

Introduction

When I moved to Rome, Georgia in 2021, a man said to me, “Bill, there are already churches on every street corner. Why are you going to plant a church in Rome?” That’s a great question that he asked. I told him that he was right about there being a lot of churches in Rome, but there were not any churches like what we were going to plant. Most of the churches in Rome are not building according to the model of the early church in the New Testament. We were going to be unique in that we were going to be devoted to the same things that the early church was devoted to. We find in Acts 2:42 that the church in Jerusalem was devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Most churches today are devoted to teaching, children’s programs, and to praise and worship. I call this the Western Church Model, as opposed to the Early Church Model. Today, I want to talk about the things that we do when we gather, and these relate back to the things that we are devoted to.

(Ac 2:42) “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

I have greatly appreciated the Apostle Paul, his life, his ministry, and the example that he set for us. I have tried to pattern much of my ministry after Paul. One of my ministry goals was to preach through all thirteen Pauline epistles, and last year I finished that goal. Paul was an apostle, and he planted churches everywhere he went. One of the things that Paul did was to plant churches according to the pattern of the churches in Judea. The churches in Judea were in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he commended them, saying, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews.” It was not just the suffering for the gospel that they imitated; it was their church government, and the priorities of the church. Paul taught the Thessalonians to be devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and to prayer.

(1 Th 2:14) “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews,”

After the Covid-19 outbreak and restrictions, I observed that many believers got in the habit of not attending church. For many, watching the services online was an easy habit to get into. It was more convenient, more comfortable, and did not take as much of their time. Many have shared that they now just listen to the messages online, as if that is what church is all about.

One day, as I was on my daily prayer walks, I came across a woman who had stopped going to church. I had spoken to her several times in the past and invited her to church. In her case, it was not Covid-19 that prompted her to stop going; it was the attitude of the church when she went through a divorce. Many people, like her, have been either hurt or offended, and stopped going to church because of that. She listened to many pastors online, and also listened to Christian radio, and thought that this was all she needed in her walk with God. In my conversation with this woman, I brought up Acts 2:42, and told her the four things that the early church was devoted to. I mentioned that by listening to different pastors online, she was getting only 25% of what the early church was devoted to. She then asked me what time our service started, and could she wear jeans. I thought she might come, but she never did. I continued to pray daily for her to return to church, and whenever I saw her outside her home, I would speak with her, always encouraging her to return to church, if not ours, another church that preaches the word. I am

happy to report that a few months ago she told me that she has joined a church in the area, and I rejoiced over this, and gave thanks to God for answered prayer.

In many conversations with other people, they have told me, “God and I are doing great! It’s just the people in the church that I don’t want to be around.” Recently, one man told me that he had not been to church in eighteen years, and seemed to be proud of that fact. He stopped going to church because of a conflict that he had with the deacons in his church. When a person tells me that he is good with God, but struggles with the people in church, I think of 1 John 4:20. John wrote, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” If we truly love God, we will learn to love His family, the church.

(1 Jn 4:20) “If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

We have to learn to work through problems and issues, rather than walk away from them. The early church had strife and divisions, and Paul encouraged them to work through those problems and to learn to be of one mind. He addressed the strife and division in Corinth. He also addressed the strife in Philippi, and exhorted the church to help two strong women to get along. It is work; but it is what God wants us to do. What He does not want us to do is to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of many.

(Heb 10:25) “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

What are the things that have made it easy for people to stop going to church? What are the things that are missing when we assemble together, that people can stay home and feel like they have received everything they would have received if they had gone to church in person? I believe that church leaders also bear some responsibility in this matter. I am taking the time this week to look at some things that the early church did, and were devoted to, and that we should be doing today. Because we are not committed to these things, people are somewhat correct when they say they received everything they would have received if they had attended a church service in person.

