



Acts 2:42-47

How To Choose a Church: Listen for Doctrine (Preaching)

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

Acts is the history book of the New Testament, it tells us what happened after Jesus, answers the question: how did the church begin and how did it spread? We're working our way through the book and we're still pretty early in the story. The apostle Peter has just preached the first sermon and 3000 people responded, so the first church became a mega church, practically overnight.

We're looking at what these new Christians did. What was their church like? And in the process we've identified seven key features you should look for in a healthy church today because churches come in all shapes and sizes and we need a way to determine what's important and what's not.

Let's read the Scripture together and then I'll give you the seven features and we'll zoom in on number two.

After Peter preached to the crowds about Jesus, and people responded by repenting of their sins, receiving Christ, and being baptized, it says:

Acts 2:42 And they 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.

So here are seven observations about the early church – things you should look for when you look for a new church.

1. There was prayer – which we looked at last week.
2. There was preaching – that was the action, but most important is the content: they preached the apostles' doctrine which we'll discuss this morning
3. There was praise – so we'll look at that next week and talk about how and why we do this thing that some call worship
4. There was power – Ultimately God was at work through them, He was doing all these things, pouring out His Spirit, empowering people to serve and minister, and

adding people to the church, God was in control

5. There was unity – they were together, they were in one accord, you had an extremely diverse group of people experiencing unity without uniformity.
6. There was a spirit of service - they met one another's needs
7. There was perseverance – they continued in all of these things steadfastly, they continued daily, even in the face of opposition

These are the seven characteristics we'll be looking at in-depth over the next seven weeks, and which we hope you find here at City Gates every week. Hopefully, it should be pretty to easy to check the box on number two, because we're doing it right now: Preaching.

And, that's not surprising. I doubt anyone is shocked to walk into a new church and discover preaching is part of the service at some point. You might be surprised about who is preaching, or what they're preaching about, you might be surprised by how long or how short the preaching is, but the fact preaching is included, in some form, during a Sunday morning service, is not surprising.

So let's focus on the core issue of content. If you assume there will be preaching, what should the preaching be about? Well, in the early church it was [the apostles' doctrine](#).

Now, if you grew up in church, those two words sound familiar to you, but if you didn't, they don't. So, let's define our terms.

First, [the apostles](#) – generally, when you read the Bible and it's talking about apostles, it means Jesus' closest disciples or students, His interns if you want to think that way. They're the people He spend the most time with, who received His personal tutoring, witnessed His life and miracles and got to ask Him lots of questions. They had names like Peter, James, and John who became leaders in the church after Jesus ascended into Heaven and who wrote books that are included in the New Testament.

So, you had these [apostles](#), men who knew Jesus first hand, and their doctrine was a big part of the early church, in fact it's the first thing listed. The early church [continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine](#).

But what is [doctrine](#)? Some people have a negative reaction to the word. It seems restrictive, and authoritative – “Don't go forcing your doctrine on me.” But doctrine appears outside the church too.

People speak of political doctrine like the communist doctrine of Karl Marx, or foreign policy named after US Presidents like the Monroe doctrine or the Truman doctrine. And anyone who has spent time around the military knows all about doctrine – each of the services have their own, and they're bound together by Joint Doctrine.

There's even a Doctrine Project in software programming that guides certain coding.

Here's my point – doctrine appears in many places as a body of established, accepted, belief, but the really, really important part is that this belief guides what you do. In other words, *doctrine drives decision-making*; it's what we do, based on what we believe.

Now, in terms of political doctrine, programming doctrine, or military doctrine, it's formed on the basis of past experience or grounded in a certain philosophical framework. It's authoritative, but not necessarily binding.

Christian doctrine is different because it comes to us from God.

Jesus claimed God directed everything He said and did. He told people:

John 7:16 ... “My message is not my own; it comes from God who sent me.
17 Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own.”

Now that's a pretty bold claim, isn't it? To say that what you're saying is 'from God?' Yes, it is.

But that's why Jesus did the miracles He did – they proved His bold claims were true. Anyone can say God sent them. Anyone can say this is what you should do and this is what you shouldn't do. People assume authority all the time. But Jesus said,

John 14:10 ... The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

And later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the apostles reported that Peter, James, and John heard the voice of God the Father speaking audibly from heaven:

Matt 17:5 ... a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

So God directed Jesus what to say and do and Jesus spoke publicly and to the apostles.

While He was alive on Earth He sent the apostles out to tell people what He was doing and encourage them to come hear for themselves. Then, before returning to Heaven, Jesus told the apostles to go into all the world making disciples of people from every tribe and tongue and nation, teaching them to obey everything He had taught.

Now, here in Acts 2, we find them doing just that – when people became Christians they joined the church where they **continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine** – they kept hearing what the apostles had to say about Jesus and eventually the apostles wrote those things down to preserve the information, and today we hold it in our hands.

Which, if you think about it, is really fascinating. Because, if you or I were put in charge of the project, this is not how we would do it.

