

What is the Mark of a Good Church?

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(This passage was taken from our *Questions and Answers* radio program.)

First of all, it should be a local church organized according to Scripture. The best place that I know to go is to the Word of God and see how the church was organized on the Day of Pentecost. They didn't have a meeting in which they elected officers at that time. They did later on, of course. But these officers were appointed. I've never been quite sure that our method of electing officers is the proper one. But be that as it may, at the very beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost it says that the mark of a good church is that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Those were the four marks of the early church. These marks are not academic, they are not philosophical, and they are not really theological. They are the four different things that characterize the group of people who heard Simon Peter on the Day of Pentecost and were converted. We are told that these people continued together "daily with one accord" (Acts 2:46). They didn't have a meeting place – they met in the temple. Now that, of course, would cause a great many Christians today to lift their eyebrows. Years ago we had a Founder's Day banquet down in San Diego, and we met in a Masonic Temple. It's just an auditorium that's rented out and used by all kinds of groups. But we were criticized so for it! I thought at the time, "This crowd that found fault with us having a banquet here, what would they have done on the Day of Pentecost going up to the temple in Jerusalem?" But that's where they met, and we are told that "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

1. The Apostles' Doctrine

The first thing that characterized them was that they continued in the apostles' doctrine. That means that they concurred with, followed, and believed what the apostles were teaching. It was not just a church creed that was quoted and meant practically nothing to the members; it wasn't that at all. The doctrine of the early church was a very vital thing. And in order for a church today to be a true church it must be a biblically doctrinal church – that is, the doctrine must be that which the apostles taught. Paul gives clear instruction to the church in First and Second Timothy and Titus. Today there are many things called churches, friends, which are not a church for the very simple reason that they deny everything that the apostles believed and taught and what's written in the Word of God. That is basic and essential.

2. Fellowship

That fellowship is a little bit different than what we think of it today. Today we think it's a term of camaraderie – a pat you on the back, "glad to see ya" sort of thing. But a bunch of Christians in church standing around shaking hands is really not Christian fellowship. True fellowship is with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That means that believers meet together and share the things of Christ together. The Holy Spirit is going to take the things of Christ, show them unto us, and that pleases the Father. Therefore, when you meet together around the Person of Christ that means you are in agreement with each other. You are sharing the same things together, you are enjoying the same things, you are rejoicing in the same things. That is fellowship.

3. Breaking of Bread

Then there's the breaking of bread, which is the Lord's Supper. About it He said, "Do this until I come. For as often as you do this you show forth the Lord's death" (see 1 Corinthians 11:26). That's what the church is all about – it's to show forth the Lord's death until He comes. That is to say, His death, resurrection, and coming again. If a church is not revealing those three things in its message then it's not a church. Maybe it's a man behind a pulpit in a building that has a steeple and a bell in that steeple that they ring on Sunday, but that doesn't make it a church by any means. Although a lot of them are called churches. A church is one that is setting forth the death of Christ for sinners by joining in the breaking of bread through the Lord's Supper.

4. Prayer

A church should also be a praying church. When a problem arose in the early church they went to prayer about it. I tried something when I was pastor of the Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles. It was a very large downtown church with members scattered everywhere, so the church had to be very organized. We divided the membership into groups, and when a prayer request came in we got someone on the phone to call the half dozen people or so in the first group. Those people in turn would call the next group, then those in that group would call another group of people. So that in the course of a day we could get word out to practically every member of the church to be in prayer about the matter. Prayer should be a very vital part of the church.

This is basic, but these four things are the marks of a good church. Now somebody may argue that it's rather idealistic. It certainly is, especially when you look at the average church today!

So when you go out looking for a church, what is it that you should look for? Is it centered around its mid-week Bible study or is it centered around the volleyball court? Is the busiest place in the church the place of worship and teaching or the place of banquets and the gymnasium? Find out where the emphasis is placed! Having inspected the physical plant and the program of the church, then move in and find out really how much Bible teaching is going on. That's on one side. On the other side, how is it being received? Are the members growing in grace, and is there love one for another? Is there concern about and are they interested in getting the Word of God out?

Where will you find a church like this? Well, I can't answer that because I don't know all the churches today. Unfortunately I don't know too many that would measure up to this, but I do know some. But this is the type of church you ought to be looking for. And when you find it you'll find a church full of people who really want the Word of God and want Christian fellowship.