

Acts 2:42-47

God Focused

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Introduction

Let me begin this morning by asking you a couple of simple quick questions. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being very willing), how willing are you to share what you have with others? And secondly can you think of an occasion when someone shared something they had with you – and what did that feel like? Just have a quick chat about it.

So did you rank yourself an 8 or 9? Or are you more like a 3? If we are honest most of us would say that we have moments when we don't feel like sharing. For example I don't like sharing the TV if there's a good football match on!

A couple of weeks ago I walked Hadrian's Wall, a total of 106 miles over seven days. I went with four other people from this church. We all got on really well and had a wonderfully fun week. But did we share everything like those first century Christians we've read about in our reading this morning. Well the acid test was at our final bed and breakfast stop where we discovered it would cost us an extra £5 to have a bath! So to keep the cost down did we decide to share? The answer to that is...No – Instead we each had a shower (separately) and saved ourselves £25 in the process.

So what's the point of all of this? Well our reading this morning challenges us in so far that these first century Christians believed in sharing everything they had. They shared food, money and other possessions with each other. But the question is - what made them feel like sharing – well hopefully we'll get a clear answer to that as we unpack the reading we've heard this morning.

In Acts 2:42-47 we see the church starting to come together and we see the pattern of what they were doing and crucially at the heart of this is their focus on God. Through the apostles teaching we read those early Christians heard the word of God, We also read that in breaking bread they remembered the action of God and through prayer they recognised their need of God. The outcome was that God blessed them and added to their number. As we begin to delve deeper into this passage perhaps the challenge for us today both individually and collectively as a church is to ensure that we are also God focused.

With all this in mind I believe there are three characteristics of the early church that emerge from this passage that we can use to set ourselves a challenge to try and ensure that we just like those early Christians continue to grow as followers of Jesus Christ and become more and more God Focused.

They are to grow in character as...

1. A devoted learning church
2. A devoted loving church
3. A devoted worshipping and praying church

So let's start to look at the first characteristic - a devoted learning church.

1. A Devoted Loving Church

You know what it's like when you read a good book – you just can't put it down.

Recently whilst waiting for a flight to Berlin I started reading a book where I just couldn't wait to see what was coming next. In a similar way these early Christians just couldn't get enough. In verse 42 we read: 'they **devoted** themselves to the apostles' teaching.' The word 'devote' is really important. Think about what 'devote' means? It's a pretty strong word. It effectively meant that these new Christians were literally hanging on to every word of teaching that was uttered by the apostles. They were so keen to learn and find out whatever they could about their amazing new faith and their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

As I think about their devoted hunger for learning I wonder how I match up? Well I've been on an Alpha course – that gave me the basics and I've done some other studying and from these early Christians I can see that they received the Holy Spirit so I guess I don't have to do too much because the Holy Spirit will also tell me what I need to know? Now you could argue that's fine – a bit of learning and let's allow the Holy Spirit to guide me through the other bits. But is that really being how God wants his church to be. Does it truly reflect the early church? Is it being devoted to becoming more and more focused on God?

So what do we need to do? Well this reading is pretty clear. If we are to follow the example of the early church then we need to devote ourselves to the apostles teaching and fortunately for us through the inspiration of God there is plenty of it. The apostles Paul, Peter, James and John offer us a rich treasure chest of learning. So right now ask yourself - do I want to get more and more out of the pages of scripture? Do I see it as a treasury of stories and truths about God which can be part of my life? Or do I choose to think that this devotion isn't necessary and that all I need to know is the basics or that that I can simply make do with a word from the Holy Spirit? I have to confess that as I say all of this I feel hugely challenged, even hypocritical because hand on heart I know that more often than not I choose the easier option.

Perhaps think of it like this. Let me admit to you here and now – I'm totally useless at DIY. Why is this? Well if I get a new flat pack wardrobe very often I just jump in and try to build it without looking at the instructions. If I do look at the instructions then the chances are I won't finish them or I don't make sure I really understand them. But then I look at my father-in-law. He is a brilliant DIY man – probably because he is a trained carpenter, probably because he has learnt his trade continuously over a number of years. Probably because he is devoted to his craft.

Unfortunately I think my DIY approach is how we sometimes tend to treat the Bible and other Christian learning. We work out the

basics and occasionally refer to the manual and it's usually only one day a week. Whereas my father-in-law's approach to DIY is more how the early church went about things. He is devoted to always learning more and more about his craft and he is engaged with it on a very regular basis.

The question for each of us is...do we follow the Gordon DIY approach or do we follow Ruth's Dad's DIY approach. If you want a well built wardrobe at the end then there is no contest. Having said all of this its tough devoting ourselves in this way and it doesn't always just happen. So if like me you struggle with devoting yourself to biblical learning then perhaps consider going along to Ian's teaching series on Romans that starts at the end of this month – it may be a good starting point.

2. A Devoted Loving Church

So lets move on to our second point – growing in character as a loving church. Again take a look at the example of these early Christians. They spent time together; they shared possessions; they gave to the poor. But crucially look at verse 42 again and in particular the word 'fellowship'. If you go back to the original Greek this translation of 'fellowship' means 'participation' or 'sharing', and refers to the close relationship which Christians are called to enjoy with one another. But it also describes the relationship which we can have with God, a relationship which we know is one of love. So as people who had come to know a loving relationship with God, those early Christians pursued loving relationships within their own church.

