

# Devoted to the Fellowship

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Preacher: Canon David Short

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] I wonder if you would open back to Acts chapter 2 please on 114. And I'm going to pray.
- Our Father we pray that as we look at your word you would open our heart today not just to you but to one another. Father teach us the treasure that we have in each other and give us that devotion that we need to support what you are doing amongst us and we ask this for the glory of your son.
- Amen. Well we return again to Acts chapter 2 and if you were here last week and wondering yes we did look at this passage last week it's a little like the story of the parish who hired a new minister and he preached a sermon on the first Sunday on loving one another that was terrific.
- And on the second Sunday when people gathered he preached exactly the same sermon word for word and people walked out and were a little less enthusiastic in their encouragement and wondered whether he had just made a mistake.
- Third Sunday they gathered together he preached exactly the same sermon word for word on loving one another and so they went to the elders and said we need to talk to this guy. So the elders gathered the minister to themselves and said to him that's a very good sermon that you've preached on loving one another we'd like a different one next week.
- [ 1 : 4 1 ] And he said well as soon as we start obeying the first one I'll move to the next one. It's an old story and perfectly illustrates why I'm going to read verse 42.
- And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers. We're in the middle of a three week series that I've called Building a Community of Grace and we are travelling back to learn from the church when it was first created to see what are the essential marks of an effective and living church so that we can recognise God's hand among us now and we can shape our life together for the future.
- Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to know that there are three essential marks of a church that is filled with the Holy Spirit under the rule of the risen Jesus Christ.
- And the lovely thing is you just can't manufacture these three things. They don't arise from our cleverness and good taste but they are marks of God being among us.
- And last week we looked at the first mark of his supernatural presence amongst us. God creates a community with people who are devoted to the Word of God.
- [ 3 : 0 2 ] God's work. And we recognised and commissioned a number of people for working in ministries that serve that priority and I'm sure there are others who serve that priority from Monday to Saturday and if we didn't recognise you, I'm sorry, be included when we commission people.
- Today we come to the second sign of the Spirit-filled church and we move from being devoted to the Word to being devoted to the fellowship. You remember in the early chapters of Acts, we're given two summaries of the pattern of the life of the church of God and we should probably have a sermon series on this priority alone being devoted to the fellowship because Luke by far gives it the greatest space.

In some ways it summarises the heart and soul of the Bible and the whole of the Bible message itself. You see, if you go back to the beginning, to creation itself, the whole reason that God created the world was for His glory and the reason He created man and woman in His image was so that He would bless them in relationship with Himself.

And the picture of God's blessing is the picture of perfect and wonderful relationships relationships between God and humans and humans and humans and humans and the creation. And those relationships were marked by harmony and vulnerability and security and love.

And my point is that if you miss the part about relationships, you miss everything about creation. But that is not our experience of the world. We don't experience relationships naturally like that today.

[ 4 : 46 ] And that is because when Adam and Eve turned away in disobedience to God, they turned creation on its head and it has had a devastating impact in every one of our relationships ever since.

Instead of loving God and naturally praising Him, we hide from Him. We suspect Him. We blame Him. Instead of treating one another as precious and treasuring each other, like Adam and Eve, we are frightened of each other.

We are frightened of what each other thinks of us. And we blame each other. And we withdraw from each other. And there's guilt and there's selfishness. And the result of sin is a scattering.

So that when you come to the Tower of Babel, the whole world is scattered. One of C.S. Lewis' best pictures of hell is living in this dull city where people are moving further and further and further and further away from each other over millions of years.

If you go to the end of the Bible, to the very last chapters of the book of Revelation, the picture of heaven that we are given there is of God dwelling with His people and our relationships renewed and restored and revitalized.

[ 6 : 10 ] And every picture of heaven is a corporate, a communal picture. And every picture has Christ at the center and God's people dwelling with Christ as His bride in harmony with each other.

At shalom with God and the world. That is where we're heading. So you see the big picture. God created us for relationship. God is moving us towards the perfection of relationships and that is why it is no surprise that when Jesus came into the world, He came to create a new community.

Notice that. From the start of His ministry, He calls people to Himself and draws them into a group. He says, I am the good shepherd who lays down my life for the sheep.

