

A Portrait or a Picture of the First Church



Acts 2:42–47

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I was in a little bit of a dilemma this morning because I was not exactly sure how to title the message. I didn't know whether to call it a portrait or a picture of the first church. I don't know about you, but there are some special events in our family, like a holiday, birthday, or a wedding, where we take a picture because we want to remember being together. Sometimes those pictures are more than a picture. There are a few, not many, in our home that we call portraits. They are not left on our phones, they are not in a scrapbook, but they actually hang on the walls of our home. We have a special place going up our stairs to the second floor where there is a portrait, not a picture, of Kory and Katie. It

commemorates, it represents, the beginning of their new life together. Soon, we are going to place another portrait beside that one of Kiki and Chad and the beginning of their life together as husband and wife. There is just a difference between a picture that captures the visual perception of a moment and a portrait that represents more than the moment.

This morning as we read Acts 2:42–47, I am going to ask you this question and I want you to make a decision. Is this a portrait of the first church, or is it just a picture? If it is a portrait, I don't think we should just glance at it or hurry through it. I think we need to gaze at it, study it. If you believe it is more than a picture, let God burn this portrait onto the wall of your heart and the entryway of your mind so that we forever know what God expects of us here at Hardin Baptist Church.

Scripture

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe 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. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

This week, I got a picture from a friend who is in Florida. There was a caption that said, "Do you notice anything funny in the picture?"



I didn't. My silence led him to send me another text that said, "Hint, lower left corner," and he had circled the part he wanted me to see. I still didn't see anything funny. What I saw was piece of metal in the water that looked like part of the boat dock, one of those vertical pegs surrounded with foam that keep your boat from getting scratched if you rub up against one when you are docking. It looked like one of those was broken off. See if you can tell what it is...



Do you see what that is? It's a gator! Can you see it? Did you see it before I told you what it was? You probably didn't see it until I told you what it was. I didn't know what it was either until he pointed out to me that it was a gator. Now, I made an excuse for not seeing it. The excuse was, "The picture is kind of dark!"

How many of you have an excuse this morning? We are going to see a portrait of the church, but I am afraid if we aren't careful some of us won't see it. So I am trusting the Holy Spirit will point out to you what you need to see in this portrait. I called my friend this morning and said, "Did you take that picture of the boat or did you take the picture of the gator beside the boat?" He said, "I took the picture of the gator beside the boat." I said, "You didn't just take a picture and then notice the gator in the picture?" He said, "No, I took a picture of the gator." It just looked like a picture of a boat that was a little off center. Let's pray God opens our eyes to see what He wants us to see in this portrait. I believe with all of my heart that Luke is not just writing to capture a moment that tells us about the church after the day of Pentecost. I believe the Holy Spirit of God is guiding his mind and his heart, and is leading his hand as he pens. Like an artist, he is

giving us an interpretation of the first church that he wants us to hang in our hearts and our minds, and let it influence us in becoming the kind of church God wants us to be as well.

The Portrait of the Church

I see four things that I want to point out in this portrait:

- The church's devotion
- The church's generosity
- The church's participation
- The church's influence

You may see other things, but it is important that we all see these things. I have redone my math...I have always believed that in this portrait there were three thousand one hundred and twenty people. I know how it is at our house when we try to get our family together for a group picture and get everybody smiling and looking at the camera at the same time. It is extremely hard. Can you imagine taking a picture of three thousand one hundred and twenty people and them all being in oneness? Wow! But I have redone the math. I am not exactly sure there were three thousand one hundred and twenty people. Yes, there were one hundred and twenty people when the day of Pentecost started, and when the day of Pentecost was over three thousand were added to the one hundred and twenty, so that is three thousand one hundred and twenty. But we know there were a lot of people there who were not from Jerusalem, they were from other places, and they have now heard the gospel in their own language – and the purpose for the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the church is that we be empowered witnesses – so I have a thought that many of them have probably already gone home but there are still a lot of believers left in the city of Jerusalem. Sometime after the day of Pentecost and the church receiving the Holy Spirit, Luke wants us to see the church because the Holy Spirit wants us to see the church. In this paragraph of Scripture, he talks about the church's devotion; he talks about their generosity; he talks about their participation; he talks about their influence.

I don't know if you have noticed this, but the word 'and' is all over this passage of Scripture. Every verse but one begins with the word 'and.' Mrs.

Coleman is here and I think she will vouch for this, but when she had me in freshman grammar class at Calloway, if I had turned in a writing and had started new every sentence with the word 'and,' I would have had red marks on many of those 'ands.' She would have marked them out and told me that I knew better than to do that. Luke got by with it because the Holy Spirit of God is leading him. Every new sentence is joined with the word 'and' so that this thought is joined with the last thought, and the next, and so on. All of these thoughts together are painting one big picture, one big portrait, of the church. How dare we pick out the ones we are partial to and not see the entire portrait of the church!

