



Acts 2:42-47

How To Choose a Church: Unity

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

We've spent the past four weeks doing some in-depth analysis of the early Church based on the book of Acts. We've identified seven key features we still find in healthy churches today, things like:

1. Prayer
2. Preaching - specifically, teaching the historic apostles' doctrine
3. Praise – the early Christians spoke highly of God to other people and they sang songs of worship when they gathered, this was normal Christian behavior.
4. There was supernatural power. This was more than just an exciting political rally for King Jesus, God was doing supernatural things in their midst. The Holy Spirit empowered people to serve and minister, and God added people to the church.

We talked about this last week and I tried to argue that if you're bored with the church, if you're bored with your faith, it's probably because you're not experiencing the power of God today in your life – but you can. In fact, you must, especially if the next three elements are going to be present in any significant way, because in a healthy church you find prayer, preaching, and praise, but you also find:

5. Unity,
6. Service and
7. Perseverance,

and the power of God makes it all possible.

So let's look at our passage again and then we'll spend our time this morning talking about unity, what it is, what threatens it, and how to connect here at City Gates:

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.

You see a lot of togetherness there, don't you? And, importantly for our day and age, it's a lot of actual, physical, togetherness, not virtual. They weren't just texting each other, they weren't doing all this together online – they were physically, mentally, and emotionally present in each other's lives.

For all it's benefits, technology has brought us to this strange place where I actually have to say: you need to know there's value in being physically present – it's not enough to watch a church service online, it's not enough to read a few Christian blogs or listen to a sermon on podcast. When you read the Scriptures, they always describe people gathering with other people for worship, fellowship, and ministry.

Scripture never portrays going to church as simply going to a location and listening to some music and preaching - it always involves being part of body, part of a family, one brick in a larger building. The Scripture always presents the early church as individual people who were an integrated part of something bigger than themselves.

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That word *fellowship* is an important word for you to know. It's the Greek word *koinonia* which could also be translated as partnership or sharing.

Interestingly, *koinonia* never appears in the Gospels. Instead, we find it's first mention here in Acts 2:42 at the birth of the Church and then it appears 20 times after this. All of which helps us see that fellowship, or community, is a key element of the church. Similarly, the phrase *one-another* occurs 59 times in the New Testament. The point is: the Christian life is all about relationships; it's all about connection. The idea of an individual Christian, which seems so common today, is foreign to the Scriptures and to the history of the church.

Consider this: Christians worship a God who has inherent community and relationship in the Trinity among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is fellowship in the Godhead. And then, God invites us into relationship with Himself – we are saved, by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and when we are born again the Holy Spirit Himself comes to live in us, *bringing us into relationship*. Scripture also speaks of this as God adopting us as sons and daughters, *bringing us into His family*.

On the night before His death, Jesus explained to His disciples what was happening. He told them He was going away to prepare a place for them. He said, "**in My Father's house there are many rooms.**" Medieval artists gave us this idea of heaven as people hanging out on clouds playing harps, but the Bible speaks of us as citizens of the Kingdom of God and says Heaven is like a city where people live together in the presence of God *as a community of saints*.

And you see that here in the final words of Acts 2:

47 ... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

When you become a Christian, God *makes you* part of something. You have a personal relationship with God, but it's not private. It's not just about you and your private religion. If you are a Christian, and you are healthy, if you are growing in your spiritual fitness, it's because you understand that you belong to something bigger than yourself and all your concerns, issues, and needs - you identify with other believers. You have fellowship with the family of God.

But what does that mean, what does that look like?

Well, when you read the Scriptures you discover that fellowship always involves connection and sharing. Giving and receiving, encouraging and enduring, people bound together by a real connection.

And that means being part of the church is more than just enjoying coffee and donuts together in the foyer. Socializing is not *koinonia* fellowship, in fact, I want to say: if you can do it with a non-Christian, it's not fellowship. You can talk about sports and the weather and current events with anyone. That's being pleasant. It's the shallow end of being social. Christian, you need to go deeper and you need to allow others to go deeper with you. That's part of the reason we're here.

