

A New Community: “Devoted”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF CHURCH

Talk to John Q. Churchgoer, and he will tell you that Christianity is about a personal relationship with God. It’s about getting saved and becoming a better person. Church is either boring or interesting but either way, it’s optional. If you want to have a church, then it should cater to individual spiritual needs (“I want to pray better, so offer a class teaching me how to pray better”). Or, if not that, maybe church is more like a spiritual social club: a holy fraternity of individuals focusing on their own spiritual growth.¹ If it helps you grow, it’s right for you; if it doesn’t, well I hear Harding has an excellent brunch that I’d recommend.

This idea fits perfectly with a “me” culture. You can find Bibles so personalized they have “Bibles for people named Bob,” and take-as-you-go communion kits where you can commune....with absolutely no one! A highly popular Christian author recently said “church is not a huge part of my life.” “Most of the influential Christian leaders I know (who are not pastors) do not attend church.” In fact, church is sort of like a university that helped me achieve my personal goals, but now I’ve “graduated.”²

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, “Chapter 9: Calling a Friend: Congregation and Community,” in *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (IVP Books, 2016), pp. 115-27. Esp. 118.

² Donald Miller. See his facebook post “The faith I keep. And the religion I leave behind.” (Oct 26, 2021). <https://www.facebook.com/donaldmillerwords/videos/the-faith-i-keep-and-the-religion-i-leave-behind/858920454771792/> See also “Why I Don’t Go to Church Very Often, a Follow Up Blog,” Storyline (blog). (Feb 5, 2014). Cited in Warren, p.120.

But this idea is foreign to the great confessions throughout church history, and it is foreign to the New Testament. It is good and right to have a personal relationship with God. Christianity is at least that; but it is also always more than that. What Christians have confessed for two millennia is that it is impossible to have a meaningful relationship with Christ outside of a vital relationship with the church. That is, you can't have a fully mature relationship with Christ without belonging to His body, without being His bride. It was the 3rd century Church father Cyprian who once declared

he who forsakes the Church of Christ [cannot] attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the Ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church. The Lord warns, saying, He who is not with me is against me, and he who gathers not with me scatters. He who breaks the peace and the concord of Christ does so in opposition to Christ; he who gathers elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ.³

This starts with the large, global church that contains every single Christian. We learned last week that the same process that adds you to Christ adds you to His body. We belong to the one holy apostolic global church. It contains every Christian on the planet living now, and it contains every Christian who has ever lived throughout the centuries. The one body. Because God didn't come to just save individuals; he came to redeem a body, that is one way the word "church" is used in the New Testament.

But overwhelmingly, in the vast majority of cases, the word "church" in the New Testament refers to a local segment of that body, a gathered people in some location. God sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within individuals. But the majority of the time, when the Bible speaks of the indwelling Spirit, it refers to the Spirit dwelling within a gathered body of believers, what we now call the local congregation. The gathered few in time and place with whom we share our communion. And in our communion, we commune with them and with the church at large, reminding ourselves of our intimate connection.

That is, except when we don't.

CHURCH IN A CONSUMER CULTURE

³ Cyprian, *De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate (On The Unity of the Church)*, Treatise 1, sect. 6. (AD 200-258). <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050701.htm>

We live in such a consumer culture. The goal of work is to have money. And the goal of money is to buy stuff. Lots of stuff. Way too much stuff. Stuff that seems so essential right now. I mean, everybody needs a knife that will cut through a shoe. So we buy it. Today's essential purchase shows up in tomorrow's garage sale. So much unwanted stuff. And our consumer culture leads to thin commitments. Like the Athenians, we always want something new. And when the shine wears off, so does our interest.

We do this in relationships. Relationships are all about me, what I'm looking for and what I get out of it. "What is my role in all of this" is never asked. So it leads to thin commitment. No wonder the divorce rate is high in America. No wonder the rate within church and outside of church is virtually the same.

And so it's no wonder we see consumer culture when we come to church. The 20th century saw the rise of the modern American church. Just me and God. Enjoy the show. Church is a 1-hour experience, put on for me to consume. And choosing a church is like eating at the food court. What's your appetite?

