

Devotion in the Fellowship of Believers

Acts 2:42-47

Last week we were blessed to have a baptism in our church. In Claudia's testimony she shared with us saying, "You fed me. I came for a year to Rock Café because you fed me." She enjoyed the breaking of bread and the fellowship, learning to belong until the day she believed, adding to our number along with her family. Claudia heard Christ's call, repented and was baptised, entering into Christ's Holy Catholic Church or Church universal with a Big 'C' and becoming a full member committing herself to Church with a little 'c' our local fellowship here at DPC. In the NT the first Christian fellowship, was the original church with a small 'c' that from its early beginnings grew into the Church with a Big 'C'.

Our reading from Acts 2 provides us with a first glimpse of what the newly birthed church looked like after the Spirit was poured out from heaven on the believers at Pentecost. When the fellowship of believers is functioning, as it should be, according to God's will, outsiders are in awe of what is happening in it and some are attracted to it, adding to their number. And it is the Lord who does this, saves people, as in Claudia's story and as it was in the case of the early church, which as a group, were one extremely devoted bunch of people.

What did it mean to be 'The Devoted Fellowship of Believers'?
What is it that we can learn from this first fellowship of believers?

To begin with...

'Devote yourself' here means to persevere, adhere and be unremitting in the attention that you give to something. It is a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action. There is no half measure employed or flip flopping over the issue. Devoted meant that you were full on! Back then and there v.42 'they who devoted themselves' amounted to over 3100 believers after Peter Preached on the day of Pentecost and 3000 responded. And now what did they Devote Themselves to: Firstly,

The Apostles teaching: Which was their authoritative message about Jesus of Nazareth that undoubtedly included a compilation of the words of Jesus, some account of his earthly ministry, suffering and death on the cross, resurrection, ascension and a declaration of what all this meant for humanity to be redeemed. Such Apostolic teaching served to centre the church in Jerusalem with its unique and individual core of truth and belief.

Then there was the **Breaking of Bread**: This phrase is used of an ordinary meal but it is the celebration of the Lord's Supper that seems to be indicated here because as a part of the worship of the fellowship of believers the breaking of bread was an occasion of praise, joy and love because it was connected with Jesus. 'Do this in remembrance of me' said Jesus. And they did- just as we do!

The believers also devoted themselves to **Prayer**:

Emphasising here what we have learnt from the beginning in Acts 1 that prayer, both private and public or in corporate worship is important and remains so throughout the whole Book of Acts. Prayer was important in the life of Jesus and it remains important in the life of the individual Christian and the church whenever it gathers together- just as we have prayed together today, our devotion to it should never cease.

In the early stages of this fellowship they continued to use the formal prayers of Judaism but were enthused by the coming and now permanent presence of the Holy Spirit to pray and praise God as lead by the Spirit. And the fellowship of believers would meet daily to pray in the Jerusalem Temple at the eastern edge of the outer court called Solomon's Colonnade. They were also taught, discussed things, worshipped, held the Lord's Supper, and no doubt, ministered the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Which is why 'Everyone was filled with awe' v.43, meaning not just the believers but everyone in Jerusalem, who knew the events of Pentecost and were observing the life of this early congregation which included many signs and wonders, healings and miracles performed by the apostles. These miracles were the evidence of the presence of God with his people, just as Jesus throughout his ministry performed miracles to demonstrate and prove that God was with Him. Such things filled the inhabitants of Jerusalem with awe – a holy and reverential fear of God because God had authenticated these men sent by him, and more importantly the message that they proclaimed, which was God's good news message to his people. Lastly, I mention, they devoted themselves to the 'fellowship'.

Fellowship implies that there was something distinctive in the gatherings of these early believers. With the influx of 3000 on the Day of Pentecost and with daily increases to their number v.47 after that, they must have had a publically recognisable identity as a new and growing sect of Judaism. Although they continued to follow and observe Jewish rites and customs, at their centre they held on to Jesus of Nazareth proclaiming him as Israel's promised Messiah, the Lord of the human race and worshipped him as God's Son, their redeemer. These things set them apart as a distinguishable entity. As a....

