



Acts 2:42-47

How To Choose a Church: Look for Prayer

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

Lots of people come and go and through DC, and some of them are looking for a new church. The question is: what should they be looking for? What makes a good church? Is it a good website and cutting edge use of graphics and media? A funny pastor who can tell great stories? A worship team that records their own songs? A Children's ministry that looks like a scaled down Disneyland? Lots of other people just like you? Finding a new church can be hard and it's harder if not sure what you're looking for.

This morning we begin a seven part series on How to Find a Good Church based on what we see in Acts as we look at the very first church. I hope this series does two things. One, I hope it helps those of you who will move away one day find a good church when you get there. And two, I hope it helps you who are here decide: is this a good church? Now, all cards on the table here – I think we are, but this stuff doesn't happen automatically, and it can all be lost if you don't keep an eye on it – so its our job, collectively, to BE a good church by holding on to these things.

Let me read to you what we find in Acts 2 and then I'll give you the list of the seven characteristics we're going to spend time on in the coming weeks and we'll dig into the first of them.

For background, you remember Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected, and then He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit, because God was going to give them a supernatural, miraculous enabling to spread the gospel. And that happened on the Feast of Pentecost when religious pilgrims from all over the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe were in town for a major religious feast. Peter preached the gospel to all these people and suddenly you had the first megachurch as around 3000 people were saved, we saw all of that last week.

And now we see what life was like for them, what did they do?

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'll look at this morning.
2. There was preaching - specifically, the apostle's doctrine
3. There was praise – this happened when the disciples were speaking in tongues at Pentecost and after that praise remained a part of their regular lives
4. There was power – God was at work. He poured out His Spirit, He added people to the church, He was in control
5. There was unity – they were together, they were in one accord as we have said so many times, even though they were a very diverse group.
6. There was a spirit of service - they were connected to one another, available to one another, they met one another's needs
7. There was perseverance – they continued 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.

We start with prayer. If you know the story of Jesus' life you probably know the closest He came to being violent, to getting in a fight, was when He came to the Temple and found the place that was supposed to be set aside for people to come in and pray had been turned into a religious market. He started flipping over table and chasing the vendors out.

Matt 21:13 And He said to them, "It is written, *'My house shall be called a house of prayer,'* but you have made it a *'den of thieves.'*"

Most of the time Jesus is pretty level headed, He keeps His cool – so it should really get our attention that this was the *one thing* He was *really* upset about: *Jesus wanted people to be able to pray.* He prayed Himself; you see that as you read the Bible. He taught the disciples to pray. He even asked people to come pray with Him at times.

So, it shouldn't surprise us to find the disciples praying after Jesus returns to Heaven. In fact, you could say their prayers back in Chapter One provoked Pentecost in Chapter Two.

And that's good, that's the right order. First, before we do anything else as a church, we should be praying – seeking God's direction, seeking His blessing, asking Him for the power He promises, asking Him to change people's lives.

But then, we notice that prayer was a part of their regular lives and gatherings even after Pentecost. Look at

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

And as we move through the book of Acts we'll see they prayed together regularly as the church grew.

But why? Why do we pray?

Well, when we pray, we're expressing three things: 1) our unity with God, 2) our dependence on God, and 3) our availability to God. We can, and we should, do all of that individually, but there is something powerful about doing it together – because we're expressing our unity with each other in the process - all of us, corporately saying to God, "We depend on You. Even all of us together can't do this on our own – we, corporately, need You. So, we're all here for You. We're available to You. Use us as You will. Lead us, send us, direct us, have Your way in us." There's comfort, assurance, and power in praying these things together with other people.

So let's take a minute and think about unity, dependence, and availability in prayer.

