

# Early Church Discipleship

by Todd Atkinson

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*This sermon delves into the significance of Acts 2:42 as a pivotal passage in the early church, highlighting the growth and challenges faced after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the devotion and steadfast commitment of the early Christians to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. The sermon explores the contrast between pagan idolatry and the Lord's table, illustrating the spiritual implications of partaking in offerings to idols versus partaking in the body and blood of Christ. It concludes with a call to examine oneself before approaching the table of the Lord with deep devotion and expectation.*

**Scripture:** Acts 2:42, Luke 22:19, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 4:16, John 6:53, 1 John 1:9, Ephesians 1:7, 1 Peter 2:24

**Topics:** "Devotion to Community", "Spiritual Reflection"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Well, today is the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, making it almost something of a season of Pentecost. And as a church, we've been doing an exciting series called Life in the Spirit. Seems fitting for Pentecost.

The key text for this series has been Acts chapter 2, verse 42, and you just can't read that one enough. I've been reading it for 40 years, and it just grows on me all the time. It's a hugely pivotal passage, and I'm so grateful that Father Stephen has built this entire series on it, which has a way of just bringing it before you again and again and reinforcing its importance.

Acts 2.42 is a summary statement of life in the early church. And it is important to notice not only what is said, but where this passage is placed in the scheme of the book of Acts. It'll help you to appreciate it all the more.

After the gift of the Spirit was given to the church on the day of Pentecost, a large crowd gathered at the commotion of the Holy Spirit coming down and people proclaiming, speaking in other languages. And so

the apostle Peter rose to preach the word of God to this crowd. And chapter 2, verse 41 tells us that when he finished his sermon, that those who received his word were baptized.

And there were added that day about 3,000 souls to the church. And so this early Christian community grows from 120 souls to 3,120 souls in the course of a single day. Goes up for church growth.

And that raises all kinds of questions that Luke wants to answer. Like what kind of challenges did that introduce? What did you do with that kind of growth? And how did you disciple that many people? What did you disciple them into? And what practices did you observe early church in order to produce sound, devout, Christ-centered, Christ-loving people? What did you do? And so Acts 2, 42 is the very next verse. After this phrase, there were added that day 3,000 souls because it answers those questions.

What did you do with all those new people? And it tells us that the early church handled that exponential growth by devoting themselves to four key things. To the apostles' teaching. The older translations say to the apostles' doctrine.

To fellowship. Amy just did a masterful job preaching that last Sunday. To the breaking of bread, I'm going to do a much less masterful job today.

And to the prayers. Four key things. That's what they did with all those people.

And so one word to consider, it's the word devotion. It's of course a key word in this passage. They devoted themselves.

And it's an absolutely interesting word because the devotion is heart language, isn't it? Not likely to say I'm devoted to taking out the garbage or someone might be, but probably unlikely. There's lots of things in life you just do. You think you're part of life's duty or responsibility.

But you wouldn't think I'm devoted to that. You'd never use that word for something that felt mundane to you. If you're devoted to something, it means it's a top priority to you.

It means you're highly committed to it. It means that you are passionate about it. So look at the way that word.

The early church was passionate about. The Greek word devotion here means to be steadfastly attentive to. Not careless or casual, but steadfastly attentive to it.

It means to give unremitting care to something. Unremitting means you care about it and you keep on caring about it. And you never stop caring about it.

Now look at the four things. The church gave unremitting care to the Apostles' Doctrine. It wasn't something they took lightly.

They gave steadfast attentiveness to it. They wanted to know it inside out. They wanted to know it on the inside of them.

They wanted to be immersed in it. They gave unremitting care to this thing called fellowship. If you weren't here last Sunday, go back and listen to that preach last week.

Unremitting care to it. They never stopped caring. The breaking of bread.

They cared about it so deeply. Unremittingly. They were attentive to it.

They were steadfastly attentive to it. And to prayer. And so any Christian that says I would like to be a Christian.

Like the early Christians. Any Christian that says I would like the modern church to resemble more the ancient church. We like that sign of pristineness and purity and innocence.

Then they would set their heart, do well to set their heart to be devoted. Absolutely devoted. To those four things.

And so the church showed unremitting care to these four things. And it's, I've been given the privilege of touching upon the third. In this list of four.

