

## Morning Worship Services

Sunday, June 14, 2009

### Faith Factor: Devotion

Acts 2:42-47

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This summer we are focusing on faith factors. That is, if you say you are a follower of Jesus Christ what characteristics of said faith should be demonstrable to yourself and others? The context for this study will be the book of Acts. The book of the Acts of the Apostles was written between the years 70-100 AD. It is a story that proclaims the mighty acts of God. The Acts of the Apostles deals with issues that are always relevant in the church: questions about the relationships between Christians and Jews, Christians and pagans; issues related to the Christian stance within the modern state; problems with prayer; the purpose of preaching and teaching; and a host of other dilemmas. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of the church as a community informed and formed by story; the story of God's redemptive work and transformation of people and society.

The early church began after the ascension of Jesus with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The church is the body of Christ; it is to be Jesus in the world. Remember that Jesus Christ came not to teach an interesting philosophy of life, but to call people to a new way of living and dying. The stories in Acts provide a platform of learning from the past on how the present is to be. The Acts of the Apostles shows us what is to be normative about the church in the first century and all subsequent centuries. Acts teaches us ecclesiology that is the nature and purpose of the church. We will learn what it means to be church. Thus, over the next eight weeks, we will discover the faith factors that display the true nature of the church; who we are to be as followers of Jesus.

The purpose of the book, the Acts of the Apostles, is not to show us the acts of the apostles; it is not to lift of the Holy Spirit; it is not to show how the gospel spread into every corner of the gentile world; it is not a response to the political problem between Christianity and Rome; it is not a second century irenicon designed to patch up the split between the followers of Peter and Paul; it is not to show that the early followers of Jesus were disappointed with the delay of the parousia; it is not a defense against Gnosticism. The Acts of the Apostles is a proclamation of what God has done and is doing. It is a catechetical proclamation to strengthen believers.

This week's faith factor is devotion. By definition, devotion is "love, loyalty or enthusiasm for a person."<sup>1</sup> As followers of Jesus Christ we are to demonstrate our love, loyalty and enthusiasm for Jesus. The church is to demonstrate love, loyalty and enthusiasm for Jesus.

D. L. Moody was visiting a prominent Chicago citizen when the idea of church membership and involvement came up. "I believe I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside it," the man said. Moody said nothing. Instead, he moved to the fireplace, blazing against the winter outside, removed one burning coal and placed it on the hearth. The two men sat together and watched the ember die out. "I see," the other man said.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder how many Christians have launched out from the church for what they thought were good reasons, only to find that what they were looking for could only be found where they left. So many people who claim to follow Jesus live separately from the church. Why? Some people avoid or leave the church due to the hypocrisy they sense there. It's true the church has always had its share of racism, immorality, greed and other sins. Some have even been personally betrayed by a church experience or leader. For others the problem is not hypocrisy; it's boredom. People become wearied by the unvarying routine: week after week they face the same crowded parking lot, sing the same songs, hear the same announcements and see the same faces.

How can something that strikes some as riddled with hypocrisy and others as boring be absolutely essential for our spiritual survival? Part of the problem is that we misunderstand the nature of the church. We talk about "going to church" the same way we talk about "going to the market" or "going to the mall." We think of the church as a place we visit and leave; rather than a reality that we live every day.

The early followers of Jesus, however, didn't talk about going to church; they talked about being the church. Why? The early followers of Jesus demonstrated singular devotion to Jesus. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Acts 2:42-47. Following Pentecost, Peter preached a powerful sermon. Acts 2:41 records, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." Conversion was not the end of the story; it was only the beginning. In the very next verse Luke writes, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." That is, those who had just experienced salvation didn't simply "go to church." They lived in devotion to certain things.

Luke mentions four characteristics of the church in verse 42 and then elaborates on each of them in verses

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<sup>1</sup>*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1999), 393.

43–47. These characteristics indicate that the church is not something we do or visit, but rather something we live.

The early church was a learning church; a loving church; worshipping church; and a growing church.

First, the early church was a learning church. Luke states they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. The apostles were eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Luke writes that the Holy Spirit came to dwell in these 3,000, he states nothing about wind or fire or tongues; he says they became learners. They sat at the apostles' feet, hungry for instruction. When the Spirit of God invades our lives, he makes us hungry for God's truth, the Word.

Notice, too, that the teaching authority of the apostles was authenticated by many miracles (Acts 2:43). The believers were in awe because of the miracles that the apostles performed and that caused them to be even more devoted to the apostles' teaching. If you saw me heal a blind man this morning, you would probably give more credence listen to what I had to say. Miracles were prevalent during the early years of the church, because God designed them to authenticate the apostles' teaching. When we study the Scriptures here and at home with an eye toward obeying them, we're devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching. Should we not see the same things happening today that happened in the first century?

Second, the early church was a loving church. Luke states that the believers were devoted to fellowship. That word has become overused in Christian circles; we use it so much we hardly remember what it means. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which means "to hold something in common" or "to share something."

