

New Year's Day: What kind of church do we want to be?

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, New Year's Day is always a very special day and it's a time where there's a sense of anticipation for all that lies ahead. We are saying goodbye to 2017 and we are looking forward to 2018. So it's a time of excitement, a time of anticipation. But it's also a time to reflect, a time to stop and a time to think of all that has gone by. And often that leads us on to self-examination. New Year, we often look at ourselves, we look at our lives and we think about what we're doing, we think about maybe things that we want to stop doing, things about things that we want to start doing. And as I'm sure is the case with many of us, that self-examination leads on to resolutions where we want to develop new habits as much as we can. And so at New Year, we often think about the kind of people that we want to be in the year ahead. But that same principle also applies to us as a church. New Year is a time to look at ourselves and to ask the question, what kind of church do we want to be? That's a really, really important question and probably the best place to go to find the answer is Acts chapter 2 verses 42 to 47. Because here in these verses, we have a wonderful description of what the Church of Jesus Christ should be like. So let's read it again and we'll study it together. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, and all came upon every soul.

And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles and all who believed were together and had all things in common. They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day after day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. These verses are teaching us about the kind of church that we want to be. And I want us just to highlight six points very briefly that stand out from these verses. Number one, these verses describe a church that wants to learn. The Church in Acts was devoted to the apostles' teaching. At the heart of their life as a church was teaching and learning. That's a really, really important point to remember because often when we think of the early church, we think of the amazing events that took place. We think of the miracles. We think of the excitement of huge numbers being converted. And we can easily think, well, the New Testament Church was all spontaneous and exciting and free. And there's no doubt many remarkable things did happen. But we have to look at the very first thing that's highlighted here. At the heart of the New

Testament Church was teaching and learning. People didn't believe whatever they liked. People didn't think whatever they liked. People didn't just do their own thing in terms of church life. The early church made absolutely sure that the teaching of the apostles was at the very centre of everything that they did. And the point to remember is that the miracles and the amazing events were simply to authenticate the teaching. It was the teaching that was really, really important. Which is why when you read through the New Testament, when it talks about dangers for the church, it doesn't say, oh, the greatest danger is that miracles are going to stop. Or the greatest danger is that you won't be having 3,000 people converted in a day as you did in the day of Pentecost. The greatest danger is none of these, it's not the stopping of any of these events. The greatest danger facing the

New Testament Church was false teaching. And Paul and the other apostles are constantly addressing false teaching because apostolic teaching is absolutely essential. They were a church that wanted to learn. And we want to be the same in the year ahead. We want to be a church that is devoted to apostolic teaching. Now you may immediately say, well, hang on, we don't have apostles anymore. The last of them passed away 1,920 years ago or something like that. That's true. We don't have apostles today. But we still have their teaching because that's exactly what the New Testament is. The New Testament letters and the Book of Revelation and the whole of the New Testament is the apostolic teaching to which this church was devoted to. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples. He said, I've still got many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. So although Jesus taught a lot in his three years, he didn't teach everything. There was more to come. When's it going to come? When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, but he will not speak in his own authority. But whatever he hears, he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

That's a really important statement there because here Jesus is saying that through the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is going to complete his teaching through the apostles.

[6 : 19] In other words, these versions are basically explaining to the disciples, you're going to write the New Testament and the Holy Spirit will guide you. And we benefit from having that collection of teachings written before us here in the pages of scripture. And so at the heart of our church life in the year ahead, we want to learn from this teaching.

Our teaching must shape everything that we do as a church and as disciples of Jesus. And here is where we come to an important point. We have to always ensure that we prioritize apostolic teaching above everything else. So for example, here's a list of instructions.

Pre-communion services should be at 11 and 6. You must stand to sing and sit to pray. Presbytery should meet every month. You must have pre-communion services. A minister should wear a suit. A sermon should last 40 minutes. A minister should use technology as much as possible. How much of that is apostolic teaching? None of it. I maybe wish the technology won walls but it's not. There's certain things there that I love. Certain things there that I agree with. Certain things that I don't necessarily so prioritize so much. But the point is that none of these things are apostolic preaching. It doesn't mean that they're bad or wrong. These things are all important and good but they are not apostolic teaching.