He says, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And that is why every Christian church is meant to be at its best an echo of God's purposes at creation and a foretaste of the marriage supper with the Lamb.

We are a supernatural community. We're meant to be profoundly and essentially different from the world around about us just in our attitudes and our behaviours. But at the very core of our being we are meant to be nothing short of new creatures, part of a new creation within the old.

[ 7 : 35 ] And that is why we saw in Acts chapter 2 when the Holy Spirit is poured out on that day of Pentecost, He comes with a rush of a mighty wind. Just as God breathed at the first creation and formed life, so now He breathes again and there is a new creation.

And the fellowship of the church is made up of those who share a deep spiritual reality. And the fire that descended from heaven is a picture and a sign of the presence of God coming among us to instil in us a love of holiness.

And do you remember the scattering effect begins to be reversed as people are gathered together and God gives them a common language and a common tongue because they participate in this deeper spirituality, this deeper spiritual reality.

Instead of being driven apart we are being drawn together. And the Bible way of speaking about this deeper spiritual reality that we were created for in the beginning that we will enjoy unblemished in heaven is this little Greek word *koinonia* which is translated fellowship or communion or participation.

That is why the second mark of a community where the Holy Spirit dwells is that it is devoted to the *koinonia*, the fellowship, the communion.

[ 9 : 01 ] Building a community of grace is all about developing and deepening and widening and enjoying and protecting that *koinonia*.

And the pictures that we are given in Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 4 of what that looks like are very concrete and very practical. They have to do with what we do with our homes and families and finances and prayers.

Because God is creating small colonies in this world that reflect the life of heaven. And the first priority of those colonies is to love God and that's reflected in being devoted to his word.

And the second priority is loving those who belong to the fellowship and that is reflected in being devoted to the fellowship. It's just a natural thing that happens.

We desire to have communion with other believers. We do what we can to protect the communion and the fellowship from spiritual damage. We want to take initiatives for the good of the Christian fellowship.

[ 10 : 13 ] But I think you'll agree with me it's becoming harder and harder. And the reason it's more difficult is because the fundamental dynamic in the *koinonia*, in the Christian fellowship is a shift from being a consumer to being a contributor.

And we have managed to shape our culture as a consumer culture and now it is shaping us. We are now successfully forming our children into consummate consumers.

We are spending too much time making money to really notice what is happening to our children. There's a psychiatrist from Berkeley, California who wrote a book recently with the cheery title *The Epidemic, The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children*.

Available everywhere. It's probably in a brown paper bag. However, he says this and I think he's right.

Many children today are inadvertently being raised to take and never give back, to accumulate but never share, to own but never value.

[ 11 : 34 ] And building a community of grace means caring enough about one another that we build this community not around that value of the culture but around the person of Jesus Christ.

and the question that we ask ourselves is this, did Jesus come from heaven to be a consumer or a contributor? Jesus said, I have come not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.

Or as the Apostle Paul says later in Philippians, do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant.

You see, there is a paradox at the heart of our life together. the more we consume the emptier we feel. The more we protect ourselves from one another the lonelier we feel.

[ 12 : 51 ] But as Calvin told us this morning beautifully, the way if we give our lives away we receive life. we are in a culture where we make decisions to gain more and more wealth and wonder why we end up struggling with spiritual poverty.

We demand the exercise of the freedom of our desires and wonder why we end up feeling enslaved. We set our hopes on this world and wonder why we feel so hopeless.

We fill our eyes with new possessions and wonder why our hearts are full of darkness and heaven seems so remote and so far away. That's why it's important for us this morning to look at practically what it means to be devoted to the fellowship and Luke tells us that there are three features of devotion to the fellowship and I just want to spend the rest of our time on this and I think they are surprising.

The first is hospitality. Back to Acts chapter 2 and they devoted themselves verse 42 to the apostles teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers and down in verse 46 day by day attending the temple together breaking bread in their homes they partook of food with glad and generous hearts praising God having favour with all the people.

I said when we looked at this before that breaking bread is not the Lord's Supper it is ordinary meals in ordinary homes around ordinary tables with other people being invited as guests from the Christian community.

