

How to Choose a Church

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[0:00] Joe was a Christian that hardly grew. The Holy Spirit lived inside of him.! He married a Christian woman.! He read his Bible almost every day.

But he stumbled over the same sins all his life. He never became any less impatient,! Joe chose the wrong church.

He put his roots down in the wrong place. That was all. A single mistake, but a big mistake. Last week we began a series called How To.

And this afternoon I want to talk about how to choose a good church. Most of you have already, obviously, you've already chosen this church, and hopefully you think it's a fairly decent church. And... Thank you, brother. But things change, don't they? Your job moves.

[1:14] Life happens. Something happens. And you need to find a church. So exactly how do you go about doing that? How do you choose a good one?

What should you be looking for? Well, for an answer, the beginning of an answer, turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 2. Acts chapter 2.

We're going to be looking at verse 42 specifically. But let me remind you of the historical context of what happened in Acts 2.

The Holy Spirit came down in power on the day of Pentecost, on the disciples, and in a moment, they were changed. They were different men.

They were the same men, but they were different men. And... Peter began to preach. And he preached the first Christian sermon of this new era.

[2:13] And the people were cut to the heart. And they cried out, What shall we do to be saved? And Peter said, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins.

And 3,000 people believed and were baptized. And the church, the New Testament church, was born in a day. So now we're looking at this new baby church.

And what is it? Well, it's a group of repenting, believing, baptized people. Repenting, believing, baptized.

And just sort of as a way to begin, that should be a good way to narrow your search for a good church. There's no shortage of churches in our country today.

But there's not a whole lot of churches full of repenting, believing, baptizing, baptized people. They're baptized, perhaps.

[3:23] They say they believe, perhaps. We can't judge every man's heart, but it appears that for many people, many so-called Christians, there's a form of godliness, but they have no power.

They deny the power of godliness. There's no life, and you can see that because there's no repentance. They never grow out of any of the same sins. They still love their sins. They still play with their sins.

There's no repentance. But that wasn't what the first apostolic church was like. They really believed and they really repented. And those two things in and of themselves should bring some clarity to the situation of when it comes your time to be looking for a new church, if that time comes, you want to ask, is this church full of repenting believing baptized people?

If it isn't full of repenting believers, then you don't want to be there. It's toxic soil. You'll never grow there. Well, the first church, it was made up of repenting believers.

That's who they were. Now let's look at what they did. What does the apostolic church do? Look at verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

[4:46] They were devoted. They were devoted. They gave constant attention to these things. They gave earnest, persevering attention.

If you're devoted to exercise, you don't just exercise once a week or you do it two times this week and then one time the next week. You exercise when you don't feel like it. You exercise every day. You don't do it just once or twice. You exercise when other people aren't exercising. You are devoted to it. And this church was devoted. They were devoted to these four things.

They didn't get tired of them. They didn't think of, we got to think of something better to do. It didn't matter what the church growth experts were saying they should do.

They were devoted. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. It didn't matter what people's itching ears and itching hearts wanted.

[5:42] They were devoted. And we're going to take a look at each of these four things in turn and we'll begin with the apostles' teaching. The apostolic church.

The church with the apostles for pastors. This is what they did. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And so what does every good, healthy church do?

What should you be looking for? You should be looking for a church that devotes itself to preaching this word. It teaches the words.

The pastors don't see themselves as entertainers or therapists, but they see themselves their primary role as teachers.

And you go into many churches today and many pastors think it's more important to be entertaining than to teach people. But you aren't going to be renewed by going to a stand-up comedy show.

[6:50] The Bible doesn't address your funny bone, it addresses your mind. And so it talks to your mind. And so when you're choosing a church, ask yourself, do they teach doctrinally?

And doctrine is just another word for teaching. Do they put an emphasis on truth? Do they let truth with all of its sharp, pointed corners, do they reveal that?

Do they speak about that? Or is it just sort of like this big bowl of pudding? You know, it's there, it's yummy, it's delicious, it's fun, it's tasty, but it has no shape.

It's just bleh, there. It's not the solid meat of the word. And so now many people today think they say, and this is true, they say doctrine divides.

And so we want to de-emphasize doctrine. We don't want to put so much emphasis on those pointed truths. Can we just all love each other and get along?

[7:50] Well, to be honest, I love peace. I do. But Luther said it, peace without truth is the devil's peace. And a bunch of smiling faces and empty heads, you know, you're as happy and chipper as can be.

