



Acts 2:42-47

## How To Choose a Church: Service

Summary: The early church was marked by seven key characteristics we should look for in a good church today.

Jesus said the greatest commandment, God's most important instruction, was this: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

Now that sounds very noble, doesn't it? That's not too controversial. I think it's pretty easy to get people to sign on to that.

But what does it mean to love? Well, one of the best known verses of the Bible is John 3:16

**John 3:16** For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

So, God *demonstrated love* by giving. There was a cost to love. A Sacrifice. Action was involved. It wasn't just emotion, love was demonstrated in tangible terms.

And that's not just a one-time thing – it's God's nature. Moses told the Jews:

**Deuteronomy 7:8** because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out [of Egypt] with a mighty hand...

God did this thing *because He loves you*. And so, *He took action*. He expressed His love by doing something for you in the real world, something that made a difference in your life, something that met a great need.

And then, hundreds of years, later the prophet Jeremiah would write

**Jeremiah 31:3** The LORD has appeared of old to me, *saying*:  
"Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.

So we see the connection again – I have loved you, *so I have done this thing for you*. I have taken action. I have drawn you in with lovingkindness. God's love is expressed through action.

I love the response of John the apostle to all of this, when he says:

**1 John 3:1** Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!

Be mystified by it. Marvel at what God has bestowed on us. We did not have this love, and now we do, *because* God has taken action. He has done something, IS doing something, bestowing it on us. He takes action, and we receive benefit.

So now, in light of this reality – in light of everything God has done for us - we are called to respond, to receive this love from God and then reflect it to others. To love God and love others *in response to the love already shown to us*.

Now I say all of that because we're making our way through the book of Acts and we're looking at the foundations of the early church. We're looking at the historical account of what happened and observing foundational elements that should be present in any healthy church today.

We read:

**Acts 2:42** And they [the early Church] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

And from this we have identified seven key features. There was, and there should be,

1. Prayer
2. Preaching - specifically, teaching the historic apostles' doctrine
3. Praise
4. Power – in a healthy church, God is actually the one behind the scenes making things happen – its not driven by human marketing, media, and management, it's a supernatural work of God adding people to the church and enabling them through the gift of the Spirit
5. Unity - we talked about this last week – all these people were drawn together to worship the same God, that was the agenda and it held them together.

But we also notice their love for God compelled them to love others through acts of

6. Service – which we'll discuss this morning
- and they kept on doing all of these things, even when it was hard, demonstrating
7. Perseverance

So, here is the case I want to make: God commands us to love our neighbors, and love, as we have seen, is expressed through action. So to turn that around we could say: service is love in motion.

Or to express things mathematically Love = Unity + Service. I know you and I know your needs and I will try to meet them.

Ideally, these two feed off each other – the more I know you, the more I know your needs and the better I can serve you, but the more I serve you the more you appreciate me and the greater the bond of unity between us. This is why extreme events produce extreme bonding – when we learn to rely on each other, sometimes in life-or-death situations, it bonds us together. Serving one another produces unity and ultimately, affection, or love, which makes me want to continue serving with you and increases my feeling of being united with you.

So you can understand why a healthy church is so compelling to visitors. When we see people who are united with a common cause sacrificially serving one another in connection with that cause, it's attractive, it's an expression of community and we want to belong to it. Listen,

**Acts 2:44** Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people.

Tell me that doesn't sound attractive, something you'd like to be a part of.

So let's talk about what was going on there.

I want to argue that they were meeting each other's needs in two distinct categories: spiritual needs and physical needs, both were necessary and each enabled the other.

It's helpful to take a step back and remember the historical context here: this happened in the days and weeks following Pentecost, a Jewish feast occurring fifty days after Passover. And it was kind of like Christmas and Thanksgiving in America. We often travel to be with family for the holidays, but observant Jews would travel from all over the world to be in Jerusalem for their holidays.

During the feast, this year a spectacular miracle had occurred: the Holy Spirit came and gave Jesus' disciples the ability to speak in languages they had never learned. And as they praised God in this dynamic way it got people's attention and they started asking, "What's going on?" So Peter preached a sermon about Jesus and 3000 people were saved, born again, had their souls moved from dark to light, from death to life. We see all of that earlier in Chapter Two.