Being part of the church is more than just singing the same songs and listening to the same sermons as the person sitting in front of me. Church is more than just a brand, a budget, a building and a board of elders - it's all of those things, but fundamentally, it's a body that requires real connections. It's a community driven by grace, love, worship, and service built on knowing God and knowing each other.

And that all sounds great when you say it the right way - it's very aspirational, very, "Yes, that's what we want to have!" But the reality is a little bumpy - so let's talk about that. Let's talk about the friction you face when creating and cultivating true fellowship. I'll give you four major challenges we confront: busyness, consumerism, diversity, and pride.

#1. Busyness. Relationships take time. You can talk all day long about the difference between quality time and quantity time, but at the end of the day, if you're going to be part of something, if you're going to have relationship, it's going to take time. The problem is, you don't have enough of it. So, you've got to prioritize: what's really important in your life?

Let me look at your bank account and your calendar I'll tell you. It doesn't matter how much you say you value this or that or the other thing - where you spend your time and what you do with your money show what's important to you.

Think in terms of physical strength - you can say you want to get in better shape all day long, but if you never put on some shorts and work up a sweat, nothing is going to change. You prove your commitment to fitness by the time you give to physical exertion.

So too, if you want to be spiritually fit, you're going to have to put in the time in prayer, in Scripture reading, in attending worship, you're going to have to prioritize your relationship with God and other Christians. You can't come to church once or twice a month and then complain that you don't know anyone or feel connected and wonder why you don't sense this vibrancy in your soul.

Here's the problem though – it's not easy to get up and work out, and *it's not easy to come to worship*. It's easy to thumb through Instagram. It's easy to binge a show on Netflix. It's easy to sleep in. And technology keeps making it easier.

Some of you may have heard the statistics that church membership is down in the United States – it's actually down in all types of organizations, groups like labor unions, sports clubs, community organizations like the Lions, Elks, Moose, Masons, or the Rotary, School council and Parent/Teacher groups even environmental groups are all experiencing decreased membership and attendance *because people are busy or otherwise engaged*. But busy with what? That's the question.

And too often the answer is: #2 consumer tendencies. In other words, we're doing things that seemed easier and more enjoyable. In our modern Darwinian social lives it's survival of the funnest. And here's the deal: you may find things that are more 'fun' to do in the short-term, but will they produce the kind of long-term growth you're looking for?

You know that old dieting adage about a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips? Well, if you're making decisions about what to do or not do, what to attend or not attend, today primarily on the basis of what is easiest and most enjoyable, what kind of withered and weak condition will your soul be in tomorrow? Friends, whether we're talking about your soul or your quads, you build the strength you'll need tomorrow, today.

So, we need to beware of this: we live in an economy built on the provision of goods and services. In other words, we live in an economy based on making people's lives easier or more enjoyable and in order to gain greater market share companies tailor things to our personal preferences. You create your own playlists, your own watch lists, you order your own meal from an app and then walk in and pick up exactly what you ordered from a shelf by the register. It's you, you, you – all day, every day.

So, when you show up to church or Bible study and you have to interact with other people and things aren't exactly the way you want them to be, do you understand why it feels a little jarring?

You're so used to having what you want, when you want it, you're so accustomed to being worshipped as a little g consumer god, that not being the one making all the decisions feels unsettling. It's hard to live all day in a world that says have it your way, and then read Scriptures that say:

Phil 2:1 Therefore if *there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy,* 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being of one accord, of one mind.* 3 *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.* 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...

My friends, you have to be aware of this – church is going to feel weird at times, because we have a whole different set of values than those the world outside is cultivating.

To be clear – you have to fight the constant pull to treat church like any other service provider. You have to actively, aggressively, intentionally fight the temptation to think church is all about you, like everything else. You must tell yourself, I am not a consumer, and the church is not a vendor. I am here as part of the community not as a spiritual shopper. Ask yourself: when you think of the church, do you think of the church you *go to*, or the church *you're a part of*? There's a subtle but important difference there.

The church doesn't exist to satisfy my consumer demands. It's the church of Jesus Christ, and we are here primarily to serve Him and help each other, not just to be served.