That might make for a good frat house, a good sorority, but it makes for a bad church. And so the apostolic teaching was doctrinal, but it also addressed the heart.

When Peter preached, the people were cut to the heart. It wasn't some intellectual college lecture. It wasn't just this intellectual ranting.

It went to the heart. He preached and they were cut to the heart. It became a life and death thing. It gripped their emotions. It gripped their passions. And so ask yourself, is this church that I'm looking at, does the teaching go for the heart?

Does it use ideas to grip the heart? If the preaching is left up here at this intellectual level, then it's useless.

[9:03] It's useless. And you could have, if it's left up there, you could have a wonderful group of very smart, intelligent, theological people.

But at the same time, they'll be incredibly selfish. incredibly proud, incredibly idolatrous group of people. And so the preaching that the apostles, the way the apostles preached, it was they used ideas to reach to the heart, to humble men.

But beyond that, the apostolic teaching was practical. You read in the Bible lots of words and those words are addressed to the mind and they reach the heart and then they direct the life.

Preaching left up here in the land of ideas, I just said, it's useless. And preaching, you know, left at the heart level but with no direction of, well, what should I do about it? That's useless as well.

And so, apostolic teaching, what you read in the Bible, how we should strive to preach, how every good church preaches is that answers the question, so what? What do I do about that?

[10:16] How do I do it? So ask yourself as you're looking at this church, is the teaching doctrinal? Is the teaching emotional? Is the teaching practical?

And if it is, great. You're well on your way. That's the kind of soil that a Christian will grow in. Well, the early church, it was devoted to the apostles' teaching, but then secondly, they were devoted to fellowship.

Fellowship, *koinonia*. *koinonia*. It means the sharing of a common life, the sharing of a common goal. They live together. Now, the biggest living organism in the world is not an elephant. It's not a whale. The largest organism in the world, by far, is a giant sequoia. And the largest sequoia in the world is called General Sherman.

And a pregnant blue whale weighs 190 tons. It's 85 feet long. It's a big, big whale. General Sherman weighs over 2,000 tons.

[11:21] That's, what is that? Let's do our math. It's over 10 times as big as a pregnant blue whale and is 275 feet tall.

Now, sequoias are very interesting. They grow best when they grow together. They generally grow in groves. And that's where they grow best at.

And you could ask why. And the reason is because they have a very shallow root system. At the very deepest, a sequoia's tree, the sequoia's roots will only go down four or five feet.

And so, instead of going down, the roots spread out really wide. And as these trees grow and their roots grow together, they start wrapping around other roots and other sequoia trees and their roots are brought in and they're all holding each other up.

And so, do you have all the picture? Do you have the picture? You have these huge trees, all these trees in this grove and they're supporting each other. That's why they very rarely can grow alone.

[12:33] If you go out to California, occasionally, you can see a sequoia growing all by itself. And you will be amazed because there it is, this tree with such potential to be so huge.

And it's only 20 feet tall. And that's all the taller it's going to get. Because if it grows anymore, it will fall over. And Christian, that's you. You have enormous potential by God's grace to grow.

But if you try to do the Christian life all by yourself, you are going to be a stunted tree your entire life. You'll be a pygmy your whole life. You'll have this DNA, the spiritual DNA to soar to be this massive Christian, but you'll be a stunted tree.

So you need the church. You, you need other Christians. You only grow strong and you only grow tall when your roots, your life, are wrapped around other Christians.

And so as we grow together, we grow tall. So what kind of church should you be looking for? Well, a church that does life together, that lives together, that loves each other, that shows that by an actual, real expressions of love and affection, it's not enough to come here and sort of just coexist.

[13:58] coexist. You've seen marriages where they just coexist. Marriages don't flourish like that and churches don't flourish when the people are just there together, but their lives aren't wrapped up around each other.

So, so what should you be looking for? Well, ask, do the people just come and go just to do this thing? Do most of the people just sort of show up and then bam, the doors are open and they're gone off to do their thing?

Or are their roots wrapped around each other? Do they share prayer requests with each other? Do they bear one another's burdens?

Do they have common goals? Or are they just sort of each doing their own thing, regardless of what the other person thinks? Fellowship is doing life together and that means doing the highs and doing the lows, doing the good times, and doing the bad.

