

29th November 2020 10 am Devoting Ourselves To Apostolic Teaching – What Does That Mean?

Service led by Michelle Harris with Jessica Harris helping, Talk by Denise Coomber, Reading and Prayers by Pam Stote.

This transcript is only of the "Bible Project" video, the reading and the talk.

Video by The Bible Project: Public Reading of Scripture

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/public-reading-scripture/>

[Jon Collins:] I was reading the Bible, which, you know, is kind of hard to do. But, I came across this verse that says

"Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching.

[Tim Mackie:] Yeah, this is Paul's letter to Timothy who's a young pastor and he's telling him about ways that he can keep his church community engaged with Scripture.

[Jon:] Okay so, preaching the Bible, I get. Teaching from the Bible, I get that too. But what about this reading Scripture together thing?

Is that something I'm supposed to care about?

Why did Paul think it was so important?

[Tim:] Oh, man. For Paul, this was really significant practice for the people of God.

Think all the way back to Mt. Sinai where the Israelites were just rescued from Egypt.

They are no longer slaves and they need a new identity, a new story to live by. And so, Moses, he gathers the people together and he reads the Scriptures aloud. He reminds them of where they came from, who they are and the new future they are called to live for.

[Jon:] This was the first public reading of Scripture in the Bible.

[Tim:] Yeah, and it didn't stop there. When the people finally got into the land, they did it again.

Joshua pulled the people together and they all listened to the Scriptures, read aloud, so they can remember where they came from and how they could keep living as part of this new story.

[Jon:] So this is something they did all the time then.

[Tim:] Well, actually, no. After Joshua died, we don't have any more stories of the people coming together to hear God's Word.

Instead, the people forgot their story. And a whole generation arose that didn't know their God or what God had done for them.

But then centuries later, a King named Josiah re-discovered the Scriptures and he was so excited that he called Israel to begin this practice once again. It sparked a renewal movement. That is, until the people forgot once more and they ended in exile.

And so this is why when Ezra and Nehemiah came back from the Exile, they needed to remind the people who they are and how they are to live.

[Jon:] So, this is a powerful practice.

[Tim:] Yeah. In fact, reading Scripture together became a core part of Jewish life. It was done every week as they gathered in Synagogue.

Jesus, Himself, participated in this practice. He even launched His mission during the weekly reading of the Scriptures.

He read from the scroll of Isaiah and then He told everyone, these Words were about Him.

And that brings us all the way back to the early Church where Paul told Timothy to keep this practice going to immerse the whole community in the story of the Scriptures.

[Jon:] Okay, but, here's the thing. Most people back then didn't know how to read. So, they had to do it publicly.

But I can read the Bible by myself.

[Tim:] Yeah, and you should totally do that! But don't underestimate the power of this ancient practice.

Reading the Bible by yourself can be hard. It can be easy to get distracted. But something happens when you hear God's Word read aloud and when you're with other people. And besides, it's really easy! You don't need anyone to preach or teach. You just need to listen to the Scriptures.

And then talk about what you've heard.

This is what God's people have always done when they enter into new and uncertain times.

They remember their story and who they are through the public reading of the Scriptures.

[Tim:] Hey guys thanks for watching Bible project video. We're a nonprofit crowdfunded animation studio. We have a lot more videos. You can help us make more: look at the bibleproject.com

[Jon:] And if you're going to try this with your friends, you can get together and just read the Bible out loud, or you can use an audio Bible there's a ton available, download it, give it a spin.

[Tim:] You should totally try it. See you! Thanks.

Reading: Acts 2:42

[Pam:]

And so we have our Bible reading. And it's taken from Acts chapter 2, verse 42, and there is just one verse. And it starts off,

42 They (that's the new believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Talk

So Denise is going to talk about that for us now, and let's pray for Denise before she begins.

Thank You, God, for Denise, thank You for all the preparation she has done. And we ask that You'd help her to speak Your words, and that You'd help us to hear and to act on what You say to us through her words. Amen.

Over to Denise.

[Denise:]

Hello everyone. Right, so today we're doing "'Devoting ourselves to the Apostles' teaching' means what?" was the title I was given.

