

A Worshiping Church

Acts 2:42

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Luke tells us in our text, Acts 2:42, “And they...”—the “they” here are the new believers along with the 120 who were in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, so these are the Christians in the early stages of the church—“...continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

“In the breaking of bread and in prayers” is our subject today.

Verse 42 tells us that they were a learning church. Every church should learn the Bible, grow in the knowledge of the Word. The Bible is to be central in our church. Every church should be a Bible church. You should come with a Bible, you should read the Bible and you should study the Bible. Why? Because the Bible is the Word of God. For everything we believe and everything we practice—what we believe and how we behave—all comes from the Scriptures. We don’t take our cues from the world, from the culture around us; we take it from God’s holy Word. It has to be foundational and central. So when we gather on Sundays, we open the Bible, and we study and learn the Scriptures.

Secondly, we found out that they were a loving church. That’s also seen in verse 42 in the word “fellowship.” It’s the Greek word “koinónia.” It means that they shared everything in common; they had a common salvation, they had a common sanctification and they had a common service to the Lord. They had a living and loving fellowship.

Now, thirdly, we come to this mark of a living church: they were a worshiping church. They were worshiping the true and living God.

So you might say that they were learning the Word of God, they were loving the family of God and they were worshiping the true and living God.

Verse 42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in...”—or “they were devoted to”—“...the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” I want you to notice that the definite article is in both expressions. So it would literally read “the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.” That indicates that this was a formal, corporate gathering together where they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, sometimes called the “Eucharist.” It means they gathered together and celebrated the Lord’s Supper. They were celebrating communion.

Right now our situation hinders us from being able to celebrate communion, but when we do celebrate it, we remember that Jesus died on the Cross, that He is coming again and to love and forgive one another. So this was the essential part that was commanded by the Lord that we do in remembrance of Him. It’s part of being a Christian and being in a congregation of believers. So I believe that verse 42 is referring to a formal gathering to celebrate and worship the Lord.

“And in prayers,” verse 42, would indicate a corporate, formal prayer meeting. They gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and to formally gather to pray corporally.

So they were the living church because they were learning, loving and worshiping.

I believe that worship is the ultimate priority of the church. That’s why we exist and that’s why we gather. We don’t exist for ourselves, we don’t primarily exist for others; we exist for God. The number one priority of the church is worship. Some say it’s evangelism, but I believe it’s worship. I believe that evangelism is the outflow or overflow of our right relationship to God. So we need to be a vertical church. As the church worships God, they then are rightly related to the Bible, they are rightly related to one another and they are rightly related to God.

We were made to worship God. He created you to worship Him. When you worship God, you’re doing what you were created to do. Everything we do in the church should be an act of worship. I believe that we should come to church as an act of worship. We should sing as an act of worship. It’s not just singing; it’s worship from our hearts. We should also give as an act of worship. I believe I should preach as an act of worship; my preaching should be given to God as an act of worship. Your listening to God’s Word by bowing down and obeying God’s Word is your act of worship. You’re bowing down not to the preacher but to the Word of God. The authority lies not in me but in the Scriptures. As you listen to the preacher, you are to worship God by bowing down in obedience to God. Then we are to go out together and serve God as an act of worship.

I find it interesting that three times in Ephesians 1, where Paul is describing the blessings that are ours in Christ, he uses the same expression that we are to be “to the praise of glory of His grace.” Let’s not forget about that as a congregation: we exist to worship God, and we exist to glorify God. Everything we do should honor, magnify and glorify God.

There are seven elements of a worshipping church. First of all, our worship should be balanced. There are two aspects of the early church’s worship, both exemplifying balance. Number one, their worship was both formal and informal. Notice, verse 46, it took place “in the temple,” so it was formal and “from house to house,” so it was also informal. Where it says there “in the temple,” it was talking about the outer courtyards. It was talking about the precincts around outside the temple or in the outer courtyard. It would be the “court of the Gentiles” or the “court of the women.” So they would gather out in the courtyard, but it was the formal place where they would gather.