But that brings us to the third challenge to unity: diversity.

Here's the fact – groups of all kinds, including churches, grow fastest when they are less diverse. We all like to walk into a room and feel like – these are my people. Teenagers want to walk into a room filled with other teenagers who like the things they like. Sports fans want to walk into a room of people cheering for the same team. People show up with kids and are relieved to see that other people with kids are there too and they're all running around and everything's fine.

We all hate to stick out. We hate to feel like we're the only one. And so we naturally gravitate toward monoculture and this is especially true if you operate like a consumer. You're going to seek out settings where people have a similar ethnic, financial, educational, or generational demographic as yours, and you're going to feel comfortable there.

If you find yourself in a diverse environment, if you find yourself surrounded by people who aren't just like you, there is going to be conflict at times. Your preferences and opinions will be different. We talked about this when we talked about praise a few weeks ago – we have a lot of different musical tastes in this room. Some people would love to sing more hymns. Some people would love it if we had a choir. Some people would love for us to add a Latin flair. Some people wish we had a whole string section. We have a diverse range of musical preferences *and that threatens our unity.*

But here's the deal – if you value having all these people together, if you value three generations of a family worshipping together, we're all going to have to learn to sing each

other's songs. Otherwise, if you're younger and your thing is really powerful, trendy music, you're going to search out a church like that. And if more formal music is your thing, you're going to search out a church like that. And if more lively music is your thing, you're going to search out a church like that. And you will find them – but you know what else you'll probably find? Other people who like those things, and you won't find some of the people you left behind. And listen, I'm not criticizing any of those things. I like orchestral music. I like a hymn and choir. I like Latin Flair. I like new music. But it's hard to do all of them, well, and consistently. *Diversity is always resisting unity.*

But a healthy church always has both: old people and young, rich and poor, highly educated and simple because one gospel applies to us all. And, as we have said before, the mass appeal of the gospel should be a source of tremendous encouragement to us. When we see people who don't look like us, talk like us, or think like us, *worshipping this same Jesus it should fill us with encouragement and wonder.*

Our hope is that this church remains a one-room schoolhouse – full of representatives from our surrounding community at all ages and stages of life, because we believe we are better together, and that God has brought us together. That means you won't always like everything we do – it won't be your favorite, or it won't be done exactly the way you would do it, but that's OK, because we're all willing to lay down our consumer tendencies for the sake of others. We're going to try, with God's help, to be the kind of church Paul commended in:

1 Cor 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

It won't be easy, it won't be automatic, but it's God's will for us: unity without uniformity, diversity without division.

That brings us to the final threat to unity in the church #4: pride. Now, when I say that word, it has a hard edge to it, and I don't mean it that way. I mean it in the sense that we think a lot about ourselves, not always in an arrogant way, but more in the way you protect a wound so no one bumps into it and makes it hurt even more.

We live in an achievement based society, and you feel that acutely here in DC. Everyone is always talking about where they work, what they've done, where they went to school, where they were before coming here, where they're headed next, what they're working on. Our kids know the difference between regular classes and AP classes and International Baccalaureate, they know the difference between rec and travel leagues, and even what kind of play button you get for reaching a million subscribers on YouTube.

And here's how you typically feel the pressures of it all: men, in general feel like you can't be weak – you can't need anything or have any vulnerabilities, you've got to have your act together, have a plan and be able to get things done. And women, in general, feel this

pressure to be perfect – you need to be able to decorate like you’re on HGTV, cook like you’re on Food Network, pull together outfits, for yourself *and the rest of the family* like you’re on Pinterest, volunteer for the kids’ thing, dominate your spin class, and still be up for promotion, for the second time this year.

And here’s why all of that is so bad for your soul: If you walk around feeling this pressure all the time, feeling like you’re always negotiating for acceptance, you’re never going to let down your guard and expose your wounds and weaknesses. Church should be different from the world outside. Most of us are here because we know we’re not as strong as we wish we were, we’re not as perfect as we would like to be.

