

A New Community: “The Apostles’ Teaching”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

Scripture Reading

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

“He must be devoted to the trustworthy message we teach. Then he can use these accurate teachings to encourage people and correct those who oppose the word” (Titus 1:9 GW).

INTRODUCTION

We can feed our bellies till we couldn’t eat another bite. But man was never meant to live by bread alone. Man *does not* live by bread alone—but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4).

Five minutes after rising from the water, forgiven from every sin, and filled with God’s Holy Spirit, the earliest Christians devoted themselves to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. But topping the list and serving as the subject for our lesson this morning, they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.

DEVOTED TO TEACHING

They did not devote themselves to their gut instincts. I read a beautiful story just the other day where a man said that his wife when she was just a teenager, was sharing the gospel with a neighbor, when all of the sudden she herself realized that *she* wasn’t a believer! You see, she was doing what her youth pastor told her to do and was using the materials her youth leader gave her to use. And while reading it, she became convicted. She had thought that being a Christian basically meant being a good little girl and going to church. That’s what seemed right. That’s what felt right. That’s what she assumed deep inside. But then she read Scripture as it was being *taught* to her, and she came to realize that being a believer is not being a good little girl and going to church,

it's trusting in Jesus Christ with everything she had. And trusting in Jesus Christ makes us into good little boys and girls, and it creates a desire within us to be a part of his community. But she finally understood the gospel.

The early Christians did not devote themselves to their gut instincts. But to teaching.

Another thing they did not devote themselves to, strange as it may seem, is their "experience." They didn't get together and talk about the amazing experience they all had of the Holy Spirit! That just astounds me. I would have fully expected them—as we see and hear today—to make "experience" the all-important center of Christianity. I would have thought they'd go around saying "have you experienced the same thing I experienced? If so, let's just focus on and talk about that. We don't need Christian theology or Christian doctrine or Christian teaching. We just need the same experience." The first Christians didn't do that!

Listen to Alistair Begg:

"If that was ever going to happen you would have anticipated it happening when there was such an effulgence of the Spirit of God on the Day of Pentecost. But what do you find? You find that those who had been filled with the Spirit of God are immediately concerned to understand the Word of God! And that is *always* the case."¹

Great signs accompanied the apostles. I mean great signs and wonders. Peter and Paul could do some amazing stuff—stuff that if I did 1/10th of, you would be astounded. But when he wanted to prove his worth, when he wanted to prove his mettle to church after church, he held up his apostolic calling, he held up his teaching, and he then he pointed to his scars, earned for teaching and preaching the very words given to him by God.

And Begg gives us this wonderful line: The spirit of God leads the people of God to submit to the Word of God. And it is powerful stuff. I take what I do very seriously, for teaching is God's way to bring about both unity and depth among God's people, to break strongholds, and to change hearts forever.

Charles Spurgeon once said that his pulpit was more influential than the throne of the King of England! And the reason it was, was because his message came first from the throne of God.

¹ Alistair Begg, "The Apostles' Teaching," Truth For Life, Parkside Church (Jan 2, 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZA5K6RifF4&ab_channel=AlistairBegg

This church is exceptional in that we consistently have nearly 70 or even 75% of those who come to worship stick around for Bible class. We are fairly unique in that we offer classes before worship and after worship, with 6 or 7 different adult offerings, and classes for every age group. We even offer more teaching on Sunday nights—with specialty classes designed for our youth. We have a plethora of classes offered for learning on Wednesday nights. We have coffee time on YouTube every Monday morning with Casey and Mark for a period of devotion and teaching. Our golden agers have a time of teaching every Tuesday morning. Our ladies come together every Wednesday morning for *two hours* of discussion and teaching. We offer agape groups throughout the week. We are a teaching kind of church. And we do that because the first disciples devoted themselves to teaching.

DEVOTED TO APOSTLES' TEACHING

And it wasn't just any kind of teaching. You can go to any bookstore or browse Amazon on your phone and find book by all kinds of people on all kinds of topics and you can learn just about anything you want to learn. Pick a subject, pick a side, and you can find some learned professor (or, if that's not your cup of tea, some famous actor) who holds that position and will articulate it for you. So teaching is very important, but the early Christians thought what kind of teaching they were devoted to mattered a great deal.

And so they devoted themselves to the *Apostles'* teaching.

Teaching Handed Down

We know that the Apostles' teaching was deeply interesting. Just 15 chapters later, Paul appears in Athens and all the townspeople say, “may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” It might have been new to the Athenians, but it wasn't new teaching. Like clothes worn by the second, third, and fourth children, it was a hand-me-down!