We gather in this building, which is not the church, by the way; you are the church. This is just a building. I like the fact that we call it the “sanctuary,” because that word means “to be set apart” or “holy.” This is a holy place, you are God’s holy people and you are worshipping God’s holiness, and you are hearing God’s holy Word. So this is the place set apart for the worship of God. It’s a formal place.

But they also met informally. They met “from house to house,” verse 46. It just means that they

gathered and prayed. You can have communion in your home, have Bible study in your home, you can meet in the park, you can meet out on the grass. Whoever thought the church could meet outside by the parking lot! But we do that. You can worship God wherever you find yourself. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." So the Lord is with us.

The second aspect of the early church's worship, which was balanced, was that it was both joyful and reverential. Verse 46, they had "gladness." That word means that they had "great joy." Some translations have "great joy." It's okay to be emotional. We don't want emotionalism, but we want emotion; we want to worship the Lord with gladness and joy and celebration. Worship should be celebratory.

Psalms 95:1 says, "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation." The King James Version says, "Let us make a joyful noise." Notice two things: we're to be joyful and make a noise. I love the fact that the Bible says we are to "make a joyful noise." Sometimes when we sing, it sounds like noise, but I think it's beautiful to the ears of the Lord. I imagine that sometimes the Lord quiets the angels and says to them, "Shh; people are worshipping me." God just soaks it up. He "inhabits the praises of His people." So we are to "make a joyful noise."

When you come to church, it's not to be a funeral; it's to be a joyful, festive occasion. We are to be celebratory—thanking God for His grace, His mercy and His love. We should be celebrating. We don't need to have crazy emotionalism, but we do want to worship with emotion and feeling from our hearts. So they had great joy.

But notice also in verse 43, it says that "fear came upon every soul." So in one verse you have great joy, and in another you have great fear. This fear is a reverential fear; it is a respect for God. So when you come to church, you are to worship God reverentially, respectfully, fearfully; not afraid what God will do to you but in awe of who God is.

I like what John R.W. Stott said. He said, "It's a mistake to imagine that in public worship, reverence and rejoicing are mutually exclusive." I pray that as a church, we are joyful, thankful and expressive in our worship and that we are also reverential and realize that we're on earth, God is in heaven and we need to worship Him as He is in His holiness.

The third mark of our worship in the church is that it should be Biblical. Our worship should be balanced, joyful and reverential and it should be Biblical.

The fourth mark of our worship is that it should be intelligent. When Paul was on Mars Hill in Acts 17 speaking to the Athenians, he said that he noticed they had an altar "to the unknown god." What an interesting statement. They were afraid they would offend some unknown god, so they built him an altar.

I like what A.W. Tozer said. He said, "An unknown God can neither be worshiped nor served." How do you worship or serve an unknown god?

In Christianity, we respond in worship to the self-revelation of God found in creation and in His Word. Creation doesn't tell us everything we need to know about God; it tells us about His majesty, His power, His beauty, His glory and His wisdom. But the Bible is the greatest, fullest, most complete revelation of God, and we learn all about God's nature and character in it. So our worship is just a response to the self-revelation of the eternal God.

Jesus said to the woman at the well, in John 4, that "The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." That's the Bible; that's the Word of God. You can't just make up God how you want Him to be and say, "This is my god. I'm going to worship him." That's just an expression of yourself. You might as well stand in front of the mirror and worship yourself. I guess that's what some people do. Someone said, "God made man in His image, and now man has returned the favor and made god in their image."

How do we worship God? As He truthfully reveals Himself to be: righteous, holy, long-suffering, merciful, kind, eternal, all-powerful, omniscient, omnipresent. That's the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible.

If you really want to deepen your worship, do a study of the nature, character and attributes of God. It will cause you to worship Him.

So worship is our response to all that God is, God says and God does.

Then how do we respond? With all of our mind—our intellect—with all our emotions, with all of our will and with all of our bodies. Our bodies are to follow up our worship in obedience. Bible study should lead you to worship. And worship should lead you to Bible study. They go together.