First, we said prayer expresses our unity with God. On the night before He was killed, Jesus prayed **Father, if there is any other way to do this, let's try that, but nevertheless, not My will, but Your will be done.** His prayer was an expression of unity with the Father and it should influence our prayer today. Jesus teaches us pray, "Father, may Your will be done. I have my own desires, I have my own ideas, I want to see this cancer gone. I want to see this marriage saved. I want to pass this test, I want to make this team, I want to get this job, I want to buy this house, nevertheless, not my will, but Your will be done. God, I want what you want, more than anything else, because I trust You." I want to be one with You, united with You. In fact, the true test of any prayer is: can I pray this in Jesus' name? Is it something He would agree with and pray?

Second, prayer also expresses our dependence on God, it declares our helplessness. Prayer has been described as weakness leaning on omnipotence, helplessness surrendered to God. How often have you heard it said, "Well, we've done everything we can; now all we can do is pray?"

There's a good way to express that, and a poor way. The poor way is to think that everything depends on us and when all else fails then we reach out to God and hope He comes through. This is the way most people think of prayer - it's the kind of thing you bring out on special occasions or in emergencies. But that's not what God wants us to do.

We actually praise God by declaring our need of Him. We come to Him, and ask for things that we cannot get anywhere else. We praise Him as the One who has what we do not.

Look at the world around you – it's full of people who are afraid, worried, anxious, frustrated and angry for all kinds of reasons. And those feelings, those emotions, are powerful and pervasive. They come and find you at work or in the gym, in your car, or on the metro, in your dorm room or in the shower. They keep you up at night and are waiting

for you first thing in the morning.

You know one way to fight them? With prayer – with prayer that admits your helplessness, your weakness, your worry, and your fear to a God who is bigger and stronger and older and who cares about you so much that He is willing to take action in your life.

Look at what the Bible says:

Phil 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; 7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Friends, your emotions, and the events of this world will eat you alive if you don't ask God to put them on a leash. And even then, they will still bark at you, but they won't be able to bite.

I want to encourage you to do something I have been reminded of myself lately, I want to encourage to come God in prayer saying, "God I am helpless. I can't do this on my own, I can't change this on my own. I can't force it or make it turn out the way I want on my own. God I am helpless here and I need You." And then, realize you're not the only the one, but all the rest of us are praying that too. You don't have to be Superman or Wonder Woman; you can be helpless and dependent on God. It's OK. God gives you permission.

But listen, that's not a one and done, that's not a single event. That's a pattern, that's a habit, that's a relationship. *Which is exactly what God wants!* God is calling us into a regular relationship with Him – the Bible actually tells us we should be in a constant state of prayer – a never ending text chain with God – sending Him messages throughout the day just to keep in touch and ask for whatever we need.

And that's the good way to think of the saying we mentioned – "we've done all we can and now all we can do is pray." The good way to express that is to say, I've done everything I can on my end, now if it's going to happen, God has to show up. I'm totally dependent on Him.

Friends, that's the kind of church we want to be. That's the kind of ministries we want to have – we want to live in that tension between diligence and dependence, between preparation and prayer. We want to work hard, prepare well, organize, administrate, and communicate, but at the end of the day, we want to depend on God for the strength, the blessings, the direction and the growth of this church, it's ministries, and our lives.

So, we said prayer expresses our unity with God, our dependence on God, but also our availability to God. I like to think of being available to God as raising the sail on a sailboat. I can't make the wind blow and I can't control how powerfully it blows when it does, but I can have the sail up, ready to catch the wind, and be driven by the wind when it comes.



I'll show you a picture of what I mean – now what I love about this picture is, the sail boat is really moving, you can see the wake it's creating, and you can see that these people in powerboats and rafts with engines are trying to keep up with the sailboat as it is carried by the wind. Wouldn't you love for that to be a picture of us, as the church? Moved by, led by, empowered by God, not simply our own management, marketing, and planning?

This is the Church in Acts, and this is what the church has been at various points in history when people raised the sail saying, "God, we can't work it up, we won't make it up, but we're here, and if You want to pour our your Spirit in a powerful way, we want to be moved, we want to be used."

