

The Church in 2015 - Principle and Practice

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 January 2015

Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] Alright, well, again, flip with me back to Acts chapter 2. Do you have a Bible?

This morning we were looking at John chapter 21 in light of Revelation chapter 1, 21, and we discussed the personal aspects of what it looks like to participate in God's program of redemption and renewal, rebirth, justification, renewal, sanctification, and restoration, the restoration of the cosmos of all the natural realm unto that which it was meant for, the Garden of Eden.

Tonight we're going to step back more broadly and more corporately and have a look at a question like this in terms of the church. What is it that the church is to be in 2015?

And so there's no better passage to go and ask a question like that than of Acts chapter 2, especially verses 42 to 47, because in that section we see the first Christian church, the first post-resurrection church of God on this earth.

And we see two things, it's practices and it's principles. It's practices and it's principles. And so what we're exploring today is how the church relates to each other, one body, how do we relate to each other, and how do we relate to those who are not the church, to the outside world, to the culture.

[1 : 32] And I think all that's embodied there in both Peter Sermon and 42 to 47, but we're going to give special attention to 42 to 47. So first, the practice of this first community, the practice of this first community.

What was the practice of this first community? Well, the thing that I want to start with is this, we're going to play historians a little bit tonight and consider how radically different this first community was from the culture outside of it and from what had been prior.

If you step back two verses to verse 40, you'll see that, or verse 41 I should say, that 3,000 people were added to the church at the preaching of this one sermon.

Peter preaches, 3,000 people get converted in a day. And so what's happened in this timeline, we're not sure exactly of the amount of days between the resurrection and this event, it's 40 plus. We've gone from 12 disciples and a band of followers, including women and some families, to 3,000 people getting converted at one sermon.

[2 : 44] And if you follow the course of the book of Acts, what you're going to find out is this happens all the time, that the apostles preach and thousands of people come to know Christ in a day in a matter of street preaching at the temples, at the synagogues.

And so what we had to expect is this entirely new culture is being created, a culture that had never been there before, a Christian culture, a culture that was about the resurrection of Jesus.

3,000 people getting saved in a day had to make a huge impact on the city of Jerusalem, right? It's not going to be the same the next day as it was the day before.

It's exponential change. And so how do we make sense of that? How do we see that in light of the way the church related to the culture outside of it, outside of itself?

Tim Keller notes when he's commenting on this passage that the key is in verse 42. It says this, they devoted themselves. That the people who had been saved devoted themselves.

[3 : 51] And there's a lot more packed underneath that word than what meets the eye. The Greek idea there gives a sense of radical unselfishness.

It's a total giving up of oneself. It's a complete giving over into. Another way we could think about it, this verb is something like this.

It's seeing the church's new mission as the entirety of life itself. Worship, learning, communion with God, and teaching others to do the same.

It's a radical devotion. It's a very radical thing. So not only is the culture they're creating so new and radical, but the way they give themselves into it, the way they devote themselves is a completely new change.

It's a radical unselfishness. It's total generosity. And so let's think first for a second just about how this community would have related to the Hebrew culture.

[4 : 56] If there's one thing that was critical in Hebrew culture from the time of the patriarchs all the way down to this creation of the Christian church, it was the concept of land.

So if you've read through much of the Old Testament, you know that the central thesis of the Old Testament or the central question you want to ask always about where you are in the Old Testament, what's the context?

Is where is Israel in terms of the land? God comes to Abram and he promises him what? He promises him a place, a people and a place.

And he says, I'm giving you this land. I'm giving you Canaan. And throughout all the Old Testament, what the Old Testament really is, is just a tracing of how Israel relates to this land in terms of their obedience, their disobedience, their favor with God, with Yahweh in the Old Testament.

How do they relate to this land? And when you come to the New Testament, the Hebrew culture still emphasizes the same thing, that land is absolutely critical.

[5 : 58] Now it's interesting to see in light of this what's going on in this passage. Let me just say that I don't know if it's, I'm not sure if it's the same thing here in Scottish culture.

In America, I would say that the equivalent to what the Hebrews saw land as, we see as time, right? You've heard the phrase, time is money.