So, it's Advent Sunday. Why do we celebrate this season? We have the history about the birth of Jesus and anticipation of Jesus coming again as part of our culture. And it's a time when we remember Immanuel: God's with us now, when God sent messengers, angels, who told mankind about the coming of the Saviour of the World. So it's part of our calendar. But why is it part of our calendar? Could it be because the people around at that time devoted themselves to what the Apostles were saying, like we heard in our Bible reading? Could it be because generations of God's faithful people since have been doing exactly the same?

We come from a great heritage, a Judeo-Christian heritage, and we often take for granted what's gone before us. We're very privileged to have the Bible in our own language and to be able to read. In the first century, as we heard in the video, that may not have been the case. They had people who were reliable witnesses, though, who could explain what Scripture said. So we heard in the video about how people read Scripture to remind them (and I've just written it down) where they came from, and how to live as God's people, to remember their story and who they are.

And so that's very important, but sometimes we don't understand what we're reading, so we're going to look through a little bit about apostolic teaching,

which sounds a really heavy thing; apostolic *kerygma* [κήρυγμα] is what it is in the Greek I do believe, but it's quite simple if you just break down what the words mean. So first of all, who were the Apostles? So the early Church started with a group of believers that were Jewish. And the people continued with their Jewish practices and worship, first of all, so they would have known the Old Testament, they would have read Scripture together every week in the synagogue, but they believed Jesus to be the Messiah that was promised in the Old Testament. So they met together, it said in Acts 2:42, in each other's homes for fellowship and the breaking of bread, two of the things, and to the Apostles' teaching.

I've added a simplified version of what this all means in the children's activities for the week. And the dictionary definition says, 'each of the 12 disciples of Jesus'. So that was originally the meaning of Apostle, as we know it, but it does come to mean an important early Christian leader or a missionary, a visionary, somebody that takes chances for the Church.

Now, if we've been on if you went on the Kairos weekends, you may have been given this book. (and I do have other copies for those that went on it but haven't collected those yet) and inside there's lots of little diagrams, and one of them is APEST, which is the five spiritual gifts for leaders of the church.



And as you can see it includes Apostles¹. So are they around today? Well, we haven't got time to go into whether they were just for that time or are for now, but that's one of the leadership qualities of a church leader: it's an apostolic sort of gift. The original meaning of the Greek word *apostolos* [ἀπόστολος] is 'messenger' so we've had the messengers, the angels, telling us about Advent, and now we've got different sorts of messengers, somebody who is sent. So it comes from the word *apostelion* [αποστέλιον], which means 'to send'. So it's somebody that's sent away. And the word becomes 'messenger' or 'apostle'.

So, to put it simply, devoting ourselves to the Apostles' teaching is taking notice of what the original Apostles, those who were sent to go and make disciples, said, as well as other important Christian teachers, who would have taught exactly what Jesus taught. In Hebrews 3 verse 1 it says,

1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

So Jesus is considered an Apostle, one who was sent. And He was sent to Earth at Advent all those years ago, to come as a baby, so that He could save the world, and He gave us a good message of how to live our lives and how we can have life in all its fullness, and the Apostles carried on what He said.

Originally the only church leaders were the 12 Apostles. So, Matthew, Thomas, Philip, Batholomew, all those people, and then Judas Iscariot was replaced by Matthias, and you can read about that at the beginning of Acts. These Apostles had spiritual but not legal authority over this fledgling church. And Peter, James and John seemed to be the most prominent leaders, and they seem to work together with prophets but had more authority than prophets. So the original Apostles were the 12 disciples, they were eyewitnesses to the resurrection, and they seemed to perform signs and wonders as well.

¹ As well as Teacher, Shepherd, Prophet and Evangelist: See Ephesians 4:11

If we read on in the book of Acts, in chapters 6 and 7, there's some people appointed to help them with their ministry: Stephen and Philip are two of the people that were appointed then, and they preached as well but and teaching remained the province of the Apostles really, and then Philip was in Samaria, we read later on², and Peter and John, two of the Apostles went there, not because Philip was doing anything wrong, but to give a sort of seal of approval on what he was saying, because there were all sorts of people claiming to have the truth, but the early Church wanted to make sure that what Jesus had taught, and the reason for His death and resurrection, weren't distorted, and their presence would go some way to making sure that happened.