But listen: It’s OK to be a little fragile. It’s OK to not be perfect, it’s OK to need help. You can show your steely hide to the world outside, but in here, in the church, it’s OK to show your soft underbelly. If we can’t find openness, honesty, help, transparency, in the Church *then something is broken*.

God designed the church so that we would receive help, strength, and even perfection from Him and each other. Isn’t that what we’ve said so many times lately? God’s plan is: people, reaching people, with power. His power, in my life, helping you. And His power, in your life, helping me. That’s a healthy church. That’s what happens when we do life together.

But you’re going to be tempted to come in here with your shields up, with your strong smile on, and lie to everyone while you fake it and secretly try to pull your life together on your own.

We’ve got to be open to sharing with others, receiving from others, and giving help to others. But in order for that to happen, we have to be open with our own needs and aware of the needs of others.

God expects us to be open and transparent with Him and to share our weaknesses and needs wisely with each other. Scripture commands us to:

Galatians 6:2 [Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.](#)

I can’t do that for you if I don’t know what your burdens are, and you can’t do it for me if I’m keeping things to myself. If we are going to be genuinely helpful to one another, we’re going to have to be honest and open, not proud and private.

OK, so we’ve seen four big threats to unity: busyness, consumerism, diversity, and pride. Now let’s talk quickly about four ways to fight for unity: Come on Sundays, Attend events, Connect with a Small Group, and Serve.

If you want to have unity with the church I encourage you to commit to being here especially on Sundays. Remember relationships require time. Time with God and with each other. We live stream the service and make it available as a Podcast, but that’s no

substitute for being here in the flesh. So come, and make your list of reasons to miss Sunday as small as possible. We had rain two Sundays in a row and attendance plummeted. But then it was nice and sunny last week and attendance bounced right back. Look, God isn't going to love you any less for missing a Sunday due to rain, but you're going to miss out on things you can't make up online or next week – casual conversations in the hall, a chance to catch up with so and so, pray for your friend, receive encouragement from that couple you just met, and say hi again to that new guy who's trying to decide whether he should come back again next week because this feels awkward and he doesn't know anybody here.

Here is God's heart on the issue:

Heb 10:24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Make it a priority to be here *so that* you can receive from the Lord and from His people, and give to the Lord and to His people.

And while you're here – reach out. If you want to have friends you have to be friendly. Some of the people that aren't saying hi to you are just as shy as you are. Someone has to break the ice, why not let it be you? And keep trying.

So, if you want to plug in, Come on Sundays, but also, #2 - Come to events. Men's breakfasts, women's breakfasts, youth group events, potlucks, come to events SO THAT you can get to know other people and they can get to know you. We think of Sunday morning as our large group gathering. Events are medium group gatherings and they're often planned with fellowship as important aspect of the event so they're a great chance to get to know someone new or get to know someone better.

That brings us to #3 - small groups – whether it's in a home group midweek or a class here at 9AM on Sunday or whether it's part of your men's or women's study on Wednesday night or Thursday or your youth group discussion group – find a smaller group setting where you can go deeper with other people and really get to know how you can help people and be helped by them.

And finally, #4 - serve. Serving is a great way to meet people and help people at the same time. There's always an opportunity if you're willing and it often leads to great connections. If you're looking for a place to get started, stop by the welcome table and pick up a copy of the How To Get Involved at City Gates document – it's full of information and if you're looking for something you don't see, let us know.

Let me close with this: A healthy, loving church, a church that experiences more unity than discord, is attractive to others and I think we're doing well here. I get good reports all the time from people who say you are a bunch of loving, warm, welcoming people. But that

doesn't happen automatically, don't ever take it for granted, we have to fight for it because busyness, consumerism, diversity, pride and other forces are always at work ready to tear us apart, to tear us away from God and each other.

Think of Paul's closing remark in his last letter to the church at Corinth:

2 Cor 13:11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Unity is not natural. It's supernatural. It's what happens when God smashes into our lives, wipes out the guilt of our sin, grants us a new birth, and adds us to the church. We are adopted, we are grafted in, we are suddenly and instantly connected to others – many of whom are not like us, but together, we're worshipping the same God and caring for each other. United in Christ.

Let's pray.