generally speaking, the maxim is true which says, "*People do what they want to do.*" When your priorities change, your behaviour changes to reflect your new priorities. What you are passionate about, directly impacts how you live.

That was certainly true for the early Christians. Our text says that they *devoted* themselves. The NASB renders it *continually devoting themselves*. Literally, it reads that they were *continuing steadfastly*. Here we have people who came to faith in Christ in a miraculous revival meeting one day during Pentecost. Yet, what happened to them completely transformed their lives. It transformed their behaviour. It is as if they understood that they would never be the same. And so, they began to live out that commitment in a very practical way every day. We see from this that **a great Church is a devoted Church.**

To what were these new disciples devoted? What were the things that this brand-new body of believers found important enough to commit themselves to? There are four mentioned in this one verse and for ease of memory I have used some alliteration. They were marked by a commitment to the *truth*, the *tie*, the *table*, and the *throne*.

### **1. The Truth: The Apostles' Teaching**

They devoted themselves first to the Apostles' teaching. In other words, they gave a high priority to understanding the truth. Now that they had come to faith in Jesus, they wanted to know more about Him. They wanted to understand how to apply this teaching to their lives. And so, they continually met together to hear the Apostles teaching, steadfastly devoting themselves to hearing, understanding and applying the teaching of the Apostles.

Devotion to knowing the truth was not only important in the early Church, but it is sorely needed in the Church today. In fact, we are seeing everywhere the fruits of not knowing the truth of God's word. The level of theological literacy among believers is, I believe, at its lowest ebb since the Church was born. Thinking Biblically about the world around us should come naturally for devoted disciples, but it doesn't for most. The issues that dominate our culture are the issues with which the Church must grapple. Do we have answers to the questions people are asking? I don't mean pat answers, full of cliches and simple solutions, but answers that have substance and which are grounded in God's truth? Have we learned to think Biblically about the issues we face today in our contemporary culture?

What do we say about the moral decay in our society? What do we say about the political forces at work and how they are shaping our society? What do we say about scientific 'truth' which bombards us every day and impacts our lives more and more? Is that 'truth' consistent with the Truth God has given us? What do we do when it is not? Unless we know what the Bible says concerning these issues, we will not have any real answers for others or even for ourselves. We also need to know what the Bible says about the Church, otherwise the whole community which Jesus birthed and promised to build can be led astray and, sadly, has been led astray in so many places in our world today.

It is tragic that even Christians, who should know the Scriptures, who should know the Truth, are being led astray by so much false teaching concerning Christianity. Many Christians do not even know how to test these teachings to see if they are right, and as a result, we hear the strangest things coming from believers who have been duped by false teaching. We must learn to be like the Bereans, whom the Bible says, "*examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*" (Acts 17:11)

We must remember that everything should be tested by Scripture and ultimately, by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must have more than just a superficial knowledge of the Truth in the Scriptures and the Truth which the Holy Spirit brings to us. Are you devoted to the apostles' teaching. In our day, that is essentially the New Testament. How devoted are you to the teaching of the New Testament about Christ, the Church, the world, your salvation and your purpose in this world? This truth is readily available to us every day and it is taught each week in Biblical Church fellowships. The question remains: how devoted are we to this Truth?

## 2. The Tie: Fellowship

Do you remember John Fawcett's old hymn which begins,

*Blest be the tie that binds  
our hearts in Christian love  
the fellowship of kindred minds  
is like to that above.*

The tie that binds is the second thing the early believers devoted themselves to, and that was fellowship. It is interesting how many people think that they really don't need the fellowship of other believers. This was certainly not the case for the believers in the early Church. They saw the need to continually devote themselves to a shared life with the other believers. In fact, they were together every day – not just once a week.

This is the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship to which they devoted themselves was both the community of believers in the local Church and the relationships of love made possible by that community. We see both "the fellowship" (assembling together with the church) and "fellowship" (sharing common life in Christ) in view here. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes us strongly when he writes:

**Hebrews 10:25** *"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Here we find the essence of what the first Church captured in their devotion to the fellowship. You can only experience true fellowship by giving diligent attention to meeting together with those in the fellowship. The former is dependent on the latter. If you absent yourself from meeting together with the other believers here, you will not have true fellowship with them, and you should not be surprised at this.

It takes time and effort to develop meaningful relationships with others, even in the Church. Why should that be different? In fact, it may even be a little more difficult in the Church because we are called to develop relationships with people who are not 'like us' and with whom we might not naturally share fellowship.