So how do we see this love demonstrated? Well take a look at verse 44 where it says: "All the believers were together and had everything in common". Now before you get worried I don't think this means that there was no private ownership. Indeed reading verse 46 shows they still had their own homes. However, what this verse does demonstrate is a church which shares, which is distinctive and doesn't simply follow the pattern of this world. Verse 45 follows and demonstrates generosity. "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need". 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. They spent time together.

For me this simply endorses that it is a good thing for Christians today to also spend time together and why therefore it is important to meet not just regularly on a Sunday but also at other times as well. I'm not suggesting we should cut ourselves off from the rest of the world but rather that we should try and avoid being Christians on our own like the coal you remove from the blazing fire that quickly cools and becomes a dying ember.

Now take a look at verse 45 again: Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. The early church demonstrates clear giving implications - they gave to anyone as had need. This compassion started within the Christian community but it's likely to have reached beyond it. And so today we too are challenged to be generous with our giving and also to demonstrate a commitment to things such as FairTrade and Trade Justice.

When you begin to add all this up what clearly emerges is a loving church. People often think of love as an emotion. Real love however, is an action. It is living out the words of Jesus in John 13:34: 'a new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

So, are we a loving church? I don't simply mean that we walk about with warm feelings or a Christian smile, more importantly. Do we spend time together? Do we share together? Do we give to each other and to others? I think the answer to these questions is yes, but can we do more? The worse thing we can do is to allow complacency to take hold or think we've got it cracked. If we matched ourselves directly with the early church how would we fair? And we can never out-love Jesus. I really hope that collectively we are challenged by this passage of scripture to do all we can to strive to be like the early church in other words a loving church.

3. A Devoted Worshipping and Praying Church

And so to our third and final point – Growing in Character as a worshipping and praying church. In verse 42 we read this of the early church 'breaking of bread and prayers'. This indicates I think a form of service which these early Christians enjoyed. Also in v46 we read '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.'

They were a praying and worshipping community. They understood that part of a response to who Jesus is and what he has done is to respond in worship, praise and prayer. Just as with teaching, they made worship and prayer a priority. With this in mind notice a couple of other things about the early church. This passage shows us they met in different places for worship. They met in the temple and they met in their homes – and this was 'Every day' - clearly worship and prayer wasn't just restricted to Sunday morning. As well as using different venues it seems likely they also used different styles of worship. Breaking bread probably represented more reflective worship while at other times you sense they were more vibrant and spontaneous in their worship.

I think the good news for us is that there is a sense of something similar here at Christ Church. I know many people here who actively worship and pray right through the week. For example listening and singing along to Worship CD's at home or in the car, meeting together in home groups, singing at Tesco or the Chineham Arms at Christmas and regularly attending prayer meetings during the week. They all help us to grow in our Christ likeness and become more and more God focused.

Yes – we probably could describe ourselves as a worshipping and praying church but again if it was possible it would be fascinating to actually physically place ourselves next to the early followers of Jesus and see how God focused we really are. You see I say again - it's easy to get complacent or to perhaps feel that only one form of worship is appropriate or that Home Group is too inconvenient. Are we really in tune with the example of the early church or is their more for us to do?

When you look at the early church what do you see. God's love shone out from them. Their love for each other and their compassion for those around them would have been clearly evident. Look for example at verse 47: "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved". These people of the early church were making a huge impact. And what is the evidence of this... 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' What we have with

these early Christians is a powerful picture of God's transformation taking place. These people were growing in their likeness of Christ as they were coming to know Jesus.

Part of the challenge for us as a church as with all churches is that it's easy to become inward looking and focus on ourselves rather than God. But if we devote ourselves to learning, if we devote ourselves to loving (and by that I mean love for others that involves action) and if we devote ourselves to worshipping and praying then we will be God focused and the wonderful consequence is that we will reach out. Let me repeat again: And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved

Conclusion

The early church teaches us and challenges us in such a wonderful way. Let me repeat again:

- a devoted learning church
- a devoted loving church
- a devoted worshipping and praying church

They recognized their fellow believers as brothers and sisters in the family of God – they shared all they had so they could all benefit from God's gifts. So how do we measure up? Well in many ways I think we do pretty well at Christ Church. But it's so dangerous when you start to say that. In the world that we live in its tempting especially if we have material wealth to cut ourselves off from one another whereby we simply take care of our own interests, each providing for and enjoying his or her own piece of the world. But as part of God's spiritual family, it is our responsibility to help one another in every possible way. God's family works best when its members work together. Also consider that a healthy church attracts people to Jesus. The early church in our reading had an amazing devotion to learning, worship, praying and brotherly and sisterly love – and it was contagious. A healthy loving, learning, worshipping and praying church will grow in numbers. What are we doing to make Christ Church the kind of place that will attract others to Jesus.

We have to continue learning, we have to continue loving and we have to continue worshipping and praying and becoming more and more God focused as we seek to follow Jesus in every way.