

Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

Good morning Church.

And if you are new to us – are new to Victoria and are looking for a church and have found your way to us – or a friend has invited you to lean in with us, or you are an old friend of Lambrick who've joined us today = **WELCOME!** We are so glad you are leaning in with us, and it's our prayer that God would use our church as a part of His ministry to you today and in the coming days...

*Can we just stop right now and **pray** for that? Let's pray...*

Well, if you are just joining or rejoining us today, last Sunday I introduced a month-long focus on **Becoming the Church We All Need** - exploring the what, why and how of **being the church** – the body of Christ – *in these days* – in this unusual and ongoing season where we cannot congregate in the ways we are used to and want.

The foundation of this series being the incredible reality that, in the mystery of God's grace, in the time between the ascension of Jesus and the final coming of God's kingdom – God has chosen to uniquely **dwell** in the ordinary life of the church – the community of God's people... What the New Testament refers to as "*the body of Christ*" ...

Can we just linger on that for a moment?

According to the NT writers, the church is *the body of Christ*.

The **hands** and **feet**, **knuckles** and **elbows**, **eyes** and **voice** – of Jesus – on earth today.

That is an outlandish claim – would you not agree?

And yet it's **not** just something we've made up. It is the clear and consistent teaching of the New Testament – that the church – the community of Jesus' followers – is the BODY of Christ – the **hands** and **feet**, **knuckles** and **elbows**, **eyes** and **voice** – of Jesus – on earth today.

And I know, in saying that, I'm naming something that both ***stirs us with longing***, and also kind of ***breaks our hearts*** too...

Stirs us with longing – because many of us have experienced something of God's presence and life and ministry in the life of the church – and we ache for it...

And **breaks our hearts** – because of how often the church has **not** truly ***embodied*** the hands and feet, knuckles and elbows, eyes and voice of Jesus...

And that church includes us...

Which is the very reason why we need to be talking about ***the kind of church community we need to be*** these days.

Because today, as ever, our world – our broken, divided, wounded and confused world – **NEEDS** to see and hear and encounter the life of Jesus in the life of the church, doesn't it?

And it's not just the world that needs this. ***We need this too – don't we?***

Which is something I've heard from so many of you in this season, and even in the last week – and something I've felt within myself – this deep ache, this undeniable longing *to experience the life of God together again or like never before... to feel the hand of Jesus again – through the hands of the church... to know God's nearness – through the presence of another follower of Jesus... to hear the Spirit's Voice again – through the listening and sharing life of the church – the body of Christ – today...*

And NO, I DON'T KNOW WHEN WE'LL BE BACK TOGETHER a whole congregation (no one knows when that door will open). And yet, in the midst of these days, I feel more and more convinced that the question that **matters most** these days is NOT **when** can we get back together – but **what do we need to BE together?**

Which applies as much right now as we **all** look for ways to come together **with a few others** – as it does when we can all come together.

What do we need to be together?

What does it mean to be the church we all need – in this season and every season?

And so, last week, I offered this simple (if not, simplistic) answer – that **what WE NEED is for God to have His way in us and among us...**

At the core, that that is what we all need. That – in every season – we would learn and embrace and practice a way of life together where we are continually *led and taught, transformed and empowered by the Spirit...*

Week after week.

Year after year.

Whatever may come...

That's what we need.

And not only that, but **that's what brings God's Kingdom to the world.**

And I don't say that lightly. Because, in the grace of God, this is what has happened whenever God, in Christ, by the Spirit, has had His way in the church. The church – the community of Jesus's followers – *has come alive with God for the sake of the world – alive with and in God's reconciling and redeeming grace...*

This is what we read about in the book of Acts.

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God was poured out on all of the followers of Jesus, and as many have noted, "The greatest spiritual revolution the world has ever known [began]. Even the mighty Roman Empire yielded, within three centuries, to the power of the gospel of Christ." (David Watson)

This is why Michael Green, former assistant to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and professor of theology and mission, titled his commentary on Acts, Thirty Years that Changed the World.

Can you imagine being a part of something like that: a spiritual revolution, a church so alive with God by the Spirit that a neighborhood, a community, a city, a nation, an empire is affected?

And we often read and hear the stories of the early church and wonder **what it was** about that first Christian community that so enabled it to impact the culture of its day. *And we know the answer. It was the Spirit.*

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the early Christians came alive with the Gospel – alive with God — and the gospel went out from them – with power...