Devotion

"And they devoted themselves..." They, the church, devoted themselves. Originally, it looked to me like they devoted themselves to four things: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. I should have seen this years ago, but I saw something this week for the first time. The sentence does not say they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (*comma*) the fellowship (*comma*) the breaking of bread (*comma*) and the prayers. It says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship (*comma*) to the breaking of bread and the prayers. There are four things, but they are divided into two categories. The first category that the church was devoted to was the apostles' teaching and the fellowship. Both have 'the' in front of them; they are important articles. The second category they are devoted to is the breaking of bread and the prayers.

You know what it means to be devoted. Many of you are devoted. When you become devoted to someone or something, you know that to be devoted you will give up certain things in pursuit of what you are going to obtain because of what or who you are devoted to. Someone who is devoted to something gives up a lot of other things. Other things are no longer the priority. Therefore, if you look this word up in a dictionary, to be devoted means 'to pursue hotly.' Why are you devoted to something? It is because you understand there is a reward in being devoted.

I remember on several occasions hearing guys talk about other guys who were devoted, though I haven't heard it used this way in a while. Normally, the context was them getting ready to go somewhere to do something, maybe they were going to go out of town to go fishing, or golfing, or hunting, or go to a sporting event. The guys would get to the meeting place and then someone would notice that 'John' was missing and ask where he was. And one of the guys would say, "Awe, you know John, he is devoted to his wife!" All of those guys would go...*Ahhh....*In all of their minds, they are thinking about what John was going to miss out on because he is devoted to his wife. What those guys don't understand is (I say this with a grin on my face) the great reward that guy is going to get and what he will obtain because he is devoted to his wife! Did you catch that?

- **To the Apostles' Teachings**

Are you devoted to the apostles' teaching? What are you giving up? What are you sacrificing? What are you not doing because you are devoted to the teaching of the apostles?

Let's be clear about what this means for us. The apostles were those men who Jesus trained for about three and a half years (the betrayer gets replaced). Now, these guys who have been with Jesus, who have the Holy Spirit of God living inside them, are now anointed with the Holy Spirit and are going to fulfil what Jesus said to them when He told them He was going away...*When I go away, it is actually to your advantage because God is going to send another comforter, another helper. He will not dwell alongside you; He will live in you, and the world can never take Him from you. He will be your teacher and bring back to your remembrance everything I have taught you...*Can you imagine the panic those guys had when they realized Jesus was going away and this was now on their shoulders and they hadn't taken good notes?

But then, they are assured of what the Holy Spirit is going to do. The early church is primarily Jewish. They have been schooled in the Old Testament scriptures. They have been reared under the Law of Moses. They have memorized much of the Old Testament. And now, their primary teaching

and influence is not going to be the Old Testament; it is going to be what God is giving these apostles, and they are going to be devoted to that. You and I know the Holy Spirit inspired those apostles to write, and what they wrote now comprises the New Testament.

Are you devoted to the New Testament? Then, what are you sacrificing? What are you giving up? What is no longer a priority that used to be a priority because you are devoted to the teaching of the New Testament? Now, we aren't taking away from the Old Testament, but the full and final revelation of God to us, as His people, comes to us in the person of His Son. In the New Testament, we see the fulfillment of what the Bible talked about in the Old Testament. Now, you and I, as the church, should be devoted to the Bible as the inerrant, inspired, infallible Word of God. Are you devoted? Do you realize how hard it is to get a family this large on the same page? If we were truthful with ourselves, we are not devoted to the New Testament; we are devoted to someone else's interpretation of it. We just don't take the time ourselves to labor in God's Word, believing God has written this for us as part of His body.

- **To the Fellowship**

Secondly, they were devoted to the fellowship. We Baptists love fellowship, but this is not talking about us having a potluck and all talking with one another. That is not what it's talking about. This word, fellowship, here is translating the word, *Koinonia*. Its basic definition is 'to have in common.' It spoke about two people having so much in common that they were actually companions. By the time the New Testament was written, it had taken on another meaning. It meant people having such in common that they become partners of something; it spoke of a partnership. Imagine being a partner in a business. There is a different responsibility when you are a partner. When you are a partner, you own something. The weight of it is on your shoulders. If you just work for somebody who owns a business, yes, you take your responsibility seriously as a Christian, but the weight of the whole thing isn't on you, it's on the owner. If you are part of the church at Hardin, you are an owner, a minority owner. I am so thankful for the people who were at this church thirty-eight years ago. Their ownership ratio was about one in eighty to one in a hundred. Now, those

people have seen their stake in the church fall to one in fifteen to seventeen hundred. That doesn't mean their ownership has decreased; it means their ownership has increased. Each one of us is owners of this church. I know it is God's church, but God's church is comprised of Jesus, the head, and we, the body. You need to feel that weight on you. We are God's church. We don't just work for God! God has made us a part of Christ's body. Do you feel that? You should.

