

Biblical Immersion

1 of 10 in Marks of a Thriving Church

Sept. 18, 2022

Acts 2:42-47, etc.

Today's scripture reading comes from the book of Acts, chapter 2, verses 42-47. I'll be reading from the New Living Translation.

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.¹

Writer Leonard Sweet tells the true story of a poor, rural Appalachian family that refused to leave their dilapidated log cabin, even though the government had already built them a beautiful, brand-new split-level home on the adjacent hillside. Their old shack was standing smack in the middle of a hollow where a lake was about to be constructed as part of a revitalization project in the Tennessee Valley.

Even as the bulldozers rolled in, the family refused to budge. In a last-ditch effort, a social worker was called in to talk with the family and find out what their issue was. "We ain't a-goin' nowhere," they announced to the social worker. "Nobody can make us; no way, no how."

The social worker pleaded with them, "Help me to explain to the authorities why you won't move into your beautiful new home."

"See that fire over there?" said the father, pointing to a blazing fire in the primitive hearth of the log cottage. "My grandpa built that fire over a hundred years ago," the man explained. "He never let it go out, because he didn't have no matches. Then my pa tended to the fire, and since he died, I've been tending it. None of us ever let that fire die, and I sure as heck ain't a-goin' to move away now and let grandpa's fire go out!"

This gave the social worker an idea. She arranged for a large copper pot to be delivered to the shack. She explained to the family that they could scoop up the live coals from the fire and take them in the pot to the new home, throw them into the fireplace, add some

¹ Acts 2:40-47 (NLT)

kindling and wood, and keep the fire burning. This way, grandpa's fire would never have to go out. Would this be acceptable?

They had a family huddle to discuss the idea, and decided to move from their shack to the new home on the hillside. But they only did so when they knew they could bring with them the fire of their ancestors.

In the verses just prior to the scripture passage I read a moment ago, we find Jesus' disciples—about 120 of them—praying and waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them to. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes and fills them, just as Jesus had promised.

Peter then gives a rousing, Holy Spirit-empowered sermon to a huge crowd, and in response, 3,000 people (if you can imagine it) put their faith in Jesus, and are baptized that very day. The apostles must've had sore arms after baptizing all those people! That was the day the Christian church was born.

Luke (who is the author of the book of Acts) then describes the life of this new church: how they were devoted to Jesus, and to one another, as well as to several core practices that helped them grow deeper in their faith, and at the same time enabled them to spread the message of Jesus wider, to more and more people. Each day, reports Luke, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

These first Christians were trailblazers for God. Through their bold witness and the attractiveness of the loving fellowship they shared with each other, the message of the crucified and risen Jesus came to permeate virtually every nook and cranny of the Roman Empire.

Some 2000 years later, as Cornerstone seeks to advance God's kingdom here in Markham-Stouffville and beyond, what we need more than anything is to make sure that we always bring with us the fire of these, our spiritual ancestors. As we go about our mission as a church, we must always bring with us the fire of the Holy Spirit.

To that end, we're starting a new series today called *Marks of a Thriving Church*. Throughout the next couple of months, we'll unpack the passage we read this morning—Acts 2:42-47—along with other passages from the early chapters of Acts—in order to understand what it means to be a church that truly flourishes as God intends us to.

Renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says that it's a vitally important exercise for any church to return to Acts 2:42-47 and measure itself against the marks of a thriving faith

community that are listed in that passage. Through this series, we'll endeavour, with God's help, to more fully reflect those marks as a church community, and in our personal lives as well.

With that in mind, let's look at the first mark of a thriving church that's listed in Acts 2:42—a mark we'll refer to as **biblical immersion**:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...²

In this message, we're going to zero in on that phrase "the apostles' teaching."

We read that first Christians *devoted themselves* to the apostles' teaching. In other words, they "gave themselves fully" to the divinely authoritative teaching of the apostles. They were persistently preoccupied with learning and applying the Bible as taught by the apostolic leadership of the church.

The example of the first Christians in this regard has been permanently etched in scripture for us to emulate. Biblical immersion was a top-of-the-list priority for the Acts 2 church, and should be for us as well. I'd like to take the remainder of this message to explore three aspects of the apostles' teaching: What it is, why it's important, and how to devote yourself to it. First:

1. What is "the apostles' teaching"?

The original twelve apostles had lived and walked closely with Jesus during his public ministry. All of them had been witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. It was to these apostles—along with the later addition of Paul—that Jesus entrusted his teachings.

In Luke 24, we read that the risen Jesus "took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."³

Jesus also promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to the apostles to guide them into all truth.⁴

Jesus instructed the apostles to make disciples by teaching people to obey his commands.⁵

² Acts 2:42a (NLT)

³ See Luke 24:27

⁴ See John 16:13

⁵ See Matthew 28:20

The apostles, therefore, would become the church's link and lifeline to the story of Jesus' life and ministry, his cross and resurrection, and to all of his words and teachings. This is why the early church put such a high priority on learning from the apostles.