When We Gather (Four Priorities of the Church)

1. Apostles’ Teaching
2. Fellowship
3. Breaking of bread
4. Prayer

1. Apostles’ Teaching

When we gather, one of the things that we should be devoted to is the apostles’ teaching. Most churches today have a sermon given during the service, so in one sense, many would be quick to put a tick on that box and move on. However, on closer inspection, I think it would be profitable to spend a few minutes on the teaching and preaching of God’s Word.

(Ac 2:42) “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

George Barna has been doing surveys on the church for many years. He is currently at Arizona Christian University, where he is the Director of Research at their Cultural Research Center. In the American Worldview Inventory (AWVI) 2022, they found that only 37% of Christian pastors had a Biblical worldview.¹ Of the mainline protestant churches, only 32% of the pastors had a Biblical worldview. The non-denominational, independent pastors had the highest overall Biblical worldview, with 57%. Only 11-12% of the youth pastors and children's pastors had a Biblical worldview. When Barna broke it down by congregational size, he found that the pastors of the largest churches, those with 601 people or more, had only a 15% Biblical worldview.

What does all this mean? It means that on any given Sunday in America, roughly 63% of what is being taught in the pulpit does not come from a Biblical worldview. It means that almost 90% of what is being taught to our children in churches does not come from a Biblical worldview. It means that in the biggest churches, roughly 85% of what is being taught does not come from a Biblical worldview. It would not measure up the devotion to the apostles' teaching that the early church had. It is no wonder that he found that 94% of self-identified Christians do not have a Biblical worldview. Of those who identify as a theologically-defined, born-again Christian, 88% do not have a Biblical worldview.²

Paul wrote that in the last days people would accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth." Pastors preach to keep their numbers up, not daring to preach things that may turn away a potential supporter of the church.

(2 Ti 4:3) "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,"

What was Paul's remedy? He charged Timothy to preach the Word, to be ready in season and out of season, to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with great patience and instruction. Pastors must get back to preaching and teaching the Word of God. They must be willing to reprove, rebuke, and exhort the body of Christ.

(2 Ti 4:1-2) "I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: {2} preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction."

Paul told the Ephesian elders in his meeting with them in Miletus that he did not shrink from declaring to them anything that was profitable, and that he had spoken to them about repentance toward God and faith in Jesus. We don't like to talk about sin and repentance today, but Paul did not shrink back; he taught the whole counsel of God. We must get back to preaching the Word of God. We must get back to preaching the whole counsel of God, not what is culturally acceptable.

(Ac 20:20-21) "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, {21} solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

(Ac 20:27) "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

¹ https://web.arizonachristian.edu/CRC/2022/AWVI2022_Release05_Digital.pdf

² https://web.arizonachristian.edu/CRC/2026/AWVI-2026_Report_1-BWV_Incidence_Stagnates-03_03_2026.pdf

Another factor in the teaching today is the type of messages being given. Different surveys show differing values, but somewhere between 80% to 95% of messages being given in churches are topical. Topical messages tend to be shorter in length, and there is a greater probability that the whole counsel of God is not being preached. The Southern Baptists had the highest Biblical worldview of senior pastors of any denomination. 78% of their pastors had a Biblical worldview, more than twice that of the national average. When evaluating their churches, they believe that expository preaching is one of the signs of a healthy church.

In 2026, Paul's exhortations to pastors remain on the mark. Pastors must preach the Word of God. They must preach the whole counsel of God. They must not shrink back from declaring to the church all that is profitable. When the church gathers, people need to hear the Word of God taught. Believers need to be challenged and exhorted from the Word of God.

2. Fellowship

The second area that the early church was devoted to was fellowship. Churches primarily met in homes, and churches in homes tend to be smaller and more relational. Having been a church planter for the past thirty years, our churches always started in the home, and stayed there until we outgrew it. There was a marked difference in the atmosphere between meeting in the home and meeting in a church facility. The first recorded church facility was in 225 AD. Since then, we have moved away from meeting in homes, and have built facilities specifically designed to hold our meetings.