I don't know about you, but I want to be one of those sailors hanging backward off the edge of the boat giving it everything I have to stay in control of steering as the wind blasts us. I want to see what God can do with a church that is increasingly available to Him, a church that is praying, "Here we are Lord, use us!"



Christians, the world around us needs God. They need salt, they need light, they need love, they need a safe place to come and they need to see God doing what only God can do through a people who are praying, "God we are helpless and hopeless without You, but we are available to do whatever You want done – use us to pray, and to preach, teach us to praise, let us see Your power, grant us unity, show us how to serve, and help us persevere. Let us ride that terrifying, exhilarating boat that's almost blown over by the power of your Spirit in it's sails."

Friends, we want to be a church that is praying, God fill us with your power for the work you've called us to. Whether that's the work of parenting or the work of the workplace, whether that's the work of studying as a student or practicing some sport or skill – wherever God sends you Monday through Friday, whatever you do on Saturday and the rest of the day on Sunday, I hope you're praying, "God would you PLEASE empower me to be here for and with You? In my conversations with my neighbors, in my response to this text message, in the big meeting on Tuesday, on that upcoming trip, in everything that I do, in every where that I go, may my sails be up to be moved by and used by You."

"And, may that be true of us as a church, may everything that we do, everything we plan, every ministry and every minister in this church have it's sails up for You – we are willing to work, to prepare, to study, to share, to approach, to invite, to play and to pray, but we're desperate to be driven by You. God we want to see the lives of people changed because they've had a radical encounter with You. May You demonstrate your sovereignty and save

people, rescue them, redeem them, and redeploy them for your purposes.”

So, lets talk for a minute about how that happens, how can we express our unity, dependence, and availability to God as a church?

First, we have a prayer chain email and you can request to be on that – send an email to prayer @ TheCityGatesChurch.org and you can be added to the list. And if you need prayer, you can send an email to that same address, or you can fill out a connection card from the Welcome Table or in the seat pocket in front of you – you drop them off at the welcome table or put them in the tithe and offering boxes on your way out and they make their way to the desks of the pastors.

You can also pray through the bulletin – each week we list upcoming events, some of our missionaries, and some of our ministries so take your bulletin, put it in your Bible and pull it out later on tonight or first thing tomorrow morning and pray over everyone and everything you see listed there: may they be filled and used by God, may the boat of that event or ministry be screaming trying to stay upright as the Spirit of the Lord moves through their sails.

You can pray for the youth of the church – Pastor Stephen is working with them to assemble their prayer requests. You can adopt a youth and commit to pray for them throughout the year and meet with them occasionally to see how they’re doing.

If you volunteer in the nursery you can pray for that baby you’re holding and all the ways God might want to use them. You can pray for their parents – they need it! And you can do the same thing if you help in Children’s Ministry – pray for the kids in your class, by name, and for their parents and their families.

You can pray for the person sitting in front of you or beside you in the sanctuary or the people you pass in the hall or see walking up in the parking lot - and you don’t even have to tell them you’re doing it. You can just pray for God to bless them, speak to them, use them or meet their needs this morning – just walk around dropping little prayer bombs all over people. I want to encourage you to think of yourself as having a ministry of prayer.

And, I want you to know that you are absolutely empowered and encouraged to minister to one another in prayer. Now, this already happens, and I love to see it, we want to keep seeing it, and to see more of it – people praying for, and with, people.

I want to encourage you to make it a rule, to never talk about a prayer request without actually praying for it. When you’re talking with someone here at church, and they tell you about the thing they’re struggling with, or the difficulty they’ve had, or the thing they’re trying to figure out – would you please, please, say, “well, let’s pray about that right now” and then pray – right there. It doesn’t have to be long, the other person doesn’t have to pray, but just take it to the Lord, right then and there together. You have our permission to minister to one another in pray, to carry one another’s burdens.