I wonder if you have a skill that you are known for, which is also the skill your father or mother were known for. Or maybe even a grandparent. Maybe when you were still little, Grandpa Eddie took you to his garage, gave you a pair of safety glasses, and let you watch as he gently guided those 2x4s through one of his many cool machines, showing you how to build a birdhouse or a rocking chair. Or Grandma Ethel and her sewing circle were all gracious enough to bandage your finger and show you once again how to thread the needle and push it through without pricking your finger. That would be a skill faithfully handed down through teaching.

The Greek word for that is *paradosis*. Twice in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul uses this word when he speaks of the teachings or traditions that were “handed down” from the Apostles to the church (1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15). That teaching that was handed down from the Apostles to the earliest churches, was then handed on to subsequent generations. Paul said, “what you have heard from me” you should “entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:20). That continues to this day, with faithful men and women who teach our Bible classes, who learned it from their teachers, who learned it from their teachers. “When we worship Jesus,” writes Tish Warren, “we rely on millions of Christians over thousands of years whom God has used to bear witness to himself.”²

Just like wood-working or the art of crocheting, the apostle’s teaching was handed down from generation to generation, but it was first handed down to *them*. For Paul said what I handed down to you I first received from the Lord (1 Cor 15:1).

Teaching With Authority

It is not just the content of the Apostles teaching that was handed down from the Lord to the Apostles, it was the *nature* of that teaching. Has anyone ever told you “Your mannerisms remind me of your grandmother. It’s just uncanny”? Well, when two of the Apostles began teaching in the temple courts, the leaders listened for a while and the text says they were amazed that these untaught men were speaking in a way that was eerily familiar. And they remembered, “that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Do you remember the startling difference that people noticed when Jesus would open his mouth to teach? The crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he spoke as one with authority (Matt 7:28; 22:33; Mk 1:22, 27; Lk 4:32; 11:18). Sometimes he taught in parables (Mk 4:2); sometimes in prose (Mk 12:38). And either way, there was something different about it. When they arrested Jesus and took him to trial, the high priest questioned Jesus “about his disciples and his teaching” (Jn 18:19). And do you know what Jesus said about his teaching? It was handed down, even to him! “My teaching is not my own,” said our Master; “whoever chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:16-17).

Isn’t it beautiful to think that the content of the teaching and the manner of the teaching that we receive today was handed down from the Apostles, and the teaching of the Apostles was handed down from Jesus Christ? And even the teaching of Christ was handed down by the power of the Spirit from the Father himself.

² Tish Warren, “Chapter 9: Calling A Friend: Congregation and Community,” in *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (2016), p. 119.

Teaching That Brings Life

The last thing to note before we move on is that the Apostles' teaching brought life because it was centered on the Life giver himself. In Acts 13, the Proconsul is transported from death to life, out of darkness into the kingdom of Christ because of the teaching. The text says “for he was amazed at the teaching *about the Lord*” (Acts 13:12).

When done right, preachers and teachers speak from the words of God (Scripture), to point to the Word of God (Jesus), and thus they place before the eyes, ears, and hearts of a congregation a word *from* God the Father to shape their lives *for* God by the power of the Spirit. The phrase “the word of the Lord came” (or its equivalents) shows up in the Bible nearly 4,000 times: and that’s just in the Old Testament! And when it does come, it creates new worlds.

In Genesis 1, it was the word of God, brought forth by the breath of God, that created and shaped the cosmos. It was the word of God, brought forth by the breath of God, that called forth Abraham and birthed a nation. In Ezekiel’s vision of dry, dead, bones—you know the story. A wind or breath brings these bones to life. It’s a story of rebirth and resurrection, a prophecy that God will bring his nation back, and ultimately that he will bring humanity back through the resurrection of his Son. But let us not forget this all happened by the Word of God, brought about by the breath of God, and before it spread over the dry dead bones, it came from the mouth of a preacher. God calls Ezekiel to start preaching to this bunch of dry bones, and through that preaching of the Word God brings life to the bones.”³

Whatever this is, I want it! This teaching that was handed down from the Father to the Son, and from the Son by the Spirit to the Apostles has been handed down to us. I want to revel in the authority behind it. I want to experience the life-giving that comes from it!

And, at this point, all of us Bible-owning, Bible-loving, Bible-toting, Bible-class teaching, Bible-class attending, Bible-Bowl champion Bible defenders want to shout from the rooftop: the answer is simple: read the manual!