Everything that happened had *everything* to do with *the presence and power and work of the Holy Spirit...*

But to leave it at just that, to say it was *simply* the work of the Spirit, is to **ignore** the very **means** by which the Spirit was at work in and through the church. It would be to ignore the **way of life** that the Spirit inspired the early Christians to learn and embrace and practice together – **through which** God did so much in and through them... *A way of life to which the Spirit of God still calls us...*

So what is this way of life that the Spirit calls us to?

Well, as I mentioned last Sunday, we read about it in **Acts 2:42**. One of the most significant verses in the book of Acts. Hear this vital text... Acts 2:42.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer [or 'to the prayers']."

Inspired by the Spirit, this became **their new way of life in Christ**... their new way of **life together**... And as they did, as the NT accounts for us, the Spirit continually led and taught, transformed and empowered them.

So, let’s just dig into this verse.

First, notice the words “**they**” and “**themselves**”. This is simple, but hugely important. We’re told “**They** devoted **themselves**.”

So, who? Think about this with me. Who is Luke describing in this verse?

Well, he’s describing all of them. All the believers – all the followers of Jesus. The whole church. Every follower of Jesus – every member of the church – devoted themselves to these 4 devotions...

Not just the apostles... Not just the leaders... Not just the men. Not just the women. Not just the adults. But “they” – the whole Christian community – devoted themselves.

And let’s also linger on this word: **devoted**... “**They devoted themselves**.”

Don Everts (a great bible teacher) explains,

“The word used in the original Greek for devotion is **proskarterountes**. It comes from two Greek words being put together: **pros**, which means ‘toward’ and has an intensifying connotation to it, and **karteros**, which means ‘strong’. Literally meaning ‘being strong toward,’ **proskarterountes** carries the connotation of continuing steadfastly in something. It is often translated, ‘persevere in.’” (Everts, 76)

Side note: Carter (my favorite and only son) – your name doesn’t just mean “one who drives a cart” – but in the Greek it means “strong”. Nice. Bring it, brother!

Ok, back to the devotion of the early Christians. *Pros-karterountes* = to be **strong toward** something – to **persevere** at something.

And specifically, we're told they were **strong toward – persevering** in – "the **apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer.**"

They didn't just **intend** to do these things. They didn't just hear preaching and teaching about these things – and say, yeah that's so good. They didn't just acknowledge these as to good, **but never actually did them...**

No, following the Spirit, in submission to Jesus, "they **devoted** themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

One more word about *devotion* – about *pros-karter-ountes*. As the definition "persevere" suggests, these devotions weren't just **an initial activity** – something that new or young Christians were to apply themselves to *for a season*. No, these devotions were their new and **ongoing** way of life together with God... **lifelong** devotions.... the things the Spirit would lead them to persevere in – to be strong toward – for a lifetime...

Why? Because they knew that their lives depended on it. And they were convinced that Jesus was still alive and with them – now by the Spirit – and so **they devoted themselves** to this way of life together – as the God-ordained means by which they would continually **RAISE THEIR SAILS** to experience the ongoing teaching, ministry, leading and empowering of the Spirit...

Is this not what we need? More than just for our Sunday Service to resume...

For us to **learn, embrace, practice** – and **persevere** in this way of life together – even in just little huddles of 3 or 5 – that we might continually **raising our sails** to experience the teaching, ministry, leading and empowering of Jesus... Oh church, that's what we need...

Alright, so, for the last half of my piece this morning, let's just focus in on the first devotion - "***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.***"

What does this mean, why does it matter, and how might we do this?

Well, first, we need to start here, not only because it appears first, but because without the apostles' teaching, the early Christians would have had no idea what it meant to be a Christian – what it meant to follow Jesus.

Think about this with me. Think about the events described in Acts 2 - it's the day of Pentecost. Jews have gathered from all around to Jerusalem to celebrate this great Feast – the Feast of the Giving of the Law. And on this very day, God fulfills his ancient promise to pour out His Spirit – the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth – on His people – and through the witness of the these 120 Jesus' followers – now alive in the Spirit – **3000 people** put their faith in Jesus, repent and believe the gospel, received the Spirit, and were baptized.

So, what now? What next?

Were they just to head home or head off – trusting in the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit – and ***do their best to live the Christian life?*** No. Of

course not. **They had to learn now about Jesus** – *from the apostles who had followed Jesus for the last 3 years...*

And so that's the first thing we need to say about the apostles' teaching – **it was and is all about Jesus**. Which we know because as we read the Book of Acts and listen to the teaching and preaching of the apostles', and as we read the Gospels they ultimately wrote and helped write – their teaching was **all about Jesus**.

