

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY - Part 1

The Most Important Sermon You'll Ever Hear

Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage: Acts 2:42a
Subject: To what did the early Christian devote themselves
Complements: the apostles' teaching
Exegetical idea: The early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.
Homiletical idea: **Authentic Christians are passionately devoted to Jesus.**
Purpose: To help my hearers to understand the identifying characteristics of an authentic Christian community and to encourage them to devote themselves to Jesus and His Word.

Introduction

For the next four sermons, we are going to focus our attention on a single verse of Scripture. You say, "Wow! That must be an important text!" And it is. This single verse of Scripture gives us the four essential characteristics of an authentic Christian community. We are going to consider one of those essential characteristics each week for the next four weeks. It's my prayer that in the days and weeks ahead we would all learn and live the truth that this text contains.

So where is that single verse of Scripture that contains four essential characteristics of an authentic Christian community? It's found in the book of Acts, chapter 2:42. And I hope you brought your Bible with you this morning. Let's look at that text together. Acts 2:42 The Word of God says, concerning the early Christians, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Before we begin to unpack the meaning of that text, let's take a moment to look at the context. What is the setting for this verse of Scripture? The apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with wisdom and holy boldness, has just preached a powerful sermon on the day of

Pentecost. He's somewhere in Jerusalem, with the other apostles, and thousands of people have gathered to listen to his testimony. His sermon title? I don't know for sure, but we might choose something like this: "The Truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth... about Jesus."

Everyone in Jerusalem has heard of Jesus. Everyone is talking about Him. But who is He? The Messiah or a madman? Son of God or a deluded and defeated visionary?

And the apostle Peter answers that question in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Look with me at Acts 2, beginning with verse 22. "....." (Acts 2:22-24, 36)

And how do the people respond? Acts 2:37. Some of those listening are convicted by the truth of his words. "....." The Holy Spirit is not only working through Peter and the other apostles. The Holy Spirit is working on the hearers, convicting them of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. And when you come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, you need to act on that conviction. You need to do something. And so they cry out to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter gives the answer, in Acts 2:38-39. "....."

Luke tells us that with many other words Peter warned them. Acts 2:40. "....." Praise the Lord, more than three thousand accept Jesus as their Messiah, their Savior and Lord. And they confess their faith in Jesus through baptism.

And then comes our single verse of Scripture which describes this authentic Christian community which has just been formed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 2:42, "They, these early Christians, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Four essential characteristics of this authentic Christian community, formed by the power of the Holy Spirit. "They devoted themselves to the apostles'

teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

The verb translated “devoted” in Acts 2:42 is an interesting one. When you’re studying your Bible, and you want to discover the meaning of a key word, you have several options. You can use a lexicon. That’s like a dictionary which examines the meaning of the word in the original language. If you don’t have a lexicon, you can look up the text in different translations. For example, the NIV says “they devoted themselves....” What does it say in the KJV? “they continued steadfastly....” The Message puts it this way: “They committed themselves..” In today’s language, we might say “they were passionately committed to the apostles teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.”

Today, we’re going to take a closer look at the first characteristic of an authentic Christian community. These early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. Question. What was the apostles’ teaching? Well, we don’t have to guess. We’ve already heard the apostles’ teaching on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:36, 38-39. “.....” The apostles’ teaching on the day of Pentecost was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...about Jesus. Jesus is the Christ.

Some time later, the apostle Peter preaches another sermon at the Temple gate. This is a short sermon. Only two sentences. But it’s powerful! Peter and John are on their way to the Temple and they encounter a crippled man at the temple gate. You know the story. The man holds out his palms and asks for some alms. And what does Peter say? A two-sentence sermon! And the sermon isn’t about money. The sermon is about Jesus, the truth about Jesus. Peter say, “Silver and gold I have none but such as I have I give to you....in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” A two-sentence sermon. Peter declares that Jesus of Nazareth is

the Christ. Notice how he refers to Jesus. What does he say? He calls Him “Jesus Christ.” That’s his sermon, right there. The truth about Jesus. Jesus is no ordinary Rabbi. Jesus is no ordinary religious teacher. Jesus is the Christ. The Messiah. The Savior. That was always the heart of the apostles’ teaching. Jesus is the Christ.

