



**Acts 2:42-47**

### **How To Choose a Church: Praise**

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

Have you ever wondered, why Christians sing so much? Why do we begin, and end our services with songs? Is Sunday morning worship like a short-concert with a TED talk? What's going on? Well, we're going to talk about that this morning, because we're working our way through the book of Acts – the history book of the New Testament and we're looking at the very beginning of the Church.

We're learning, what the first Christians did, what their church was like. You remember all this happened after Peter preached to the crowds about Jesus, and people responded by repenting of their sins, receiving Christ, and being baptized, and then:

**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
2. There was preaching – specifically, the apostles' doctrine
3. There was praise – which we'll look at this morning
4. There was power – which is so important, because you have to recognize that ultimately God was working 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 – among a diverse group of people
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, even in the face of opposition

These are seven characteristics we hope you find here every week. In fact, we're off to a good start because you've already experienced prayer and praise and we're getting some preaching right now.

But there's nothing special about that really, right? You kind of expect to encounter prayer, singing and preaching at a church, don't you? It's just a question of: what kind or style will you experience and whether you will like it or not and that's what I want us to spend some time thinking about this morning – because we can make an awful lot of decisions about whether we like a church or not based on whether or not we liked the music.

It's an important topic, and it always has been. Think about this: there are hundreds of us in this room, and hundreds of millions of Christians on the planet joined with a few billion others throughout history... and we're all part of one Church. We belong to something that was here before the oldest of us in this room was born, and, should Jesus delay His return, when the youngest of us in this room dies, the Church will continue on and praise will be a part of what it does.

We see here in Acts that the Church praised God from the beginning, we experienced this morning that the Church is praising God now, and but see in the book of Revelation that the Church *will continue* to sing praise to God in the ages to come.

People are often distracted by all the strange and unusual things in the book of Revelation, but there's a whole lot of worship that happens too. All around the throne of God you find people singing, praying and praising. For example, consider what we read in

**Rev 15:1** Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete.  
2 And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark *and* over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God. 3 They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying:

“Great and marvelous *are* Your works,  
Lord God Almighty!  
Just and true *are* Your ways,  
O King of the saints!  
4 Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?  
For *You* alone *are* holy.  
For all nations shall come and worship before You,  
For Your judgments have been manifested.”

Now, there's a lot going on there, but I bring our attention here to help us see, *Christian worship begins with the early church and continues for all of eternity*. And also, to point out something SUPER important about that: *we never see anyone worshipping God privately in Heaven*. It is always in the midst of the congregation. There is something to be said about

private, devotional praise, but there is also much, very much, to be said about worshipping God with other Christians.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer is remembered today as a famous Christian pastor, theologian, and spy who was martyred by the Nazis just as the Allied forces were freeing Berlin. But before all that happened, he was a visiting student from Germany living in New York City while studying theology at a seminary in the 1930's before World War II began. On the weekends he would visit African-American churches in Harlem and he was captivated by their worship. It was completely different from his own culture, but he felt that it was real, it was authentic, and it provoked and challenged him.

Their praise expressed vibrancy and a reality that he had not experienced in the German churches back home where music was something that was performed *for* the congregation but not always *by* the congregation. So, when he returned to Germany, during the war, he made sure to emphasize the role of corporate worship for Christians in a new way.

Now, can we stop for a minute and marvel at the majesty of our God who would use African American congregations in Harlem to stir the heart of a German pastor who would return home to agitate the stagnant German Church and participate in the resistance effort to overthrow the Nazi government with its goal of white supremacy? Human beings don't dream up this kind of strategy.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

*"The more we sing, the more joy we will derive from it, but, above all, the more devotion and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together. It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song."<sup>1</sup>*

He's saying something many of you have come to learn: singing praise to God in the congregation, blesses you as your voice fits itself into the chorus, as you join in the communal event, but it also blesses everyone else whose voice is being woven together with yours, and it leaves a lasting impression on those who don't yet believe.

The church always tends to elevate musicians and preachers – to separate them from the congregation and say: *you do that God thing for us*. That's what was happening in the German church as Bonhoeffer was growing up – you went to church and people performed music for you, a priest read the Bible to you and explained it for you. People, even people

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Chapter Two: The Day With Others; Singing The New Song

who attended church regularly, were there as religious consumers instead of fully engaged participants.

And that's what happens in too many churches today – you have someone or a team up on stage, and they lead and the rest of us choose whether we're going to join in or not based on things like who we're standing next to, or whether or not we like the song, or whether or not we feel like singing – we have all sorts of reasons, but it boils down to this: *worship seems optional*. He, or she, or they, up front are going to do the thing and I can choose whether or not to join in.