Time is money. Land is money to these people. But then you come to this passage. They hear the gospel preached. They hear about the resurrection of Christ.

And what do they do? Just let your eyes wander over this text with me. Verse 43, all comes upon every soul. Many wonders and signs are being done.

All who believed had all things in common. They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing everything they had to anybody who was poor, anybody who had need.

[6 : 59] They broke bread and shared it in their homes. They ate their food with gladness. They showed favor to everyone with their material possessions. And then if you flip over a couple chapters, which you find out is the first major discipline issue in the early church is one over the same issue, right?

Ananias and Sapphira, they didn't want to sell their land. They wanted to keep the money. So land was hugely critical. The first thing that Luke records about this church is that when they hear the gospel, they start treating their possessions differently.

A radical unselfishness, a complete generosity. By the way, Christianity still sees land just like the Hebrews did, even though we don't make much of it in our Western culture.

The new heavens and the new earth, that's our goal. That's where we're going. And Christianity works on a linear time clock. A lot of the Eastern religions, of course, are cyclical, rebirth means starting over again in a new time period.

In Christianity, rebirth means a reorientation of going somewhere, going to a promised land, going to a new heaven and a new earth. Sorry, that's just an aside.

[8 : 21] So what does this mean? What does this mean for us? I think something that we can take away from this, by the way, another quick aside is that this text has been used in the past to support ideas like communism.

And what's not going on here, it's not communism. It's a generous spiritual communalism. It's a family togetherness. This is one body.

This is one people. It's not talking about the larger society. It's talking about how the people of God relate to each other. But this speaks to how we relate to each other as well.

It speaks to how we relate to each other in Saint Seas, and it also speaks to how we ought to relate to other churches. I think one thing it teaches us is that we ought to have a spirit of unity and charity towards one another and towards other churches, even the ones that we disagree with.

A spirit of unity and charity. Now I'm talking about churches as in gospel believing, faithful, Jesus Christ, died and resurrected type churches.

[9 : 29] We ought to have a spirit of unity and charity with all our brothers and sisters across the world as one body. A generous communalism. I think it also teaches us that we should embrace the idea of Catholicity.

So when we speak the Apostles Creed, we always say we're one holy Catholic church. And that's not a reference to Rome, to Roman Catholicism.

The word Catholic precedes that church a long time before. What it's a reference to is simply that we are one big body with Christ as our head. That there is a sense of togetherness that spreads universally across all the lands.

And in that sense of charity, togetherness, Catholicity, we recognize that we are all going to be one people, one nation, one body for all of eternity with God.

And of course that plays out in the way we treat each other, right? I just want to say when Heather and I came to St. Columbus, we had never been in a church that was as loving to one another as this church.

[10:39] It was astonishing to us. We had never been in anything like it. And so I think that this church practices so well this principle that we're talking about, generous communalism.

We haven't even bought a single baby item since we came. It was all given to us. Now another interesting point to make about how this church relates and is so radical against the Hebrew culture is that we have to remember the setting.

This is Acts chapter 2. This is Pentecost. At Pentecost what was happening was thousands of Jews that had been affected by the diaspora had come to Jerusalem to celebrate this feast.

They'd usually come for Passover. Pentecost means 50. And so they were celebrating a feast 50 days after Passover. And what was happening in that scenario was that thousands of these people were not, were speaking different languages.

They were foreigners. They might have been Jews, but they were brought up in a completely Greek place. And so they were probably speaking Greek instead of Aramaic or Hebrew.

[11:53] Different languages from all over. There were converts, proselytes from Egypt. All sorts of different people that we read about. Ethiopian, Unic that we read about later in Acts. All these different people that would come to Jerusalem to celebrate this feast.

And you remember earlier in Acts chapter 2 that one of the miracles that happens here is that people start speaking in tongues of fire. In other words, they start speaking a common language that everyone can understand.

All right? So 3,000 people get saved at Pentecost. Many of whom must be foreigners. And in the very next text we see that they're sharing everything that they have together.