There is wisdom in that. When we fellas get up at 4:30 on Christmas morning to put together a playground set with 2000 parts, and we say, “I don’t need to read the

³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), Chapter 1 (Kindle).

manual,” it doesn’t mean we won’t have a finished product. It just means our finished product will be unsafe and will probably kill our children.

It is a step in the right direction to say “read the manual.” But you know as well as I do that the Pharisees read the manual and they were complicit in the crucifixion of the God who gave us the manual. The church has read the manual for 2000 years, and we have at least that many factions and divisions, everyone claiming they know how to read the manual right. And in our stream, where we put a premium on individualism—each person reading for themselves, thinking for themselves, and standing alone by themselves—you get two people in a room and ask a Bible question you’ll likely get 3 opinions (because one of us isn’t even sure if we agree with ourselves).

It is true that Jesus said 7 times in the Scriptures “have you not read”? But the same Jesus who said over and over again “have you not read?” also said to religious leaders who memorized vast amounts of Scripture: “go and find out what this *means*.”

- When the Pharisees who knew every Leviticus verse about separation, cleanliness, and holiness, asked why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus responded: Go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:13)
- When the Pharisees who knew backwards and forwards the command ‘thou shalt do no work’ on the Sabbath day attacked Jesus for plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, Jesus responded: If you had known what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless (Matt 12:7)

And so, I hear our Lord gently saying to us as we read Acts 2:42 (“and they were devoted to the Apostles’ teaching”) “go and learn what this means.” These young Christians were barely dry. Not one of them had a New Testament handed to them as they came up out of the water, because it had not been written yet. Paul had not written his majestic letter to the Romans, or to the Corinthians, or to any of the churches for that matter. He wasn’t even a Christian yet! With no New Testament, this early band of believers “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.” *To what exactly did they devote themselves to?*⁴

⁴ For an excellent treatment of this phrase, see Dr. Scott Adair, “Devoted to the Apostles’ Doctrine,” *Fan the Flame: Renewed by the Power of the Holy Spirit (Acts)*, Harding University Lectureship 2019 (Sep 30, 2019). Audio: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/lectureship/2019/>. Video: <http://hu16-vod.harding.edu/CablecastPublicSite/show/2436?channel=1>

DEVOTED TO THE GOSPEL

I'm sure by now you've noticed this set-up on stage. It's an old illustration. Stephen Covey used it to illustrate the value of priorities in his book *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. You remember, don't you? The big rocks represent the important things in life: relationships; family; religion; principles; service. Things that are both important and urgent. The beads or pebbles represent important things but less than the foundation principles of life: how to get ahead in your career; how to improve your skills and how to learn new skills and grow in important ways. The sand represents the lowest level—things that are neither urgent nor important. Video games, scrolling on facebook, eating junk food and being a couch potato. He makes the point that we spend so much of our time in the sand. We go there first because its easy, and before we know it, it fills up our calendar. We barely have room for some pebbles. And before we know it, we never even get around to the most important things in life. It's a valuable illustration for a number of things. It can even help explain Acts 2:42.

When the text says “they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching,” the first thing I do is look back at what the Apostle just taught them. The sermon in Acts 2 lists many foundational truths: **[Place rocks in the vase]**

- (1) There is one God, our Father
- (2) There is one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God
- (3) There is one faith—the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- (4) There is one body—the church of our Lord, containing all believers
- (5) There is one baptism—the shared experience of all believers, in which we find forgiveness from our sins
- (6) There is one Spirit—God's Holy Spirit, the giver of Life
- (7) There is one hope—hope of everlasting life with God, when times of refreshing shall come and Christ will raise the dead, and so shall we ever be with the Lord

When you look at the sermon in Acts 3, you find the same story. In Acts 4. In Acts 10. In Acts 13. In Paul's speeches before Felix and Agrippa. You find the same story, with the same major themes, given over and over and over again.

There is another way to speak of these simple foundational truths. We just say “the gospel.” But that is what these central truths represent. In Acts 15:7, Paul says what his hearers heard and believed was “the word of the gospel.” Acts 8:25 says that the Apostles went about preaching the word of the Lord, and then he says that preaching the word of the Lord meant “they preached the gospel.”

So, the doctrinal content of “the apostles’ teaching” here in Acts 2:42 is simply *the gospel*.