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The size of a church, or any organization, affects how it must be run. A church or business cannot grow large without being well organized and structured. Systems and processes must be developed and in place for it to grow larger. Unfortunately, there is a trade-off. As churches become larger and more structured, there is a tendency to become less relational. They usually become more program-oriented and less relationship oriented. It does not have to be that way, as large churches can grow with strong small-groups in their DNA. The small groups, especially when they meet in homes, are where the relationships in the church form and are strengthened. Without the small groups in place, people simply attend a service and go home. When this happens, people can stay at home and watch the service on their TV or computer, and get almost as much out of the service.

In the Bible there are thirty-three "one another" commands. In a typical service, very few of these one-another commands will be carried out. In a relationally-oriented church, there is an emphasis on carrying out these commands. Here are some examples.

The Bible tells us to pray for one another (Jas 5:16). For us to pray for one another, we need to know what to pray for in the person's life, and without relationship, we will not know. There must be a time for fellowshiping with one another so that we are aware of the needs and can pray for the person. There must be time together for us to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another. Not all these will happen in a worship service, but there must be times for us to gather when these things do take place.

(Jas 5:16) "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

In 1 Peter 4:10, and Galatians 5:13, we are exhorted to serve one another. If we are not aware of the needs in a person's life, we will not know that they need serving. The sharing with one another will probably take place outside of our worship services, either before or after, or at another time. The actual serving of one another will also take place outside of a worship service.

(1 Pe 4:10) "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

(Ga 5:13) "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

In Hebrews 3:13, 10:24-25, Romans 14:19 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11, we are taught to build up one another, or encourage them. We must spend time with them to know how to encourage them, and then to actually encourage them. In a highly structured service, there are not opportunities for this to take place. Before or after the service, or in a small group setting in a home, encouraging one another is very easy and natural to do.

(Heb 3:13) "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

(Heb 10:24-25) "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, {25} not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

(Ro 14:19) "So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."

(1 Th 5:11) "Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing."

Again, there are thirty-three of these commands, and they all require us to have relationship with one another, and to spend time with one another, or we will not be able to carry them out. If we were encouraging and building up one another when we gathered together, people would truly miss out on that blessing and benefit if they chose to watch a message online. We must get back to fellowshiping with one another, and carrying out all of these various one-another commands.

When we look at the context of Acts 2:42, we find the members helping out one another with any material needs that they had. People even sold off extra property or possessions in order to share with those in need. The Greek word that is used for fellowship is *koinonia* (Strong's G2842). The root word is *koinos* (Strong's G2839), which means common, and that is the word used here. All those who had believed were together, and had all things in common. That does not mean communism or socialism. It refers to a love and caring for one another, where they shared with one another, as anyone might have need. They shared their lives with one another, and they shared their possessions. The result was that there was tremendous unity in the church.

(Ac 2:44-45) "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; {45} and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need."

We must design our services so that there is time for people to fellowship and minister to one another. There must be time before or after services for people to fellowship. A strong small-group ministry is crucial in large churches for meaningful relationships to form and for fellowship to take place. The small group settings are vitally important for fulfilling the one-another commands that God has given us to do.

Another consideration is preparation. In Hebrews 10:24-25, God tells us to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. It takes time to consider how we might encourage this person or that person. When we gather together, we must be ready to encourage them. When we come to a church service, we must come ready to encourage others. The preacher is not the only one that must come prepared; we must all come prepared to share and encourage one another. If a church is not in the habit of doing this, it will take training and time to have this incorporated to their gatherings.

(Heb 10:24–25) “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, {25} not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul devoted the whole chapter to what goes on when we assemble together. He said, “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” The edification, building up of believers, and encouragement of believers should be a major part of our assembling together. Obviously, with a large assembly of people, each person cannot teach, share a psalm, or give a revelation. With the early church meeting in homes, this was entirely possible. Therefore, having a strong small-group or home-group ministry is critical if we are going to encourage these kinds of things to take place in our church. It is not just the structure, every person must come ready to share, teach, give a prophetic revelation, or other word of encouragement.