It's absolutely radical because, look, foreigners were not welcome. People of different skin color were not welcome.

This was not a culture that loved and embraced ethnic diversity. But the church does.

[12:55] The church does. In one day, the church has changed. The church loves ethnic diversity because God loves ethnic diversity.

He created it. And so we see this radical, radical shift in the Hebrew culture. Now there's also a difference from this church and the outside culture in relation to how they're related to Rome. Now remember that at this time in history, the Jews in Israel are occupied by an outside force, the Roman government.

And so not only was this the church in a Hebrew culture, this was the church in a Hebrew and Roman culture, much bigger and broader Roman culture and a Greek culture, in fact, even, that had all infiltrated and had its pinnacle point at this one location in Jerusalem.

Just imagine for a moment that you're not Western, that you're not from Scotland or wherever you're from or America or whatever it is. Well, Siraj is not Western.

[14:02] He's from Nepal. But imagine even so that you can remove yourself from this culture and pretend that the way you grew up, the culture you grew up in, was not completely infiltrated by the Bible.

Even though Scotland as well as America and other places are having a lower church attendance and a lot of biblical illiteracy, our cultures are still completely built on Scripture.

Our laws, many of which have been changed away from the Bible, but many, much of it, much of all of the West, America and most of Europe, is built from at least the late antiquity period, early medieval period, on Christian principle, on natural law, on special revelation, on all these things. But if you bring yourself out of that and pretend for a second that you don't have this culture just embedded into our very beings and think a bit about what the Roman culture was for a second, then you can see how radical it is that there are such sharp divisions between people groups, between race, culture, language, socioeconomic status, age, gender, religion, married and singles, tax collectors and taxpayers.

How could all these types of people groups be bridged in one day, one day, one sermon, 3,000 with such differences?

[15 : 38] Just to consider a few of these ideas, the Christian community was the first that emphasized making peace with your enemies. If you know anything about the Roman Empire, you know that Rome wanted to crush its enemies.

Or the fact that if a Roman soldier asked you to carry his weapons, his luggage for him and you didn't do so, you'd be killed.

And Jesus comes along and what does he say about carrying a Roman soldier's stuff? He says, if you ask you to carry it one mile, you carry it two. A radical ethical difference, completely different type of lifestyle.

One that promotes peace, one that promotes service, one that embraces suffering. Very different. The other thing that the Christian community brought that had never really been embraced before like the Christians did, was a care for the poor.

They cared for the poor based on the dignity and value of human life because all humans are created in the image of God. That's a principle and value that we're still holding on to today as we fight things like abortion.

[16 : 58] That all humans are created in God's image. Because an emphasis that, in treatment of the poor, that came with Jesus preaching and with this first church radical practices.

It says in 46 that all who had need were being cared for day by day. All who had need. This emphasis on peace, mercy, and embracing diversity all came with this community.

This community changed the world. It changed the world. Now I just want to read two quotes from you and then we'll move on to the principles.

This first one is kind of long, but it's really good. So stick with me. It's a fantastic quote. It's from Mothaites. We don't know who he is.

He was a disciple. Mothaites just means disciple. He was a disciple in the first century of the Christian church. He's writing a letter to Dionytus, an epistle to Dionytus, and he's defending Christianity by describing it.

[18 : 09] He's describing the character of this early church that we looked at here in Acts 2. He says this, Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, by language, or custom.

Nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life. But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast and followed the local customs and dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship.

They live in their own countries, but only as non-residents. They participate in everything as citizens and they endure everything as foreigners.

Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign to them. They marry like everyone else and have children, and this just gives you a flavor of how radical these Christians were in light of the Roman context.

They marry like everyone and they have children, but they do not expose their offspring, their children, to kill them for sacrifice. They share their food, but they don't share their wives.

[19 : 28] They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws. Indeed, in their private lives they transcend the laws.

They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned. They are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich.

They are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified, and they are dishonored. They are slandered, yet they are vindicated.

Yet those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility. In other words, the Christian community exhibits the best of the culture surrounding it while maintaining itself as entirely counter-cultural.