Once the big rocks of the gospel proclamation are in place, then you can begin to see all the important implications of the gospel. The things that follow from having the gospel in place. **[Place beads in the vase]**

For example, can't we see the effortless ways in which Christian *ethics* follows from Christian doctrine? If there is one God, then I am not him, and thus I am called to humility. If there is one Spirit, then I must welcome all in whom is God's spirit. If there is one hope, then I must live as a person full of hope. If there is one body, then I can't hoard when another member of my body needs something. And thus, in Acts 2:42-47, we see Christian ethics following from Christian doctrine. They were together as a body should be. They gave to whoever needed anything. They were full of awe (which is deep humility) and had favor with all the people (as those who sought peace and love that comes from the one Spirit).

If the gospel is true, there are many—maybe hundreds of things that must also be true and must follow in the light of the gospel. And those things fit in smoothly once the gospel is laid down. Some of these are mentioned directly here in Acts. Some are there by implication. Some are not there at all.

Then there are matters of great interest, but clearly debatable; things over which Christians have disagreed for centuries. **[Place Sand in the Vase]**. Things which honest and sincere believers reading the same text with willing hearts just don't see eye to eye, or things the text just doesn't clearly reveal. Interesting. Certainly worth thinking about as someone wanting to please the master and grow in every way. But it's not the gospel. And it's not a necessary result OF the gospel. Its Christian trivia. It has its place, tucked neatly in the crevices once the gospel is laid down and the direct implications of the gospel have found a solid place to land. These don't seem to have even entered the picture to what Luke had in mind when he spoke of the Apostles' teaching to which these early Christians were devoted.

You know there were religious people in Jesus' day who considered themselves people "Devoted to Moses' doctrine." After all, Moses gave 613 commandments, all handed down to him by God. And over and over again, Jesus looked at them and said "you don't know the scriptures; you don't know the power of God. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel. You don't seem to realize there are two greatest commands, and there are weightier matters of the law. You want to see someone devoted to the Moses' doctrine? Take a look at the good Samaritan. Learn from the tax collector fumbling in prayer." And they didn't get it. They knew every verse in their Bibles. Backwards and forwards. They knew enough to debate a carpenter, entrap an unsuspecting bystander, enslave a proselyte, and embarrass an adulterer. But they didn't

know God. And I imagine it is still true that there are foolish men building their houses on sand.

I say all this to emphasize that it was possible to be “devoted to the Apostles’ teaching” just moments after becoming Christians and long before there was a New Testament to read. When all they had were the big rocks. For a church to be faithful to Acts 2:42, must they be fully aware and fully in agreement on every issue that came down the pike a full millennium later? I would think not. Being devoted to the Apostles’ teaching doesn’t mean they were all Bible Bowl champions. It doesn’t mean they all knew the answer to questions like “is it wrong to take another Christian to court?” “Should we vote for a Christian Caesar, or should we stay out of politics?” “Can an elder have one faithful child and one unfaithful child, or must all his children be faithful, and if so, must he have children in the plural?” Church should be a place to ask, think, discuss all those questions and more. *But that is not required* for a church to be “devoted to the apostles’ teaching.” In fact, I have known churches to major in those kinds of questions, and lose sight of the *gospel* which Acts *majors* in. And when the bickering, and the fighting, and the backstabbing, and the splitting occurs, it proves that asking all those other questions actually caused them to no longer be devoted to the apostles’ teaching—for there is no teaching more clear from the Apostles, than that we have love one for another, and that we endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And there is no clearer sign that a people are devoted to the apostles’ teaching than that they want to be together, share together, and show deference one for another.

DEVOTION CALLS FOR BIG ROCKS FIRST

When it comes to the big rocks illustration, what is the moral of the story? Whatever you do, big rocks first.

Years before there was a New Testament, centuries before there were 1000 splits over various minor issues, the early Christians devoted themselves to the gospel. That is, they centered their thinking and built their faith on the big rocks—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If our reading of Scripture causes us to deny these central teachings, we are not reading Scripture right. If our church community—due to experience or reasoned argument—has separated itself from all other believers based on peculiar teachings that are not central to the Christian faith, that may be a sign that we have failed to appreciate the universal faith of the Christian community. But if, in turn, we recognize the big rocks for what they are, we may just find that our house of faith is being built on solid rock rather than shifting sand. All other teaching, if it is sound, hangs comfortably on the pegs of the gospel, agrees with the gospel, and flows from the gospel.

And that is how brand new Christians, with no New Testaments, could be devoted to the Apostles' teaching. Show me a people who know no more than the gospel, act on what little they know and who love much, and I'll show you a people devoted to the apostles' teaching. Show me a people whose lives are so inspiring that people watch them live and say, "I want what you've got!" And I'll show you a people devoted to the apostle's teaching.