But now there's suddenly this overwhelming need for spiritual care and instruction for 3000 people. This was the first many of them had heard of Jesus because they lived throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe. But now they wanted and needed to know everything the early disciples had learned and experienced being with Jesus. They wanted to know all the stories. And so, the apostles began to pastor the people. They began to serve them spiritually. Remember,

**Acts 2:42** they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The apostles served the people spiritually – teaching sermons, praying with people, counseling people, and God worked miracles – signs and wonders occurred including the greatest miracle of all – people responding to the teaching about Jesus and being saved.

But as the apostles did their work, suddenly there was a lot of other work to do too. All these people needed a place to stay, they wanted to hang out and learn more. They had questions. You couldn't just give them a Bible and tell them, read this on your way home. The New Testament hadn't been written yet. This was still living and breathing, first hand history.

New Christians had this one chance to hear what Jesus was like from Peter, from John, from Nathaniel, from Thomas, and then they would have to travel hundreds or thousands of miles back home and there was no Internet, no phone lines, no radio. They had to soak up all the information they could.

That people wanted to stay is understandable, but it created a burden on the people who lived locally and were suddenly running their own Air BnB supporting all their new fellow Christians. You see how that could create some tension, right? "Honey, we've had people over every night this week and it's nice, but it's also really messing with our routine and creating a mess, and by the way, we're out of bread and just about everything else."

We could totally understand that attitude; we would even say it's reasonable, justifiable. But it's not what happened. Instead, these new Christians served each other. They raised money, they sold things off, they pooled some funds and took care of each other. They met both the spiritual *and* practical needs of people in response to the love that God was showing them.

You see this pattern continue throughout the Bible. In just a few chapters, in Acts 6, the church gets organized along spiritual and physical lines. Some people will have a responsibility to minister to spiritual needs through the Word and prayer and some will have a responsibility to minister to physical needs through acts of service and when they're both in place, the whole church grows.

God's plan: is people, reaching people, with power. So, He calls some Christians to meet the

spiritual needs of people and other Christians to meet physical needs. Both are necessary and good. We find it put plainly in

**Ephesians 4:11 (NLT)** Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. 12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

So, you see this, right? Today God gives pastors and teachers to the church to minister to spiritual needs. And as that happens, ideally, men and women are equipped to do their work, and here's the result:

**Eph 4:16** He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Church, this is monumental, massive, it's essential – when each of us does the thing we're called to do, it helps other people grow, it helps us all fit together, and the whole church becomes **healthy, and growing and full of love.**

I want us to just stare at that for a minute and let it sink in – we all have a part to play in the body of Christ, in the church of God, we have something to do that others cannot or should not do, and when we do it well, by God's grace and with His strength, when we fill our role, the whole body is **healthy and growing and full of love.**

Now, I'm not a doctor, but I still think I can make a diagnosis here: if a church is not **healthy, growing, and full of love** – it's probably because people aren't doing their part. Spiritual needs are not being met, physical needs are not being met. Parts are missing.

And I want to argue that deficit is felt in more ways than one. The church suffers the loss of the part that is missing, but the part suffers too, because it's not being used as God intends. And when you're not allowing God to shape you, fit you together, and empower you, you're missing out on His plan for your life... and His plans are good.

If we had time to go deeper here I would take you to passages like 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 and we would talk about the spiritual gifts God gives us to do the work He's inviting us into. But I think the passage here in Ephesians 4 makes the point sufficiently clear: we all have a part to play in a healthy church by serving one another.

So, with our remaining time, I want to address what your individual service to God and others might look like, and what we do here at City Gates to serve.

I'll start with an important clarification – when it comes to acts of service, we're more like athletes than musicians. Here's what I mean – you shouldn't expect a trumpet player to also play violin. You shouldn't expect a drummer to also play the flute. But you can expect

everyone on a football team knows how to catch the ball. You can expect that even the goalie on a soccer team has good foot skills. And certainly every player on a basketball team knows how to shoot free throws whether they're a guard, forward, or center.