The word translated "worship," in the Old Testament, has the idea of literally "to bow down." It also has, in the New Testament, the idea of "to kiss toward" and "to serve" or "to minister." It was used to refer to the ministry of the priest in the temple. When it said they would "minister before the Lord," the word "minister" had the idea of "worship." We translate the word as "worship" in our English Bibles.

Then the word "worship" in the English language means "worth-ship." It comes from two words: "worth" and "ship." It means that we give God worth and value. We ascribe to Him worth and value. So we are magnifying the Lord by worshiping Him and ascribing Him worth.

Another definition that I think is good is that it is "the total adorning response of man to the one eternal, self-revealed God." That's a great definition of what worship is.

The fifth characteristic of our worship is that it should be congregational. Now you can worship anywhere—on the freeway, in the shower. By the way, worship sounds good in the shower, because your voice echoes off the shower walls. The rest of your family may hear you in the rest of the house, but that's okay. I used to love hearing my kids sing in the shower; it was so cool to hear their happy hearts.

Do you think God delights in hearing you sing to Him, in hearing you worship Him? He does. We are exhorted in the Bible to worship congregationally. That's why the closure of our church for so long has been so difficult. You're sitting at home, watching on your screen and that's a great substitute. But it is a substitute. We shouldn't really rely on it instead of being in church.

When you are worshiping God congregationally, you're hearing your other brothers' and sisters' voices being lifted to God. I love it when we sing acappella, and all you can hear are the voices singing praises rising up to God. It's a little slice of heaven; it's a foretaste of what heaven will be like.

Psalms 149:1 says, "Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise in the assembly of saints." That is a Biblical reference that we are to sing to the Lord in the congregation. In Hebrews 10:25, it says, "...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." In Ephesians 5:18-20, Paul says, "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation..."—or "excess"—"...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another..."—remember the "one anothers" in the Bible? It's talking about corporate worship—"...in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord..."—that literally means the Holy Spirit plucking the strings of your heart in worship and praise to God—"...giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

There is power in congregational worship. What a blessing it is to congregate. We congregate to worship and witness; we celebrate all that God says, is and does; we communicate by preaching, teaching His Word as we learn about God; and we respond by consecrating our lives to God in dedication.

Romans 12:1-2 is a classic section on worship. Paul says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice..."—or "as an act of worship"—"...holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service...that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

The word "bodies" here means your whole personality, your whole being—body, soul and spirit. He's not just saying to sing with your lips; he's saying to also sing with your heart and your mind and to worship God with your obedience, surrendering your life to Him. So when He says to "present your bodies," in the Greek, it's a once-and-for-all act, where you basically say, "Here I am, Lord; take me and use me," and you surrender your life to God.

The sixth mark of our worship is that it should be spiritual. It should be spiritual, as opposed to liturgical, ritualistic and ceremonial. Those things are fine, as long as they are energized by the Spirit. Worship is not a rite, a ritual, a ceremony or a place. Worship is a person.

When Jesus met with the woman at the well in John 4:20-23, and they were talking about worship, she said—since she was a Samaritan and was talking about Mount Gerizim—"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Then Jesus said, "The hour is coming when you will neither on this

mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."

We talked about the truth being the Word of God, and now we have the Spirit of God. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are the "dynamic duo." So we have our minds enlightened by the Word of God, through the Spirit of God.

Then we worship in the Spirit. That means that the Holy Spirit energizes, directs and empowers and leads us to worship. Everything the Holy Spirit does is to glorify Jesus Christ. He does nothing else but work to glorify Jesus. Any time you have a church, a preacher, a ministry, you have a Christian, you have a married couple, you have a family, if the Holy Spirit is working in that situation, Jesus Christ gets all the glory. Jesus is the one He is focused on. He has come to glorify Christ.

If we have Spirit-filled, Spirit-led worship, the attention won't be on the worship leaders, it won't be on the preacher; it will be on Jesus. That's what real worship is all about. So our worship is to be spiritual. It's not just standing up and sitting down, it's not a rite or a ritual, but it's the Spirit of God working in the hearts of the children of God to glorify the Son of God.