And therefore they must never ever ever be given the prominence that belongs only to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament. And our great desire in the year ahead is that we would learn, learn, learn more and more about that teaching and that our thinking would be shaped by what the Bible says. So instead of stuff like this, as a church we want to be focusing on things like this. The sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, the unity of the church, the ethics of Christian morality, the priorities of Christian discipleship, the goals of Christian service and the fullness of the gospel's promises to us. That's the stuff that really matters. That is what apostolic teaching focuses on and that's what we want to devote ourselves to in the year ahead. May God make us a church that wants to learn. The second thing that we see in these verses is a church that wants to be together. We see that, that the church they devoted themselves to the fellowship. They were a church that wanted to be together.

That's a great reminder of the fact that it wasn't just about gaining knowledge in order to fill our heads. It wasn't just about growing as theologians in terms of our understanding of apostolic teaching. It was to have a far more real effect on life because it's telling us that these believers had something in common. That apostolic teaching didn't just fill their minds with knowledge. It showed them that they were now part of a wonderful family, a glorious body of which Christ is the head. They shared that in common, all united together in Jesus Christ. That's what the word fellowship means, in common. That's where we get the word communion, something in common. That's what Pentecost demonstrated so powerfully.

[10:13] Here you've got all these different people, Parthians, Medes, Elamites and loads of other places. They're all hearing the gospel in their own language, showing the fact that people from all corners of the earth are being called into this one church as an amazing family under the headship of Jesus Christ. People from different nations, different classes, different upbringings, different backgrounds, they're all united in this one family and they belong together. And that brings us back to the two greatest commandments of Christian living, loving God and loving one another. As a church, we love one another because we are united together in Jesus Christ. But as with every form of biblical love, it is not simply shown in terms of what we say, it must be shown in terms of what we do. That's why every week in 2018, we want to make sure that we come together as a church. And that's so important because being together as a church opens up the opportunities for so many wonderful things. By being together, there's all sorts of things that we can do. We can talk together.

We can share each other's burdens. We can share prayer points. We can laugh together. We can rejoice together. We can weep together. We can confess our struggles and our sins to each other. We can learn together. We can pray together. We can grow together. All of that requires being together because fellowship is something that we want to be at the heart of our church life. And the great thing is that that can happen in lots of ways. It can happen at our services on a Sunday. It can happen at our midweek meetings. It can happen at additional events. It can happen in each other's homes. If you look in the passage, you see that sometimes this church met in the temple. Sometimes they met in each other's homes. The location didn't really matter. They were able to share fellowship together in lots of different ways. And in the New Testament, a key part of experiencing that fellowship was hospitality. Reading through these verses and acts, you're constantly being reminded that these believers ate together. And that's a wonderful part of our tradition here in Lewis. And it's a great way to build up fellowship, to eat together, both in our homes and here in the church building. But we must remember that when it comes to fellowship, we must always be inclusive, not exclusive. We want everybody to feel included. We want everybody to feel that they belong. Because everybody who comes into our church, either as a member or as an adherent, everyone is precious. Everyone has gifts. Everyone has thoughts. But we all belong together. And that, of course, raises the question of denominations.

If you imagine reading these verses and acts, imagine it said, the believers devoted themselves to apostolic teaching, the fellowship, et cetera, et cetera. But some of them met in the church of Jerusalem and others met in the free church of Jerusalem. That would be horrifying to the apostles. To the apostles, division between believers was absolutely unacceptable. And we have to ask the question, has apostolic teaching changed in 2018? And the answer is no. We want to be a church whose great desire is to be together. That should always be our goal. I know that it's not as simple as that. And we bear that in mind.