By Acts 11 there are elders in place, presumably appointed to help the Apostles, so that they could start preaching outside Jerusalem³, and then these elders seemed to help in the role of leadership, and decisions were made by the Apostles, the elders and the people, it says in Acts 15.

We won't be able to discuss, as I said, in great detail whether anybody other than the 12 original Apostles are relevant, but we do hear about Barnabas and Paul being talked of as Apostles in Acts 14, James, Jesus's brother in Galatians 1:19 is described as an Apostle, and there's somebody called Andronicus and Junia, who are described as Apostles in Romans 16:7. Junia is a lady's name, so that's perhaps a discussion for another time.

If we look at some of the New Testament writings, we can see the Apostles at work. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 it says,

12 I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.

So that's Paul's speaking, and then again in Ephesians 4 it says,

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

So as I say, we don't have time to go into "are there apostles now?" but it does say in these verses that Christ **gave**, there's no indication of time there, so I'll just leave you to decide that one. But today, church planters, missionaries those sorts of people are who we see as apostles.

Of course the original Apostles died. Much of what they taught, we have written down for us in the New Testament, mainly in Paul's letters. So some people have said that that's all we need. But sometimes we need those in authority to explain things and to point out what God is saying to us, in our particular context.

We've been looking at how we can take Scripture as a reliable document in previous weeks. We can trust what it says to be a reliable record of what went on in the first century, and the words are often copied meticulously by scribes, and people say, "Well how do you know that they were copied properly?" Well, because we have things like the Dead Sea Scrolls which were very early manuscripts, which are exactly the same as those that were written later.

So the mantle was passed on from one church leader to the next. The people changed, but the message stayed the same. And for those wanting long words that's called 'apostolic succession'.

But no matter who the leaders were, they needed to speak the same message as the

2 Acts 8

3 Acts 11:30

Apostles. So, what was that message? And I've tried to do a 3 point sermon here and they all begin with the letter F, so we'll see how we go. So the first one is '**firm foundation**'. They provide a foundation for the church. In Ephesians 2 it says,

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

So we know there's lots of things in the gospels that Jesus said about buildings because He was a *tektōn* [τέκτων] like His dad. He was a builder, God the builder (Can He fix it? Yes, He can!) And so Jesus is the cornerstone, but the foundation is the Apostles and the prophets who are basing what they teach on Jesus. And then in Revelation 21, it says

14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

So that's just symbolic language to remind us that the Apostles are foundations on which our faith is built. So everything we believe should be built on a firm foundation of truth. There's "the wise man built his house upon the rock," to remind us of that. And we've read in other parts of Scripture that Christ is the cornerstone. We believe we build our lives on Him and anything else will crumble and fall.

So the Apostles help us to understand the meaning of who Jesus Christ is and what He's done to buy us back from the kingdom of darkness: the meaning of the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus.

Everybody around at the time seemed to agree that Jesus's death and resurrection was a historical fact. They would have remembered that there was an empty tomb. They might not have understood its significance, so the Apostles used every opportunity to explain what it meant: that people can be saved. They had, and we have, been bought with the precious blood of Christ, whose body was an atoning sacrifice. He paid the penalty for our sins. He took the punishment that should have been ours, to satisfy God's need for justice; and we can now be set free to serve Him, and one day be with Him forever, because He loves us and has shown us His grace and mercy.

So, their teaching was initially telling people how they could be saved, but it was also reminding them that there would be a future judgement for those who did not accept God's free gift of salvation, and the message is the same today. So devoting yourself to that is to devote yourself to Jesus.

So over the centuries, what was included in Scripture had to be decided. And the books that the people already pretty much used already became part of Scripture, the canon of Scripture at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. There were prominent church leaders and bishops there, those who had continued to teach what the original Apostles had taught, and they came to a consensus as to what the church believed, which we sometimes use in our church services, the Nicene Creed, as well as deciding things like when Easter was going to happen, discipline and things like that.