Which should not surprise us. This was exactly what Jesus had charged them to do. In **Matthew 28:19-20** (what we often call the great commission), Jesus commanded his disciples to,

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

And then in **Acts 1:8** – just before his ascension – Jesus commanded the apostles, *"You will be my witnesses."*

And so that's what they did – wherever they went – they taught others about Jesus. **The apostle's teaching was all about Jesus**.

Which might seem unnecessary to emphasize – but it's easy in the church and in the Christian life to get drawn into all sorts of side topics, that may be **fascinating**, but are not ultimately integral to knowing and following Jesus.

Or with that, it's easy to simply to put all of our focus on distilling the does and don'ts of the faith, or an ethical position (which **matters**, but only, ever, as an overflow of knowing and following Jesus). It's easy even to make the Christian life all about the

devotions even – about reading the Bible and prayer, fellowship and the breaking of bread. But all these exist for the sake of something greater – knowing and following Jesus... Contrary to what many believe, there is no "christian value system" **apart from** knowing and following Jesus. Which is why the apostles' teaching **is all about Jesus!**

Don Everts (a Christian who's spent his life talking with college students about Jesus) writes about this in his own life (in his book "Getting Your Feet Dirty: A down-to-earth look at following Jesus" – a book that I'm drawing from a lot in today's teaching). He writes,

"When I was a young follower of Jesus, I became interested in Old Testament prophecies and Revelation images and how to those were (or were not) being fulfilled in the Cold War that was on the front page of the paper every day. I found this intriguing, mysterious and energizing. Was Gorbachev the Antichrist? Were the latest troop movements in Russia indications that the end times were finally upon us? I even wrote my senior high school English thesis on the fact that the world was about to end, as indicated in recent events. This was the spring of 1990.

*While all this study had me reading the Bible regularly, it wasn't a very fruitful reading. I had been sucked in a silly code-word game that happened to involve the Bible but that had nothing to do with sitting under the clear teachings of the Bible. This is not to say that reading Isaiah or Revelation or studying about Jesus' words on his sure second coming are to be avoided. **This is just to say that I could have learned from [the example of the early Christians] by making sure I was devoting myself, quite specifically, to the apostles' teaching: hearing about Jesus, studying his life and his teachings, and learning to obey the clear things he taught.**"*

So, that's the first thing about being devoted to apostles' teaching – **it's all about Jesus.**

Second, (and I'm following Don Evert's thinking here) – the apostles' teaching was and is **a received message.**

Let me explain what I mean. And I'll be honest – this feels like such an essential truth to proclaim in our day – and to hold fast to as a church – as a community of Jesus' followers today.

Simply put, the Apostles' teaching was NOT anything *they came up with* on their own – but was simply and completely them *passing on the things that had experienced with and learned from Jesus*.

As the Apostle Paul says in **1 Corinthians 11:23** – "*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you...*"

Or as the Apostle John wrote in beginning of his first letter – **1 John 1:1-3**,

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life... We proclaim to you have what we have seen and heard."

There is a perennial temptation – in every age and in every heart – for something fresh – a fresh word – a fresh revelation from God or about God.

If I'm honest, I feel this at times as someone who teaches regularly. I even remember having the thought, early on, when I first started preaching and teaching regularly – *that I might run out of things to teach*.

And yet, as I'm sure you realize, this fear is rooted in the false idea that *the Word that gives life comes from me*.

But it doesn't. In the pages of Scripture, with Jesus at the centre, God has already spoken and revealed more than we could ever exhaust in a lifetime of devotion... Which is good news for me (as a preacher) and for you – for all of us.

As Don Everts says,

"As a follower of Jesus, I follow one who has all the ideas. He is the King; I am not. There's no pressure on me to be clever. I am simply to repeat what Jesus taught and has passed down to me. I am to be a witness." (82f)

All that to say, the apostles' teaching is **a received message**. Which means our calling is not to dream up or listen to new ideas about Jesus and the gospel, but to give our all to attending to what Jesus has already made known about Himself and Life with Him...

Which doesn't imply *checking our brain* at the door – actually the opposite – it means *bring our whole mind to this* – to seeking to hear and learn and understand God's revelation and all it means for our lives and world... Being devoted to the apostles' teaching means and entails coming to *love God with all of your mind* (and heart and soul and strength)...

Third – and this again might seem unnecessary to say – but it's important for us to understand and acknowledge that the apostles' teaching **is now what we know as Scripture.**

For the first followers *it wasn’t*. It was the message and teaching of the apostles’ who sat and stood right there with them.