And this apostolic church was devoted to fellowship. And what happened was they grew. You can go and look down in verse 47, the last sentence.

[15:08] And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. So do you want to be part of a growing church? Then be a part of a church that does fellowship well.

Now the third, the third item here that they were devoted to was the breaking of bread. And this is probably referring to the Lord's Supper. They devoted themselves to remembering the death of Jesus Christ by participating in communion with each other.

In other words, they were a gospel-centered church. In all their ways, they never got very far from the cross and from remembering together what Jesus had done.

And so as you're looking for a church, this should be an item that you're looking for. Does the church have a serious, ongoing practice of holding biblical communion?

communion? And notice that the supper, the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread, was for those who accepted the message.

[16 : 15] The table wasn't open for everyone. It wasn't a free-for-all, just show up and come on in. Pastors call that fencing the table.

Maybe you've heard that. they put fences around it. So people can't come in and participate that shouldn't participate. Now as you're looking at a church, you should ask, do they actively fence the Lord's table?

And if they don't, you can know for certain that really they have no idea what salvation is about. That might seem like an overstatement, but I think if you think about it long enough, you'll see, if they don't really care about who comes in and who says, I'm a part of Christ, then it really says that they don't know how to make a distinction between those who have gone from death and those who are dead and those who have gone from death to life.

They don't understand the meaning of regeneration if they think, well, you're a nice person. You're a nice Joe, you're a nice Sally, come on in. And so ask the pastor, how do you fence the table?

How do you do that? And if you just get this blank stare, leave. Or at least dig into it a lot more. It's not a place where you want to be.

[17 : 42] The gospel is confused. The gospel has been lost. And so when you look and choose a church, look to see what they think about the Lord's Supper.

If the church doesn't care how it's done, and if the church doesn't care who's doing it, if it's very undiscerning about that, then you don't want to be there. It's going to be a hard place to grow.

And then finally, the apostolic church devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, and then finally to prayer. And this is talking about public prayer.

It says they devoted themselves to the prayers, prayers, which probably refers to the set times of praying, of saying of the prayers in the temple.

And so you remember the whole church is in Jerusalem. They're all there, and so it would have been normal for them to keep meeting at the temple.

[18 : 41] That's where this had begun, and so they met in the temple, and as they met together, they prayed together. In other words, they had frequent prayer meetings.

So, what should you look for when you're looking for a church? Well, you should look for a congregational prayer meeting of some kind.

I'm not saying this has to be just like ours. I'm saying, do they pray together as a people? Are the pastors there praying with the people over mutual concerns?

Do they have one? Or have they abandoned it? Are they meeting together for anything but prayer? They have lots and lots of meetings. They have Awanas and kids meetings in this ministry and that ministry for singles and old people and retired people and young people and all these people, but do they pray?

Do they pray together? If they don't have some sort of congregational prayer meeting, I think we can say that there's something not right there.

[19 : 53] It's a sick church. And just think about it. What does it say about a church who they don't pray?

What does it say about them? Well, I think it says that they don't think they need God. That might sound harsh, but when you don't pray, isn't that what you're saying?

They can do this church thing without God. They can do this ministry without God. They can go on mission without God. They know what they're doing.

They don't need God's wisdom. And so they're in the grip of pride. It also says that they don't think God is involved in this world.

Why don't we pray more as individuals? Well, because we don't think God is relevant to this situation. We don't see how he comes in. And so a whole church where they never pray together is obviously saying, well, what does God have to do with these things?

[20 : 58] You know, they might worship the Lord with their mouths, but in reality, they don't think God has anything to do or say with this world. He doesn't care. He can't help. Something. But God is out of the picture.

Then I think it also says that God isn't working there. When God is working in you, don't you know this? When God is working in you, what do you do? You start to pray more.

The church might appear to be alive and thriving with lots of things going on, hustle and bustle and lots of good things going on, but it's dead.

Revelation 3, Sardis had the appearance of being alive. But Jesus says, you're dead. You're dead. And the church with no prayer has Ichabod written over the doors.

Ichabod means the glory has departed. God has left. Jesus has blown out the candle. The show might go on. The ministries might go on. It might get bigger, but it goes on without him.

[22:13] It means nothing to have lots and lots of programs, good or bad, lots of things going on, but with no congregational corporate prayer, then you want to stay away.