For the same reason, the apostles made teaching God's word their top ministry priority, along with prayer. We see an example of this in Acts 6, when a feeding program for widows—important though that was—had begun to distract the apostles from their teaching ministry:

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."⁶

Of course, we see evidence of the priority the early church placed on the apostles' teaching not only in Acts, but throughout the entire New Testament.

Indeed, as the Christian movement grew and spread, we see evidence of the development of an authoritative pattern of teaching by the apostles. For example, the Apostle Paul urges his protégé Timothy to,

Hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching you learned from me—a pattern shaped by the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you.⁷

In time, the church would come to recognize a comprehensive written body of apostolic teaching which we now know as the New Testament. So for us today, devotion to the apostles' teaching means giving ourselves fully to the teachings of the New Testament.

Of course, to acknowledge the divine authority of the New Testament is to equally acknowledge the divine authority of the Old Testament, because throughout the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles continually point back to the Old Testament as God's word.

⁶ Acts 6:2-4 (NLT)

⁷ 2 Timothy 1:13-14 (NLT)

Therefore, to be devoted to the apostles' teaching today is to be committed to learn, love, and live the counsel of the whole Bible.

To drill down a little deeper, in the early chapters of the book of Acts, we find examples of the apostles' teaching, particularly in sermons delivered by Peter. As the lead apostle, Peter's teachings would have been representative of what all the apostles taught.

Two features of Peter's teaching especially stand out. The first is how very Christ-centered it is. Peter constantly shows how the Old Testament scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus. To give just one of what could be many examples, Peter says to his Jewish listeners,

“Friends, I realize that what you and your leaders did to Jesus was done in ignorance. But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah—that he must suffer these things.⁸

Along with being so Christ-centered, the apostles' teaching also points toward God's final restoration of all creation in Christ. In the same address, Peter continues by saying,

Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah. For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.⁹

If I had the time, I could trace for you these two key aspects of the apostles' teaching throughout the entire New Testament—its profound Christ-centeredness and its focus on God's ultimate restoration of all things—of all creation— in and through Christ.

So in answer to the question, “What is the apostles' teaching?” suffice it to say for our purposes that:

What is the apostles' teaching?

- It is Bible-based (both Old and New Testaments)
- It is Christ-centred
- It points ahead to the final restoration of all creation in Christ.

These key elements need to inform our own approach to the teaching and study of scripture today.

⁸ Acts 3:17-19 (NLT)

⁹ Acts 3:19-21 (NLT)

Now that we've considered what the apostles' teaching is, let's talk about *why* it's important. Clearly, it was important to the Acts 2 church, because they devoted themselves to it.

2. Why is immersing ourselves in the Bible important?

To begin with, it's important because **if we don't fill our mind with God's truth, we'll fill it with something else.**

In our passage, the 3000 people who converted on the day of Pentecost dove right in, devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching of God's word to re-shape their way of thinking, their outlook, and their whole way of life.

But, as Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, "Where no attention is given to teaching, and to constant lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up shaped by whichever social pressures are most pervasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence or memory."

Pastor John Ortberg puts it this way: you're going to be shaped by *something*. The question is, what's that something going to be? It could be TV. It could be video games. It could be celebrity gossip, idle conversation, or anxious thoughts. It could be your culture or family of origin, or peer pressure. But God calls you to be shaped by the truth of his word. If you hear your parents say, "I love you" often enough, you'll absorb those words and they'll become part of your identity. You'll live differently than someone who never heard those words from their parents on a regular basis.\

Similarly, if you take in God's word on a regular basis, you'll absorb it, and it will affect your entire way of thinking and your outlook on life. You'll live differently than someone who doesn't take in God's word on a regular basis.

Another reason it's important to immerse ourselves in scripture is that in doing so, **we follow the example Jesus set for us.**

I mean, if Jesus immersed himself in scripture—and he did— how much more did the first Christians need to? How much more do you and I need to? When he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus' first instinct was to quote the book of Deuteronomy:

The scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'¹⁰

¹⁰ Matthew 4:4 (NLT)

The idea here is that just as bread is food that you need to nourish and sustain your physical life day by day, scripture—God’s word—is the food that you need to nourish and sustain your spiritual life day by day.

Next, immersing ourselves in scripture is important because the Bible says in 2 Timothy 3 that **God uses the Bible to teach us truth and prepare and equip us for every good work.**

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.¹¹

If there’s any truth to this passage, then you just can’t expect to be able to grow and live as a follower of Jesus apart from learning, loving, and living the Bible. Today, many professing Christians have a knowledge of the Bible that’s like my knowledge of superheroes.

Of course, superhero movies are all the rage these days. This is really exciting news for those of you who are keen on superheroes that only serious comic aficionados would really appreciate.

These folks have expertise about superheroes that I simply do not have.

Sadly, far too many Christians have a knowledge of the Bible that resembles my knowledge of superheroes. Sure, maybe you can quote John 3:16 and pick Jesus or Noah or Adam and Eve out of a lineup of biblical characters, but anything beyond that would be a challenge for you. And if that’s the case, do you know what’s missing from your life?