The breaking of bread. Before I do, let's take a checklist. Why don't you take a personal checklist today? How's your devotion? Not duty.

Devotion. When you think about the apostles teaching. Solid Christian apostolic doctrine.

Is that something that you give unremitting care to? That you're attentive to? Or is it something you're casual about? If someone even asked you what is the apostles teaching? Would you even have an answer for it? What kind of care have you given there? How about fellowship? Is that something that you give a great deal of care to? Never give up on. Breaking of bread. Is it something you just do? Why does the church do this? Because we're like the early church.

We're giving unremitting care. We teach on it all the time. We emphasize it.

We're devoted to it. To the breaking of bread. And someone who came to us who was new.

Maybe think, why is this church? They love praying. We're always praying for people. Because these are the four ways that we demonstrate our devotion to Jesus.

So take a little bit of a checklist there. And ask the Lord, which one do you feel a lot of devotion to? And which one would you ask the Lord? I'd like to grow in that one or two. I'd like the fire of devotion.

To be kindled upon my heart. It's okay to say, Lord, I don't really get it. People talk about pray.

I go to pray. I feel like I'm alone in a room. I don't really get it.

I don't have devotion to it. But I can see other people do. I know it's important, but I don't yet get it.

Then ask him for that. Or whichever of the four you'd like to grow in. Of course, when we hear the expression breaking of bread.

It can only mean one thing. The same author of Acts 2.42 is the author of Luke's gospel. St. Luke, Luke chapter 22, verse 19.

He writes, and he took bread. Jesus. And when he had given thanks, he broke it.

And he gave it to them saying, this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. These were the words our Lord spoke at the last supper.

Before his crucifixion. He broke bread with his disciples. The breaking of bread.

The first breaking of bread. And he said, do this, the breaking of bread. Do this as a way of remembering me.

And that is exactly what the church did. They never stopped. They never stopped remembering him in the way that he had prescribed.

Prescribed. Acts chapter 2 is only 50 days away from the last supper. This is less than two months.

And yet in that short span of time, the early church took the breaking of bread. And they made it the very centerpiece of their worship. They did remember.

It became one of the four things that defined their worship. It was one of the chief ways that they showed their deep devotion to Jesus Christ. It was a brand new idea only 50 days earlier.

Now it is an institution. Now it's a non-negotiable. It's at the very center now.

This morning I'd like to take a brief look at a single passage of scripture. Because I think it will show us how it is. That the early church encountered Christ in the breaking of bread.

The passage that was read for us early is 1 Corinthians chapter 10. This is a church that St. Paul had planted himself. He'd started this congregation.

Stayed with it and taught. And though he's went on to start other churches in other places. The Corinthian church wrote him a letter and said, here's some things that we're struggling with.

Here's some things we'd like you to speak to. And so 1 Corinthians is his response to that. And interestingly there's two things they want him to speak to.

One is pagan idolatry. And another is the Lord's table. They've asked him to speak.

And he's going to show in this single passage how combined those two things are. Or how contrasted they are. This is a pretty deep and profound passage.

So I'm going to have to just draw some summaries out of it. In the little bit of time that I have. One of the issues that Paul is addressing in the letter is that of paganism.

Because most of this church had come from a pagan background. What do we mean by pagan? It means that they worshipped any number of gods. And could call virtually anything a god.

And that they made statues or objects which represented those gods. And those objects were called idols. And they rendered worship to those idols as unto their gods.

And so when these dear people heard the message of Jesus. They chose to leave behind the worship of idols. And to turn to the one true God.

The maker of heaven and earth. It no longer made sense to them to worship something that they could make with their own hands. Why not worship the one who made us all? He's obviously greater than anything we could construct or put together or conceive of.

He's obviously greater than all our idols. And so it was like an epiphany to them. There's one God.

True God over heaven and earth and worthy of our worship. And when they took that message into their heart. Their pagan idolatry no longer mattered to them.

However, the culture they lived in was still totally steeped in idolatry. All through the city, particularly Corinth. There were temples which were dedicated to various gods.

You couldn't walk through the city without seeing these temples. And seeing the people go in and out of them. And the sacrifices that were happening there.

In those temples they'd erected altars to their particular gods. There'd be a different probably temple for each of them. And upon those altars, sacrifices were offered to those gods.