So what's written in the Creed is pretty much what we believe about God and Jesus, it's sort of a basis of Christian faith. But it's written by human beings, so we need to go back to Scripture and test everything against Scripture, no matter who wrote it. So:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, the maker of Heaven and Earth.
Yes we do.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.

Yes we do.

For us and for our salvation He came down from Heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
We believe that as well. And that's what we celebrate at this time of Advent.

So then we read on in the Nicene Creed about how He died and He was raised from the dead and He's coming again in glory and the Holy Spirit came to help us, and that now we have the Church.

I won't read the whole thing, but I'm sure many of you know it off by heart. So Scripture backs all this up: in 1 John 1 it says,

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

(and the 'we' is John who wrote this, and the other Apostles)

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.

So John, who was known as the disciple Jesus loved, starts his letter by reminding us that he was a witness to everything Jesus did. And Paul wrote in Ephesians 3,

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

So the mystery of Christ was revealed to these people by the Holy Spirit through the teaching of the Apostles: they spoke with authority just like Jesus did, and they were custodians of what was taught to the early Church.

The Apostles' teaching was the teaching of Jesus. They were the people that Jesus had entrusted with the message of how people can be saved. So devoting ourselves to the Apostles' teaching means accepting the Good News about Jesus, and taking the free gift of salvation and entering into a new life devoted to Christ and following Him, which can only be done by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But not only did they teach, they also performed wonders and miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. We've been studying the book of Acts in our Wednesday Bible studies, you might have been watching them (it's 12 o'clock on a Wednesday), and quite a lot of the time the disciples, the Apostles, go around doing signs and miracles in the name of Jesus, which attracts lots of attention, and sometimes trouble, but it also gives them a platform to share the Good News about Jesus.

They took the early Church from being an offshoot of Judaism, so that by the time of Paul, when he went on his first missionary journey⁴, the message of the Good News was being preached to Gentiles all over the known world, and what had been a Jewish sect had become a Gentile fellowship, free from Judaism. Now I remember a song that I learned in my youth, which goes (I won't sing it)

I am a child of God, I am
I am a child of God.
Though the devil may say 'No! No! No!'

4 See Acts 15

Though the world may say, 'Ho! Ho! Ho!',
All I say is 'I know, know, know -
I am a child of God, I am.'

My identity is in Christ, I'm accepted, significant and secure, because of what Jesus has done for me. That truth is the foundation on which my life is built and the temptation to find acceptance, security and significance in other things, money, sexuality, status is false. Our identity, who we are, is that we're children of God. We are in Christ, and the lies of the devil are irrelevant. And that is what the Apostles were trying to get people to understand in the first century.

But Satan hates this: he hates it when people come to know Jesus and he'll do everything he can to prevent people from knowing the truth. And it was the same for the early Church. So, what another thing that the Apostles had to do was to correct falsehoods:

Number two, **falsehood correction**, begins with 'F'. There were many people not only claiming that Jesus, what Jesus had done, was a lie, but they were trying to try to distort the truth just slightly (that's what the devil does, he just slightly changes it so people get confused: "Did God really say it" was the original temptation), and the Apostles had to correct these distortions, so that people didn't get led astray. We've recently been looking at Galatians, and people were saying that they had to obey the Jewish law, as well as accept Jesus, which wasn't true. And so the letters that the Apostles wrote, especially the letters Paul wrote, were to correct these things, especially Paul's letters to the Corinthians, because they got up to all sorts of strange things.

So to put it into 'theologians-speak', among the primary apostolic functions, the main reason that the Apostles did what they did is not only the propagation of the tradition, it's not only to keep alive the fact that Jesus died for us and arose again, but also preservation from corruption with human traditions. George Eldon Ladd wrote that, and he quotes Colossians 2:8,

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

He goes on,

and from distortion from false prophets who preach a Jesus who is different from the Jesus of apostolic tradition.