What’s missing from your life is what we just read in 2 Timothy— *everything that is useful to teach you what is true and to correct you when you are wrong and to show you what is right.*

What’s missing from your life is the main tool God uses to *prepare and equip you to do every good work* he has in store for you. What’s missing from your life is the main tool that God uses to help you get to know who he is, what his plan for this world is, and how you fit into it; the main tool that he uses to point you to his Son Jesus, because all scripture ultimately points to Jesus.

¹¹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NLT)

It's fine if you want to be a superhero or a comic book "fanboy" or "fangirl" as they call it. But what the church really needs is *Bible* fanboys and Bible fangirls—Bible "geeks" and Bible "nerds" so to speak—people who know their Bibles so well that the scriptures transform their whole way of thinking, their whole way of seeing the world, and their whole way of living.

Another reason why immersing yourself in the Bible is important is that **it keeps you from being susceptible to false teaching.**

Peter writes of the confidence we can have in scripture, saying that:

Above all, you must realize that no prophecy of Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there are false prophets among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and deny the Master who bought them... Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered.¹²

Today, you can tune into a whole range of Christian teaching—or in some cases, so-called "Christian teaching"—online and on TV. Some of it is good, solid biblical stuff. Some of it is little more than feel-good pop-psychology fluff spiritualized with a few out-of-context Bible verses and the occasional mention of Jesus' name.

Some very popular speakers out there are actually peddling some dangerous false teachings that have little if anything to do with the true Christian gospel. The devil is a master at leading people astray by twisting scripture. The point is, the better you know your Bible the less susceptible you'll be to such deceptions.

The Acts 2 church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and so should we. So far, we've seen what the apostles' teaching is. We've also considered why immersing ourselves in scripture is important. Finally, let's consider:

3. How to devote yourself to the teaching of God's word.

I'd like share several practical suggestions here, and I invite you to listen for the one or two suggestions the Holy Spirit is convicting you to act on.

¹² 2 Peter 1:20-2:2

For starters, **pray for a hunger for God's word**. When a congregation like this becomes hungry for God's word—when there's a yearning for learning, and loving and living the scriptures—it's a sure sign of spiritual health and vitality—a sure sign that God is preparing the faith community to flourish.

You could make this your breath prayer in the weeks ahead: "Lord, make me hungry for your word." It's a short phrase that you can easily pray over and over again, whether aloud or quietly in your spirit, at any time of day. Or better yet, pray, "Lord, make *us* hungry for your word." Then, watch for how God answers your prayer.

Speaking of prayer, may I ask you to regularly **pray for those who teach and preach** here at Cornerstone? The words of the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 20 apply just as much to us to those of us who teach and preach as they did to the elders of the church at Ephesus to whom they were originally addressed:

So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders."¹³

The heart of feeding and shepherding God's people is scriptural teaching. All those who teach and preach need your prayer cover as we sit down to prepare for things like not only sermons like this, but also those who teach Bible classes and workshops, Sunday school classes, youth group meetings, young adults gatherings, women's and men's groups, and those leading small group Bible studies. Pray that those teaching and preaching would study God's word deeply, handle it rightly, and be led and empowered by God's Spirit in all of our preparations, teaching and preaching.

Another way we can devote ourselves to the teaching of God's word is to **make the most of Sunday messages** here at church. Come to service each Sunday prayed up. Listen carefully, and takes notes. Pay attention to how the Holy Spirit is speaking to you through the sermon. Is God convicting you, comforting, affirming or guiding you?

Review the sermon notes or the sermon video that we post online each week.

Another means for devoting ourselves to the teaching of God's word is to **study the Bible with others**. We have a range of Bible-based classes and workshops that will soon be starting, with both online and in-person options.

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/workshopsandclasses/>

¹³ Acts 20:28 (NLT)

Next, Cornerstone has developed a **Practical Guide Sheet for Bible Intake** www.cornerstonechurch.ca/bibleintake that I encourage all of you to check out. Here, you'll find a range of tips and resources for immersing yourself in scripture, including how to:

- Hear it
- Read it
- Study it
- Memorize it
- Mediate on it
- Apply it

I'd also like to highlight our guide sheet on the **Prayer Practice of Lectio Divina** www.cornerstonechurch.ca/lectiodivina.

Lectio Divina is Latin for sacred reading. It's an ancient Christian practice that helps you draw near to God through the repeated, prayerful reading of a short passage of Scripture. It's a practice that has shaped millions in a very powerful way as they've encountered God through scripture, and it can shape you as well as you practice it.

Both the Bible Intake and Lectio Divina guide sheet are available online, and we also have a limited number of free printed copies available in the café after the service.

Lastly, and most importantly, the key thing to remember as you engage with the scriptures is that Bible always points to Jesus. The Bible is not meant to point to itself, but it's meant to point you to Jesus. Above all, that's why we are called to immerse ourselves in scripture—to draw nearer to Jesus himself.

The written word of God always points us to the Word of God made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, I'd like to close this message by sharing with you a powerful video that expresses that very point. Featuring the words of Tim Keller, this video is called, **"True and Better"**. [A purchased version of the video is forthcoming to show in this Sunday's service.]