You can do the same things for every ministry you attend and for our Sunday morning worship. In fact, you can come early and pray – the media team and the worship team pray for their own ministries each week, but there is a group that gets together and prays for the entire church and it's ministries too from 9:30 to 10:00.

And if you can't make it to that, let me give a few things you can pray for the church.

First, pray for direction. This is the number question I have right now – God what are you doing with us? Where are we going?

There are signs of growth all of the church. Over 100 women signed up for our most recent Bible study, over 2 dozen people are coming on Tuesday nights for the Self-Confrontation class, and over 50 people came to our last leader's luncheon.

Sunday morning attendance keeps growing. But we're going to run out of space soon. So, do we go to two services? Do we start a new church? Do we look to build something? Why has God given us 15 acres but only 464 seats? I don't have the answers, but these are the questions I'm asking. Pray with us that we would discern God's leading. Are we willing to pray: God give us eyes to see what You want to change in this church and anything we're missing?

Pray for our efforts to roll out home groups and small groups – we know people want to get connected to other people and that's hard when the church is growing. One reason some people don't like growth, don't like the idea of a bigger church or two services, is they feel like you lose touch with people, and that's true – but what do we do with the people who keep showing up enjoying the fellowship and the teaching they find here? Have we reached enough people for Christ? Did you know there are over 2500 students at Woodson High School next door – if they all decided to come to church one Sunday we would need five services and we still wouldn't have room for their teachers, coaches, administrators and staff, or their younger brothers and sisters from Frost down the street, or their parents or their friends at Fairfax High School or Lake Braddock or Trinity or ICS, or the people who work at Peet's Coffee and Trader Joes across the street...or any of you. So, you tell me, does God want to reach these people, and does He want to use us to do it? If so, we can't stay the same.

Of course, if we reach them, we want to reach them with the Word – and we'll look at that next week, but for now let me ask that you would pray for me and for everyone else that teaches the Bible here. The Apostle Paul asked the Ephesians,

Eph 6:19 [pray] for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Pray for the bold and clear teaching of God's truth in this church – that it would confront us

but also comfort us.

Again, Paul asked for prayer from the church in Rome:

Rom 10:30 Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me,

I'm going away for a little personal prayer retreat tonight through Tuesday and I want to ask you to pray for that, that I might get some personal sense of direction for ministry. In fact I tell people all the time – feel free to manipulate me through prayer. I want to be a marionette on God's strings – so ask Him to move me, lead me, and the rest of the elders too. And ask Him to keep us in unison, because there is the most amazing, refreshing, and encouraging sense of unity among the men who lead this church, and each of wants to know we're leading in the direction and manner that pleases God.

I want to remind you that in each of our elder's meetings we pray for the members of this church by name, and then for it's ministries and missionaries – we'll do that this afternoon in our Leaders Luncheon too. But how do we pray as a congregation? Are we [continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers?](#)

I think so, we pray a lot during our Sunday morning meetings at various points in the service, but I think we can do better in remembering to pray for certain things we know God wants us to pray about like: the political leaders of our nation, other congregations and ministries, for God to raise up new people into ministry, for the salvation of the lost, for persecuted believers, and issues that affect, the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. I have not kept these issues in front of us in prayer as often or as well as I should, but we know these are things God wants us to pray about so we need to find a way to include things we're likely to forget or overlook.

There is no doubt our world is in a pit of darkness, fear, frustration and hate. People are drinking super-sized slurpees of crazy sauce. But if you look back in history, we've been here before, and into the midst of darkness, God sent the light of salvation.

My friends, if you want to see a change in your family, in your community, in your country, let me remind you that every revival begins with prayer – people seeking unity with God, expressing their dependence on God, and making themselves available to God to see what He wants to do. You find all of these things in the first church, you find them in healthy churches today, and I hope you find them in increasing measure in this church.

We've got a lot to think about in the coming weeks – and a lot to pray, so let's take some time and do that now.

Let's pray.