



CHURCH BORN (SHORT) (April 15)

(ACTS 2:42-47)

INTRO

I'm physically lopsided. My right shoulder is slightly lower than my left. It's the result of a lifetime of guitar playing. It's only subtle but it's mildly annoying because my shirts all tend to slide down to the right, leaving my collar uneven on my neck.

You're probably you're lopsided too. Most of us have one foot bigger than the other, one arm more developed than the other. Even our faces are not completely symmetrical. You see, we are all lopsided in some way.

But did you know **churches** can be lopsided too? They can get things out of balance. They can inappropriately accentuate some things and devalue or neglect others, so the church gets slightly out of whack.

This passage in Acts 2 describes the 4 key elements that characterised the NT church at its very beginning. And they are mentioned here because they are the 4 key elements that EVERY church ought to hold in balance. And as we look at these 4 elements more closely now, I want you to consider the question: Are these 4 things equally well-developed and emphasised in YOUR church? Or are there some that have been neglected or under-emphasised? Is your church slightly out of whack, and does it need to get back IN whack. In fact, my working title for this sermon is "Getting Your Church Back in Whack".



The four elements mentioned here are the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.

And the very first thing to note is that the early church was "**devoted**" to all four of these things. Did you notice that word? Verse 42 says,



"They devoted themselves" to those 4 things.

There was nothing blasé or half-hearted about the early church in each of these 4 areas. They were passionately committed to these 4 things.

So, let's dive in now and see how their passion and devotion played out in practice in each of these areas.



1. THEY WERE DEVOTED TO THE APOSTLE'S TEACHING.

In fact, they were so devoted to this that this fledgling church met EVERY DAY, to listen to the Apostle's

teaching. Verse 46 tells us,  ***"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts*** [that's the outer public courtyards of the temple, where the Apostles would stand and preach]." ***Every day*** they met together to be taught and fed spiritually by the Apostles. Now that's devotion!

Wow! Wouldn't it be great to be able to go back in time and sit under the teaching of the Apostles like that?

Hold on a minute. We can! We can sit under their teaching, because that's what this is! What we have, recorded for us here in the New Testament, is the teaching of the Apostles and of several other elders of the early church. And through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit it has come down to us through the centuries as God's inspired, authoritative Word.

And so the question I want to ask you is, Are you devoted to the Apostle's teaching, personally? And is your whole church devoted to it?

Because it seems to me that in some churches, the sermon, when the Apostles' teaching is taught and explained, is something people just put up with in order to get to other parts of the service which they consider to be more important. And when the preacher stands to preach, some people just switch off; they have a little snooze, start to think through their shopping list for the week, their list of jobs to do. And if the preacher goes much more than 15 minutes, well, it's almost like the end of the world!

Yes, in some churches the preaching of God's Word is valued less highly than other elements.

But did you notice the order of these 4 elements that are listed in this Bible passage? Devotion to the Apostle's teaching is mentioned **first**. It comes **before** the others. And that's not a coincidence. This is no random listing. It starts with the most important of them all. Because the TRUTH MATTERS. And unless we get the truth right, everything else we do as a church could be completely off target.

It's very significant that throughout the writings of the New Testament, it is the preaching and teaching of God's Word that is URGED upon the first century churches as a matter of FIRST and HIGHEST priority.

And that is because it's only God's Word that has the power to actually transform lives. Romans 10:17 says,



"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."

In Matthew 4:4, Jesus described God's Word as food for the soul. He said,



"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

The early church understood this. They understood that it's God's Word that feeds and nourishes us: that it strengthens our faith, and increases our hope, it inspires our service, it determines our values, it informs our beliefs, it challenges our sin, it refines our holiness and it transforms us into mature disciples of the Lord Jesus.

And while other elements of the service are also a source a great encouragement to us, only the living Word of God can bring about this kind of **deep** transformation.

This is what is meant in Hebrews 4:12 when it says,



"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

SO, let me ask you: Do you believe that? And if you do, how devoted is your church to God's Word? And how devoted are you, personally?

Being devoted means listening eagerly and attentively as God's Word is preached. It also means reading your Bible every day, personally, eager to learn and grow spiritually. And a church that is devoted to God's Word will have an active midweek Bible study program, with a large percentage of members enthusiastically meeting to study God's Word together.

So, how is your church going? Are you a church that is devoted to God's Word?



2. THEY WERE DEVOTED TO FELLOWSHIP.

They were deeply committed to one another. Check out the depth of their commitment in verses 44-46:



"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate with glad and sincere hearts."

This is a **remarkable** picture of a church family that is deeply and intimately connected to one another. They shared possessions, they **sold** possessions to give money to the needy, they met together daily, and they ate meals together in one another's homes. They were deeply connected to one another. They really were a family.



And this didn't go unnoticed by the wider community, because we are told in verse 47 that ***"they enjoyed the favour of all the people."*** No wonder. This was radical, deep, practical love – the kind of love that will be a powerful witness to everyone around you.

Does your church look like that? Are you intimately and deeply connected to one another? Or are you divided and distant? And if that level of deep connection isn't quite there, what can you do to foster it and deepen that family connection? Maybe that's something you need to look at as a church.



3. THEY WERE DEVOTED TO THE BREAKING OF BREAD.

This is an interesting phrase and I need to give you a bit of historical background.

In Jewish first century society, every evening meal was started by the head of the home, usually the husband and father, saying a brief prayer of thanksgiving and then breaking a loaf of bread in two, to symbolise the start of the meal and his willingness to share his provisions with everyone at the table. That was how the evening meal was commenced in every home throughout Israel, every day of the year, not just at Passover.