So here's how that plays out. On the one hand, some of us are called to meet spiritual needs – we have pastors on staff and you could even include some of our youth leaders, children's ministry workers, and Bible studies leaders in this – they're called to teach, that's their gift. But that should never be all we do. After all, Jesus took the role of a servant and washed the disciples' feet. Meeting spiritual needs doesn't exclude you from picking up trash, doing hard work, and meeting immediate needs.

But the reverse is also true. Meeting physical needs doesn't exclude you from meeting spiritual needs too. When we get to Acts 6 we'll see deacons appointed to handle food distribution. You would think well, you just need someone with good organizational skills in here, you need a good manager, you need someone to put together a good system for scheduling. And you do need all of that, in Acts 6 they say we need people who are full of wisdom, but also, they also need to be full of the Holy Spirit. And after they find the people to fill that role, to meet that need, the next thing you see is one of those exact same men preaching a powerful sermon.

But doesn't all this make sense if what we're saying is true? If your spiritual needs are being met and your physical needs are being met, aren't you going to be increasingly capable of serving in each of those realms? Won't you be able to give some of what you have received? You might not be the best, that's OK, it's not your gift, but you're still able to do something to help in a pinch.

So let's talk about how all of this plays out in your life. And I begin by asking: do you know your role in the family of God? Do you know your position on the team? Do you know your part in the body? If the Bible is true, and I believe it is, you have one. You've been crafted and designed by God, given a mix of natural ability and spiritual gifts to accomplish something on this planet. That might be through mothering, or management, or medicine. But you have a role; you have a service to offer. So, what is it?

Now, we're talking about this because it's come up in Acts, so it's evident there are needs and opportunities to serve in the church, and we'll talk about that in a minute, but I need you to recognize that *some of the service these men and women provided to the church was also related to the service they provided in the world.*

Think about this: some of these early Christians had homes, homes large enough to house visitors and host Bible studies. Some of them were providing food to the people. In other places in the Scripture we read about a woman who was loved because she provided clothing for the needy in the church. You read about high-ranking military officials with servants, and people who served on the staff of politicians. And they all used their position and their privileges to serve God and bless people.

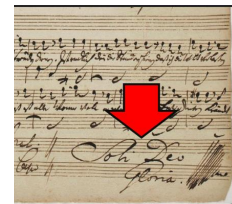
The church was not entirely poor, unskilled, uneducated, and lower class. There is nothing wrong, with any of those things. But the point I want to make is that God may be giving you certain skills that you don't think of as inherently spiritual in nature, and yet He may have you exactly where He wants you doing things that will provide tremendous value to the church and to humanity in general by meeting physical needs.

You can serve God and people by building a satellite that will provide technology that minimizes human suffering or enables human thriving. You can build networks that enable defense of innocent lives. You can manage people in a way that is caring and compassionate and yet profitable and goal-oriented. You can teach a class, drive a nail, design a layout, all to the glory of God. You can make art to the glory of God.



The famous composer Johan Sebastian Bach was known to begin composing music by writing the initials JJ on the page – Jesu Juva, Latin for Jesus, Help.

And when he felt that the work was good, and complete, he would sign it with SDG, or, Soli Deo Gloria, - to the Glory of God. My friends you can do good work in programming, and carpentry, and real estate, S.D.G. *solely to the glory of God*. You can see your entire life as an act of service to God and others without ever receiving a paycheck from a church or ministry.



And you can use your success for the good of others. Make good decisions, demonstrate good ethics, be fair and equitable in all your dealing, produce excellent products, *by God's grace and with His help*. In fact, I want to challenge you to pray more about God's role in your work than I pray in mine. Because we're both serving Him, right? Some of us are meeting spiritual needs and some of us are meeting physical or material needs, *but we're all serving God*.

And it doesn't have to be in these gigantic obvious ways. You can be a consistent source of encouragement, hope, and companionship to a small group of people, or to a group of small people, like kids, and never really be known or recognized, and that's OK. Little things done consistently matter tremendously.

So serve God and others with your life in general. But then, keep your eyes out for other ways to serve too. Specifically keep your eyes open for ways to serve other Christians in and through the church. It is good to do good at work, but it is also good to do good to the family of God. That's what was happening in Acts, right? People were opening their homes, cooking meals, giving financially, as well as praying, preaching, and teaching, and *all of these things came together to make a healthy church*.