People generally gravitate to others like them in some way. We find people who are our same age, or have a similar situation in life, like small children, or no children. We find people who share our interests. But in the Church, where God arranges the parts of the Body (1 Corinthians 12:18), we are put together with many others who are not like us. In the Christian Church, our common interest is Christ and so we are to transcend issues like age, education, social status, situation in life, race, and the like. This is the beauty of the Church, and a testimony to the world of the unifying love of Christ.

### **3. The Table: Breaking of Bread**

Thirdly, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. Now, this could mean one of two things, or perhaps both. It could mean that they shared their meals together. Or it could mean that they devoted themselves to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper or Communion as many people call it. Perhaps both are involved.

Because they had been gathered together into this one fellowship by the sacrifice of Christ, these newly baptised believers began to celebrate their unity with and love for one another, and their worship and reverence for Christ. One way they did that was to share meals together. Another way they 'broke bread' together was to celebrate Communion. Or perhaps it was both at the same time?

There is evidence to suggest that the early Christians celebrated the Communion as a part of a shared meal. Like any close Church, they would eat together frequently, perhaps more frequently than most Churches do today. In fact, they may have had a meal following each Lord's Day service. This would not be unusual for their culture. Many cultures today also do this. I know that many of our Filipino and Korean brothers and sisters do. In any case, their celebration of the Communion took on a different form than ours. It was not the sombre, almost funeral-like event that you still see in many places today. It was reverent - but joyful, prayerful - but full of rejoicing.

Although the Scriptures do not give us specific details as to how we are to structure this special time together, other than to remember Christ's death when we do it, we should learn something from these early Christians about how to observe this aspect of our faith.

### **4. The Throne: Prayer**

Finally, it says that they devoted themselves to prayer. Their focus was heavenward, toward the throne. Their focus was on God Himself. So, they gave themselves to a life of prayer. Jesus said that His house should be known as a "*house of prayer.*" This early Church knew the necessity of seeking God and His will in prayer. They knew that it took a continual, daily devotion to prayer. A great Church must be a praying church. A great Church will devote itself to prayer because it depends upon God for its very existence and certainly its wisdom and direction in ministry.

Unfortunately, over the last hundred years, prayer seems to be a dying art among Christians. Many people say they believe in prayer but few people really spend much time praying. Of course, almost everyone sends up a brief prayer from time to time, some may even send up several a day. But how many believers today spend significant time in prayer? Fewer still spend any time in communal prayer – that is prayer with other believers.

Have you noticed the death of the Church prayer meeting? It seemed to die years ago in most Churches. Announce a Church lunch and you will have a full house. Announce a prayer meeting and you may be there alone. I am sure there are some Churches today that call one of their services a prayer meeting, but it is generally only another meeting for Bible study and worship. Prayers may be offered, but it is not a meeting devoted to prayer.

Of course, one of the reasons for this is that many people do not want to pray corporately. They are embarrassed to pray with others. Or they do not think that they would know what to say. The real problem may be that they have not been taught how to pray.

Jesus' disciples felt this need keenly and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. They saw Jesus spend entire nights in prayer and they also saw the effect of that prayer. If we want to see the effect of prayer, we must pray! When we speak to others of our needs, we get whatever people can do. When we speak to God about our needs, we get whatever God can do! That's why James reminded us:

**James 5:16** *"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."*

The reason for the power of prayer is that it engages God in the situation. The early Church quickly learned to use prayer effectively because they began to be persecuted. Peter and John were rebuked by the Sanhedrin. When they returned to the assembly, prayer was the first order of the day. Later, when Peter was imprisoned, the Church came together to pray. The early Church was devoted to prayer as a way of life and God moved in their midst as a result.

**2 Corinthians 10:3-5** *"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."*

**Ephesians 6:12** *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."*

Like it or not, we are engaged in a spiritual battle which must be won in prayer. We must be devoted to prayer. Whether it happens in a designated prayer meeting, or one-on-one over coffee, or in our small groups or on a 'prayer walk' around our town with a brother or sister ... our prayer ministry will take root and grow if and when we devote ourselves to this important ministry.

A great Church is a Church in which people exhibit a deep level of commitment in their Christian walk - a devotion to the disciplines of the Christian faith. We must never forget that the call of Christ is a call to follow Him. It is not a call to subscribe intellectually to a set of religious teachings. A great Church is a *devoted* church, one in which people follow Jesus. It is a Church where people live out the reality of New Testament Christianity, not merely a place where they only speak of it.