In Isaiah 29:13, the prophet Isaiah—as many Old Testament prophets did—chided the people of Israel, because their worship wasn't spiritual. He said, "These people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me." How true that is.

God doesn't care if you come to church and sing, if your hearts aren't right with Him. God doesn't get excited with your words; He gets excited with the surrender of your heart.

Jesus warned us in Matthew 6 that in our giving, in our praying and in our fasting, we should do it all for the glory of God, not to be seen of men. When you give, don't give to be seen by men. When you pray, don't pray to be heard by men. When you're fasting, don't fast to be seen by men.

Sometimes people fast and they get sad and look disheveled and show up at a church potluck. They'll just walk around and look at the food. "Why, brother, aren't you going to eat?"

"No, I'm fasting."

"Oh, can I touch you? You're spiritual." Just stay home!

"I just came to smell the food, but I'm suffering for Jesus today."

"Well, I'm not; get out of the line! I want to get to the mashed potatoes."

When you pray, you're not praying to impress people. "Oh, I hope they like my King James English." When you give, it's not, "Look what I'm giving to God!" as though God was clapping

for you. You do it in secret. “Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly.” In Philippians 3:3, Paul said, “We...worship God in the Spirit.” True believers worship God in spirit.

Let me give you the last mark of worship. Worship should be transformative. True worship will be accompanied by an obedient life.

In 1 Samuel 15, Samuel the prophet told King Saul that God wanted him to go to war against Amalek and to utterly wipe out men, women, children, animals; everything in Amalek was to be destroyed. That's because God had waited and waited, but they hadn't repented; they were a wicked nation, so God judged them.

But King Saul disobeyed God by saving some of the good sheep. He justified his action by thinking that he would give them to God, sacrificing them to God. Then God would be so pleased with him. But when Samuel met the King coming back from the battle, the king said—and this is what we call “religious verbalized garbage”—“Blessed be the Lord! We have done all that God has told us to do.”

Samuel said to him, “No you haven't. If you had done everything God told you to do, then why do I hear the bleating of sheep in my ears?”

Saul then said, “Oh, well. The people pressed me, and said that we can give these to God.” That was disobedience.

So the prophet told King Saul, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed...”—that means “with listening and obeying”—“...than the fat of rams.” I like that.

When Isaiah went into the temple, in Isaiah 6, the year King Uzziah died, he saw three things. The Lord was sitting on a throne, and His glory filled the temple. When you come to church, my prayer is that you see the Lord and that you see Him as “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!”

Secondly, Isaiah saw himself. He said, “Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Then God sent one of the angels, who took a hot coal from the altar and touched Isaiah's lips and cleansed him from his sin.

When we gather to worship, we see the holiness of God, but we also see the sinfulness of our own hearts. Sometimes worship and the Word of God is to make you uncomfortable, when you realize you are living in disobedience to God or there is sin or a wrong attitude or something displeasing to God in your heart. We need to confess our sins, and He “will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Thirdly, Isaiah saw the need. The Lord asked, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?” Then Isaiah said, “Here am I! Send me.” Isn't that great? At the end of every church service, that's what we should say. We should say, “Here am I! Send me.”

Then God would say, "Okay, go home and love your husband."

"Well, send me somewhere else, Lord. Send me off to Africa or somewhere else, or I'll just tarry in church for a while; maybe I didn't hear You right."

No, we need to say, "Here am I! Send me. I'll go where You want me to go. I'll do what You want me to do. I'll be what You want me to be. I'll say whatever You want me to say."

That's what worship is. Worship is transformative.

If you come to church every Sunday, but your life isn't being changed, you're not really worshiping God. You haven't surrendered to Him. Your "all" is not on the altar. There is something wrong with your vertical relationship to God.

So we are to be a worshiping church. We are to get into God's Word, learn about God and love one another as brothers and sisters. We are the family of God. The reason we exist—our priority, our highest purpose—is to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Amen.