Wouldn't it seem better, if you were Jesus, to just write it all down yourself? Why do we have four gospels, four biographies of Jesus – when you could have just one authoritative autobiography? Why not just do the Gospel of Jesus according to Jesus?

The answer is: because God chooses, from the very beginning, to involve us in His process and purposes. For reasons we don't fully understand and most certainly don't deserve, God's plan is: people reaching people, with His power.

So today, when you walk into a church, one of the things you find is happening is the teaching of apostles' doctrine in various formats as Christians remind ourselves, and tell others, who God is, what He is doing for us and through us, and what lays ahead.

There are three main ways that can happen, three different approaches a church can take.

Some churches follow a liturgical calendar – this means they organize the year around holidays like Christmas celebrating the birth of Christ and Easter celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ and they prepare sermons and Scripture readings accordingly, usually on a three year cycle so each year you're celebrating Advent in December and Lent in the Spring and filling in the gaps with the epistles and maybe some of the Old Testament at other points in the year, but it's the holidays on the calendar that drive the content of the sermon and the life of the church.

Other churches follow thoughts and ideas, often driven by the immediate concerns of the people, current events, or something that has captured the attention of leadership because of a book they've read, a conference they attended, or something they saw another church doing. These are the churches that have a six week series on Building a Better Family, or a series on evangelism, or a series on managing your money God's way. These will often be supported by graphics and posters and branding. The hope is to move you along spiritually – it starts with the pastor or other leaders thinking – our people are here, and we need to get them to there – so, what messages do we need to deliver to bring change?

Now, that can be done well. Sometimes a topical series can be helpful, and sometimes it might even be the best way to address a particular issue the church needs to think about. It can be done thoughtfully, prayerfully you just have to beware of over-branding, over-reliance on marketing and media, and you want to make sure the series is grounded in Scripture, not just ideas and concepts.

Because, there's also a bad way to be led by ideas. I went to a church once where the sermon was based on a dream the pastor had. He dreamed about being watched, and so he talked about how we all have this feeling like we're being watched at times, and sometimes it's by people, but God is always watching us. And that can be bad, because it means He sees the wrong we do, but God is willing to forgive us for all that, and it can be good too

because, (and here he tied in Scripture, but totally out of context), [the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him](#) (2 Chron 16:9). And we can be those people; we can be used by God who sees us.

Now, there was truth in that, there was Scripture in that, but I remember sitting there thinking, this whole sermon is based on a dream you had – and that feels like a really, really, precarious way to lead a church.

In a church led by ideas the pastor might preach in response to the latest headlines because social and political issues drive their church. Or sometimes they look at the sermon as a sort of family meeting where ‘we’re going to deal with some things going on around here’ because their church is driven by things happening in the lives of people in the church.

The big problem with a church led by ideas is: you always need another idea and that opens up the door to follow bad ideas and stray away from the apostles’ doctrine.

So, around here, we follow a different model – we go verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, through large chunks or whole books of Scripture. We will do a series on a topic occasionally, but this is our main diet. I like to say this approach to Scripture is self-calibrating, because if you start to drift too far either to the left, or to the right on any issue the Word of God pulls you back in line as you keep going straight through Scripture.

And here are some things I like about that. It forces the authority of what we say to remain in the text, you know exactly why we’re talking about whatever is being said – you can see it right there in Scripture for yourself. Which hopefully encourages you to read the Bible for yourself – whether you’ve grown up in the church, or you’re a new Christian or a non-Christian, you can see the link between the sermon and the Scriptures. And when we deal with hard or culturally sensitive things, you know we’re not trying to be reactionary or controversial, we’re just dealing with what comes up next in the text.

So, when you come to church, or when you listen to anyone teaching on spiritual issues, I want to encourage you to ask: where did they get that? Because there is such a thing as false doctrine, bad teaching – there are things that happen, even in churches, that do not come from the apostles or Jesus.

John, one of the original apostles, had to warn early Christians about the presence and danger of bad doctrine:

[2 John 1:9](#) Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him;

So you see how, very early on, the church determined what was and was not true, based on the authority of people who had spent time with Jesus.

And that's still a good pattern to follow today – the more time you spend with Jesus the easier it is to spot false doctrine. Paul encouraged the church in Ephesus to grow spiritually, to mature as Christians, so they would be able to recognize bad teaching. He longed for the day to come when they:

Eph 4:14 ... should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

In the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, you find Jesus sending out progress reports to seven churches. Two of them – Pergamos and Thyatira have been infiltrated by bad doctrine and He says it needs to be driven out or Jesus will send judgment on the churches.

If people and churches were already drifting away from the Apostle's doctrine just a few decades after Jesus walked the earth, do you think it's something we need to worry about today? Absolutely. This is why sometimes you hear about, or experience, churches doing strange things. Individual Christians and whole churches can drift away from Jesus and that drift can start in the pew or in pulpit.

The Apostle Paul wrote three letters to young pastors - First and Second Timothy and Titus. In them he explains what ministry was all about and how they needed to lead their churches.