All my life growing up I worked for Dad and Papaw and they paid me a decent wage. I didn't even know what minimum wage was. It didn't matter – I just took what they paid me. I will never forget after graduating and getting married, Papaw and Dad bringing me on as a partner. I was twenty percent owner and they owned forty percent each of a small farm called Cunningham & Cunningham Farms. When I became a twenty percent owner, everything changed. But when I worked for them, I got paid by the hour, and because I loved to work and there was always something to do, I made a lot of money! I will never forget years ago when we planted Pisgah Bay in beans. There came a great big flood and the beans didn't come up – they "broke their necks," so to speak, trying to come out of the ground. So Dad and Papaw sent me down in the bottoms to disc it up again and replant that hollow, and I got paid a second time! It was glorious! About the third year after I made partner, the same thing happened in another hollow. Deer came in and ate about a hundred and twenty acres of what we had planted. We were going to go in and replant it, but this time I wasn't being paid by the hour. This time the repayment was coming out of my twenty percent, and it hurt!

- **To the Breaking of Bread**

Which one of those two illustrations describes you and your relationship to this church? Too many of us show up in this place, hear a message, then go home and never think about who we are again. We think about ourselves as an individual Christian and the rights we have as a Christian. We don't think about ourselves being an owner of this church! The weight of this is on us. Each one of us is a minority owner accepting the responsibility we have, and coming together to be the people God wants us to be. Why? Because we are devoted to Christ and to Christ's church,

which is us – all of us. Please tell me you feel the weight of this! Please tell me you felt the weight of us trying to be the church during a pandemic. Please tell me you didn't make decisions just based on what was personally best for you but that you made decisions on what was best for the church of Jesus Christ because you know you are the church!

That is the picture here – a church that is devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the New Testament, to the partnership they have with one another under God and to the breaking of bread. I personally believe this is a reference to the Lord's Supper. We took a picture last week, and less than two hundred people at Hardin Baptist Church came back to sit down at the table of the Lord and take the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine into their body to do what Jesus told us to do in remembrance of Him. Less than two hundred of the minority owners showed up. How can that be? How can Jesus die that death on the cross and then give us a memorial to do in His honor, and because some of us are more devoted to other things on Sunday afternoon, we aren't coming back to the house of God as the people of God? How can that be? I hear all time, "If you would just do the Lord's Supper on Sunday morning..." I know – you would take it, because it would be convenient – just add it on to the service. Does anyone believe it was convenient for Jesus to go to that cross and do what He did? No! We are not going to make it hard, but we will not make it convenient.

I ask you as your pastor, will you let this portrait of the first church being devoted to the New Testament being devoted to their partnership, being devoted to honoring Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and to the prayers burn in your heart and mind?

- **To the Prayers**

Praying. Pray, believing that prayer is how we declare our dependency on God, believing with all of our hearts what John Wesley said, "Prayer is striking the winning blow. Ministry is just gathering the results." Just as the early church did, we want everything we do here at Hardin to be bathed in prayer so that we don't do anything in the flesh. We do what we do under the anointing of God's Holy Spirit because the church having the presence

of the Holy Spirit is so that we will be empowered witnesses operating under His leadership, not our personal talents and abilities. Do you see this picture? They were devoted. Are you devoted? Please, let's be devoted.

Generosity

Secondly, I want you to see their generosity. Because of their devotion, awe came on every person. Whoa! That means everybody in the church was getting the respect they were due as signs and wonders were being done through the apostles. Notice the ESV translates this word, '*phobos*,' not as fear as it does in other places in Acts, but as awe. We get the word 'phobia' from the word 'phobos.' It is something we are in fear of, something we are afraid of, but there is also positive aspect to this word. It means to be in awe of, to have reverence, to honor, to respect. Our ESV translators believe this word means the early church was respected by others because God's presence was known in the church.

So as God's Spirit is moving in His church, here is what verse 44 says (this blows my mind), "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." This word, common, is where the Greeks get the word for generous from. These people are together and they have all things in common, and now Luke will describe their generosity. People in that early church (there are several thousand of them) started selling their properties and their possessions and distributed to all, as any had need. The early church didn't get together and decide to bring ten percent of what they were making and give it to the church. They felt this ownership. They looked around and saw people who were genuinely in need, and they saw what they, themselves, had that wasn't really needed, and they sold it so that everybody had what they needed. There was no sermon telling them to sell everything they had and share it all communally. No, we know everybody didn't sell everything they had because we see later on that they break bread in their houses. There were just people in the church who were generous to the people they saw with needs.