As believers, there are things we share in. First John 1:3 reads, "Through him (the Word) all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. The most significant thing we share in together is our connection with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we share together in him, all other differences ought to melt away. That's why the church was the first institution in history to bring together Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and freemen. In the same way, today's church ought to include rich and poor, white collar and blue collar, healthy and unhealthy, young and old, black and white and everyone else.

Church ought to look like the Tag Office. At the Tag Office you are immediately confronted with an immense cross section of people. Where else can you go and find the owner of a brand new Mercedes renewing his registration alongside a disheveled person who appears to live a marginalized existence. This sort of fellowship can

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<sup>2</sup>George Thompson Brown Davis, *Dwight L. Moody: The Man and His Mission* (K.T. Boland, 1900), 61.

be uncomfortable at first, but when people with every reason to divide end up loving one another, you can be certain something powerful is at work.

In verses 44 and 45, Luke describes how the believers sold their property and possessions and used the proceeds to help those in need. Some have said that this practice was an early form of communism and that we should enforce the same lifestyle within the church today. Should we follow their example? The answer is “yes” and “no.” First the “no.” Jesus and the apostles never directly forbade private ownership. In fact, they assumed it. In Acts, we see the church meeting in private homes, which we can assume were still owned by the individual believers. Furthermore, it’s clear in Acts that giving up one’s possessions was a voluntary activity. In Acts 5:4, when Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira, who pretended to give away all the proceeds of their land, he said, “Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?”

Having said that, the answer is also “yes.” When the Spirit of God enters a person’s life, this sort of sacrificial giving is often the result. All of a sudden, you realize money and possessions don’t define you. You want to respond to those in need. We mustn’t evade the challenge of these verses. In 1 John 3:17, the apostle John writes, “Whoever has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” That verse is particularly troubling, as we live in a world in which there are so many people in need. This is something for us to think about. The Bible is clear that the government is not to be in the business of taking care of people. Taking care of people is to be the business of the church.

Third, the early church was a worshipping church. Followers of Jesus were devoted to the breaking of bread and prayer. “The breaking of bread” refers to what we call Communion or the Lord’s Supper, which was celebrated in the context of a meal. When Luke mentions prayer, he doesn’t have private prayer in mind, but rather corporate prayer; the prayers of God’s people together. Communion and prayer defined worship. Verse 46 reads, “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.”

The early church met in the temple and its courtyard. Acts 3:1 describes how “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.” In other words, they continued to attend the formal worship services in the Jewish temple, consisting of sacrifices, prayers and blessings offered by the priests. But they also participated in informal meetings that took place in homes.

The early followers of Jesus didn’t go to church; they lived it. They did these things “day by day.” It was

part of their everyday lives. There is nothing like being in a home with other believers and having a meal together; laughing, praying, crying, talking and sharing. You begin to see people in a new light, because such intimacy creates vulnerability. If this kind of fellowship is not a part of your church experience, you're missing out. If all you do is come to church but you're not meeting with a small group in a home, serving the marginalized, growing in your understanding and experience of the written and living Word, connecting with other followers of Jesus in common vision, fellowship and purpose, your church experience is like being a couple who gets married but never moves in together.

Finally, the early church was a growing church. The people went to temple, broke bread together and prayed "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."<sup>3</sup> Why does a church grow? Luke gives us part of the answer: a church grows by having favor with all the people. These early believers were still rubbing shoulders with people in their community. They didn't sever relationships with unbelievers. Instead, they tried to meet needs outside of the church fellowship as well as within it.

But there was also something else at work. Luke is very careful to acknowledge, "the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." Ultimately, it's the Lord's job to save people and he's at work among us to do exactly that.

A number of weeks ago, a young man approached me after ekklesia. He asked me to explain more fully what accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord was all about. I had had a long day and the last thing I wanted was to get into a long conversation with a stranger, but something told me this guy was sincere. The more we talked, the more I realized he actually had received salvation that night. The Lord did that. It was his work. It's not all up to us. He's always at work before we are.

Don't go to church! Live the church. Be the church. Be a follower of Jesus living in awe a life of wonders and miracles. In Philip Yancey's *Church: Why Bother?*, Yancey explains that after years of cynicism about the church, he realized the key was not finding the right church, but rather understanding the church properly. He learned to look inward, look around, look upward, and look outward.

When we're devoted to the apostles' teaching, we look inward. We come to grips with what God is saying to us through his Word by recognizing our need for grace and his willingness to provide it. We express our devotion

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<sup>3</sup>Acts 2:47

to fellowship by looking outward. We also see people in need and commit to meet that need. We express our devotion to worship by looking upward through the breaking of bread and prayer in both formal and informal settings. Church is not a spectator sport where we sit back and rate the performance of those on the stage. Finally, looking outward, we see the Lord at work in people's hearts to draw them to salvation. We gladly participate in God's work and we rejoice as God adds to our number day by day those who are being saved. Living in awe a life of wonders and miracles; that was the early church. That can be today's church. We must recover the faith factor of devotion. Let us pray!

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 14 June 2009 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh  
at Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas*

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