And so for the typical American consumer Christian, here is church: We sit. We receive. We consume. Sometimes we ask more. For example, we might check to make sure this place offers more for my kids to sit and receive and consume! And we then we call ourselves *members* of the church.

And can you find anything remotely like that in Scripture? When we open our Bibles to the book of Acts, are we not shocked to find that the New Testament church was NOTHING like that?!

Francis Chan says try to imagine this 1st century conversation between Peter and Paul:

"I go to The River. They had great music and I love the kid's program."

"Cool. Can I check out your church next Sunday? I'm not getting much out of mine."

"Totally. I'm not going to be there next Sunday because little Matthew has soccer. But how about the week after?"

"Sounds good. Hey, do they have a single's group?"⁴

I love when a church sings well and prepares themselves to sing well, don't you? I love when loving Shepherds, trained children's ministers, and eager parents get involved to spiritually train our children. I love that Naomi has worked so hard to help us create a singles group here at West Side. If you hear that imaginary conversation and think we want to denigrate such things you miss the point.

⁴ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (David C. Cook, 2018), "Chapter 4: The Gang."

I'm talking about why we are here. That conversation doesn't sound anything like what you would hear between two Christians on their way to a gathered assembly in the Roman catacombs under the cover of darkness, while risking their lives to honor the presence of the living Jesus and to respond to the call of God's Spirit within them to manifest the Kingdom of God. The consumer model of church—where church is sitting, singing, and suffering through a sermon, then shuffling off to Shoney's--means having as much spiritual connection to this body of believers as you do to the people who happen to sit next to you in a movie theater.⁵

It's not what God had in mind.

What the NT calls for is intimate connection through deep commitment within a covenant community. One that blesses those inside, blesses those on the outside, puts the world on notice and causes the world to take notice. A people who inspire because they have been inspired.

Our text this morning says the gathered people of God “devoted themselves.”

DEVOTED TO A PERSON: GOD

First, they devoted themselves to God. In a world that only looks inward, we look up. Do you see the practices the early church engaged in? We see studying the word of God, offering prayers to God, communing with God. However church became comparable to the a theater, the first century church was the exact opposite of a theater. We didn't come to sit in the audience, we came to perform and proclaim for God is the audience. Don't think of me or Robert as the actors on stage. Think of us as the stage hands whispering your lines: for you, and me, all of us are offering up worship and the hearer—the listener—is God himself. What matters most is not what I get out of worship, but what He gets from our worship. And if what happens up here doesn't suit your taste, look up above any of us on stage to the Holy Trinity looking down on us in love, and moving among us in this place this morning. Hear this wonderful line from Philip Yancey:

⁵ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church*, chap 4: “In many churches, you have about as much of a connection to the people who are supposedly your spiritual family as you would to someone who visited the same theater as you.”

“Church exists primarily not to provide entertainment or to encourage vulnerability or to build self-esteem or to facilitate friendships but to worship God; if it fails in that, it fails.”⁶

Oh, I can sit in my pew as a theater critic. I can discuss with my neighbor how much I prefer the order of worship we did last week to the one this week. When C. S. Lewis first began attending a church service, he noticed they were singing 5th rate lyrics set to 6th rate music. But then he saw the old man kneeling in prayer wearing muddy boots. And as he listened to the prayer, he realized he wasn't worthy to clean those boots.

The trappings of a service are no match for an encounter with God. And for the spiritually minded, that can happen every time we meet. But it has to start with an inward devotion. When the Old Testament speaks of being devoted, notice how often the subject matter...is God. In the latter part of Solomon's reign, he and his people suffered because “his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God” (1 Kings 11:4; see also 1 Kings 15:3). Contrast that with a good king. A good king, says the Chronicler, is one whose heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord (2 Chron 17:6).

David knew. That's why when he gave instructions to his son Solomon on how to build the Temple, he gathered all the people, urging them to help Solomon build the Temple, but the first words out of his mouth were these: “Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God” (1 Chron 22:19).

When our focus, our sole focus, is on Him, everything else falls into place. And people can't help but notice it. To put this another way, do you have a vital relationship with Christ that is so transforming and transformative that it changes your life forever? If so, you'll see it, in fact, you'll see HIM, in every service.