But look back at what we see in Acts – people, average people, all the people, were engaged in the life of the church. And, when we look ahead to scenes in Heaven from Revelation we see people, all the people, fully engaged in worship.

That's what we want to see, hear, and experience in this church. The worship team and I stand up here on the platform so people in the back can see us and we have microphones so everyone can hear us, but the hope, the goal, is that we're all in this together. We even work hard at vocabulary – I try to call this the platform, not a stage, because this is a worship service, not a performance.

We call this a sanctuary not an auditorium. And after each service the question we want to ask is not “How did the band sound?” But, how did the congregation sing?



Now, that's not true in all churches – sometimes you have a soloist who performs special music for you, and it may be beautiful, and it may cause you to think and reflect, but you're still consuming, not producing worship.

Other churches will have a full band, sometimes including paid musicians, and they're there to pump you up – to get you excited. They may say things like “I can't hear you!” and try to get you to join in, but even if you don't they're still going to make sure “worship” occurs.



Some churches have a choir so you take a bunch of people from the church and put them up front to sing for everyone else. And look, there's nothing inherently wrong with any of these – they're not sinful, and there are occasions for all them to be used with great effect, but they should never silence or overpower the most important instrument in the room.

And what do you think that is? It's not the piano, it's not the guitar, it's not the drums – it's us. It's the voice of the congregation. That's the most important source of praise and it's the one we want to hear above all the others. We want to be in a room full of people singing to God because they have affected by God.

We want to be a church like Paul encouraged the Ephesians, to be

**Eph 5:18...** filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Make a note of the flow there – filled with Spirit, then speaking and singing. That’s important. In fact, listen to what He said in his letter to the Christians living in Colossae, encouraging them:

**Col 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

It sounds very similar, right? And note the flow – **Let the word of Christ dwell in you**, then speak and sing. *What comes out of us should be an evidence of what is happening in us.*

Music helps us express the things we already think and feel – so if you’re filled with the Spirit, if the word of Christ dwells in you richly, it should compel you to sing – there should be something in you that wants to come out.

And when it does, it’s an act of worship to God, but it’s also an encouragement and a witness to people around you.

Do you remember what drew all the people to hear Peter’s first sermon on Pentecost? You had all these religious pilgrims in town for the Jewish Feast and they came together because they heard Jesus’ disciples “**speaking in our tongues the wonderful works of God.**”

They were praising God - speaking, not singing in this case - but the still it was their praise of God that drew people in. Years later the Apostle Paul and Silas would be wrongfully arrested and jailed and they began singing to God in their jail cell and all the other prisoners listened to them – their worship under the worst of circumstances, along with a miraculous earthquake led the jailor to ask: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). And they said:

**Acts 16:31** ... “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Later, in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is giving the church instruction on what to do and not do in their worship service because *he assumes people who are not Christians will come, see and hear what’s going on, and be saved.* So there’s this connection = Christians worshipping God with authenticity can lead to the salvation of others.

I like to remind the worship team of my own testimony occasionally. I walked into Calvary Chapel of Oceanside, right outside Camp Pendleton, as a young Marine one Sunday

morning. God had been stirring things in my heart and mind for months but I wasn't going to church, I was just trying to figure life out. And then, as I stood in the congregation and they sang on Sunday morning everything came smashing together. I don't remember what they were singing. The pastor hadn't preached. But being there, in worship, God nailed me. And He spoke clearly to me – You've been living for yourself, and you know it's wrong; you need to live for Me.

God crushed me that morning, and He started the rebuilding process of my life and it all began during worship surrounded by people who knew and worshipped their God.

So, there is a pattern of congregational worship in Scripture and in life, and there is a powerful testimony we experience in worship, as we find encouragement, instruction, or conviction. But there are also some obstacles to congregational worship, so let's talk about those for a few minutes too. I have three things to point out: culture, style and content.

One of the first obstacles is that we have come to the place in our culture where people rarely sing anymore; we let other people sing for us. And so, for many people, singing doesn't feel natural. It feels uncomfortable because we don't really know how to do it, and no one likes trying to do things they're not good at while standing next to a bunch of other people. We don't even really like to sing Happy Birthday, so we take our friends out to a restaurant where someone else will sing to them for us.

As a Christian you will have to make the choice to sing in the congregation. And that choice might not be easy. I still remember quite vividly being at that point when I had to decide, when it comes time for worship will I sing or just listen? Am I going to be an active part of this, or a passive bystander? It all feels very self-conscious and awkward at first, but the more you do it, the better you become.

You might never sing a solo in front of a crowded room, but you learn how to join your voice into the chorus of Christian community that is gathered to praise our mighty God. You learn how to be part of something, to fill your space in this enormous thing we call worship.

Do you remember how Bonhoeffer described it?