You see this the way these early Christians lived. They were citizens of their country. They obeyed the laws to such an extent that they transcended the law.

[20 : 29] They did more than was asked of them. Yet they knew that they were foreigners in a land that was not theirs, that this was not their home, that there was something more promised to them because of the resurrection of Christ.

And so the way they related to their culture was this, that they saw themselves as distinct, but they also saw themselves as immersing into the Fatherland, into the country in which they lived, and living as the best citizens, the kindest people, the most loving, the most peaceful, the ones that cared for the poor the best in order that everyone around them would see it, and they would believe the very same gospel.

One more shorter quote, and then we'll move on. Enzi Wright describes the unusual character of the Christian community this way. He's a professor of St. Andrews.

The earliest Christians lived as a single family. When you live together as a family under one roof, you don't see this chair, or this table, or this bottle of milk, or this loaf of bread as mine, like our children often do.

Rather than yours, the breadwinners in the household of Christians don't see the money they bring in as theirs rather than belonging to the whole household. That's part of what it means to be a family.

[21 : 51] When the twelve disciples were going about with Jesus, they held a common purse. Various people contributed to it out of their resources. They behaved as a single family.

How do you continue like that when quite suddenly several thousand people join the movement? With difficulty, they determined to do it nonetheless.

You see here just a flavor of the practice of the early church. This is the practice of God's people. We have to ask the question in how we relate to the outside world and how we treat the culture and how we get to those people through kindness and peace and justice and mercy.

What is the principle that that stands on? You don't become like that, that kind of person, a total radical unselfishness, a total devoting yourself unto, a total giving up, a seeing life as mission without principle to stand on.

I think there are two principles here in place. The first is the means of grace, the means of grace. If you come and look with me at 42 to 47, what you see first is that the church became like this because they were devoted to learning together.

[23 : 14] They were devoted to learning together. It says that they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. They were people that were committed to learning more of God, to knowing God more and more, to making their habit the practice of education of things eternal.

The second thing that they did is that they loved each other really well. They loved each other before they loved the culture. They loved each other before they loved the non-Christian.

So it says that they devoted themselves to fellowship, that they sold their possessions and they gave to anybody who had need, that they did everything together.

It's a principle of love and unity. The third thing they did together was they worshiped sincerely. You see in the text there. They did not ever miss going to the temple, going to the synagogue, which was still the practice at this time, in worshiping.

The other thing that they did there that's kind of hidden is it says that they were devoted to the breaking of bread, breaking of bread. Undoubtedly they feasted together all the time, as most of us do together on Sundays.

[24 : 32] But it's a reference to more. The breaking of bread here is the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was their, what was their eggs and toast in the morning?

It was what they lived off of. It was their sweet time of communing with Christ, with the Spirit of Christ. It was the way they continued to feast with the one who had ascended to heaven.

And lastly, in this first principle, the means of grace, they evangelized consistently. They evangelized consistently. They had generous hearts, they had favor with all the people, and the Lord kept adding to their number day by day.

Look, Saint Seas does all these things really well. We worship together. We love each other. We learn together, and we evangelize consistently.

But what this is a call to do is to rededicate 2015 to these four practices, to being absolutely and utterly committed to this, to see this as mission in life, to worship, to learn, to love, and to evangelize amongst each other.

[25 : 52] And if we do that, what happens is we start to do that outside these walls, in the culture. We start to relate to other people like this first church did. But there's also an even more lower ground, a more fundamental principle to this community, to living like this, than just the means of grace.

The means of grace don't exist in a vacuum, just because John Calvin coined the four means of grace or whatever, that word. They don't exist in a vacuum. They exist for a much bigger reason, a more fundamental ground than that.

And that's this. In John 17, Jesus says to his father, as he's praying, Father, you sent me into the world, so for their sake, I devote myself.

Now, the interesting thing is that phrase in John 17, I devote myself, is the same exact phrase that appears here in Acts 2.42, and they devoted themselves.

And like we said earlier, that's a reference to radical unselfishness, a total giving over to life as mission, complete generosity, it's seeing life with one purpose.