DEVOTED TO A PEOPLE: THE COMMUNITY

Second, they devoted themselves to each other. In a world that is highly individualized, we think of the community. As you read through Acts 2:42-47, you'll see the early church together. Serving together. Worshipping together. Communing together. And whatever anyone had need of, it was theirs, for what's mine is yours. Devoted to each other. It's a New Testament command. “Be devoted to one another in love,” writes Paul (Romans 12:10). Love. In fact, over 50 times in the New Testament we are commanded to love one another. Over 50 times! And we know that love is not a feeling felt in your heart, it's an action done with your hands. And so Paul writes to the Corinthians this note: “You know that the household of Stephanas were the first

⁶ Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 1998), p. 25. For this paragraph, see pp. 24-27.

converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people" (1 Cor 16:15). They devoted themselves to loving the community.

Is there any better example of what it means to be a community than a gang? Oh, I know when you first think of a gang, you think of how they hurt those on the outside. But think about what it means to be on the inside. Can you imagine gang life being reduced to a one-hour weekly gathering? Can you imagine the conversation? "Yo, how was gang? I had to miss this week because Matt had soccer and, well, life has been pretty crazy!"⁷

Nobody talks like that. Because a gang is not a once-a-week theater experience. And neither is church. It's a community of loyal, committed, and present people sharing their lives and shaping their lives together.

Or is it? In the Old Testament, one of the biggest problems God had to deal with among his people was the problem of syncretism. That's when you say yes to Yahweh, but you say yes to Baal, too. Why not cover all your bases? It's a problem in other parts of the world today. Sometimes you hear of very "successful" short term mission trips with a hundred baptisms to show for it! But for the people, it was like attending a community fair and picking up free giveaways at each booth. Buddhist yesterday. Baptized today. Wonder what's on the block tomorrow?

For most of us, though, the problem isn't Baal and Jesus, or Buddha and Jesus. It's baseball and Jesus. It's bass fishing and Jesus. It's business and Jesus. Never forget that it was in the context of money, clothes, food, and entertainment when Jesus said "no one can serve two masters: after all, you will end up devoted to one, and you'll despise the other" (Luke 16:13).⁸

We've already talked about how church is an opportunity to give God what he is asking for; it is also a call to give to each other what we are begging for. We need to stop asking if sports, work, and television is keeping us from the Sunday assembly. We need to ask if sports, work, and television is keeping us from *being* church. Your gifts and my gifts—the ones we use in the corporate world to get money, and in relationships to make friends—these are given to us by God, says Paul, for a greater reason: "Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit," writes Paul, "try to excel in those that build up the church" (1 Cor 14:12).

⁷ Francis Chan, *Letters to Church*, chap 4.

⁸ The prophet Ezekiel mourned what would happen to the God-forsakers in Israel; for their daily walk caused them to devote their hearts to every idol other than God (Ezek 11:21; 20:16).

Church is a covenant community. We don't decide to attend. We agree to serve. We ask others in this room to hold us accountable. We covenant with other people to love them and give ourselves over to them rather than sailing our own little ship on the high seas of life. It's the difference between being adopted and living in an orphanage. We don't just shared space; we are committed as a family, and we are in this together. To put this another way, a member is never fully assimilated into this body of believers until the language changes from "they" to "we." God never expected perfection from you and me. But he did expect commitment (Luke 9:57-62).

I have a dream. It isn't mine. It's the Lords. But I want to share it with you. The dream is for every single member here to have a role, a task, a responsibility, a place where what you do and what you bring is so needed, were you to be away we *all* would feel it. I challenge you to drive our shepherds crazy with far too many requests. Make Casey put on his creative thinking cap with a list of things you are able to do and say "good luck finding a way to make that into a service for the kingdom." I promise you we can do that. There is a role for you here at West Side, as we *be* the church together.

Baptism says "I commit." The Supper says, "I re-commit." The only question is: to what?

DEVOTED TO A PLACE

Third, the early church met together in the temple courts. They met in each others' homes. They had favor with all the people. And the place was better for it. Let's talk for a minute about devotion to a place. In a world that is highly mobile, we learn the value of stability.