(1 Co 14:26) “What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

Much of the emphasis in 1 Corinthians 14 is on proper order. God is not a God of confusion but of peace. Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to earnestly desire the greater gifts, especially prophecy, because the church was edified. God wants His people, the church, edified when we meet together. He wants things done in such a way that there is order, not confusion, and for everyone to be built up in their faith.

(1 Co 14:33-40) “for God is not *a God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.... {39} Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. {40} But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.”

If people have just been attending a service where there is no fellowship and building up of one another, they could be easily be deceived into believing they could watch or listen to the sermon online. However, they would be disobeying God’s instructions of not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together and encouraging one another.

3. Breaking of bread

The third thing that the early church was devoted to was the breaking of bread. The breaking of bread is commonly taught as taking communion, but it was more than that. The breaking of bread meant that they shared a meal together. During the meal, they also celebrated taking communion as part of the meal.

(Ac 2:42) “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

In the culture at that time, the host would take a piece of unleavened bread and break it, and pray a blessing on the food. The breaking of bread was the signal that you could eat. However, it was more than a signal. They did not have knives, forks, and spoons on the tables like we do in the western world. They used their unleavened bread to scoop up their food and eat it. When the host broke bread and handed it out, they had everything they needed to eat their food.

The meal that the church shared together was referred to as the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul brings correction to the church about how they were eating the Lord’s Supper. He said, “But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. Therefore, when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

(1 Co 11:17–22) “But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. {18} For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. {19} For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. {20} Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, {21} for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. {22} What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

Let’s look at a few things. First, one of the reasons for them to come together was to eat the Lord’s Supper. In verse eighteen, Paul is talking about when they came together as a church. In verse twenty, he said that when you meet together, it was not to eat the Lord’s Supper. Sharing a meal together was a big part of their meeting together. It was one of the things they were devoted to, and it was a priority.

Second, Paul mentioned that one was hungry and another was drunk. Even if the church used wine to serve communion, nobody is going to get drunk on a little cup full of wine. Another person was going hungry. Communion is not a meal where we satisfy our hunger; it is a time to reflect and remember what Jesus did for us. Then, Paul said, “Do you not have houses to eat and drink? Paul is talking about a meal that the church shared together. There was a problem in Corinth because they were not sharing the Lord’s Supper together. The wealthy brought an ample supply of food and wine, and were having a feast. There were poor people in the

congregation that did not have food or wine, and were going hungry. They were not coming together for the better, but for the worse. The Lord's Supper was a time to bring unity, and it was actually highlighting the divisions in the church. They were not taking the Lord's Supper in a way that honored God, so Paul did not praise them. He said, "Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." Then Paul said, "when you come together to eat, wait for one another." He is not referring to a small piece of a cracker and a thimble full of juice; he was referring to a meal that they shared together.

(1 Co 11:33) "So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."

Next Paul gave some further instructions about taking communion that he had received revelation about from the Lord. In verses twenty-seven through thirty-two, he spoke about the judgment that they had incurred because of the way they had been celebrating the Lord's Supper. Many had become weak or sick, and a few had died, as a result of the Lord's discipline. He encouraged them to judge themselves rightly. Paul was referring to some being hungry and some being drunk. They had not shared with one another. They had not waited for one another. They had not honored God.

In Jude 12, Jude referred to the Lord's Supper as a love feast. He said that there were some ungodly people who had turned the grace of God into licentiousness, and these men were hidden reefs in their love feasts. The point that I want to make is that the Lord's Supper was called a love feast. It was not just taking the communion elements.

(Jud 12) "These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted;"

In Acts 20, Paul was on his way back from Macedonia to go to Jerusalem. He sailed from Philippi to Troas, and stayed there seven days. He wrote, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight." The early church met on the first day of the week, which is Sunday. They met on Sundays because it was resurrection day. It was not a holiday at that time. Sunday did not become a day off from work until AD 321, when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, issued a decree and made Sunday a day off. People worked on Sunday, and they gathered together on Sunday after work for the Lord's Supper. It really was a supper, not a lunch meal. Paul used the term, "break bread", which referred to sharing a meal together. When the church gathered together, they broke bread, but they also did other things. Paul preached a long message until midnight, and in that account, a young man named Eutychus fell asleep while sitting on the window sill, and fell out the window from the third floor. Paul prayed for him, and raised him from the dead. The main point here is that they gathered together on Sunday to share a meal, to fellowship, and to hear the word of God taught.