It's not a place for a Christian to grow. Well, it's those areas that we should look into as we're looking at a church, as we're seeking to do church, as we're thinking about how we want to do these things.

This is a very familiar passage, but I think we need to ask ourselves as Grace Fellowship, are we satisfied with these things? Are these things enough for us?

And then as we have the opportunity or the necessity to go look, we're looking for these things. Do they preach the word of God faithfully, fully, boldly? Do they live in fellowship?

Do they remember the Lord's death consistently? Do they pray together? And I think what you will find after you start testing churches is that no church is perfect. No church is perfect.

[23:20] No church does all these things just right. So what do you do then? What's the bottom line? I think the bottom line comes down to this.

Are they a gospel-saturated church? Let me tell you what I mean by that. Do they make a big deal out of Jesus?

His life? His death? Do they preach justification by faith alone? Do they know what justification by faith alone is? do they understand how repentance and faith works?

That it's not the things that I do, but I receive all my righteousness, all the righteousness that I need as I turn away from my sin and then take a hold of Jesus Christ for everything that He is for me as a sinner.

In Him, everything that the sinner needs can be found. Do they revel, enjoy, palpably enjoy God's amazing grace?

[24:33] Are the pastors, the shepherds, men who are passionate about the gospel? Has the gospel worked on them? And you can know it's worked on them if they're humble men, if they're loving men, if they pray, and if they're quick to bring everything back to Jesus.

There's a lot of men with a lot of gifts, but the gospel hasn't worked on them, and they're authoritarian, and they're not humble, and they want their way, and they think they can do it on their own.

It's not a safe place to be. But if your pastors are humble men who can take an offense, who can love, who are dependent, who pray, then you're in good hands.

Whatever weaknesses there might be in a church, if the gospel is thriving, and active, and loved, and preached, and proclaimed, and people are loving it, and putting their faith in it, then that is a safe place to put down roots.

Because what's driving those four things that we saw, all of it was Jesus and his salvation that he worked.

[25:56] I mean, you know, Luke wrote Luke, and then he wrote Acts, and right here in the middle of Luke and Acts is this cross. And out of the cross, out of the power of Jesus' life and death, the church was born.

And so, whatever areas they need help on, if the gospel is there, then these things are going to start coming around. So, it's a good place to be. Now, remember Joe.

Joe, we started with him. Joe, who didn't grow. Let me tell you about a girl named Sally. And Sally grew up in a nominal Christian home.

She went to a Baptist church. God saved her there, but she didn't grow. She was a stunted sequoia, just like Joe. But then life happened, and she came to another church, a gospel church.

And the gospel was preached, the church was teaching, there was congregational prayer, there was communion, there was fellowship, and over the weeks and months, Sally went on a growth spurt.

[27:06] And what she used to be, she wasn't anymore. She was changing, and her life changed, and she started killing sin, and she actually became less impatient and less greedy, and less

selfish.

She was transformed, and she became more Christ-like. It was like a renaissance, a second birth of sorts. Well, what was the difference? Same Sally, same Bible, same Holy Spirit, but now she's in a church where she could grow.

And so, brothers and sisters, choose your home well. Choose your home well. Look for a church that follows the Bible's pattern, and it will make all the difference in this life and in eternity.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, I pray that Grace Fellowship Church would be that kind of church, that we would be devoted to listening to your word, to applying it to ourselves.

we would be devoted to fellowship with one another, to loving and caring for one another, and to remembering the Lord's death, that we would be so focused on what He's done for us that it would transform our lives as we remember Him.

[28 : 29] And I pray, Father, that You would work in us more of a spirit of prayer. As we have opportunity, as we have necessity to look for another church, I pray that for all my brothers and sisters here, that You would give them wisdom, that You would do them good, that You would direct them to the place that You would want to bless them in.

Show Yourself to be a great and sovereign, loving God for them. Lord, will You please send us on our way this week, looking forward to another Lord's Day, another day to rest.

Thank You that we can rest in Jesus Christ, that we have found in Him everything that we need. All the work for salvation has already been done, so now we can rest in Him.

Pray that we would do that actively, we would do that worshipfully, and will You transform us by the renewing of our minds this week, so that this coming Lord's Day, we would come with hearts full of praise, with high thoughts of You, and emotions full of love, and a will that is set on worship, that You would have glory in our life by whatever we do.

It's in Jesus' name I pray, amen. Amen. Amen. may may may!