
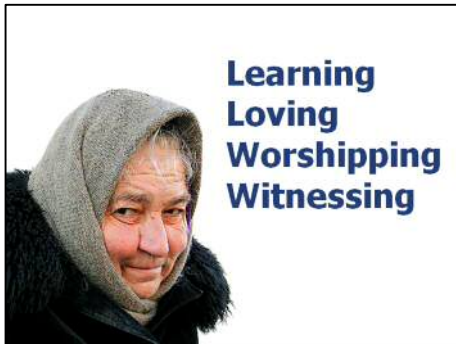


**The Word of the Lord  
for the people of God.**

**Thanks be to God.**

Some years ago, an old lady living in the Soviet Union was demonstrating her love for Christ by kissing the feet of a life-size carving of Christ on the cross. At that time, the Communist Party sent KGB agents to the nation's churches on a Sunday morning in order to discourage religious faith.

Noticing this old woman adoring Christ, a KGB agent went up to her and demanded, “Babushka, are you also prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist party?”

“Why, of course,” came the immediate reply. “But only if you crucify him first.”<sup>1</sup>

The Babushka, the old lady, was **devoted** to Jesus; the early church was **devoted** to God and to their new community centered upon Jesus as the Messiah; and Timothy commands us to **devote** ourselves to godly training. This morning, I want us to consider being devoted to learning, loving one another, worshipping, and witnessing.



Luke tells us the early church was “**devoted**” to the apostles’ **teaching**,” and Paul tells Timothy “have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales;” instead, “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”

At that time, the apostles’ teachings would have been given orally, as they recollected what Jesus said and did, reflected their experiences with Jesus, and connected what Jesus did to the Old Testament. They would have pointed out how Jesus fulfilled

scripture and how the Old Testament still applied to believers. Their teaching was learned and passed on to others, and much of it found its way to the New Testament.

So that if we are to follow the example of the early church, we are to be devoted in learning the teaching of both the Old and the New Testament, as well as the theology and ethics that derive from them. We are to devote ourselves to learning scripture. Our growth in holiness and righteousness is dependent upon it. We have to make sure we are regularly reading and applying it to our

lives, and we can do that by going to Bible studies, Sunday school, retreats, and seminars; by reading scripture every day; by listening to scripture on CD; and by memorizing and meditating upon scripture.

One person complained to a preacher that going to church to listen to sermons was a waste of time. “Whenever I asked a believer at work what they learned on Sunday,” he explained, “they can’t remember. What a waste of time!”

The preacher replied, “Well, you know my wife cooks dinner for me almost every day, and I can hardly remember what I ate the next day. But I know that I was fed and I would sure miss them if I stopped coming to the dinner table!”



The early church was devoted in learning and in **loving one another**. They developed and maintained a fellowship that had the same values, convictions, and purposes that Jesus had. They were deeply committed to and involved in one another’s lives. They didn’t think of the church fellowship as a voluntary association that they could come to whenever they wanted to or just as easily miss; but rather, it was their family, their identity, and their life.

Luke tells us the two primary ways they loved one another was by eating meals together and by providing for the needs of one another. Eating meals together was not just taking in nourishment and enjoying a tasty food; it was strengthening friendships and demonstrating commitment to those around the table. Eating together was a proclamation that they supported, cared, and loved the others just like family, and would do all things they could to help them.

They were willing to sell property and use a portion of their money to take care of the needs of fellow believers. They did all that they could to make sure everyone would have shelter, food, community, and work. Thus until famine and persecution overtook the community, all their needs were being met.

A study conducted some years ago demonstrated a correlation between loving relationships and spirituality. The more close friends one had who were fellow church members, the more likely one was to remain committed to the church, and feel the presence of God at church.

Another study found that growing churches had members who were involved in one another’s lives throughout the week, calling on the phone, going out to eat, participating together in clubs and service projects, and being in each other’s homes. Growing churches had members who loved one another and met together outside of the church building. We encourage fellowship at church with various dinners, but to be involved with one another and doing things together apart from and away from the church takes initiative from each family.

We also show our love and commitment to members by giving monies to meet expenses, taking one another to doctor appointments and therapy, and visiting those shut up in homes and care facilities.

I know when I was suffering with excruciating back pain. Raceland Presbyterian Church graciously helped me with my needs; they did not cringe away from my pain, and took me to doctor visits. It was a humbling but blessed experience. And some of you also helped Veronica and my needs to go to Vickie's funeral in California. Yet for this to happen to you, you have to speak up about your needs. Speak up when you need help. Let others help you.