(Ac 20:6-7) "We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. {7} On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight."

The sharing of meals is a great time for people to connect with one another, and have fellowship. This was a priority of the early church and they were devoted to it. As we look further in Acts 2, we find that the church was continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from

house to house, and were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. They did not just share meals together on Sundays, they also broke bread day by day. The result of the fellowship and sharing of meals together was there was unity (one mind), and they were full of gladness and sincerity of heart, and the Lord was adding to their number day by day. They were a light to their community, and they had a powerful witness, and people were getting saved.

(Ac 2:46–47) “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, {47} praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

My friend, Jim Elliff, wrote a book called, “The Lord’s Supper Is A Meal.” If you are interested in reading the book, you can visit their website: www.ccwtoday.org. It is a small, but excellent book, and it includes discussion questions at the end of the book.

In chapter nine of the book, Jim gave three applications for churches. The first one was for churches that meet in houses. In his network of churches, they meet in homes. They meet in the late afternoon, and they fellowship together, have a time for teachings, sharing of testimonies, confessions, prayers, and singing. Then, they have a longer and more serious teaching time. Afterwards, they share the Lord’s Supper (meal) together. They share communion as part of that meal. The entire service is about four and a half hours.

Jim’s second application is for churches that do not have a small-group ministry. He said that they could share a meal in a church hall after their regular meeting. He said that sharing the Lord’s Supper would be a learning process that may take a while to incorporate. He said “the church should think of this as one event with various parts which in this case will include Bible study in classes, singing, the main teaching in the auditorium, and the Lord’s Supper.”

Jim’s third application was for churches that have small groups. They have an option of eating the Lord’s Supper when they gather corporately, as part of their service, or to consider having the small groups eat the Lord’s Supper on other evenings besides the Lord’s Day.

4. Prayer

The fourth thing that the early church was devoted to was prayer. The Greek word for devote is *proskartereo* (Strong’s G4342), which means to be earnest towards, to be constantly diligent, to attend assiduously all the exercises, or to adhere closely to as a servitor, and to continue in. It speaks of a concerted action and a determination towards prayer. There is an intensity to prayer when someone is earnest towards it. We must be earnest towards and constantly diligent to attend prayer.

(Ac 2:42) “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

I want to go back to Acts 1 to look at being devoted to prayer. In Acts 1:14, the eleven remaining apostles, along with some women, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brothers were all with one mind and were continually devoting themselves to prayer. They had obviously learned from Jesus’ example and His teaching that prayer was vitally important. Jesus was devoted to prayer, and now His disciples are devoted to prayer.

(Ac 1:13–14) “When they had entered *the city*, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James *the son* of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas *the son* of James. {14} These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the women*, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

Their group that was devoted to prayer included about 120 people. However, when we go to Acts 2:42, three thousand people had been added to the church, and now there are three thousand people who were devoted to prayer.

A few years ago, I was invited to attend the weekly prayer meeting at a church. When I showed up, I was the only man there. Furthermore, there were just four people there, including me, and I was not a member of that church. I asked the ladies where the pastor or other leaders were, and they said that they do not attend. This church had between 200-300 members, so this was not a church prayer meeting; it was a ladies prayer group, and a small one at that. Unfortunately, this is pretty common in churches. Prayer meetings usually include just a handful of people that are devoted to prayer.

Many years ago, I was asked by a senior pastor to head up a weekly church prayer meeting. One of the pastors did attend every week, but the senior pastor never came one single time. If you are going to have a church that is devoted to prayer, the leadership of the church must be devoted to prayer. They must personally be devoted to prayer, and set an example for the flock to follow. If they do not attend, it communicates to others that it is not really something important, and they can better use that time doing something else.