[27 : 11] And that's the kingdom of God. Jesus says this in John 17 to his father, he's praying this prayer and he's about to go to the cross and he says, Father, I devote myself to you.

Make me, let me bear your wrath for their sake. He says for their sake.

What is the underlying and ground principle, ground reality of what causes people to live like this, to live like many of you live?

It's that you're imitating Jesus. He said to his father, I give myself over to death for them.

And then his people, in light of that reality, in light of being changed by that truth, go and say, I give myself over for them, for them, because there are still some that don't know, because there are still some that are going to die without Jesus.

[28 : 17] It's a complete radical unselfishness. And we see that in Christ's life in two ways, in two theological realities.

The first is the incarnation. What do we mean by incarnation? We mean that God became man. And when you read a passage like Philippians chapter two, it speaks of Jesus making himself nothing.

That's another way to think about total devotion, totally devoting oneself over to. Paul phrases it that he totally made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant in the likeness of human flesh.

The incarnation is the very practice of God, of this reality that we're trying to be like in the church, making ourselves nothing for others.

Jesus did that because he was the only one who could save people from their sins. We do that because we want people to know that Jesus is the only one who can save people from their sins.

[29 : 21] The second way Jesus did it is in something that we call his humiliation. So not only was he incarnated and made low, made himself nothing, but he was humiliated.

If you think about Jesus' life, it was one of sorrow. He was always humiliated. And it wasn't that he was simply a victim.

It was that he was God allowing and dictating that that be so. You can remember in the Garden of Gethsemane, I've talked about this before, when the soldiers come to arrest him.

They ask the question, where is or who is or is this Jesus of Nazareth? They're trying to identify the man that are going to arrest, right?

And what does he say? He says, I am. And immediately the soldiers reaction is to fall on their face.

[30 : 20] They bow. They put their noses into the ground. Why? Because he's just uttered the divine name from the Old Testament in Exodus 3.14 when God identifies himself as the Yahweh, the I am.

Jesus is saying, I am. And he has to tell them to get up and arrest him. He has to tell the people who are going to crucify him, stand up, take me.

I'm commanding you to do this. That's the power of God. He made himself passive unto humiliation. He made himself nothing. He totally devoted himself unto death for our sake. And so the principle that we're given here for the church, for who we are, how we treat each other and how we relate to the outside world is that we make ourselves nothing.

We promote peace. We promote love. We promote unity between our body. We love the poor.

[31 : 33] And we preach the gospel to everybody that we encounter if possible. That's what it is to be totally devoted. Let me just say as we close, this is really hard to do.

It's really hard to live like this. And I look back at my own life in 2014 and recognize that on a term of the scale like the first Christians lived, and they failed.

We read Corinthians. It was a disaster. But I haven't evangelized well this year. I haven't loved all of you enough.

We haven't loved each other enough. It's never perfect, right? And so what 2015 offers us is an opportunity for renewal on a corporate level.

We talked about renewal on a personal level this morning, but on a corporate level as the church being devoted to these practices. And I think St. C's and the church, the staff, we're going to be offering a lot more as far as some of these things go for us to dove headfirst into.

[32 : 40] I'll close with a quote from Calvin. Yes, from John Calvin.

John speaks here of how the Christian ought to see their life in this world and how the Christian ought to see the church in this world. And this is what he says. The whole world is a theater for the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power of God.

But the church is the orchestra. The most conspicuous part of it and the nearer the approaches are that God makes to us in Jesus, the more intimate and condescending the communication of his benefits, the more attentively we are called to practice them ourselves.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you for giving us both prescription and description of the early church of what they were like and what we are to be like.

Father, we're not good at it. We pray and ask for help. We ask that you would strengthen us as it pertains to loving one another and loving people who are not Christians.

[33 : 57] We ask that you would strengthen us as it pertains to our weakness in worshiping you and being focused this year. We ask that you would strengthen us in our zeal for learning, in our zeal for education, in our zeal for knowing more of you.

And we ask, lastly, that you would strengthen us in our love of mission and evangelism. God make us a people who treasure these things as our very mission in life.

And we ask for this in Jesus' name. Amen.