Do you think that pictures us? Could it be the reason we are not generous is because most of the time we only see persons; we never see people. Most of us are only sensitive to the people we know. We are not sensitive

to the people we don't know so we are only generous to the people we know. The early church is a picture of knowing each other and then meeting those needs. Most of us don't see people we don't know so we aren't sensitive to them, and because we aren't sensitive to them, we aren't generous. – Let me give you an example. Many of us have a certain belief about people who break the law and what should happen to them when they break it...until it is someone you know. When it is someone you know, you start making excuses for why they broke the law. Because you know them, you do not want them to face what you wanted that person you didn't know to face. Am I right? – I want to ask us, as a church, to ask God to reveal those people to us that He knows we need to know, so we can display the generosity of Christ to them.

Why was the first church generous? It was because the basic need they had, which they could not meet themselves, was met by God who put His Son on a cross in their place – the most generous thing God could do. How many of you deserved it? How many of you really believe you deserve Jesus dying for you on a cross? None of us. Yet, when it comes to generosity, we only want to be generous with those who deserve it and the ones we think deserve it are the ones we know. Do you see the importance of building relationships? If we don't build relationships and we live our lives in isolation, we may not meet the needs of people God has brought into our paths. I think that in this day and age in order for us to see true need, we have to stop. When we stop, instead of making a judgment about a person based on how it looks from where we stand, why don't we try to imagine what life might look like from where they are standing. Then, see what God's Holy Spirit does in relation to us being generous.

Participation

I love this! Day by day, they attended the temple together. I have to be honest with you – knowing what we know today, we would have fled from the temple as far as we could have fled!... *Woo! Free in Jesus! A sacrifice has been made on a cross! I don't have to offer a lamb ever again!*...We would have never gone back there, but they kept going back. Have you ever wondered why they went back? Do you know why they went back together? This is my personal opinion, but I don't think the first church

thought their faith, which was personal, was supposed to be private. I think they thought it was supposed to be public. They had been going to the temple and they had this huge court of Solomon where thousands of people could gather. Now they have several thousand people, so they decide to go back to the temple, not to worship God under the Mosaic Law, but to worship Him under the Messiah. It was the only place big enough to hold them all. They also had this thought that if they went there to worship, somebody might hear what they knew to be true and they might get to influence them with the gospel, so they were committed to publicly meeting together in large groups.

I know this is countercultural today, but I still believe that God ordains we gather together in large groups. There is one thing that is not negotiable at Hardin Baptist – yes, there was a time when our large group services got interrupted, but this pandemic did not disrupt them – God wants us to meet on the first day of the week. He wants us to meet at 7:50, at 9:15, and 10:40. He wants us going public with our faith in large group assembly and not being ashamed of gathering together on the first day of the week because we are the people of God. As we gather in large group, we must also recognize that the early church didn't just go to the temple. When temple was over, they went back to their homes and broke bread together. We have to have relationships. You can't just come to a worship service and sit and look at the back of somebody's head, and hear a sermon. We have to be in meaningful relationships with people. Hardin will never compromise on large group and small groups. We want to continue to grow larger, but smaller at the same time. Parents, listen to me. Don't just come and get your sermon for the week and put your kids in a small group, then go home. As an adult, you need that small group as much as your children need that small group! Our children need to see adults committed to small group relationships. 9:15 has been really convenient for a lot of us. We are not going to live by what is convenient anymore. We are going to be who God has called us to be, and that is the church.

Influence

The Bible says they ate their meals with gladness and generosity in their hearts. They were tickled to death to get to sit down with somebody else!

Are you ever glad to get to sit down with somebody other than your immediate family? Maybe there is a new believer in Christ – someone who has moved here from another state – and we get to welcome them here at Hardin Baptist Church. This is who God wants us to be. He wants us to burn this in our hearts and minds. Because when the church is who the church is supposed to be, growing larger and smaller at the same time, the Bible says in Acts that they had favor with all the people. Their devotion, their generosity, their participation led them to have influence with all the people, and the next thing you know, people are being saved every day, and every day God is adding to the church. That is the picture.

There are times here at Hardin when nobody gets wet (baptized), but then there are times where somebody gets wet every Sunday for two or three months in a row. When we see those people getting wet, we should be praising God. But when we don't see someone get wet, it should go through our minds whether that means nobody got saved that week. Does that mean we didn't introduce anyone to Christ this week? Now, it doesn't mean we get in the flesh and did something we shouldn't do, but I don't believe God just wanted people to be saved every day in Jerusalem; I think God wants people to be saved every day in Murray, in Benton, in Hardin, in Dexter, and Almo. Do you sense that?

What a portrait...I pray our desire is to be the church God wants us to be.