The Brooklyn Tabernacle is a church that is pastored by Jim Cymbala. It now has about 10,000 people who attend their services. Each week thousands of people come together to pray. In their early days, God revealed to them that the church was to be built on the foundation of prayer. They realize that prayer is the engine that drives the church. There is substantial evidence to convict them of being devoted to prayer. They tell the story on their website of how they became a church devoted to prayer.

“The early days of their ministry were filled with discouragement and challenges of every kind. Pastor Cymbala found himself on the verge of giving up and desperately cried out to God for a breakthrough. God clearly revealed that the church was to be built on the foundation of prayer, and this would be the source of the blessing and breakthrough that were needed. As a result, a new emphasis on prayer was established in the church, and the mid-week prayer meeting became recognized as the most important meeting of the week. God was faithful to bless the small congregation as they witnessed him answer prayer, move powerfully in their meetings, and add to their congregation with testimonies of miraculous life transformation. Today The Brooklyn Tabernacle is still in the heart of downtown Brooklyn and is a multi-ethnic, non-denominational church with about 10,000 people who attend services each week. The church continues to emphasize the importance of prayer as the engine that drives the church, as thousands join together each week to pray for needs around the world.”³

The early church and the leaders were devoted to prayer. In Acts 6, we find that some of the Greek widows were being overlooked in the serving of food. Instead of personally overseeing

³ <https://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/about/our-story/>

this ministry to the widows, the apostles found some faithful men to manage this ministry. Why did they appoint others? The apostles were devoted to prayer, it was a priority to them. Luke records their statement to the church: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” They were devoted to prayer, and they set a great example to the church.

(Acts 6:4) ""But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.""

Paul gave instructions to the churches to be devoted to prayer. In Romans 12, he exhorted them to be devoted to one another, and also to be devoted to prayer. This is very similar to the four things we see in Acts 2:42, and it should be. Paul taught the churches to model the churches in Judea, and they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, breaking of bread, fellowship, and prayer.

(Ro 12:10–13) “*Be* devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; {11} not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; {12} rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, {13} contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.”

In Colossians 4:2, Paul exhorted the church in Colosse to devote themselves to prayer, and to keep alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. He taught the Ephesians to pray and petition at all times. He taught the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing. Paul was devoted to prayer, and he taught all the churches to be devoted to prayer.

(Col 4:2) “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of* thanksgiving;”

(Eph 6:18) “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,”

(1 Th 5:17) “pray without ceasing;”

How does a church become devoted to prayer? What does it look like? Will a time of prayer be incorporated into the Sunday gathering? Or, will prayer be held on another night, like they do at Brooklyn Tabernacle? I have often asked the leaders in the churches that I have pastored, “If this was a court of law, is there enough evidence for us to be convicted of being devoted to prayer?” I think the answer to that is partially found in the definition of the Greek word, *proskartereo*, which is to be earnest towards, to be constantly diligent, to adhere closely, and to attend continually. When the leaders and the congregation are earnest, and are continually attending, and are praying about everything all the time, the church is devoted to prayer.

I believe that prayer must be part of the DNA of a church. The apostles established prayer as part of the DNA of the churches in Jerusalem before they ever grew large. Therefore, when people were added to the church, they became part of that culture of prayer.

If prayer is incorporated into the regular Sunday gathering, the size of a church will affect the methods of prayer. If a church has fifty people, people can come up and pray from the front, or microphones can be passed around. If a church has a thousand people, not everyone can pray in the Sunday gathering, unless the church breaks up into small groups all over the auditorium. The leader moderating can direct people about what to pray about. Another option is to have a time of prayer and worship before or after the rest of the service. I have found that more people will stay for the time of prayer after a service than will show up an hour earlier and pray.

Prayer can also be incorporated into the small group meetings in homes. Everybody has the opportunity to pray, and without the pressure of being in a larger group. It is easier to pray for one another, and for the other things that the whole church may want to pray about. Small group leaders must be taught how to lead and moderate the prayer times. The congregation also must be taught about prayer.

