

The View from Here



What to Look For When Choosing A Church

One of the most perplexing issues of living the Christian life in twenty-first century America is where to go to church. New believers seeking their first church home, long-time Christians relocating to an unfamiliar place, and even those well entrenched in a particular church must face this issue head on. That's because so much of what passes for "church" today isn't really church, at least, not as the New Testament presents it to us. Therefore, if you are seeking a church home, the only place to discover what really matters is in the Bible. The Book of Acts offers us a blueprint for church life:

***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, pleasing God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* (Acts 2:42-47)**

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching ..."

The first thing we discover about this early church is a commitment to the teaching of the apostles. These early believers heard the apostles firsthand; however, we have this very same teaching in our Bibles. Therefore, a good church is a Bible-centered church. Nothing is as important as this -- not a large congregation, a witty pastor, or tangible experiences of the Holy Spirit. These first believers never made personal experience the touchstone of their faith, which is a common error today, because the Bible is God's supreme instrument for renewing his people in the image of Jesus. If you take time to read through the entire Book of Acts, you will discover it is full of the centrality of preaching.

Unfortunately, preachers who distort God's Word are all too common today. Sometimes this springs from a sincere desire to soften hard hearts, but hearts aren't changed by compromise. A preacher may be tempted to water down the truth about sin and the need for repentance, or the difficult parts about the incarnation and atonement, and replace them with misguided promises of personal prosperity or a focus on political issues. Or he may adopt the technique of an anecdotal preacher, departing from Scripture and telling a series of amusing stories. So, then, the first thing to seek in a church is a commitment to sound doctrine.

"They devoted themselves... to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

The Bible introduces us to two sacraments given to us by the Lord Jesus himself. These sacraments -- baptism and the Lord's Supper -- will be found in every faithful church, i.e., they are not optional because they are commanded by Christ and give Christ to His people.

To be sure, many Christian denominations argue and debate about what is actually offered in these sacraments. Are they mere symbols? Or do they actually give Christ in the water and the word, a visible word? And is the Lord's Supper a symbol for something that is not present, namely the body and blood of Jesus? Or is the Lord's Supper the very body and blood of Christ given for the forgiveness of sins?

The Lutheran church confesses that Christ is given in holy baptism and adopts a person into the family of God. We also confess that along with the bread and wine in the Lord's supper, the body and blood of Christ are truly present as Jesus says, ***"this is my body.....this is my blood."*** A faithful church will provide a clear explanation of the sacraments and how to participate. In addition to the sacraments, prayer, too, is a vital element of a healthy church. A good church will include prayer in the worship service and will emphasize both corporate and personal prayer.

“Everyone was filled with awe...”

Joy, reverence, and a sense of awe characterized the worship of the believers in the New Testament church. They had a grasp of how high and holy God is -- his transcendence -- as well as the fact that he indwells his people -- his immanence. A good church, therefore, is one that is concerned about reverent worship.

However, reverence does not mean that we are restricted to a particular style of music or liturgical structure. In fact, every worship service should be a joyful celebration of the mighty acts of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Although worship services ought to be dignified, it is not right for worship services to be dull.

Now it is possible for dignity to be dull and for expressions of joy to be irreverent, but the pattern in the early church does not set dignity and joy in opposition to one another, which is an all too common practice in contemporary evangelical circles. In the early church everyone was filled with awe because the Lord Jesus was present; there was reverence and rejoicing, formality and informality, structure and absence of structure. Trumpets sounded and cymbals clanged and other instruments joined in this great cacophony of sound and they raised their voices in praise to the Lord and they sang. These believers weren't on some emotional trip, but were instead declaring theology. In a good church, the worship will focus on truth and engage the minds of those who come. It may also be emotional in as much as such emotion is a reflection of hearts caught up in wonder and praise.

“They devoted themselves...to the fellowship.... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”

When we think of the word “fellowship,” we tend to think in terms of spending fun times with like-minded people, but biblical fellowship is much more than socializing. Believers share a common life because we share faith in one Savior and have been reconciled to God the Father through him. Fellowship within the church operates much like a family, which also means there are times where confrontation is necessary. In the church, this takes the form of church discipline, and a good church will practice it for the good of the whole congregation and most especially for the spiritual welfare of the erring believer.

Inherent in true fellowship is a call to generosity. In Acts we see that money was collected and given to those in genuine need. A good church, therefore, is one that seeks to distribute its resources to those in need at all times and in every circumstance with sacrificial generosity.

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

While these early believers were learning, worshiping, and sharing, they were **not** doing so at the expense of evangelism. We learn here in Acts that this early church grew in number daily. Yet who did the adding? It was Christ. He is the head of the church; therefore, he is the one who adds to the church, and he typically does so through the preaching of the Word, worship, and the voice of believers spreading the good news of the gospel.

Today, however, we find many man-centered endeavors to win converts. Such churches rely on slick methods, programs, packets, ideas and schemes rather than on presenting sound doctrine. I do not wish to diminish the right use of well-intentioned programs; however, a good church is one whose members seek to live as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are, or know someone seeking a church, seek one where the Word is proclaimed, where the sacraments and prayer are honored, and where worship is reverent. Seek a church where the fellowship is characterized by joy and generosity, and where the gospel is boldly proclaimed. It's that simple.

That's the View from Here

Pastor Bill Winter