As a result of that powerful sermon, Peter and John end up in jail. The next day, Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin. The religious leaders asked a question: “By what power or name did you do this miracle?” We can read Peter’s response in Acts 4:8-12.

“.....” This was the apostles’ teaching—Jesus is the Christ!

And it wasn’t just the apostle Peter who preached the message of Jesus as the Messiah. Look with me at Acts 5:41-42. “.....” This was the heart of the apostles’ teaching. Jesus is the Christ!

After Saul of Tarsus was called to be an apostle of the Risen Christ, following his conversion on the Damascus Road, what was the message that he preached? Acts 9:19-22.

“.....” This wasn’t just Peter’s preaching. This was the message of all of the apostles. Including the apostle Paul. Just one more example. Acts 17:2-3.

“.....”

Some people in our culture are uncomfortable with the exclusive claims of Jesus. He doesn’t just say “I know the way to heaven” or even “I am one of the ways to heaven.” Jesus boldly declares, “I AM the way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” That sounds exclusive, but it’s the truth. There aren’t many ways to be saved. You can’t just make up a way that seems good to you. The apostles had clearly understood the teaching of Jesus when they declared “there is no other name under heaven given among men

whereby we must be saved.” And “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” In other words, if you believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be, if you trust Him as your Messiah, your Savior and Lord, you will be saved. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

That’s the message that the apostles proclaimed. And it is the message that every authentic Christian community proclaims. We devote ourselves to the apostles’ teaching—that Jesus is the Christ!

I wonder what impression people get when they visit our church here at Forest Lake. Do they see an authentic Christian community? I pray that they do. And if they do, one of the characteristics of that authentic Christian community is a people who are devoted to the apostles’ teaching that Jesus is the Christ. People ought to leave here saying, “Those people are really devoted to Jesus! Amen? Those people really focus on Jesus. Those people are passionately committed to Jesus.

Some of you might be thinking, “The apostles taught more than just “Jesus is the Christ.” And you’re right. The truth about Jesus was the heart of their teaching. And it was out of that devotion to Jesus that they gave the rest of the teaching. Because the apostle Peter was devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ, he encouraged fellow Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 3:18. Because the apostle Paul was passionately committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, he encouraged fellow Christians to “follow my example as I follow the example of Jesus.” 1 Cor 11:1. Because the apostle John was devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ, he encouraged fellow Christians to consider what manner of love the Father has given to us through His Son Jesus, and in preparation for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to purify

ourselves even as He is pure. 1 John 2:1-3 Everything centers in Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ, and being passionately committed to Him.

I'm always moved when I hear stories of men and women who are passionately committed to Jesus. Some years ago, I heard the story of brother Abel. He lived in the African country which is now called Zimbabwe. It was during the time of civil war. One day, freedom fighters came to his villages. They ordered all of the villagers to gather in the village square. When they learned that brother Abel was a Christian, they mocked him and ordered him to renounce his faith in Jesus. "Say, 'Down with Jesus!'" they demanded. Brother Abel refused. "I am a Christian," brother Abel declared. "I cannot say 'Down with Jesus!'" The freedom fighters beat him. Suddenly, it began to rain, and so the freedom fighters locked brother Abel in a small building and found shelter from the rain. While in that small building, brother Abel wrote a short note to his son. When the rain finally stopped, the freedom fighters returned and dragged brother Abel out into the open. Again they yelled at him: "Say down with Jesus." But brother Abel was passionately committed to Jesus. He was an authentic Christian. He could not say "Down with Jesus." When he refused, the freedom fighters shot him in the head. Brother Abel died a martyr's death that day. His persecutors left him lying in a pool of blood.

When brother Abel's family came to retrieve his body, they found the note that he had written to his son. This is what it said. "Son, I have prayed for you all of your life. Be faithful unto death."

And that's my prayer for you, my brothers and sisters. Not that you would be powerful, or popular, or prosperous. I pray that you would be faithful to Jesus. I pray that you would be passionately committed to Jesus. Because Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the

only Savior. Jesus is our soon coming King.