In the local marketplace, people could purchase meat on the way to the temple. They would purchase meat to be used in the sacrifices. And after the meat was sacrificed, the temple could sell it again out the back door.

At a lower price. Because it had already been purchased once. It had already been used.

I know. Cheap meat. Doesn't sound like a good idea to me.

So this presented a dilemma for people. Because on the one hand, there seemed to be some sense in buying meat at a reduced price. But on the other hand, they wondered whether there might be some desperate spiritual consequences.

To eating meat which had been offered to an idol. And so they wrote the Apostle Paul and asked him, can you speak to this dilemma? Is this healthy for us in our new Christian lives to do something like this? And Paul's response is fascinating. He teaches the church several things.

Just four that I'm going to summarize. Number one. First, that they ought to flee from idolatry.

This is something that they were converted out of. And they should never return to. Because he shows them that in the history of God's people.

Every time that they had flirted with idolatry, it had produced disastrous results. This isn't something that doesn't have consequence. And so they ought to be careful never to return to that lifestyle.

Much could be said. Of course, what makes us want to reflect is. We don't have altars like that.

We don't have temples like that. But do we have physical things that we attribute ultimate worth to? Do we have some things that act like idols? To worship means to attribute worth to. Absolute worth to.

And so do we have things that don't look like ancient paganism. But maybe they're modern forms of idolatry. Because they've captured our heart.

And they also have disastrous consequences. Second point in the summary. Paul says an idol isn't a God in a real sense.

It's not a divine being on par with God. God of heaven and earth. And in that sense, it really isn't anything at all.

False gods aren't entities. They're ideas. And yet Paul explains that because people have been worshiping this idol.

As though it was a real thing. And because they have been giving it all the honor that one would bestow upon God. That that idol can become inhabited by spiritual entities.

By malevolent spiritual entities called evil spirits. And when he explained that, the people would have understood that. Because they would have seen idols displaying strange and unusual powers at times.

They would have seen spiritual phenomena associated with this. And not pleasant spiritual phenomena. So it actually made sense to them.

That there's something in that idol. It's not kind or gracious or generous or all-powerful. There's something malevolent there.

Something with ill intention. That's his second point. Third point I'm summarizing.

Therefore Paul says you should be really careful with idols. They can be inhabited by evil spirits. Be careful with them.

And be careful with the food that has been offered on an altar to a false god. Now follow his reasoning here. Because the food that was offered on an altar of a false god.

Was in fact offered to an unseen spiritual force. And so if you partake of the food. You will enter into a sense of communion with that evil force.

That food was offered. It belonged rightfully to that evil spirit. That evil spirit inhabited that offering.

Made it its own. So there's something you can see. Inhabited by something you cannot see.

He's saying that though you cannot see the evil spirits. That once food is offered to them on a pagan altar. They become in a sense one with that food.

They enter it. And if you eat the food you are coming into direct contact. With the spirits that inhabit it.

So be careful. However one of the chief reasons Paul is spelling this out. Is so that people actually understand the opposite.

They actually understand what's happening at the Lord's table. Which is why he's dealing with both. He calls it the altar of demons.

And the table of the Lord. He's dealing with both in a single passage. Because the more you understand one.

The more you understand the other. There are two things that Paul is addressing in this letter. Number one the danger of worshipping at pagan altars.

But number two the glories at worshipping at the table of the Lord. So let's follow his argument. It's a contrast.

False gods are worshipped at altars. The true God is worshipped at the table of the Lord. The Lord's altar.

In both instances worship is happening. Food is placed upon the altar of idols. Bought at the marketplace. Meat bought at the marketplace. Given to false gods. But food is also placed upon the Lord's altar.

Upon his table. Which is why he talks about the bread and the cup. There isn't a real God within these idols.

But there are undesirable spiritual entities at work there. You can't see them. But they're surely there.

On the other hand at the altar of the Lord. There's the one true living God is present. You can't see him.

But he's assuredly there. Powerfully there. That's why it's called the table of the Lord.

He's present at his own table. It'd be like inviting someone for dinner and not showing up yourself. You're the host.

And God is always the host at his own table. When you offer food to idols. Which are inhabited by evil spirits.