Which highlights *something else* to us – that being devoted to the apostles’ teaching was originally **a communal devotion**. Right? Do we see that?

For the early Christians, being devoted to the apostles’ teaching meant sitting **WITH** the apostles’ and others who’d learned from the apostles. It meant listening and learning **from another** or **others**. It meant conversation in community.

Which was largely the case till the **15th century** – when the printing press was invented, and bibles came to be mass produced and made available affordably – to a population that was only then starting to be literate as a whole.

Prior to this – that is, prior to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century – being devoted to the apostles’ teaching was **a communal practice** – that required coming together and listening and learning from others... from one disciple to another. And then, **in time**, the apostles’ teaching was written down and became what we now know as the **New Testament** – and with this, a Jesus-centered interpretation of the Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures).

So, when we talk about being “*devoted to the apostles’ teaching*” – we’re talking about being devoted not just to the apostolic sermons in the Book of Acts, but *to the whole of the New Testament* (which is all about Jesus) *and a Jesus-centered interpretation of the Old Testament*.

But with this, we're being invited into a conversation about Scripture **with others who've followed Jesus before us** – both those alive and around us, and God's people in ages past.

All that to say, devotion to the apostles' teaching does not simply send us off by ourselves to read and interpret the Bible in isolation, but actually, it invites us **TOGETHER** – to read and hear and study and interpret God's revelation, in dependence upon the inspiration of the Spirit, together...

Alright, fourth and lastly, devotion to the apostles teaching **requires humility and faith...**

It requires the **humility** to admit that we don't know it all – and never will – **but God does** – God is infinitely wise and all good – and because of this, I need/we need to listen. And keep listening. To learn and keep learning – day after day, week after week, year after year, for a lifetime – from Jesus, by the Spirit, through the apostles' teaching (the Old and New Testament as they have come down to us)...

And **to practice this humility together** – with a willingness to think and learn together – to learn from one another, from others who have devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to contribute to the conversation what God has taught us through His Word...

So, this devotion requires humility – **AND FAITH.**

Faith that God still speaks through His Word to ordinary people like you and me. Faith that what the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 is still true today.

2 Tim 3:16 - "All scripture **is** God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be equipped for every good work."

There is a whole Sunday of teaching in that one verse, but for the moment, just notice with me **ONE THING**: that what the apostle Paul says here about scripture – is not in the ***past*** tense, but in the ***present tense***.

He says, "All scripture **IS** God-breathed..."

And note, when Paul wrote this, the New Testament hadn't been written yet – which means Paul was speaking about the Old Testament – which were already ancient texts in his day (just like the NT is now for us).

And yet he said that "All scripture **IS** God-breathed..."

Which is to say that *through the scripture that God has given us God is still speaking* – still breathing out His revelation – "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be equipped for every good work."

To which my heart cries:

Oh God, please and thank You. Give me faith to keep coming... to keep listening... to keep living devoted to the Apostles' teaching...

Thank You for not leaving us to just make it up or figure it out for ourselves.

Thank You for the gift of the Apostles' teaching – and for the gift of the Holy Spirit who continues to abide in the church as we live in devotion to the apostles' teaching together....

Thank You GOD – that we don't need to know everything today (that I don't need to be embarrassed that I don't know everything – that I haven't arrived)... But that instead – YOU simply invite us to learn to listen – to be devoted to the Apostles' teaching – and as we do – You will teach and lead us – day after day – season after season – for a lifetime...

For God's glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy in Him...

Alright, so let me close with a few thoughts or ideas on **how to do this** – for those of you who are saying – **YES, but how!**

And the simplest answer I can give is – **just do something.**

- Commit to a regular reading plan
- Join a bible study – and pull some friends together to read, listen to and study Scripture...
- Read the Bible for yourself with a commentary in hand...
- Pray through the psalms (start at Psalm 1 and work your way through – then repeat)
- Make a weekly date with God (one night maybe) to read a whole text/letter...
- Commit to a study date
 - journal your insights
 - Read with a question in mind
 - Study something specific
- Choose a passage to memorize
- Listening to Scripture (on CD/MP3) – while you walk, drive, do simple tasks
- Learning from others – who are devoted to the Apostles' Teaching (books, friends, podcasts)
- Listen for God in the preaching of God's word (as you are right now)
 - Always asking, first and foremost: What does this reveal about God?

*Commit to do any of the above with others - *in conversation with others*

- Let's pray...