In 1960, George Smith wrote the little book *The Apple Tree Community*. On his farm sat an ancient apple tree that attracted all kinds of creatures and critters. One day a woodsman stopped by with an axe and a suggestion. "Let me cut down this tree so you can burn the pieces in your fireplace, and then you can plant a new, young straight tree in its place." But farmer Smith kindly said No. You see, said, Farmer Smith, there is far more to that tree than meets your eye. "That old apple tree is a honey factory, a bird's hotel, a summer cafeteria, a winter pantry, a concert stage, an egg hatchery, a nursery, a shelter, a floral exhibit. It's even more. It's the center of a patch of green earth where daisies, buttercups, goldenrod and even primroses grow."

Sometimes all we see is an old apple tree. We don't see the apple tree community. Or why there is such a community in the first place: because that old apple tree is rooted in a place, and standing through the storms of life, has matured in that place and proved

itself a steady and dependable place, offering shade, nourishment, and hospitality over time.⁹

I have always loved old farms and old homes that housed the same family for generations. Stores that have stood and served a community for a century. I have admired preachers who stayed at a congregation for 40 years. But I never fully realized the impact until I examined my own life. I used to pride myself in the fact that I have lived from coast to coast and on foreign soil. Racking up states and countries on my resume made me feel like I had diverse experience, able to relate to a broad range of people. All of that is true. But one acquires that in exchange for a hollowness that doesn't quickly go away when you realize you have no hometown. And there is no one place on the map where you can say "those are my people."

Church hopping is just another expression of our hypermobility, spurred on by our consumeristic culture. But what if you decided to stay. To grow roots. To be a blessing in a way that only truly grows a harvest over time?

In Dubuque Iowa stands a Cistercian monastery known as Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey. All the members of that abbey have devoted themselves not just to each other, but to that place. You see, they took a vow of stability. It reads this way:

We vow to remain all our life with our local community. We live together, pray together, work together, relax together. We give up the temptation to move from place to place in search of an ideal situation. Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion. And when interpersonal conflicts arise, we have a great incentive to work things out and restore peace. This means learning the practices of love: acknowledging one's own offensive behavior, giving up one's preferences, forgiving.¹⁰

We all know life happens. We know sometimes movement is not your choice—when your job is no longer an option here, or economics demand you move elsewhere. The calling of God to mission is not only ok, it's a gift. And it's not a sin to move closer to family. But I'm talking about a mindset. What if you were all in—as much as depends on you to be part of the legacy of this place? To hope for the harvest you will only see decades from now?

⁹ Quoted in C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (IVP, 2014), "Chapter 3: Stability: Fidelity to People and Place."

¹⁰ Quoted in *Slow Church*.

DEVOTED TO A PURPOSE

Finally, the early church was devoted to a purpose. In a world that follows instincts and the latest craze, we act with intentionality, and pursue the vision of God.

At the beginning of the sermon I described the church this way: intimate connection through deep commitment within a covenant community. One that blesses those inside, blesses those on the outside, puts the world on notice and causes the world to take notice. A people who inspire because they have been inspired.

CONCLUSION

Words like "religion" and "church" sound so negative in the ears of many. It's common to think church people are takers, wanting your time, your money, and your freedom. I can think of stories in church history that sound like that. You might think of experiences in your life that felt like that.

But the original vision--the dream in the mind of God as he wrapped a towel around his waist to wash the feet of the very people who would soon forsake him--was of a people who would be known as givers. To God and to you. People who didn't come asking for your money; they would come deeply interested in your story. People who didn't demand blind allegiance; but people who would share such enthusiasm for the Savior, such selfless interest in Christ and his cause that others couldn't help but be inspired.

Have you ever seen a true devotee? Someone who spends 100 hours a week learning a skill, or memorizing lines to perfect a practice? Have you ever watched a YouTube clip or witnessed on stage a performance that was uncanny as the performer gave everything they had to the role? You don't walk away feeling like they took something from you, or made demands on you. You walk away amazed and inspired. And, for some, you feel a sense of challenge, and maybe an inward call to consider to what you are giving your life. After all, we all are living for something.

And for us, the insiders, the question this morning is simple: In a world void of devotion, won't we chart a different course? And with so many things to be devoted to, will we choose to love our God and King, and to love the church, not just in word, but in deed and truth. For this is what the Lord had in mind all along.