

A Template for a Congregation

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[0:00] Let me direct your minds briefly to Acts chapter 2, where we're going to look at verses 42 to 47. At verse 42 of Acts 2, Scripture follows in our understanding of the church and our understanding of the way that God provides for his church to the present day, isn't it?

These verses, these chapters in the book of Acts, following the Lord's ascension to glory and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And then the aftermath, the result of that in the church's expansion and reaching out with the gospel to the surrounding nations.

And in verses 42 to 47, we could say that the word devoted or devoted themselves is really the central controlling feature of these verses.

They devoted themselves, these disciples, they devoted themselves to the apostles, to the teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of bread and the prayers.

When it says they devoted themselves, these words originally mean, you could say that the essential meaning of they continued diligently or continued steadfastly.

[1:41] They devoted themselves, they continued steadfastly to continue diligently looking or attending to something. It's really the essence of the church at that time as they were gathered together.

This is what they were doing. They devoted themselves to these things that are mentioned. They continued diligently in these four features that I'm going to mention that come directly from the passage itself.

Of course, it's important that we always remember that the church, when we speak about the church, as Acts makes clear, the church is the people who confess God as their God, not the buildings in which they gather to worship or anything like that.

The church is the people, just as it is today. The church here is not this building, though we refer to going to church. And there's nothing wrong with that, but the church is you people who are gathered here, the visible church of God, who have come together today, as you do regularly, to worship him. So what did they continue diligently in? First of all, they continued diligently in learning, in being taught, in studying and being taught in the teaching of the apostles.

[2:58] They devoted themselves. They continued diligently to the apostles' teaching. Secondly, they continued diligently in fellowship.

The apostles' teaching and fellowship. We'll see that literally that means the fellowship. Thirdly, they continued diligently in worship, because this is what they were doing as they came together, not only in the temple, but also in their homes regularly.

Regularly, they worshipped God. They worshipped Christ. And fourthly, they continued diligently in witnessing for God or witnessing to the gospel or to salvation.

Learning, fellowship, worship, witnessing. That's the essence of what the passage is about. And they continued diligently. Now, these are very important elements at all times for the church and for ourselves as individual Christians, individual believers as well.

It's something that we would want to do, not only together, but also whenever the opportunity is there for ourselves. So they continued, first of all, diligently in the apostles' teaching.

[4:10] Now, of course, the apostles' teaching was foundational at that time and continues to be foundational for the church today. Never mind the fact that so many, you find still to this day, people adding to what the New Testament contains or presenting what's called new revelations, whether it's through charismatic groups or whatever.

Here is the gospel, and it's actually the gospel contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as our standards put it. And that's because the apostles' teaching for the New Testament church was foundational.

And through the apostles, God was giving direction. He was giving teaching. He was giving all the things that were necessary at that time to establish the church further in the truth of God. Apostolic teaching was foundational. And because it's now incorporated into the New Testament, it's foundational for ourselves. You could say, in a sense, that God was, while it was carrying on from the Old Testament, of course, we don't place any severe gap between the Old and New Testament.

But God was, in fact, opening what you might say was opening a seminary. And when it came to the day of Pentecost, and when it came to the church gathered then, God was effectively opening a seminary for the teaching of these disciples, for the discipling of his new people in the church.

[5:40] And there were 3,000. Imagine if Edinburgh Theological Seminary, our own seminary, had such an intake on the first day of a new term. 3,000 people were converted, were brought to know the Lord.

That's what we read in this passage itself. Verse 41. Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.

And, of course, there have been revivals, as we call them, down through the centuries from that time onwards. But here's the wonderful emphasis there, that God was setting this on foot, this New Testament church, this continuation of the church into this New Testament age.

And he was opening a seminary, and that's really such an important part of what you find in the passage, but also carrying on through to the epistles of the apostles, where you find that the emphasis is not so much on working of miracles, so that's mentioned.

The emphasis is actually on people coming to be disciplined in the ways of God, and coming to relish these things for themselves, and coming to gather together, as we'll see, for fellowship and worship, and for witnessing to God.