Our basic principles in this area must always be, there is one church, believers belong together. Thirdly, these verses describe a church that wants to worship. The church in Acts 2 was devoted to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Here we have two vital aspects of church life being highlighted, the Lord's Supper and prayer. And again, these two things should be at the heart of our church life. The Lord's Supper was a vital part of what we do as a church. We are commanded to share the Lord's Supper together by none other than Jesus Christ himself. And as we do so, we remember, we proclaim and we give thanks for the death of our Savior. And one of the wonderful things about the Lord's Supper is that it keeps the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross at the forefront of our minds.

It means that we are never, ever, ever forgetting the fact that the only reason we exist as a church and as Christians is because Jesus died and he took the penalty of our sin upon himself on the cross. And so the Lord's Supper is essential because it keeps us focusing on the cross. That's why in the year ahead, we want to keep sharing together in the Lord's Supper. That of course raises the question, how often should we do it? Well, there's some New Year's Day homework for you. You can go and read the Book of Acts and you can come and tell me what you think about how frequently it should be. The Lord's Supper is an essential part of our life as a church, but so too is prayer. Prayer is an absolutely vital part of what we do as a church. And here is where we have to make sure that we've got a good sense of perspective and a good sense of priorities because as a New Year begins, it's a good time to ask, what do we need to do as a church? And as a church, there's loads of things we want to do. We want to do outreach, we want to do discipling, we want to do visiting, we want to organize events, we want to look after our building, we want to build up the

[16 : 58] Ladies Bible Study, the WFM, Road to Recovery, Youth Fellowship, Sunday School, all of these things, these are all things that we need and want to do as a church. But what is job number one in the life of our church? Job number one is prayer. That's the first and main priority for our work as a church. We must never forget that you don't pray for the work of the church. Prayer is the work of the church. And that makes perfect theological sense as with everything else that the Bible tells us to do. It makes absolute sense because who is it who's got the resources, the wisdom, the power and the strength to bless Carl away in the year ahead? Who is it? It's God. And so by praying, we are simply asking the one who is able and we are talking to the one who has the power and strength and wisdom to accomplish all that we want to do as a church. So prayer is incredibly important.

That's why the prayer meeting is such an important part of life in our church. We've got two prayer meetings a week, one on a Thursday evening, one on a Sunday morning and it's great if you can go along to these. And if you've never been to the prayer meeting before, go for it. Just go for it. It's a wonderful thing to do. And these two things, the Lord supper and prayer are reminding us that worship is at the heart of what we do as a church.

And everything here, the apostles teaching that we want to learn, the fellowship together that we have, the breaking of bread, prayers, they are all part of our worship to God. And we want to be a church who worships, but we must never forget that worship is not just what we do on a Sunday morning and Sunday evening, worship is something that we do in every single part of our lives. Our whole lives are to be a living sacrifice, an act of worship and devotion to God. And that's a really, really important thing to remember again because we could look ahead to 2018 and we could say to ourselves, this year, I am going to give God my time or my service or my devotion or something like that. We can easily find ourselves saying this year, I'm going to give God something. And that's a great thing to think. But the biblical teaching is slightly different because the biblical teaching is not saying this year, I'm going to give God this, that or the next thing.

The biblical teaching says, I am going to give God this year. I'm going to give God everything. Because everything about you is for his glory. Your job is for his glory.