That food becomes united to those evil spirits. So don't eat it. Unless you want to become united evil spirits.

But when bread and wine is offered to the one true living God. And we consume that bread and wine. Because it's been offered to him.

And because he made himself present there. Then God infuses that holy food with himself. And in eating it we come into contact with him.

Fascinating how he's dealing with these two realities in the same passage. This altar. Real spiritual things are happening.

Be careful there. This altar. The table of the Lord.

Real spiritual things are happening there. You should love this and run into this. Evil spirits are here.

The spirit of God is here. You'll come into contact with malevolent powers here. You're going to come into contact with the one great holy and gracious power of the universe.

God himself here. And so in verse 16 he says these words. Just look at them afresh.

The cup of blessing that we bless. Is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break. Is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Two key words.

Then we'll wrap it up. The word bless. In this context bless means to offer to the Lord.

Because that's its altar imagery. To offer to him. It means to make it his own.

To set it apart from ordinary usage. And to use it for his purposes alone. To ask him to infuse it with himself.

And so in the liturgy we do that. That's exactly what we do. In fact there's even a we on it.

We offer you these gifts. You're actually meant to participate in that with me. The cup that we bless.

We offer it to God. That's why I kneel afterwards. Because once I offer it to God it's his.

And that's what makes it holy. So I acknowledge that. That that's suddenly.

There's a shift that just happened in that. From profane to holy. From just a cup with wine in it.

To something that was now given to God. Just like our bodies. Once our bodies are given to God as a living sacrifice.

We don't treat them the way we used to do we? We don't engage in the things that we used to engage in. We bless the cup. We offer it to God.

We make it his. He takes it and fuses it with himself. Unites himself to it.

The second key word is the word participation. Which could take a long time. I'm going to give a very short.

It comes from the word koinonia. Which is the same word Amy touched on last week. Remember? Fellowship.

We talked about we fellowship with one another. The exact same word but it's about our fellowship with him. Fellowship is the most intimate form of union between people.

It's also the most intimate form of union between God and people. Because in koinonia there is a giving of oneself. A sharing of who we are with one another.

And so when we fellowship together as Christians. It's more than even friendship. It's more than hanging out.

We give the gift of who we are. We dig deep. It literally means to share oneself.

We share our very selves with one another. Which is why when we go into Christian fellowship. And we do it from a kind of egocentric perspective.

What can I get from this? That's why it kind of falls apart. When we go into it and said how can I share myself. And how could I receive when someone else wants to give me that gift of their selves.

And it becomes selfless. And it becomes then at that moment you're touching into God's love. But likewise the reason that word is used in this context.

Is because at the table of the Lord. The Lord is sharing his very self. Not partially but fully.

He gives you himself. That's what makes this a sacrament and not a symbol. A sacrament means that something invisible.

Is being given to you by means of something that is visible. And so God is present in that which is offered to him. He's present at his table.

And the one thing he wants to give you. More than any other thing. Is the highest gift he has.

Which is himself. After all these years of walking with Christ. There's nothing more I want from him more.  
I pray this day. I just want the gift of you. And the place where he has designated.  
To give that gift above every other place. Is at the Lord's table. It's called communion.  
Because that's where he communes. And so as we spend time in God's word. Faith cometh by hearing.  
And hearing the word of God. As we spend time in God's word. Our faith actually starts to grow.  
And then we start to go to holy communion. With a different expectation. Faith than we used to.  
We ask ourselves. What would that be like? To go and give myself to him here. And to receive the gift of him.  
So I love you Christ. I love Lord as this bread. Dipped in wine is put into my hand.  
In receiving it. I receive you. And then eating it.  
I want to take you in. Into my innermost parts. I don't want Jesus out here in my hand.  
I want to take him in. And so as your faith grows. As teaching happens.  
You go with a higher expectation. And people begin to have sweet encounters. With Jesus who is present at his altar.  
And who is present in the elements. That are offered to him. And if we did that.  
We'd never return to a pagan altar again. Because we don't want the gift of them. We don't want them to share themselves with us.  
We only want him. And so let's go together. To the table of the Lord just now.  
You who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins. Reconciled and at peace with your neighbor. And intend to lead the new life.  
Following the commandments of God. And walking from henceforth in his holy ways. Strongly with faith.  
Make your humble confession to Almighty God. I'd like you to take some moment to prepare. Before we come to the table of the Lord.  
Once you understand 1 Corinthians 10. You'll understand 1 Corinthians 11. Where he says before we do this.  
We should examine ourselves. Why? Because God is there. So please just take a few minutes.  
To ask that he would kindle deep devotion. And expectation. Together let us make our confession.  
Most merciful God. We confess that we have sinned against you. In thought.  
In word. And deed. By what we have done.