[6:54] This was the active church, as it must still be the active church of God, carrying out these activities. And it's important that we see they placed themselves under the apostles' teaching.

If you go to the likes of Romans, chapter 6 and verse 17, Paul there speaks of the form of teaching to which you were committed.

And you've got the image in mind there is, when he says the form of teaching, or the kind of teaching, it really means the shape of this teaching, and the shape that is brought to a Christian, in a Christian development, is formed by this teaching.

The shape of Scripture is really what we take on. In its teaching, when we come to follow the Lord, when we come to be his disciples, you don't step outside of the Word of God, you don't step outside of the teaching of Scripture, in order to take on or to import something else.

This is what forms your life. This is what shapes your life. This is what brings to your life that kind of consistency that you need, and your life is shaped the more you actually come to have it under the direction and teaching of the Scriptures, of God's Word, of the Apostles' teaching.

[8:15] And you take that with you, of course, into every area of the church's life. That's why we teach our children, as we do from the Bible. That's why in our Sunday schools, we emphasize the Bible above everything else.

That's why the teaching we give to them is based upon the Scripture itself. That's why we teach our children how valuable Scripture is, for them as well as for older ones.

All the children here today are here receiving Scripture direction, Scripture teaching. Their lives are hopefully being shaped, as they develop spiritually and morally, by the Word of God.

Why are so many people in our society misshapen, as far as we take the Word of God to form our thinking of what a proper shape is for a human life, a life that glorifies God, a life that brings praise to God, a life that has benefits received for themselves.

What is wrong with our society that so many people, in terms of the Bible's teaching, are misshapen? Well, because they're not shaped by the Bible's own teaching.

[9:22] When you stop being shaped by the Bible's teaching, you become misshapen. Your life becomes twisted. Of course, we don't see it that way as human beings. None of those people today who reject the Gospel and say that it's completely outdated or whatever else, they would never say, my life's not misshapen.

I direct my life in a way that's true to myself and true to what secular society sets before me. Well, the Bible says, this is what shapes your life today.

Make sure your life is based in Scripture, rooted in Scripture, around the person of Christ, around the fatherhood of God, under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

That's what's going to bring proper God-honoring shape to your life. So they continued diligently in learning. They continued diligently also in fellowship.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship. And literally, as we said earlier, it's actually the fellowship. There's a definite article there which the translators have missed out, but it should be there.

[10 : 36] They devoted themselves to the fellowship. What is the fellowship? Well, the fellowship is the church in its life together. That's what it is.

We speak about having fellowship one with another, don't we? We speak about having fellowship at different meetings. We speak about meetings being fellowship meetings. And of course they are.

There's nothing wrong with that. But what this is saying to us is the church is the fellowship. It is the body of people that share together and share in and share out.

That's really what fellowship means. It's a word that means to share. But it's a sharing in and it's a sharing out. And the two things go together. When you are a fellowship, when you are the fellowship of the church, you're sharing in the life that Christ has given to his people.

You're sharing in the things that God has provided for us in the gospel. It's a sharing in salvation and life and the benefits and morally and spiritually that come from what God has given us in his revelation.

[11 : 44] It's a sharing in all of these things. That's why when you go to Ephesians chapter 3 verse 6, if I throw a few verses out at you, Colossians 1 verse 2, Hebrews 3 verse 14, 2 Corinthians 1 verse 7, they all talk about partaking of something, sharing in something, sharing in something spiritually together.

And the togetherness is important. The togetherness is important, especially in days when we find an individuality so much emphasized in our society.

I'm the boss of my own life, people will say. You have no right to tell me how to live or what my conduct should be or what I should think. But the church's life is life together.

The church's life is the fellowship of God's people. And as the fellowship of God's people, they share in things together. They don't just share in the teachings and in the salvation that God has given to us individually.

There is that. Of course there's that. And that's important. But you're here together to share together the things of God. You're sharing in them as the fellowship, as people who in the gospel are worshipers of God.

[13 : 07] And that leads to sharing out. Because the fellowship is not just the fellowship in taking things in and enjoying things together and in partaking of things together.

The fellowship is also active in sharing out from the things that we share in and share together. We share out. Not just to one another but to that world out there.