And if one person was inviting another to dinner, they would ask, **"Would you like to break bread with us, tonight?"** Breaking bread was simply the phrase that denoted having a meal together, and it referenced this ritual at the start of every meal.

Then at the end of the meal, when everyone had had enough to eat, the host would stand and raise his cup and pronounce a toast, wishing everyone at the table good health. And this toast signified the end of the meal, after which people could leave the table if they wished. That was how every evening meal finished.

So, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, at his final meal before his death, he took these ordinary, every-day rituals that took place at the start and end of every evening meal, and he gave them new meaning.



At the beginning of the Passover meal, he broke the bread and said, **“This is my body, given for you”** ... and at the conclusion of the meal, (because Luke's Gospel says it was **“After supper”** that he took the cup, after a full meal had been consumed,) he took the ordinary cup of blessing and said, **“This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many”**.

And as he gave these every-day rituals new meaning, he said **“Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24-25)**. In other words, ***from now on, every time you share a meal together like this, do it in remembrance of me.***

So, you see, at the Lord's Supper, Jesus wasn't instituting a NEW ritual. He simply took an existing, every day ritual and gave it new meaning.

And the early church followed his instructions. Every evening meal, when they broke bread at the start of a meal and took the cup at the end, they paused to give thanks for the death and resurrection of Jesus; it became a normal part of every evening meal in every household. And this passage indicates that there was a remarkable level of shared hospitality within the early church, opening their homes to one another to share a meal together in this way and to give thanks for their Saviour.

This is what is meant in verse 26:



“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

So, at the very beginning of the church's history, the Lord's Supper, or what we commonly call Communion, was celebrated every night, in the homes of Christian families as they shared an evening meal together.

Of course, it soon spilled over into their larger, corporate gatherings as well, where it gradually took on a more symbolic expression in that larger context.

But it's important for us to reflect on the Lord's Supper as it was instituted by Jesus and practiced by the early church. Because in the very beginning, it was a very simple and practical way of remembering and giving thanks. In fact, the word **“eucharist”** literally means, **“to give thanks”**.

You see, communion is **primarily** an act of THANKSGIVING, not an act of RECEIVING. It is not a mystical ceremony for getting a top up of God's grace. Consuming the bread and wine doesn't top up our salvation which may have started to leak out of us during the week! It was never intended to do that. There is nothing in the way Jesus instituted it, nor in the way the early church practiced it, that would lead us to that viewpoint.

And just in case you think I'm saying something radical and controversial here, let me point you to the 39 Articles of Religion, which is the Anglican Manifesto, the summary of beliefs for the Anglican church worldwide.



Article 25 of the 39 Articles states that the Lord's Supper is **“an effectual *sign* of grace”**. Now, importantly, it doesn't say it is a **means** of grace. It is a **sign only**, a **remembrance** of the grace that God has **already** given us in Jesus, not the **means** of our receiving it. We don't receive Jesus' grace by taking part in the Communion, we receive Jesus' grace through faith and repentance!

So, if you are coming to communion with the primary aim of receiving more grace or being topped up in your salvation, then you've missed the point. Of course, celebrating communion *is* a source of great encouragement and blessing to us, just as every other element of the service is. In fact, Article 25 of the 39 articles states that

by participating in the Lord's Supper, God works within us to  ***“strengthen and confirm our faith in him.”*** But we don't receive more of God's grace by consuming the elements. Communion is an act of remembrance and thanksgiving for God's grace that is ALREADY ours in Christ.

So, in being devoted to the breaking of bread, to the Lord's Supper, please make sure you are devoted to it in the right way, and not motivated by some kind of self-focused religious mysticism that was *never* part of the Lords Supper as it was instituted by Jesus, as it was practiced by the New Testament church, and as it is defined for us in the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion.



4. Fourthly and finally, the early church was DEVOTED TO PRAYER.

As we go through the book of Acts you will, indeed, see a church who were utterly devoted to prayer, who fell to their knees as a **first** response to crises and needs. A church who sensed the spiritual battle they were in and who cried out to God for the working of his mighty power in their midst.

And God answered their prayers, at times, quite miraculously! So, in verse 43, immediately after this reference to prayer, we read,



“Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and signs were performed by the Apostles.”

Did you get that connection? The church prays. Then miracles happen. And one of the miracles was an ongoing one. Verse 47 describes that ongoing miracle:



“And the Lord added to their number daily – yes daily – those who were being saved.”

So, let me ask you, do you want to see God work powerfully in your own community? Do you want to see a steady stream of people coming to faith and joining your church family? It won't happen without prayer. Prayer that calls upon the power of God to open the eyes of the blind, to soften the hearts of the sceptical and to bring people to genuine repentance and faith in Christ. Conversion is a miracle and only God can do it!

Are you devoted to prayer? Are your prayer meetings well attended? Do your study groups pray fervently and passionately for revival in your church and community? Do **you** pray devotedly in your personal life? Are you a church that is devoted to prayer?

CONCLUSION

So, there are the four key elements of a healthy, balanced church:

- A healthy church is devoted to reading and studying and eagerly hearing God's Word.

- A healthy church is devoted to deep, generous, intimate fellowship with each other.
- A healthy church is devoted to celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus appropriately, biblically, without self-focus or superstition.
- A healthy church is devoted to prayer – corporate and personal prayer that faithfully and persistently calls upon the power of God to be at work in their midst.

So how are you going in those 4 areas? How balanced is your church? Has one or two of those things got a little bit out of whack? Do you need to get back in whack?

I want to challenge you to think through these four elements as individuals and as a church – perhaps even in your parish council. And ask God to reveal to you the things that need to change in order to become the balanced church that he calls you to be.

May God guide you and give you great wisdom and insight as you do that.