May it be said of each one of us, whether in life or in death, they were devoted to Jesus. They were passionately committed to Jesus. The most important sermon you'll ever hear is a sermon about Jesus. It's a sermon telling you the truth that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. And that the wages of sin is death. But God so loved the world, praise His holy name, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. It's a sermon that tells you that God did not send His Son Jesus into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved.

And this morning, I want to invite you to confess your faith in that Jesus, who is the Christ, the Savior of the world. I want to invite you to be passionately committed to Jesus. I want to invite you to be an authentic Christian. Authentic Christians are passionately devoted to Jesus.

Some years ago, I was preaching at the McDonald Road SDA church, near Collegedale, Tennessee. I was a guest speaker. In fact, it was my first time speaking at that church. During the first stanza of the closing hymn, the Lord impressed me to make a call, to invite people to trust in Jesus as their personal Savior. At first, I struggled with that. I said, "Lord, we're singing the closing hymn. I'm new here. The people don't even know me. We don't just interrupt closing hymns to do things like that!" But the conviction remained. "You need to invite people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior." So after we had completed the first verse of the closing hymn, I turned to the organist and went like this. Then I stepped up to the pulpit, and said, "Brothers and sisters, while we were singing this hymn, the Lord impressed me to give an

invitation for people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior. Perhaps you've heard today, and you've never accepted Jesus personally. Or perhaps you've wandered away from Jesus, and you need to come home. I want to invite you to make that commitment today. While we're singing the closing song, I want to invite you to come forward and confess your commitment to Jesus Christ."

And then we began to sing the second stanza of the hymn. And almost immediately, a young man about five rows back popped up and, with tears running down his cheeks, he made his way to the front of the church. Then another came, and another and another. I was amazed. And so was everyone else. And we were filled with joy. And there is also joy in the presence of the angels of God when one person recognizes that he or she is a sinner in need of a Savior.

I met with the group of about 15 men and women after the service. And what impressed me the most was the testimony of that young man who popped up on row five. He said, "During the closing hymn, I noticed that you were troubled. And the Lord said to me, 'I'm troubling him to make a call.'" And that young man said, "Lord, if he makes a call, I'll go forward!"

I'm eternally thankful that I gave the call that day. For that young man, and for the other men and women who responded, that was the most important call they ever heard. And I thank God that they responded to the invitation to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

When we began this sermon, I asked you to put a response sheet in the front of your Bible. I want to invite you to take that out right now. Perhaps you've never made a conscious decision to accept Jesus as your personal Savior. You know about Jesus. You believe that Jesus is the Christ. But you've never made a conscious decision to say, "Jesus, I accept you as my Savior." I invite you to make that decision today. Check that box on your response card.

Others may read “I’ve wandered away from Jesus and I want to come home” and you say, “That’s me.” I used to be passionately committed to Jesus, I used to be devoted to Jesus, but I’ve wandered away. And I need to come home. I invite you to come home today. Check that box on your response card.

Some of you may sense the need to experience a deeper relationship with Jesus. You want to learn more about what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. We have a Bible study class that will help you on that journey. Just check that box.

And then there’s a box for all of us. We, as a pastoral staff, want to commit to pray for you and those that you love. There’s someone you know, someone you love who needs Jesus, who needs to accept Jesus as their personal Savior. I want you to write their name in the space provided. We want to join with you in praying for that person. And I’m also going to pray that you would invite that person to church!

After you’ve checked the appropriate boxes, just write your name, phone number, and e-mail address at the bottom of the response sheet. We want to pray for you by name, and follow-up on the commitment to Jesus that you have made today. As you leave church today, please give that response sheet to one of the pastors or one of the elders standing at the door.

Next week we’re going to talk about another essential characteristic of an authentic Christian community. But let’s start with this one. Passionate devotion to Jesus. As we come here to church each week, as we live our lives each day, may we exhibit this first characteristic of authentic Christians. May it be said of us, “Those people are passionately devoted to Jesus!”