Because when you go out to evangelize, when you go out to witness for Christ, you're sharing out what God has given. You're sharing it out to others. They may never receive it. They may never want to receive it.

But you have it from God not just so that you'll enjoy it but so that you'll actually share it out to others. As if it was, and indeed it is, spiritual treasure. You're giving it out.

You want others to come to know it. You want others to come to share in it as well. And indeed, that's true also in a practical sense, isn't it? Here's this passage itself telling us in verses 44 to 46 here, they had all things in common.

[14 : 12] They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. There's the sharing out by those who are sharing in together of the things of the gospel.

They didn't just say, well, this is great. This is wonderful. Having this together. Let's just enjoy this time. Let's keep this to ourselves. No, they want to share out amongst each other and they want to share out as we'll see in a minute by reaching out with the gospel to the world around them.

That's what God has given to you as a congregation. You're sharing in the things of the gospel but not so as to keep it to yourselves. You're sharing in it so that you'll share it out. So that you'll go to the society around you and say, this is what shapes human life.

This is what's foundational. This is what brings true and lasting happiness. This is what brings contentment. What brings security. What brings a well-founded life together. So they continued in diligently learning from the apostle's teaching.

They continued diligently in fellowship, in being the fellowship, partaking of things together and sharing out. They continued thoroughly, diligently in worship.

[15:29] You notice the breaking of bread and the prayers. Now the breaking of bread is an interesting phrase. I think it involves both because it mentions what they were doing at home as well as in the temple.

I think it means both the Lord's Supper or partaking of the Lord's Supper but also in the ordinary sharing of meals together.

And very often in those days, there's early days, that went together. They didn't have church buildings such as we do now apart from the temple itself. So when they came to celebrate or take part in the Lord's Supper it would be in someone's home.

And very often that would include an ordinary meal which sometimes was called a fellowship meal and especially a fellowship meal when it was the Lord's Supper. But however we interpret that, it's true that that's what the church of the time was like.

They continued diligently in the breaking of bread and in the prayers, in the worship of the church, the worship collectively of the church. Now we're here today because the weather is bad.

[16:40] All of these empty seats are here today because of the weather primarily. But it is something of course important that we worship God together, that there is a gathered church mentality in our minds.

And while we benefit so much from the technology that allows us to tap into services when we cannot be gathered with others at church, and that benefit is undoubtedly there when you come to share online in the things of the gathered church at worship, it is still not a substitute for people actually physically coming together to worship God together.

That's the pattern that the New Testament sets out for us. And, well, okay, you might say, well, they didn't have Zoom and they didn't have the technology we have today.

They didn't have online services. And people might say, well, if they had them, surely they would have used them. Well, perhaps, but that wouldn't have taken away from the principle of physically gathering together as the people of God so as to be seen as well as to share together in the things of the gospel and to worship God together.

Gathered worship is so important right down through the history of the church. There are people today in Ukraine and places like that that go through really dreadful, testing, challenging conditions in order to get to where God's people gather together.

[18:10] There are churches in Ukraine, people will tell us from mission agencies there, where there are so many people that gather at some of these church buildings there's not enough room for them.

In Ukraine, under bombardment, under attack, under persecution. What's bringing that about?

It's because they realize that they need to be together as worshippers of God. That they need the benefits of being the gathered church of God where they are, whatever the conditions.

We have it relatively easy, friends, don't we? And so our focus should be and our relish should be in the things that are to do with meeting together, as you are today, of course.

But it's something that we need to focus on and keep maintaining in our lives and be like the church of the apostles. They continued diligently in worship.

[19:11] And you see, there's one thing mentioned there that's really important for us as well. As well as meeting together, they praised the Lord and had favor with all the people.

And as you go through the book of Acts and other passages that speak about their gatherings together, you can see how much joy filled their hearts.

They bore witness to God joyfully. They were in awe. That's what the passage says. Awe came upon every soul. They had all things in common. They met together and they had this reverence, this awe.

But awe is not an enemy of joy. Awe is not something that causes you to hide the joy that you have in Christ, that you have as a saved individual.