[ 14 : 34 ] Have you ever noticed how much of New Testament Christianity happens around meals? You see when those meals and when the hospitality is done to the glory of Jesus Christ it is a wonderful demonstration of the living reality of fellowship and koinonia.

and this is not just an isolated pattern of enthusiasm in the early church it is continued. Let's have a look at this pattern. Just keep your finger in Acts chapter 2 and turn right one book to Romans chapter 12 on page 152 verses 9 to 13 which would be a very good sermon series.

Let love be genuine hate what is evil isn't that interesting phrase hold fast to what is good love one another with brotherly affection outdo one another in showing honour never flag in zeal be aglow with the spirit serve the Lord rejoice in your hope be patient in tribulation be constant in prayer contribute to the needs of the saints and that word contribute is the word for koinonia practice hospitality practice so it might become perfect and the word practice there is the word to pursue something to hunt it and even to persecute it when you find it the idea is that this is not something I do just because I have to do it it's something that grabs my imagination doesn't mean it's always easy when we come to the letter of Peter the apostle says in chapter 4 practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another which means

I take it that having people into your home is not so that you can talk about them after they go this is what Paul means when he says outdo one another in showing honour the word means take leadership in raising the bar in honouring each other naturally we do the opposite we lower the bar we say I'm not going to invite those people they never invite me but this is what it means to be devoted to the fellowship it's practising hospitality hospitality and it will mean that many of us will invite people into our homes I think I asked in October did I get a show of hands I'm not sure I did how many of us have invited people from this congregation into our homes for a meal over the last six months well if you felt bad then let me ask you if it's changed I recognise that not all of us can offer hospitality in our homes but it might be in Starbucks or Torre

Faziones or wherever if you're single it may be both more difficult and more easy some of the singles in our congregation I think exercise the most creativity in their hospitality in February we want to offer an opportunity for everyone to be involved in this we're going to try a guest who's coming to dinner and you will have the opportunity to sign up along with hundreds of others to be part of a small group and the idea will be something like this that with your group you can meet for a monthly meal in different homes for a year or so or for a few months it might force you to get to know people in the congregation sorry it'll be a great opportunity if we can't do this as a Christian community who's going to do it it'll be it'll be a way to practice hospitality that's the first feature of being devoted to the fellowship hospitality the second is more worrying it's the use of our money let's go back to

[ 18 : 43 ] Acts 2 shall we verse 44 these familiar words all who believed were together had all things in common there's the word coiner and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need we turn the page to Acts 4 verse 32 now the company of those who believe were of one heart and soul and no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own but they had everything in common coiner verse 34 not a needy person among them as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them brought the proceeds of what they sold and laid them at the apostles feet for distribution as any had need when we looked at those passages we saw this is not mandatory communalism but something far deeper and far more wonderful and worrying it's the reality of coinonia and it's very searching for us in this consumer culture but there's a cycle you see if we devote ourselves to the fellowship it loosens the grip of money on our hearts and if we give we grow in our devotion to the fellowship not so that we'll feel good about ourselves but because we genuinely care what happens to the community of Christ don't you think we spend so much time and energy on things that

Jesus says are ridiculously trivial so easy to fall in love with this world and allow the love for the world to choke out our desire for spiritual things it's so easy in our culture to live horizontally to constantly compare ourselves to those around us but building a community of grace means developing somewhere where we can wean our hearts from that false love and learn together and foster together what it is to desire God and to desire heaven you see there is a generosity of spirit created by the Holy Spirit it's not just confined to the use of our homes but to our finances well you know of course in the Old Testament that God commands his people to give 10% of their income to the work of the temple and to the teaching of God's word and I should say if you've been a Christian for five years or more if you've been part of this congregation for five years or more and you're not yet giving 10% of your income you need to re-examine your priorities not just for your own sake but for the sake of the

Christian fellowship the only problem with giving 10% is that it's so easy to think that God doesn't have any claim on the other 90% but you see we're stewards and everything we have is on loan from God and it's our job to manage it for him you know that in the New Testament the first call on our resources is the local congregation where we receive the ministry of the word not so that we can pay dues to keep the heating going and keep the lights on but this is what God does he gives us the opportunity to invest what we earn and he takes it and he transforms it into something that bears fruit for eternity and in us he works this amazing miracle where we learn the joy of open handedness and open heartedness and we become devoted to the fellowship and I want to acknowledge that there is a spirit of generosity evident in this congregation I see it in hundreds of little ways which I cannot tell you about and in the big way in the end of year figures but I want to challenge you for the year ahead there are lots of things in the

Anglican church that are uncertain for us if you're a regular giver pick up your envelopes they're at the back if you're not yet you can fill out a form in the pew and receive those envelopes but I want to challenge you to continue to give generously not just to your local congregation but where you see a gospel need not for not for the sake of St.