Together these books total just 5% (13 of the 260 chapters) of the New Testament, but in them Paul mentions doctrine 15 times. That's nearly half of the mentions in the New Testament. In other words, doctrine should be a big part of a pastor's ministry and therefore, a big part of the church.

Here's just one example of what Paul wrote:

2 Tim 4:1 I charge *you* therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

So, stop and think about this – according to what we have read in the Scripture – false doctrine, that is: bad teaching about God and about Jesus and about His plans for your life, can come from false teachers who have their own agenda, *but it can also be sought and*

desired by people. In other words, the drift away from [the apostles' doctrine](#) can start in the pulpit or the pew.

But why? Why does that happen? Well, to put it bluntly – it's because people don't always like the truth. If [the apostles' doctrine](#) says something we don't like, both the pastors and the people have two choices – either it's wrong, or we're wrong. And who likes to admit they're wrong?

We all want to believe we're right, our insights, our preferences, our beliefs, are the right way to see things.

Here's the problem – have you heard of confirmation bias? It's not a new concept – psychologists started writing about it more in the 1960's. Confirmation Bias is the tendency we all have to look for information that lines up with what we already believe and then cast aside information that doesn't, *even if it's good information*. This is also known as cherry picking the evidence for your argument.

And it has big consequences in areas like finance where studies have shown investors are often overconfident in their strategies ignoring information that might keep them from losing money because it doesn't line up with what they already want to be true.

It's a problem in academic science where scientists have a proven history of resisting or down playing new discoveries by selectively interpreting results or ignoring unfavorable data. There's a lot of peer-review that goes into publishing, but studies have shown scientists are more likely to give favorable reviews to findings that line up with their prior beliefs than to studies that challenge or expand existing beliefs.

It turns out we all know what we believe and we don't want to hear anything different. Now, add social media into the mix and things get really, really bad, really fast. Because confirmation bias is amplified through the algorithms used by all the major platforms that show us more of the things we like and mute the things we don't.

If we're going to escape from this, we have to be ready to accept things we don't like or agree with, when they can be proven true.

The way to do that when you are confronted with a spiritual truth you don't like is to ask – where does this come from? And the answer should be: from the Word of God that records [the apostles' doctrine](#), which they received from Jesus, who was sent by God. That's the chain of custody.

Because here's what's going to happen – sooner or later, at some point, you're going to come across something you don't like and you're going to have to make a decision – should I change, or does God need to change? Does He need to modernize or catch up or do I need to change my convictions? And that decision, right there, sets the trajectory for your life.

And, that's why, here at City Gates we put such an emphasis on teaching verse by verse, chapter by chapter, through whole books of the Bible. It's because we know there are going to be times when we come across hard things, things that challenge our understanding, preferences, and opinions. There are things in Scripture that completely contradict what you want to believe or what the culture around you says today. So, it's really important that we answer the question – where did you get that? And the answer needs to be – right here in Scripture.

Think about the things we make a big deal about around here. Why do we put an emphasis on loving God and loving others? Because that's the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22.

Why do we speak about being increasingly available to God? Because, according to Eph 2:10 God has a plan for our lives and promises the power and ability to do what He's called us to.

Why do we put something in the bulletin and pray each week for foreign missions and in-house ministry? Because that's the Great Commission found in Matthew 28. We emphasize these things, and others, because we are convinced of the doctrinal imperative behind them.

Teaching and learning were foundational to the early church and they have been essential ever since. Christianity does not talk mainly in terms of converts, but of disciples – so the church is not just something you join, it's becoming a learner, a life-long learner of Christ.

That's why we are a church that prioritizes God and His Word. The core of what we do occurs in our Sunday morning worship and spreads naturally across our week and through our daily lives. Everything else augments this.

And the best way to learn about Him is as He revealed Himself, to the Apostles, who wrote down their doctrine, in the Scriptures. This what the early church did, and what the modern church should continue in today. So, when you look for a new church, look for a church that uses Bibles, for people that carry Bibles, preferably paper Bibles all marked up full of notes. It's been said a Bible that is falling apart is usually a sign of a life that is not.

Christians worship a God who reveals Himself and wants to be known, wants to be discovered, wants relationship. He is not distant or entirely unfathomable, it's not all a mystery.

Friends: you can know God and what He is doing today. You can have answers to your spiritual questions. You can find guidance and meaning for life. The Scriptures claim to be **“the pillar and ground of truth”** a firm foundation for you to build your life on when everything else seems constantly changing – let them be the glue that binds us all together.

I'll close with this: [the apostles' doctrine](#) has been accepted by people all around the world in all cultures and times. It has been summarized in the Apostles Creed which is not in the Bible, but is meant to be a summary of what the New Testament teaches. It says:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

This is the core of Christian belief. It's explained in depth in God's Word, written by the Apostles, which they received from Christ, who was sent by God. It's what we preach each Sunday, and it's what you should find in any healthy church.

We live in a world that will drown you with access to information, but this is the foundation of life, given to us by the author of life – let it guide you, and let it guide us.

Let's pray.