The two things are friends, awe and joy. They go together. They're twins in Christian experience. That's the balance the Bible gives us.

[20:16] If our Christian life, if our Christian witness, if our Christian confession is dreary, drab, boring, that's not awe.

Whatever else it is, it's not awe. Because nowhere in the Bible do you find reverence and awe being at odds with joy. Being at odds with truly being in your heart joyful and upbeat about the things of God.

And we are to show that. We are to show that to the world. Not in a false way. Not in a way that goes out really just as it were just making a main point of showing that we have joy in the Lord. Sometimes it's very difficult to show that we have joy in the Lord. And sometimes it's actually our sadness that conveys more than our conveying of joy. But that doesn't mean that we don't deliberately set out to show that we are joyful in Christ.

That we have something in the Lord that no one else can add to human life. And isn't that the case for you today? Let me say this to the young ones as well.

[21:32] you want to be happy don't you? You want to have a joyful life. Of course you do. So do we all. Well here's the Bible telling us how do I have a truly joyful life?

How do I have the kind of joy that the world the devil that no other power can actually take away from me? Well you have it because you have Jesus.

And when you have Jesus then he's your joy. And when Jesus is your joy that's what you show to the world. And if people ask you why are you always joyful?

Why do you seem to have such happiness in your life? You can say well it's because I know the Lord. It's because I know Christ. And because I love him.

And he loves me. That's what adds joy to my life. And so they continued diligently in worship.

[22:34] In learning in fellowship the fellowship and in worship. And finally they continued diligently in witnessing. Now it doesn't say that explicitly in the passage but it says that they had all things common and they actually had a favor having favor with all the people.

they were publicly praising God and had favor with all the people. Because you see all the things we've mentioned previously are kind of inwardly looking if you like into the church or a congregation.

The learning the fellowship the worship in a sense that's more inward looking than it is outward looking but they have their outward dimensions to them. we don't come together to worship God without being noticed.

Fair enough people won't bother to notice today whether you go to church or not in Stornway or wherever else we are but quite a lot of people will. And some people might be even asking questions why do they do that every week?

Why do they do that so regularly? What is it that brings them to that church? You don't know that maybe people are actually asking that today why in such wild weather would people actually bother to gather together to be in a church building to worship at a worship service?

[24:01] Some people might say they're absolute idiots going out in this weather. Fair enough. But others might be asking yeah but what is it that drives them in such conditions as these to want to be together to worship?

Think about that. And the answer to that of course if you get the opportunity is that you want to continue in worshipping God because that's one of the main features of your life as a Christian to worship God together with other people.

And that public witness that public gathering that public emphasis to the church at the time and this passage doesn't say it but the whole of Acts afterwards really is about this isn't it?

It's about the church going out in its witness to God with the gospel going out to the world around them and it's one of the most amazing things of the book of Acts is the preservation of the church in such difficult circumstances but not just its preservation it's actually its mission to the world.

It's an amazing thing to actually see in the book of Acts the development of the Lord's cause as the Lord adds to his church as the gospel goes out to the Gentile world to the pagan world to the Greek world to the Roman world as the gospel goes out and seeing the establishing of churches in pagan places like Corinth and Athens and Thessalonica where there wasn't a church previously how has it come about?

[25:36] Well it's because the Lord blessed the witness of his people their witness in the gospel their witness as a gathered people of God regularly worshipping the Lord and you see it says here something very important as well and the Lord added daily to their number those who were being

saved why is that important?

Well it's important for two reasons first of all it's the Lord who adds to the church it's wonderful to see new people coming to attend church services and since I was here as a minister I can see the times I've been back there are new faces there are people I don't know and it's thrilling it's great to see it long may it continue long may others be encouraged to come as well but to be added to the church to be added to the number of the saved is what it means essentially that's the Lord's work not the minister's work it's not the Kirk Session's work yes the Kirk Session puts people on a role of communicants perhaps or a congregational role of all the people that actually regularly come to church but to be added to the church savingly that's the Lord's work now you know that already but it's all too easy to forget it and it's easy to become a bit despondent perhaps at times such as a vacancy like you're going through yourselves the Lord adds to his church and he added to church here daily those that were being saved and here's the other thing as well as the Lord adding to the church he's adding to the church those that were being saved because you cannot be saved really without having a desire to be part of this church of Christ something wrong with an individual he says well I'm saved I'm a Christian I believe in Jesus but I don't need to go to church I don't need to gather with other people such as they do that's fine for them if they want to do that that's entirely up to them well that's not what the Bible is encouraging me to think at all is it where do you find anywhere in the Bible somebody saying I'm a Christian but I don't need to meet with other Christians I don't need to actually go together with other people to worship this Christ I can do that at home yes you can do it at home if you're not able physically to come together with other people that's where we have the technology but without that of mind and body to come together well that's what we do because the