Before closing, I want to mention one more thing pertaining to prayer. In Psalm 141:2, David prayed, “May my prayer be counted as incense before You, the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.” The Hebrew word for psalm is *mizmor* (Strong’s H4210), and the root word is *zamar* (Strong’s H2167), which means to strike the strings of a musical instrument, i.e., to play music. Psalms are songs to the Lord, and many of the psalms are prayers that are sung to the Lord.

(Ps 141:2) “May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.”

We find in Revelation 5:8 that the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, and each one was holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. In one hand is a harp, representing worship with music, and the other hand has a bowl of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. Worship and prayer go together.

(Re 5:8) “When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were in Philippi. There was a slave-girl there with a spirit of divination, who was bringing her master much profit. Paul cast out the demon from the slave-girl, and her masters saw that their hope for profit was gone. They seized Paul and Silas and brought them before the authorities. The crowd in the market place rose up against them, and the chief magistrate tore their robes off, and ordered them to be beaten with rods. Then, they threw them into prison, and commanded the jailer to guard them securely. At midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and suddenly there came a great earthquake, and the foundations of the prison were shaken, and all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. This was a God-quake, not a simple earthquake. Notice what Paul and Silas were doing; they were praying and singing hymns of praise. Prayer and praise go together.

(Ac 16:25) “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;”

Many of our songs are prayers to God, put to music. The church in America is devoted to music, but not to the prayer aspect of it. We just need to expand our understanding of worship to include corporate prayer.

Is it easy to do this? No. One church that I was pastoring had a very talented worship leader, but he lacked understanding about the priority of prayer. When we set aside time in our service to pray, he said, “This is weird.” He also said that it was difficult to invite people to a service where people prayed. A devotion to prayer was not part of his DNA, and he needed to have a better understanding of prayer and worship.

Conclusion and Applications

The early church was devoted to four things: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. They did not necessarily fit all these things into every meeting, but they found a way to incorporate these things when they gathered together. The early church understood the importance of hearing the Word of God. They also understood the importance of prayer, and it was modeled by their leaders. They were encouraged to be devoted to prayer, and they prayed. They saw the power of God as a result of their prayers.

The early church was devoted to fellowship and the breaking of bread, and these two things go hand in hand. They met in homes and it was very natural for them to share meals together, and to fellowship with one another. Their services were relational and not driven by a tight time schedule. The early church came to participate, rather than to be entertained. They gathered to pray for one another, and to encourage one another. They took time to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and to build up one another. People were edified in the services, and they did not want to miss out on that.

When people begin to experience the encouragement and blessing of being in a relational church, they will not want to miss out on the opportunities to gather together. However, if they show up to a service and watch a video from a pastor, and go home without engaging with anyone, they are one step closer to just watching a service at home while comfortably sitting on their couch.

Our first application is to be devoted to God's Word. Have a good daily reading plan, where you read through the Bible every year. Spend time memorizing and meditating on God's Word. Learn how to study and rightly divide the Word of God. If you are a pastor, make the study of God's word a priority. Preach the Word of God. Preach the whole counsel of God. Make sure your flock is being well fed and nurtured with the Word of God.

Our second application is to be devoted to prayer. As an individual, take time to pray. Find a time in your schedule to pray. Learn how to pray. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Ask your pastor or another leader in your church to help you learn how to pray. Pray for your family. Pray for the needs in your own life. Pray for your church family. Pray for your neighbors. Pray for government leaders. Be devoted to prayer.

If you are a pastor, make prayer a priority in your life and in the life of your church. Be devoted to prayer. Find a way to incorporate prayer into your services, and small group meetings. Teach your people how to pray. Be an example and show them how to pray. Guard your time so that you can be devoted to the ministry of the Word of God and to prayer.

Our third application is to be devoted to breaking of bread. Practice hospitality. Invite people over for lunch or dinner after a service. My wife and I used to invite a different family over for lunch every week after the service. We were able to fellowship and get to know many people through hospitality. Attend church luncheons and dinners.