The early church was devoted to learning scripture and loving one another. They were also **devoted to worshipping God**. They worshipped God in the privacy of their homes, and publicly under the colonnades of the temple courts, in their Sunday services, and while they ate meals together. They expressed great joy and gladness for God's provisions, and they did so with sincerity, not just pretending to have joy in the Lord.

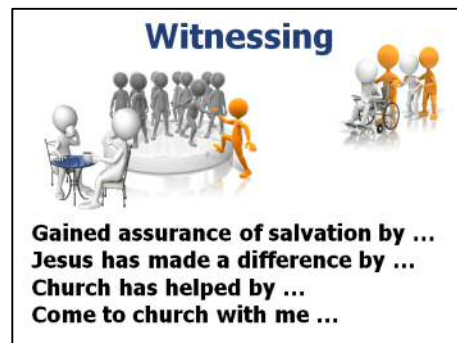
Notice the early church did not give up on formal, ritualized worship. They went to the temple courts to pray, and said their prayers at set times as was expected from good, upstanding Jews. Worship was rarely, if ever, private and individualistic; it involved the community.

We are to worship God individually, as a family, and as a church. We do so in order to let scripture realign our thoughts and attitudes toward God. It reminds and shapes us to be the children of God, citizens of the kingdom of God, and ambassadors of Jesus.

We worship not only in set prescribed and preplanned times, but also spontaneously. We don't take God's name in vain, but we are quick to say "Thank you Jesus!" We continually talk to God, giving him thanks, asking for help, and expressing our love to God for all that God has done, is doing, and will do.

Worship reminds us that we are part of something greater and more important than our individual selves, and it supersedes our devotion to spouse, family, and nation. And as Calvin reminds us, unless we set a specific day and time aside for corporate worship, our sinful nature will keep us from it. Worship has to be planned to assure us we engage in it with others, but it can also be spontaneous as we interact with nature and others.

The early church was devoted to learning, loving, and worshipping. And they were **devoted to witnessing** about Christ being in their lives. This is implied in our text from Acts, and it will be more explicit in the chapters that follow. God added people to their number, not by some unknown mysterious force, but because they were telling other people about their faith and how Jesus fulfilled scripture. New believers did not just miraculously appear out of nowhere. Neither did they come because they had such a joyful community, but because people told them about Jesus being the Messiah.



God usually works through, with, and within people. God does not work alone, apart from people, but purposefully uses his people for his kingdom. People reach people by talking about their faith in Jesus.

Thus we cannot think our good deeds alone are a sufficient witness of our faith. If we do something good without speaking up about our faith, then **we** get thanked. If we do a good deed and say we are doing it for Jesus, then Jesus will get thanked. Witnessing requires us to speak about Jesus. All of us should develop short personal stories to tell others about how we gained assurance of our salvation; what difference Jesus has made to our lives; and how the church has helped us.

We also witness by inviting people to join us for worship at Church. We help them feel the love and care of our fellow believers. There is no mystery in church growth: we develop a congregation that we enjoy, tell others about our experience, and invite them to join us, and continually pray for God to use us to bring others to salvation. Church growth and spiritual revival always comes through periods of prayer, God-centered and pleasing worship, and people talking to others about their faith in Jesus.



Note that even though the apostles were able to perform **miraculous signs and wonders**, the church itself was **not devoted** to it. Miracles were not sought after, manufactured, or demanded. Miracles in the Books of Acts and subsequently in Church history come whenever the gospel was entering into new territory, and when people needed special attestation of the validity of the gospel with a miraculous sign from God.

Thus even though we believe **miracles can** occur today, we do not **guarantee** they will always come. Neither do we put down anyone who has not experienced a miracle or has not had a mystical experience. Our faith is in Jesus, who has been revealed in scripture, not upon signs and wonders or personal experiences.



The early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread, to prayer, to fellowship, to witnessing, and to expressing their gratitude to God with others with all sincerity.

People who join Alcoholics Anonymous are also devoted. They are devoted to: attending their weekly meetings; supporting fellow AA members; giving generously; being kind in criticism and creative in making suggestions; and caring for their own health. Each member promises to "give AA my interest, my

enthusiasm, my devotion and most of all, myself."<sup>2</sup>

What about us? Will we give God and his Church our interest, our enthusiasm, our devotion, and most of all, our own selves?

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted by the account by Os Guinness, “America’s Last Men and Their Magnificent Talking Cure,” in *No God but God* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 112; taken from [homilecticsonline.com](http://homilecticsonline.com).

<sup>2</sup> From the AA devotional book, *24 Hours a Day*, for December 31; taken from [homilecticsonline.com](http://homilecticsonline.com).