

The verses that we are going to look at this evening describe the church life that resulted when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:1-41 has described the day of Pentecost, the sounds and sights that accompanied the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and the sermon that Peter preached as he was empowered by the same Holy Spirit. Towards the end of Peter's sermon, many of his hearers were convicted of their sin and danger and asked what they should do. Peter had preached the good news of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit through repentance and being baptized and we are told that about 3000 souls were added on that day. The verses that we are going to consider this evening describe for us what happened in the days following these events. They describe what the new followers of Jesus did in this new situation that was characterized by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. The gospel was preached. Many people were added to the number of believers and Acts 2:42-47 describes what the believers in Jesus did as a result of the influence of the newly poured out Holy Spirit.

Luke is describing for us what happens when the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives. He describes what happens when the gospel is preached and people receive it and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In general terms Luke describes the new believers as being involved in the corporate life of the church. Luke actually describes salvation in Jesus Christ as being added to the church. Verse 41 says, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." And verse 47 says "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." No distinction is made between being saved and being added to the community of believers. That is how central the church is to the biblical understanding of salvation. Individuals are saved, but at the same time by being saved they are added to the church. The Bible does not contemplate salvation apart from membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

This is why our confession teaches that outside of the church "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF 25.1). The WCF footnotes Acts 2:47 as the biblical basis for that statement. One of the fundamental ways that the NT describes being saved is being added to the church. Throughout the Bible God saves a people and being saved means being added to that people. And the Christian life revolves around that reality. This is at the heart of our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. We belong to Jesus Christ and because we belong to Jesus Christ we also belong to his body, the church. We remain individuals but we are not isolated individuals we are individuals who belong to a body and the Christian life is lived in that body. A fundamental part of our understanding of who we are in Christ is that we are members of his body.

Acts 2:42-47 describes what that meant for the people who were saved on and following Pentecost. Verse 42 is a summary statement and the rest of the verses highlight certain things about church life. Verse 42 says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." First, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...." When people are saved by God's Word and God's Spirit – when they are convicted of their sins and receive the message about Jesus and turn from their sins and believe in Jesus they devote themselves to the apostles' teaching. We get samples of the apostles' teaching in the sermons recorded in the book of Acts and from them we see that the apostles

teaching is the message about Jesus expounded from the OT Scriptures and from Jesus' own teaching and the apostles' growing understanding of the significance of Jesus. For us the apostles' teaching is the Bible – the Old and New Testaments – the word of God. Luke is telling us that when the Holy Spirit is poured-out and people are saved, they become hungry for the Word of God. In 1 Peter 2:2, Peter writes, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up unto salvation...." Newborn babies have an instinct to feed. It belongs to being alive. And that is what Luke is describing in our text. As soon as they receive the Holy Spirit, they devote themselves to the apostles' teaching.

This is why the Bible is so central to the life of the church. This is why preaching and teaching and learning from the Bible are so central to the life of the church. The Christian life is about growing – it is about growing in our knowledge of Jesus and our love for God and growing in becoming more like Jesus in our inner being and in our outer life. And the Bible is central to that growth.

And notice that what Luke is describing is the newly saved devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching together. Luke here is not describing individual Bible study. He is describing believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching in community. This is very interesting. I think we will all agree that the individual study that we do is very important for our spiritual growth. But this verse is emphasizing the fundamental importance of learning from the apostles' teaching together. No doubt part of the reason for that is that few people had Bibles in their homes as we do. The NT was not written yet and the OT was a large collection of scrolls and many people were illiterate. So the only way that they could learn the apostles' teaching would have been through gathering together to be taught. But all that being said, the importance that the NT places on believers being together, extends to learning together.

Luke tells us that these first believers who had received the Holy Spirit devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. That speaks of effort. It speaks of making it a priority. And we should ask whether that can be said of us. Does our church attendance and our attendance at other gathering where the word is taught demonstrate that we are devoted to the apostles' teaching?

The next thing that Luke mentions in verse 42 is the fellowship. Those who had received the Holy Spirit also devoted themselves to the fellowship. Fellowship is an important biblical word. It includes what we think of as fellowship, but it goes much deeper than that. We use the word "fellowship" to describe what happens when we chat together after a worship service and other situations. Fellowship is social time. And that is true, but we must remember that fellowship is much more than that.

The Greek word translated here as "fellowship" refers to sharing something together. In the context of the gospel it means that believers share in Christ. It has to do with the fact that we participate together in the life of Christ. This is symbolized most clearly in the Lord's Supper and Paul spells this out in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 where he writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, it is not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ. Because there is one bread, we who are many are

one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” That is the core idea of fellowship in the Bible. As believers we together share the one Christ. We are united to one another because we are all united to him.