What you do at school is for his glory. Your involvement in the community is so that you can be salt and light for him. Your home is a place to be filled with the love and joy of the Lord. Your hobbies are a means to enjoy the blessings that God has given us. Absolutely no part of our lives is outside the Lordship of Jesus. Therefore, every part of life is lived to his glory. And again, that makes perfect theological sense because you think about your job or your home or the responsibilities that you have or the hobbies that you're involved in. Who placed you in all of these things? God did. And so he's put you there to glorify him, to serve him and to live for him. Every day in 2018 is from God and for God. And then on the first day of every week this year, we come together to worship just as the church in the New Testament did. We praise God with joy and thankfulness. We pray to God together, confessing our sins, pouring out our burdens and interceding for those around us. And we study God's word so that we can learn more and more and more about what an amazing God we have. May God make us a church that wants to worship. Fourthly, these verses describe a church that wants to share. Verses 44 and 45 says, And all who believe were together and had all things in common. They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. Now you read these verses and they can make you feel quite uncomfortable because you think, Are we supposed to have a kind of common ownership society in the Christian church? Are we almost to be like a sort of communist type thing where nobody owns their own property and everything is shared? Well, some people have come to that conclusion over the years, but others have shied away from that and sought to explain this verse in different ways. How are we to understand what is being said here? Well, we must always, always remember the rule that the Westminster Convention of Faith sets before us, that scripture interprets scripture. So whenever you have one part of the Bible and that you're maybe not sure of, you have to make sure that you understand that in accordance with what is being taught elsewhere in the Bible. And here is a good example of that because all you have to do, if you say to yourself, okay, verse 44 and verse 45 are saying that nobody should own anything and everybody should share all their possessions. You only have to read the very next verse to discover that that's not what's being taught because verse 46 tells us that they broke bread in their homes, which shows us that they still owned their homes. And so this is not saying that private property is wrong and the biblical teaching is the very opposite. Ownership of property and respect for other people's property is a key biblical principle and that's enshrined in the eighth and tenth commandments. So these verses are not saying that we are to own nothing, but they are saying that as a church we want to be ready to share in order to help those who are in need. And again, that's a vital part of being a church. We want to give of what we have to help the needy. And I have to say that I can only just thank and commend you all for your generosity over so many years.

[23 : 56] It's an amazing thing and this is a wonderfully generous congregation and that's something that we want to maintain and continue. And so we want to share our resources. We always want people to know that we care about them. But we also as a church want to share our time and that brings us back to the theme of being together. And this is one of the biggest challenges that we face in 2018, the constraints on our time, the fact that life is so busy. But you know the amazing thing? The amazing thing is that God the Holy Spirit when he gave the apostolic teaching of scripture 2000 years ago, he knew that in 2018 Christians would be really busy. God knew how busy you would be. And that's why he gave you the Lord's day. That's why he gave you the first day of the week, every week, as an amazing opportunity to slow down, to rest, to worship, to be together. And as a church we want to make the most of that. Sundays are a wonderful opportunity to share time together, to eat together, to talk together, to visit the housebound, to worship together. May God make us a church that wants to share both of our resources and of our time. So as a church we want to learn, we want to grow, we want to worship together just like the New Testament church did. But when we look at these things we must never ever think that it's all about nurturing ourselves. And it's very, very easy to become inward looking as a church. But we must never forget that these verses also describe a church that wanted to reach out. The New Testament church was a missionary church. It was constantly reaching out with the good news of the Gospel.

That was what Jesus said to the apostles at the very beginning of Acts, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sumeria to the ends of the earth. The New Testament church was not cut off from the world, it was a wonderful light in the midst of the world. And we want to be exactly the same. We want to be in the world and we want the world to see that we love God and we love our neighbour. And that's one of our great goals to be reaching out in every way that we can. And that's something that we want to try as much as possible in the year ahead. But of course it's difficult. It's a real challenge to reach out to people.