So there's people preaching stuff about Jesus that just isn't true, so the Apostles had to correct that. In 2 Corinthians 11,

3 But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the snake's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. **4** For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

And 1 Corinthians 15,

1 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. **2** By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

So there's the truth of Jesus. And then there's people trying to distort people away from it. It's like the parable of the sower, so the truth gets seed sown in

the ground and then it gets taken away by thorns or whatever. So the Gospel, the message of the Cross, is not just a historical event, it means something, it still means something. It's foolishness⁵ to those who don't understand it, but Paul and the other Apostles who had been teaching that Jesus died and rose again, and everything else was distorting the truth and needed correction.

Everything the Apostles taught was in line with the Gospels. They'd been given authority by the risen Lord and His Spirit and were devoted to Christ. And they weren't self-seeking or domineering or proud. They just wanted the brothers and the sisters to believe in Christ, and they knew that they had the privilege of revealing this mystery to other people.

It was an open secret, it wasn't just for the favoured few. And we have a great privilege of knowing the truth as well, knowing about God's unending and unconditional love and mercy for us, and how we can be brought into a relationship with the living God, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, because of what Jesus did for us on the Cross.

So what does all that mean to us? Devoting yourself to all that's been taught to us, what does that mean? Well, it's a **framework for life**. Number three begins with an 'F' again. So once the Good News about Jesus has been proclaimed, and any corrections had brought people back to the true faith, the people who are alive in Christ need to be taught how to follow Jesus.

They had the truth, but so what? What did it mean? How did what Jesus had done, and their identity as children of God, make an impact on the way they lived? How should it have affected their morals and their ethics and the way they behave? How should it make an impact on the way we live? We can't work our way into Heaven, but, because of our gratitude and love for what God's done for us, we are called to live our lives differently.

The Apostles, Peter, James, John, Paul, Matthew, as well as others like Timothy, go to great lengths to teach us how we should live. It's all written down in the New Testament: we should avoid the corruption of those around us and live lives worthy of those who have been bought with a price. So in Ephesians 4:32, for example, we have, [in NKJV]

be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 5 [first phrase of v1 NKJV and other translations, otherwise NIVUK]:

1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children **2** and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So it's about love and loving God and loving other people, but then it's detailed how we do that. So the next verse says,

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

And then Romans 12,

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. **2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The whole of the New Testament is full of things like this: ways in which we can

5 1 Corinthians 1:8

live our lives. There's a great chunk which I'm not going to read out to you, that I've written down here from 2 Peter chapter 1, and Simon Peter introduces himself as an Apostle of Christ, and then tells us how we can live so that we can live as children of God. So he says,

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

and then he outlines how you can live this good life by adding to your faith goodness, goodness knowledge, knowledge self-control and so on. And he finishes that little bit by saying,

10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, **11** and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So the three points I made were:

- the Apostles' teaching was a firm foundation,
- it corrected the falsehoods,
- and it gave us a framework of how to follow His word and live our lives.

So in conclusion, the Apostles taught how the amazing revelation about Jesus coming to Earth can affect us.

They taught us how we can know life in all its fullness and be God's children, and be filled with the Spirit, and that our identity is in Christ, it's not in all these other things, and they taught us how to live lives worthy of our calling.

So at this time of Advent let's take some time to reflect on all the truths that we've been told about God's amazing love for us, and how we can enter into the best of what He has for us, if we put our trust in Him, accept the promises He's given us, and try to serve Him as God's children.

The people of God were to love God and love each other, to be upright and good ambassadors of Jesus, willing to give an account for the hope they have, no matter what the cost, because others need to hear how they can have eternal life as well.

So it's the same for us: 1 Peter 2:21 says,

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

So I suppose the old adage, "What would Jesus do?" is very appropriate here, devoting ourselves to the Apostles' teaching is devoting ourselves to Christ, obeying Him and sharing the Good News of the Kingdom, entering into everything that God has done for us, and being grateful.

And as someone that I googled said, the call to be devoted to the Apostles' teaching is an invitation to experience true life, resurrection life, found only as we abide in Jesus. We are loved in Him. He patiently teaches us together to love like Him. And we have no better teaching or philosophy or story to devote ourselves to. Hebrews 3:

1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

Father, thank You that You sent Your Son to die for us. Thank You, that You sent your Apostles to share with us, and we pray that You will send us in the power of Your Spirit to love You, and to live a life worthy of Your calling. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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