And that has implications for our lives. Fellowship is an objective state of affairs that results in a togetherness – that results in sharing the Christian life together. That will include socializing together, but it will also involve worshipping together, learning together, helping one another, caring for one another. So fellowship is the togetherness that we participate in because we together are participating in the one Christ.

So in these last verses of Acts 2, most of what is being described is fellowship. These verses described different aspects of the togetherness that resulted from their common participation in Christ. We will look at those details as we come to them.

So when the Holy Spirit was poured out – people were saved by hearing about Jesus Christ and believing in him and one of the results of that was that they devoted themselves to the fellowship. And it makes sense for us to ask ourselves whether we are devoting ourselves to the fellowship. Are we devoted to the life of the church in the many different ways that is expressed?

Third, the believers whom Luke is describing devoted themselves, to the breaking of bread. The interpreters are divided, as to whether this refers to eating together in general or the Lord’s Supper. I think it may be both. In the early church, the Lord Supper was often celebrated in connection with the sharing of a meal together and so it may be that when Luke says that they devoted themselves “to the breaking of bread” he is thinking of that combination of sharing a meal and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. In the immediate context, verse 46 describes them as “breaking bread in their homes” and “receiving their food with glad and generous hearts.”

Both the Lord’s Supper and sharing meals together are important in the life of the church. Begin devoted to celebrating the Lord’s Supper for us means that we take part in it when we can and that we do not absent ourselves without a very good reason. That applies to next week as well when we are scheduled to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The session is providing two morning worship services with the Lord’s Supper – one in which masks are required and one in which we are asking everyone to comply with the government regulations but making allowing for conscience exceptions. And we hope that everyone will devote themselves to celebrating the Lord’s Supper next week. We understand that some of our older people are especially vulnerable, but we are hoping that as many as possible will be devoted to celebrating the Lord’s Supper together. That is one of the ways that this verse applies to our situation.

But the idea of believers sharing meals together is certainly included here. We have been hindered from doing that in varying degrees because of the pandemic and certainly in normal times sharing meals together whether in our homes or church-wide potlucks is an important part of belonging to Christ’s church. Eating together is an important expression of fellowship and it was one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit’s work on and after the day of Pentecost. The description given in verse 46, paints an attractive picture. They were “breaking

bread in their homes, [and] they received their food with glad and generous hearts....” Here too we should ask ourselves whether we are devoting ourselves to the breaking of bread.

Finally in verse 42, we are told that they devoted themselves to “the prayers.” The prayers being referred to here are probably the set times of prayer in the temple. Remember the children’s song – “Peter and John went to pray/ they met a lame man on the way.” That song is describing Peter and John going to the temple to take part in these set times of prayer. Acts 3;1 says, “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.”

Luke is telling us that these early members of the NT church, filled with the Spirit, were devoted to taking part of these prayers. So the reference is to set times of prayer. The closest to these set times of prayer for us are our Sunday worship services and midweek meetings where prayer is a central part of our meeting. Here we have an other example of how much the Bible stresses the importance of believers praying together. And the question for us to ask of ourselves is whether we can be described as being devoted to the prayers in our church.

I want to say a little more about that word “devoted” as Luke uses it in verse 42. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles doctrine and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Luke is holding this up before us as a good thing – as a positive example. The context is still Pentecost – the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. Luke is describing what church life looked like when the Holy Spirit was poured-out upon the followers of Jesus. They were devoted to church life. They were devoted to learning the apostles’ teaching together. They were devoted to being together and helping one another. They were devoted to eating together. They were devoted to praying together.

This is a strong encouragement to us to be devoted to the life of the church. It also raises questions if we cannot describe our involvement in church life using the word “devoted.” It is true that this was a special time in the life of the church. The Holy Spirit was active in a powerful way. And the history of the church shows that there are times when the Holy Spirit is more active than other times. But certainly the picture that Luke draws here of the Holy Spirit working powerfully so that the followers of Jesus were devoted to church life is held up before us to encourage us to be more devoted than we are.