*It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song.*

You are part of something bigger than yourself in congregational worship. Something so hard to replicate, that even if you attend some mega-church that has satellite campuses where they set up a screen and broadcast the sermon in on video, they usually still have a live worship team, because you can't replicate the experience of worshipping God in a congregation with live music.

But here's the problem – it's a two-edged sword. Being present in worship with a group of other people can be comforting and powerful and humbling... or it can make you feel like you're completely out of touch with what others are experiencing because, we are what I like to call, a one room schoolhouse.

We have people in here who are nine years old and people who are in their 80's. We have people who grew up in France and people who grew up in Franconia. We have people who speak English as a second, or third, or fourth language. We have people who listen to hip-hop and people who listen to classical music. People who like country music and people who can't stand it. And all of us, are somehow, supposed to find a single musical style to bind us together in expressing our praise to God.

Friends, that's next to impossible. Our worship team tries to play an assortment of songs, some old, some new and in a variety of styles. But there is no way for them to pick songs that are your absolute favorite every week and still touch the lives of the diverse family of God gathered around you. It just isn't going to happen.

But you know what? That's actually a good thing – because it reminds us that worship is not just about us. It's for God – so, as long as it's pleasing to Him, we need to see if we can find a way to engage in it. And, maybe the song we're learning this week is exactly what we will need to sustain us when we find out what's happened two months from now. *Maybe God is equipping you with a song today that will express something you'll feel or understand then.*

When you don't like a song, ask yourself why? Is because you don't like the style? That's OK – maybe it's somebody else's favorite style and we're all doing this together. Or, maybe we're limited because we don't have the musical skills or ability on the current worship team to play another style – maybe you need to join the team, or pray that someone who can lead in your style would – we're open to having a variety of styles.

But it's the content that is really important because what a song says is more important than how it sounds.

Outside of the church people usually like songs based on how they sound – this is why people like songs and don't even know the lyrics or don't understand them. But inside the church, content always trumps style.

Think about this: the Bible is full of songs that have been preserved over time – all the way back in Exodus you have things like the song of Moses and the song of Miriam. The biggest book in the Bible is the book of Psalms – literally Praises in the Hebrew – it's 150 songs used by the Jews in worship. And, the Bible ends with the book of Revelation, another book filled with songs.

We have the lyrics for all them, but we don't have the music for any.

Musical styles come and go – instruments fall out of favor. But the truth of the lyrics, the content, remains because it's enduring and true, no matter how it is said.

So here's something you have to watch out for in the church – some songs are more devotional than congregational. In other words, sometimes the song is about us, and how we respond to God or feel about God.

For example, a few years ago there was a popular song called How He Loves Me – and some people really loved it, it had a great sound, a great style – but the original lyrics said

*We are His portion and He is our prize,  
Drawn to redemption by the grace in His eyes,  
If His grace is an ocean, we're all sinking.  
And heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss,*

Those are the original lyrics and they're full of artistic, poetic, meaning to the original author, but when it was recorded for the radio and sung in churches the lyrics were changed to "Heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss" and then it goes on:

*And my heart turns violently inside of my chest,  
I don't have time to maintain these regrets,  
When I think about, the way  
That He loves us,*

Now, here's the problem. We had people in their 20's and 30's who loved the song. But there are also people in the church who love God, I know they do, I would never question that they do, and I know they would never say that God makes their "heart turn violently inside of their chest." If you do feel this way, you say "YES!" best song ever! I love how this sounds, I love what it says! But the person standing right next to you who doesn't relate to God that way, is left saying, "huh?" *And neither of you is wrong.*

So here's the thing – songs like this are more of a devotional song. If it expresses what you feel, personally, individually, that's great. Use this song on your own. But when we come together as a congregation to worship, understand that we need songs that tell us things that are true at all times for all people. That's not easy and it's not an ironclad rule. But it's something you have to keep in mind. The average person in the congregation should be able to agree with the declarations of the worship songs we sing.

I want to encourage you to pray for our worship team.

I want to encourage you to pray about joining our worship team – maybe up here, or maybe at another point in the week at a small group or other event.

I want to encourage you to consider learning an instrument or vocals if that's something that interests you.



But more than all of these things, I want to encourage you to expand the role of worship in your life. You're never going to run out of reasons to worship. You're never going to run out of reasons to praise God. I want to encourage you to get to the point where worship music is the soundtrack of your life – it's what goes through your head when you wake up and when you fall asleep, it's the tunes you find yourself humming as you go about your day – it will please God, it will strengthen your soul, it will be a witness to a world full of needs and questions today.

And it will prepare you so that when we come together corporately, we can be like the early church:

**Acts 2:46** 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.

Let's pray.