Lord adds daily to the church in these days of the apostles those who are being saved there should be no room in our own thoughts as Christians or in our own thoughts as congregations for individualism individualism is destructive of the church's life because what it means is you're going to focus on each individual rather than on the whole body of Christ and if we just say individually that's fine for me the rest can do what they like that's not being a Christian that's not what the Bible encourages us to think or to do here is a church who are shunning individualism who are saying what we have belongs to all of us together what we share in is ours together to save to save to share what we are in terms of our salvation yes there's an individual aspect to it but it doesn't make us individualistic we share that as well in the fellowship and in the things that we share in the Lord's supper and so on that's why Paul goes on to use the imagery of the body in his epistles when he deals with the church you can't think of your physical body as if the arms the legs the head other parts of it just function on their own it wouldn't function and God is through that teaching us as Paul writes in his epistles that the eye cannot say I have no need of the hands or the hands say I have no need of the feet they all exist together to be together to function together to each contribute their own part but to act together collectively as the body of

Christ they continued diligently in witnessing as God's people in the world four things four things that are a crucial aspect of the church's life it's learning of God's truth it's being the fellowship together of God's people it's worship of God publicly and privately it's witness to God to Christ as Savior and they're as applicable to you today as a vacant congregation as at any other time these things don't stop when a vacancy occurs in a congregation I know you know that already I'm just setting out for you what the Bible is clearly teaching us we need to focus our minds on so as you go on with the vacancy however short or long it might be and

[31:27] I know in a sense I've caused it by retiring although I had to do that nevertheless it's a vacancy all the same and it's important for you as a congregation that I love and often preach to that you continue learning from the teaching of Scripture together that you continue in being the fellowship of God's people in the world partaking of sharing in and sharing out it's important for you that you continue to diligently publicly come to worship the Lord it's important for you that you continue to witness to witness to the Savior to God the Father to God the Holy Spirit to Jesus and that you continue to be a people as I'm sure you will be who will have these four features as prominent aspects together of your life as a congregation let's pray

Lord our God we again give thanks that these aspects of your word and its teaching are applicable to us at all times in the history of your church and we thank you that they are relevant and applicable to us today whatever our circumstances Lord may be continue to bless this congregation of your people we pray provide for them at this time bless those who have positions and functions

of of leadership at this time the elders in the session remember also Calumurdo as he continues to minister the gospel here and remember Calum McLeod as he heads them in being an intermoderator we pray Lord for all of those individuals and for them collectively to continue to guide and steer the congregation at this time above all we pray for your Holy Spirit to guide them we pray for souls to be saved we pray for others to be added to the number of the saved and we pray for the glory of your name to be more and more manifest throughout your people here we pray in Jesus name Amen We're going to conclude our service today singing in Psalm 133 well known words of Psalm 133 in the Scottish Psalter version Behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well together such as brethren are in unity to dwell like precious ointment on the head that down the beard did flow even Aaron's beard and to the skirts did of his garments go as Herman's Jew the Jew that doth on Zion hills descend for there the blessing God commands life that shall never end Psalm 133 to God's praise behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well together such as brethren are in in unity to dwell like precious ointment on the head that earned the beard did flow flow he he on beard and to the skirts did off his garments go as her most Jew the Jew that doth on Zion hills! there the blessing God that shall end God commands life that shall ever end! [36 : 03] Amen! them all will get now this here is not all he one will there so he who will see if he here he by car week Thank you.
Thank you.