You probably see how some of that works out here at City Gates. Each week we get together and try to include these different elements – we pray, and we praise, we get into the apostles' doctrine – I do that from the pulpit, but we also do it from children's ministry

through the youth group and in all the different studies, groups, and classes we have – and we pray, regularly and consistently that God’s power would be on display here. We work and wrestle our way through unity in this one-room schoolhouse where you have a range of physical ages and spiritual maturity, or personal preference, and background or experience, and we try to serve each other consistently, persistently, over time and through difficulty no matter our differences. In other words, we’re trying to be a healthy church.

But let me tell you about some of the other things we do.

We support ministries that meet spiritual needs by supporting our missionaries – we support Brett and Krista and the work they’re doing over at GMU, reaching and discipling college students. We support churches in France, Costa Rica, Mexico, East Asia, and West Africa, and we support missionaries that are over in Spain right now looking at how they can start a support center on the field that will provide encouragement and coaching for missionaries serving in difficult places. We support Vic and Suebee’s work down at the county jail ministering to the spiritual needs of prisoners.

We support these works financially. In other words, through our giving, we help meet physical needs so that the spiritual work can be done. But some of you also participate as volunteers in the spiritual work – leading Bible studies and participating in outreaches on campus or in the jail.

We also support works that meet physical needs – think of the Ayeles and the work they’re doing with at risk youth in Ethiopia. When we give financially to support their work, it enables them to hire workers for their children’s home, pay medical bills for the kids, and have electricity. And we give to Stone of Help to enable Pastor Bill and Marcella to do a similar work with schools and churches in Haiti.

We support Assist, or Metro Women’s Center, here locally in their work with unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. It’s a very spiritual issue manifesting itself in an immediate physical form and they’re there to help – so we try to help them. Again, sometimes by giving financially to help with physical needs, but some of you also go and help – you do ministry, by serving as Administrators in the office or nurses in the clinic. You’re meeting physical needs for spiritual reasons.

And then, right here under this roof, we allow other congregations and ministries to use this space as much as possible. Right now a congregation is meeting behind us speaking in Vietnamese, and over in the corner there’s another group speaking Lao and Thai. On Friday nights and at 9AM there are groups speaking Chinese. We try to open up our church home for them to minister, like we see here in Acts 2.

And for our own body, we try to meet each others needs in countless ways. There’s a meals ministry for those in need after a medical event or birth or death in the family. There’s a mercy ministry fund that has assisted with emergency airfare to visit family after the death of a parent, to help with bills during government shut-down, or provide food for the



holidays.

It seems to me like we're on track trying to be faithful to the calling of the church to love one another by serving each other and if you're not involved yet, let me say it clearly: there is room for you.

But we've got to keep an eye on it all because we're constantly pressured by time and prosperity. Living here in DC you're likely to feel like you don't have time to serve outside of what you do at home and at work. And that might be true for some of you – you're here for a crushing season and we want to minister to you and help you get through it. But it's not true for everyone. And we all need to watch what choices and commitments we're making because they will inevitably interfere with our ability to be available to other people in some form. So I have to ask: Are you making the right choices when it comes to how you spend your time? Are you serving the right people in the right ways?

And, how are you doing with your money? The natural tendency is that money will keep you from serving and being served. If you look at life through the lens of your money, you'll always feel like you need a little more, and you'll think once you've taken care of this, or that, then you'll be able to give and serve. My friend, that day will never come. And along the way, you'll try to meet your own needs through money; you'll try to be self-sufficient instead relationally connected. You'll try to serve yourself instead of letting others serve you. And that's not God's plan. He made us for community. When we do this well - our needs are the chance for someone else to serve. Now, that can get out of hand, but it's true.

There is much more we could say, but let me end with this. The apostle Peter was there, ministering in the early church, serving others, and many years later he would encourage Christians with these words:

**1 Peter 4:7** ... the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. **8** And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." **9** Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. **10** As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us minister to one another here, today, in this church according to our gifts and according to the needs.

Let's pray.