You think how am I going to witness to my colleagues or my friends, my neighbours, people in my home? How am I going to do it? It seems so difficult. How am I going to do what we need to do? Well the amazing thing is that we don't do it. It's God who added to their number day by day. Our role in that is to be among the people in the world so that they can see us. There's a really interesting statement at the end of verse 47. It said that this church had favour with all the people. Isn't that really, really interesting? The church in the New Testament had a good reputation among the people around them. And that's our really, really important point. That people want to see that we stand out as people who are beautifully different from all that is broken and wrong in the world. So we want to reach out but the rest we leave to God. Because as it says here, the Lord added to their number day by day those who are being saved. But it's important to notice there that there's two day by days in those verses. It says in verse 46, day by day they attended the temple together, broke bread in their homes, received their food with glad and generous hearts, praised God and had favour with people. Day by day the church met, they came together, they built up a good relationship with outsiders, they grew as the people of God. And then day by day the Lord added to their number. So we need to make sure that we're doing the first day by days because that's our responsibility. And the rest we leave with God. May God make us a church that wants to reach out. So the church in the New Testament prioritised learning, fellowship, worship, sharing, reaching out. And we want to do all of these things in 2018. But finally and very briefly, we want to be a church that keeps going. Because that word at the very beginning devoted means to keep going. Basically means to continue, to persist, to persevere, to keep going. And that's what the Church of Jesus Christ does, it keeps going. And that is something that's so, so important to remember as Christians because constantly in our lives we are going to be confronted by things that will make us want to stop. We're going to be confronted by challenges that make us feel that we're too weak. We're going to be confronted by temptations that are going to lure us away.

We're going to, there's going to be times where we're going to feel totally isolated and everyone we know or work with or spend time with is doing different things. And we feel like we must be wrong to believe in God and to believe all that the Bible says. We're going to face a world that laughs at us for the beliefs that we have. We're going to face so many pressures to give up. But the New Testament church and the Church of Jesus Christ keeps going. And that's what we want to make sure that we do, to keep going in our Sunday services, in our prayer meetings, in our activities, in our currcessions, in our deconst court, in our outreach, in our youth work, in all that we do as congregations, in all that we do in our community. We want to keep going together. And the amazing thing is, and the thing that we must never, ever forget, is that you will never, ever, ever be on your own as a Christian in 2018. Because you have this massive, wonderful family of brothers and sisters in Christ who love you and care for you and want to support you. And even more than that, you have God himself dwelling in your heart by his Holy Spirit. We look at the Book of Acts and we think that was the most amazing event that took place in the history of the Christian church. And who was it who was at the centre of it? It was

Peter. Peter who was a simple fisherman. Peter who had major insecurities and did all sorts of silly things. Peter who failed spectacularly in terms of his Christian life. And so does God take Peter and say, okay, I can't do anything with you. I'm moving on to somebody else?

[32 : 06] No, he doesn't. God, the Holy Spirit, comes into Peter and does amazing work through him.

And you are exactly the same. Because that's what God does in his church. He takes people who are weak, who doubt, who struggle, who slip, who make mistakes. He brings them all together in a wonderful family and he uses that family to do great work for his name.

And that's what we are as a church. A family of people who all have our faults and failings and our weaknesses and our struggles. But together we are able to serve. Together God can use us. Together we are to keep on going. So let's keep learning this apostolic teaching.

Let's keep coming together in fellowship and throwing closer. Let's keep worshipping through the sacraments, through prayer and all that God has instructed us. Let's keep sharing together our resources, willing to give of what we have to help others who are in need.

Let's keep reaching out. Let's keep on going. And as we do so, we remember the words that we read at the very beginning. Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, you're labour. What you do this year is not in vain.

[33 : 47] That's the kind of church we want to be. Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you so much that in your church you do not preserve it for the wise or the knowledgeable or the able. But you call in the weak, the stumbling, the poor, the needy, those who are poor in spirit, those who struggle. And these are the people, people like us, who you take and who you build up and who you use. And so Lord our God, we offer you our lives as a living sacrifice, praying that 2018 would be a year whereby the work of the Gospel flourishes in our midst and that in every way that we can, that we would live every day for you. Help us to remember that that's not just about starting new things, but it's about doing what we're already doing with our eyes on you. Help us Lord to live each day in your service and to your glory. And we thank you so much that not only have you called us away from the ways of the world, but you have also come to dwell in our hearts by your spirit so that when you promise that you'll never leave us or forsake us, we know that that's a promise that you will never break. So in the year ahead, draw us closer to one another, draw us closer to you. And wouldn't it be so wonderful Lord if we saw as well that you would add to our number those who are being saved. We leave these things in your hands and we commit the year to you in Jesus' name. Amen.