If you are a pastor, make breaking of bread a priority. The early church met each week to break bread; it was priority, and an important part of their weekly meeting. Find a way to incorporate sharing of meals with one another. Schedule fellowship lunches or dinners. Encourage your small groups to incorporate meals into their meetings. Encourage hospitality so that families join together after service for a meal. Order Jim Elliff's book, *The Lord's Supper Is A Meal*, and read and study it.

Our fourth application is to fellowship. Take time to consider how to encourage others in your church. Ask the Lord to give you a word of encouragement for others. Arrive early for church services, and stay afterwards so that you can fellowship with others. Be ready to share and to encourage others. Be committed to a small group in your church. We are all busy, so you must be devoted to fellowship, or other things will get in the way.

If you are a pastor, be devoted to fellowship. You need fellowship just as much as your church members. Be part of the small group ministry. Encourage people in the church to be committed to small groups. Make it a part of your church membership class and orientation. Include a commitment to a small group as part of becoming a member. When someone joins the church, have their new home group leader come up with them and pray for them. Encourage people to pray for one another and to use their gifts. Take time in a service for people to turn around and greet those around them, and to pray for one another. There are many things that you can do to help your church be devoted to fellowship.

Closing Prayer

Father God, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for letting us know the things that we should prioritize and be devoted to. Our churches today do not have the same priorities. Give us wisdom for how to implement these four key things into our churches. Help us to be devoted to the apostles' teaching. Help me to preach the whole counsel of God. I pray for pastors all over the world to preach the Word, in season and out of season. I pray for pastors to preach the whole counsel of God. I pray for us to prioritize prayer in our churches. You have called us to be a house of prayer for all peoples, so help us be devoted to prayer. Help us to be individually and corporately devoted to prayer. I pray for pastors to lead their congregations in prayer. Give us wisdom about how to incorporate prayer into every facet of church life. I pray for us to be devoted to breaking bread together and to fellowship. Help us to be relational. Give us wisdom in this area also. Show us how to implement and incorporate these priorities into our church services and gatherings. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- Why is being devoted to the apostles' teaching so important?
- Is devotion to the apostles' teaching merely teaching the things that the apostles taught, or does it include the teaching from apostolic leaders today?
- When we assemble, each one is to have a psalm, teaching, revelation, etc. How do we incorporate several teachings into our Sunday gatherings?
- How does our traditional western church model line up with the early church activities?
- For a church to be convicted of being devoted to prayer, what are the evidences that need to be seen?
- What are some critical things that need to be in place for our churches to be devoted to prayer?
- Is celebrating the Lord's Supper, i.e., having a meal together on the Lord's Day, an optional thing, a good idea, or something that the church today truly needs to embrace and be devoted to?
- Of the four things the early church was devoted to, what do think is the most difficult one to implement? What is the most important to be devoted to? How would you prioritize the list?
- Do you believe that the failure to be devoted to these four things has hindered the church?
- When you go to church, are you prepared to share a psalm, teaching, word of encouragement?

When We Gather

Introduction (Ac 2:42, 1 Th 2:14, 1 Jn 4:20, Heb 10:25)

1. Teaching (Ac 2:42, 2 Ti 4:1-3, Ac 20:20-21, 20:27)

2. Fellowship (Ac 2:42, Jas 5:16, 1 Pe 4:10, Ga 5:13, He 3:13, 10:24-25, Ro 14:19, 1 Th 5:11, Ac 2:44-45, 1 Co 14:26, 14:33-40)

3. Breaking of bread (Ac 2:42, 1 Co 11:17-22, 11:33, Jud 12, Ac 20:6-7, 2:46-47)

4. Prayer (Ac 2:42, 1:13-14, 6:4, Ro 12:10-13, Col 4:2, Eph 6:18, 1 Th 5:17, Ps 141:2, Re 5:8, Ac 16:-26)

Conclusion and Applications

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- 2.
- 3.
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