When we think about the work of the Holy Spirit, there is both the side of his sovereignty and the side of our responsibility. The Holy Spirit stirs us up and gives us zeal, but we are also called to be more zealous in our involvement in the life of the church. In Ephesians 5:18 Paul exhorts us to “be filled with the Spirit.” Being filled with the Spirit involves prayer and all the other things we do to nurture our love for Christ and zeal for the life that he calls us to live. And it involves our interaction with texts like the one we are looking at – dwelling on them – praying over them – allowing them to convict us of our sins and to spur us on to repentance. Thankfully we do this as believers – already accepted and cherished by God for Jesus’ sake – already indwelt by the Holy Spirit for Jesus’ sake. But it take effort on our part – to examine our lives in the

light of God's word and prayerfully making changes to reflect what God is calling us to do. And by this verse he is calling us to devote ourselves "to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

We will now work our way through the rest of this paragraph. It describes different aspects of the church that Jesus formed through the preaching of the apostles and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. Verse 43 says, "And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." It was a special time in the life of the church – these early days after Pentecost. It was the beginning of the new era in the history of salvation. The Spirit was active in a new way. The apostles were preaching and teaching about Jesus. And doing signs and wonders by which God was authenticating their message. And the people were in awe. That is understandable.

But there is still plenty of reason for us to be in awe even though the apostles with their wonders and signs are no longer among us. When the Holy Spirit is active he helps us to see the reality of God's truth and its implications for us. Just think of the impression that Peter's preaching had on his hearers. Verse 37 says that they were cut to the heart and asked what shall we do? That's what happens when the Holy Spirit is blessing the truth of who Jesus is to us. He gives us a sense of the greatness of God. He gives us a sense of our lives in the light of who Jesus is – who God is. Hebrews 12:28-29 say, "[L]et us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

The Holy Spirit heightens our spiritual awareness and one of the results of that is the fear of the Lord. That is a good thing. If we are believers we have no reason to be afraid of God, but we have every reason to fear him in the sense of reverence and awe. One of our sins is to have small thoughts of God – to fail to be aware of his awesome majestic greatness and glory. Think of John's reaction when he saw the exalted Lord Jesus as he describes it in Revelation 1:17. He says, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." In that instance, Jesus "laid his right hand on [John], saying 'Fear not...'" But this passage shows us why it is appropriate to be in awe when we think of who Jesus is – who God is. And we can be sure that the more the Holy Spirit is at work in us the more we will be in awe. And that is something we should pray for. It is something that we should seek through thinking about the greatness of God. This belongs to genuine heart-felt worship – to see the greatness of God so that we are in awe before him. That is the kind of worship that gives us joy and delight in God.

Next we come to verses 44 and 45 which describe how the followers of Jesus helped one another. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." To understand what this means we must consider other passages that contribute to our understanding of what was going on here. The story of Ananias and Sapphira makes it clear that this was not some form of communism where everyone sold everything and put it in a common pot. Ananias and Sapphira were a couple who sold a piece of property and gave some of

the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to the poor while pretending that they were giving all the proceeds from that sale. Their sin was that they pretended to give all of the money made in the sale while giving only part of it. But in that connection Peter said to Ananias, Acts 5:4, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?”

This shows that what is going on here is radical generosity, but no requirement at least that everyone sell everything and live from a common pot. The language suggest that the people understood that God had given them whatever wealth they had not simply for their own use but in order to help the poor as well. So the application for us here is not that we need to sell everything and give it to the poor, but that what we have is not really our own. God has given it to meet our own needs, but also to help the needy and so there is a sense in which it belongs to them.

The application for us is that when the Holy Spirit works in us, we will understand that our money and our possessions are not our own and that we are to use them according to God’s intention and that certainly includes being generous towards the poor. In our situation we do this through providing the deacons with the resources they need to help those who are in need and through supporting organizations like Word and Deed and Voice of the Martyrs and the Dawn Pregnancy Resource Center. This story is an encouragement for us to give sacrificially in order to help the poor especially among the people of God.

The picture that is drawn in these verses is one in which the Holy Spirit empowered the followers of Jesus to give much of themselves in the life of the church. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They spent a lot of time together and they were sacrificially generous so that everyone had everything they needed. And one does not get the impression that they were sad because so much of their time and energy and money went into their church life. One does not get the impression that this was a group of people who were missing out on the best of life because they were so heavily involved in the church.

They are described as receiving “their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.” Their hearts were glad as they spent time together – eating together, worshipping together, learning together, and caring for one another. And they were an attractive bunch. They had “favor with all the people.” The people who witnessed how they were living, were attracted.

And it is in that context where “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” It is significant that Luke mentions that the Lord was adding to their number. No doubt the preaching of the apostles was involved. No doubt believers were speaking to nonbelievers about Jesus. No doubt they were inviting them to come to church meetings. But whenever some one was saved, it was the Lord who was adding to their number. And this is still the case. The Lord is seated at the right hand of God. And from there he is building his church. Every person who is saved is one more that is added by the Lord.

Luke, in these verses, paints a very attractive picture of the church immediately after Pentecost. The same Holy Spirit is at work in the church today and we do experience much of what is described here. But let these verses stir us up to seek to experience them more and more.