Fellowship The Greek word is koinonia and expresses the idea of community. It is the spirit of generous giving as in direct contrast to the spirit of selfish getting. It is the act of a believer giving himself or herself to God in the first instance, and then in giving or sharing themselves in their relationship with others in the church.

So in the Christian Life Koinonia is:

A sharing of friendship and an abiding in the company of others. Only those who are friends with Christ can really be friends with each other. It is a deeper spiritual bond than even with a blood relative who is a non-believer because it is a life giving eternal bond, one which is lived out in this life and into the next.

People who you wouldn't know let alone give the time of day to in the world, when met in the church can become the best of friends. Never the twain would meet... well in church you meet and share and give of yourselves to one another. So, koinonia is that bond which binds Christians to each other, to Christ and to God.

There is also the Practical aspect of Koinonia where in your relationship you share with those less fortunate, making Christian fellowship a practical thing. We see this in vv44-45

There was obviously Unity in this early fellowship because "All the believers were together". Their sense of spiritual unity expressed itself in communal living and sharing with needy members of the group. This was voluntary sharing to provide for those who did not have enough for the essentials of living. In some small way we have our Dry Goods Food bank to share in the first instance amongst ourselves along with the provision of meals for those in times of need. The practice of holding possessions in community was a common feature of some Jewish sects in New Testament times for instance, the group at Qumran. We have the modern day example of the Drury Community Church who live and worship on the same property holding and owning their real estate, farm and building assets in common. The sharing of the early Christians involved both what we would call their real estate "possessions" and their personal possessions "goods". They sold property and possessions to give to anyone in the fellowship who had need, who lacked or was destitute. Not everyone sold all their property and all their possessions at once; it was as the individual was lead. Believers still retained houses in Jerusalem because the fellowship who met and worshipped at the Temple didn't stop afterwards like we do to 'break bread' or what we enjoy as a very nice morning tea come brunch here at church after our service. This fellowship would break down in size

and ate their meals together in small groups in their own homes after their daily worship. Joyful conversation and fellowship continuing at a deep level of who God was and how Jesus was working in their lives and what the Holy Spirit was leading them to do next. More than likely followed by more prayer.

This is what it meant to live a life devoted to the fellowship of believers. Outsiders liked what that heard, saw and experienced, these Pentecostal Messianic Jews worshipping, performing signs and wonders, teaching about Jesus, praying, sharing possessions and eating together, praising God, and enjoying the favour of all people. So much so, that many wanted to join, and they did, each and every day. The fellowship, oneness and sharing enjoyed in this first devoted group of believers was the manifestation of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Joy was the overarching mood, the result of the devotion of the believers in this first Christian fellowship.

If the local church is going to develop the kind of joy and beauty that God says is possible, that which will attract others to Christ, we must commit ourselves as devoted followers of Christ, to becoming together, the kind of church Christ calls us to be –

A devoted fellowship of believers!

I will end with this challenging thought. In his book, *Rediscovering Church*, Bill Hybels the Lead Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church [20,000 members], tells of a message by Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, his former Seminary Professor, first ministry mentor, encourager and live in consultant who said,

"The only kind of fellowship many know in church is after a service when men stand around and ask each other superficial questions. Then they find their wives who are having similar conversations, and go home. But biblical fellowship has the power to revolutionize lives. Masks come off, conversations get deep, hearts get vulnerable, lives are shared, accountability is invited, and tenderness flows. People really do become like brothers and sisters. They shoulder each other's burdens - and unfortunately, that was something that few of the people today experience growing up in church in America."

That is the perceived state of the fellowship of believers in the U.S.A. But I ask, how are we doing in NZ and at DPC?

I am sure we each could stand to grow in this area of our lives as individuals devoted to the fellowship.