



Is the Very Early Church Our Best Model for a Local Church?

In a recent strategy post we asked the question – *When is a church no longer a church?* (<https://columbimetro.org/when-is-a-church-no-longer-a-church/>.) We followed it up with an article titled *When a Church is Spiritless It Is No Longer a Church.* (<https://columbimetro.org/when-a-church-is-spiritless/>.)

A second Bible passage we suggested you read and reflect on is Acts 2:41-47, which reads in The Message as follows:

"⁴¹⁻⁴²That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. ⁴³⁻⁴⁵Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. ⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved."

This series of articles seeks to answer these questions -- When is a local church no longer functioning like the early churches we read about in The Acts of the Apostles? What is the correct definition of a church? If a local church is no longer a church, what is it?

The characteristics of the very early church as recorded in the above passage may suggest that if a congregation does not have most if not all of the seven characteristics of the very early church, it may no longer be a viable Christian local church.

Where is your church on the following seven characteristics?

1. An Uncommon Experience with God's Word. The first of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon experience with God's Word. Consider Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

What expressions of God's Word did the very early church have following the day of Pentecost? First, they had the Living Word of God – Jesus the Christ. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)

Second, they had the Voice of God. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” (John 10:27) Third, they had scrolls and the memorization of these scrolls that were the beginning of the collection of inspired writings that were the written Word of God.

The most uncommon and extraordinary expression of God’s Word available to the very early church was the testimony of the Apostles. They had spent three years experiencing the Living Word of God and his relationship with his Father.

2. An Uncommon Life of Fellowship. The second of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon life of fellowship.

As we experience the Greek word “koinonia” transliterated into English, it is possible to think about the words “common,” “uncommon,” “community,” “fellowship,” and others. The very early church had an extraordinary relationship of fellowship, however, that cannot really be translated or transliterated into any one word. It was richly characterized by “koinonia.” They had all things in common. They had daily experiences of fellowship in community with one another.

Fellowship involves the ideal or goal of our relationship with God, one another, and the people of God’s world. We are in fellowship with God and one another when we gather for worship, for Bible study, for discipleship development, for expressing leadership, and for food and fun.

3. An Uncommon Prayer Life. The third of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon prayer life.

The committed people of the very early church continually devoted themselves to prayer in community with one another. They were united through their prayer life. They showed the truth that people who remember each other in their prayers can survive the differences which otherwise might divide their unity. Devotion to the Lord and one another characterized their uncommon prayer life rather than debate over any differences that might exist.

Today, people of an uncommon prayer life not only pray for family, friends, co-workers, and their church, they also pray by name for people who do not know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Their prayers are not given over to a primary focus on health and grief issues but include significant prayers about the opportunities and challenges the gospel of Jesus Christ presents every day.

4. An Uncommon Worship. The fourth of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon worship.

When you put together the first three uncommon characteristics of the very early church – God’s Word from the testimony of the apostles, fellowship, and prayer – you have an

uncommon worship full of the feeling of awe, reverence, wonder, amazement, and spiritual esteem for all God has done, is doing, and will do.

The very early church rejoiced in worship rather than endured worship. They yearned for worship rather than dreaded worship. They felt like their day – much less their week – was incomplete unless it involved worship in the fellowship of the followers of Jesus the Christ.

Certainly, it is difficult – even as it was for the very early church – to sustain this intensity of worship day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year unless Christians are captivated anew in each worship experience by the wonder and majesty of the Triune God. Each worship experience is a new encounter with God. Each worship experience can draw us closer to God.

5. An Uncommon Expectation of the Miraculous. The fifth of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon expectation of the miraculous.

Through the apostles, the very early church had various experiences of the miraculous – wonders and signs. It was not life that was common; it was life that was uncommon. It was not life as routine; it was life as extraordinary.

They had recently experienced the miraculous in the resurrection and later the ascension of Jesus. They were in the habit of experiencing the miraculous through physical, psychological, and spiritual healings. They had an expectation of the miraculous happening because they walked by faith rather than by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

6. An Uncommon Generosity. The sixth of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon generosity.

The 45th verse of our biblical passage about the uncommon very early church (Acts 2:41-47) says, “and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all as anyone might have need.” (NASB) In other words, the very early church had an all-in approach to generosity.

It has been said by some interpreters that the very early church expected Jesus to return soon, so sharing financial resources would be enough until then. I would suggest we ought to look at the gospels to see a pattern that reflects this uncommon generosity.

In Matthew 19:21, Jesus suggests to the one often called the rich young ruler that he sell his possessions and give to the poor. While, again, some interpreters suggest this was a specific prescription for a specific person’s situation, we still need to look further. In Matthew 6:24, as part of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus taught that it is impossible to serve God and to simultaneously serve wealth.

7. An Uncommon Witness. The seventh of at least seven uncommon characteristics of the very early church was an uncommon witness.

The very early church was both a gathered and a scattered church. They were active and faithful witnesses of that which they had experienced. The fruit of their ministry were those the Lord was adding to their number daily as people experienced spiritual salvation.

The modern day church must be intentional about its role as both a gathered and a scattered church. The tendency is to focus more on the gathering than the scattering. It is hard to be a witness without reaching out to non-Christian people. Your witness gets stale if all you do is hang around with Christian people.

It is hard to be a witness if you do not go to places where you encounter non-Christian people and you willingly interact with them. It is hard to be a witness if you do not invite non-Christian people into your home. It is hard to be a witness if you do not invite non-Christian people into your church.

So I Ask . . .

- How many of these seven characteristics are true about this church today?
- What needs to happen for all seven of these characteristics to be true about this church today?
- What are you willing to do – if it is within the uncommon understanding of the will of God for this church – to be a congregation where all seven of these uncommon characteristics are passionately held and gloriously practiced by this congregation?