And by what we have left. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry. And we humbly repent. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ.

Have mercy on us. And forgive us. That we might delight in your will.

And walk in your ways. To the glory of your name. Amen.

Receive from Christ. The absolution of your sins. Almighty God our Heavenly Father.

Who in his great mercy. Has promised. Forgiveness of sins.

To all those who sincerely repent. And with true faith turn to him. Have mercy upon you.

Pardon and deliver you. From all your sins. Confirm and strengthen you in all goodness.

And bring you to everlasting life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. If you will receive from Christ.

The full absolution of your sins. Then together we proclaim. In all that I ever wanted.

This heart has found in you. As I tasted life. And nothing satisfies like you do.

Oh you would have found. More on the drive. As nothing satisfies like you desire.

More than you are. Your living water. Drink from the endless well.

Sit at your table. Forever grateful. Forever with.

As I tasted life. And nothing satisfies. Like you do.

You would have found. Nothing satisfies. Let's sing this together.

All my family. As all my fountains are in you. Oh you're my only.

Beloved the Lord be with you. And with your spirit. Lift up your hearts.

Lift up your hearts. Let us give thanks. To the Lord our God.

Praise to you. Praise to you. Holy and gracious Father.

In your infinite love. You made us for yourself. And when we had sinned against you.

And become subject. To evil and death. You in your mercy.

Sent your only son. Into the world. For our salvation.

By the Holy Spirit. And the Virgin Mary. He became flesh.

And dwelt among us. In obedience to your will. He stretched out his arms.

Upon the cross. And offered himself. Once for all.

That by his suffering and death. We might be saved. By his resurrection.

He broke the bonds of death. Trampling hell and Satan. Under his feet.  
As our great high priest. He ascended to your right hand. In glory.  
That we might come with confidence. Before the throne of grace. The night that he was betrayed.  
Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread. And when he had given thanks. He broke it.  
And he gave it to his disciples. Saying take and eat. This is my body.  
Which is given for you. Do this. In remembrance of me.  
To which the church says. Lord. We will remember.  
Likewise after supper. Jesus took the cup. And when he had given thanks.  
He gave it to them. Saying drink this. All of you.  
For this is my blood. The blood of the new covenant. Which is shed for you and for many.  
For the forgiveness of sins. Whatever you drink it. Do this.  
In remembrance of me. To which the church says. Lord.  
We will remember. We celebrate. The memorial of our redemption.  
Oh father. In this sacrifice of praise. And thanksgiving.  
And we offer you. These gifts. We give them to you.  
We make them yours. And we ask that you would sanctify them. Make them holy.  
By your word and holy spirit. To be for your people. The body.  
And the blood of your son. Jesus Christ. Come.  
Spirit of God. We offer you these gifts. Sanctify us also.  
Make us holy also. That we may worthily receive this holy sacrament. And be made one body with him.  
So that he may dwell in us. And we in him. In the fullness of time.  
Put all things in subjection unto Christ. And bring us with all your saints. In the fullness of your heavenly kingdom.  
Where we shall see our lord. Face to face. All this we ask.  
Through your son. Jesus Christ. By him and with him and in him.  
In the unity of the holy spirit. All honor and glory is yours almighty father. Now and forever.  
Hallelujah. Christ our Passover lamb. Has been sacrificed.  
Once for all. Upon the cross. The holy sacrifice of Christ.

Cover our sins. And cleanse us from all that is. I hope.

That we might be one with him. And he with us. Amen.

Come to this your table. Merciful lord. Trusting in our own righteousness.

But in your great mercy. Through your one and only son. You made us worthy to receive your gifts.

But in your great mercy. Through your one and only son. You made us worthy to receive your gifts.

So grant us therefore. Gracious lord. The need of this sacrament.

Before remembrance. Grant us. Therefore.

Grace.

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