John's not just because this is part of your discipleship of Jesus Christ but because this is part of the second this is part of the feature of what it means to be devoted to the fellowship the first mark is hospitality the second is generosity and let me just finish with the third it is prayer because it is as we pray that we demonstrate most practically and beautifully that we are not just a voluntary organization we're not the liberal party at prayer or the conservative we're not the we're not a rugby club but the fellowship that we have is not just with one another but with God and that the community that we're part of is a supernatural community that's why we have a prayer chain and a Sunday prayer ministry and prayer meetings after church that's why we pray when we gather that's why we have a monthly parish prayer meeting is to show that our trust is not in us it's in God that our confidence is not in our strategies and plans and great taste but in the

[ 24 : 05 ] Lord who raises the dead it is as we pray that we put our shoulder to the wheel it is as we pray that we put on the armor of God it is as we pray as we pray that our eyes are lifted from ourselves and the purposes of God are moved forward and it shows what it means to be devoted to the koinonia to the fellowship to the communion and I've been teaching on this for a number of months now but the koinonia the communion has a number of dimensions it has a personal dimension it has a corporate dimension here in the body of the congregation and it has a worldwide dimension as well and we have been the very fortunate beneficiaries of the worldwide international Anglican koinonia it has expressed itself in a number of different ways through the courage of the African brothers and sisters who are standing up for us despite the crushing financial cost to them are you aware that when Bishop

Malango stood up for us the Episcopal Church cut funding to him and to his diocese it's demonstrated through the courage of Bishop Buckle who stood up for us at risk to his own ministry but primarily it is demonstrated through the prayers of hundreds and thousands of Christian believers around the world for us there is a letter on the back table today even from the Sydney diocese and all the letters of encouragement and all the movements in the Anglican church have at their heart this concept of communion and how we protect it let me say a word about our youth ministry Richard's ministry has meant a great deal to many of us and his leaving has left some of us concerned and anxious about our young people it's important for me to say and Richard wants me to say this that the ministry to our young people is not about Richard it is about God and if God is working there God will continue to work there and we thank him for what he's doing and we look to him for what he will do in the future and one of the themes that Richard continues to strike with us is that youth ministry is not an island out here and the real ministry here but it is part of the ministry of the whole family of

God and it's as good a time as any today for us to begin praying for our young people individually in the congregation and I'm going to suggest a way we could do this at the back of the church today there are envelopes like this you can go to the back and you can register at a table in the foyer and take one of these envelopes and in the envelope is the name of one of the young people in our youth ministry and you can sign this document and promise to pray for that young person each day for a year you don't have to volunteer on Friday night it's just something to do in the privacy of your own prayers but I think it is a way of demonstrating tangibly the reality of our fellowship together and I want to encourage you and challenge you to become a prayer partner of one of our young people for the next year let me finish when we stand and say the creed and we say I believe in the communion of saints we're talking not just about ourselves we're talking about our community and we're talking about God we say we belong to something which is supernatural and eternal created by God led by Jesus

Christ indwelt by the Holy Spirit it is God who is seeking us and gathering us to himself into a fellowship with himself and with one another into a supernatural entity and every local church has the potential to echo those purposes of God in creation and to be a preview of the heavenly banquet where we will be gathered in fellowship with the son where faith will be turned into sight and this precious gift of fellowship it is a gift from God and he has called you and me not to be interested in it not to spectate not to be supportive of it but to be devoted to it that is the word of effort and intensity and choice where we deliberately choose to mold our families and to shape our lives around this precious gift it was fellowship we were created for it is fellowship we crave it is fellowship we must cultivate it is fellowship fellowship we pray for this fellowship we that God creates in us