



Becoming an Authentic Reflection of the Early Church

Gateway Community Church of Alhambra, California

In order to become an authentic reflection of the early church, we as a church family are focused on these traits which we observe from their example.

1. Multiple Elders

Having several pastors or elders ensures that every decision is shared as a group, and thereby more likely to be correct.

*Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Prov 11:14)*

It also allows the care of the congregation to be shared by several brothers, and no single pastor is worn out by shepherd everyone. As Jethro told Moses, after watching him sit as the only judge over the people Israel,

“You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.” (Ex. 18:18)

We see that the pattern of church leadership in the book of Acts was always to appoint several elders in every city or church:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

2. Transparent Leadership

We believe it is important for the elders to share openly with the congregation their prayers, their plans and their decisions, so that the church is in complete unity and partnership with their leaders. We often have our elders meetings in a member's home, so that they can join in our discussions and prayer time. This transparency with the congregation will build trust within the body.

Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret." (John 18:20)

"You yourselves know how I lived among you... teaching you in public and from house to house." (Acts 20:18-20)

3. Gentle Leadership Style

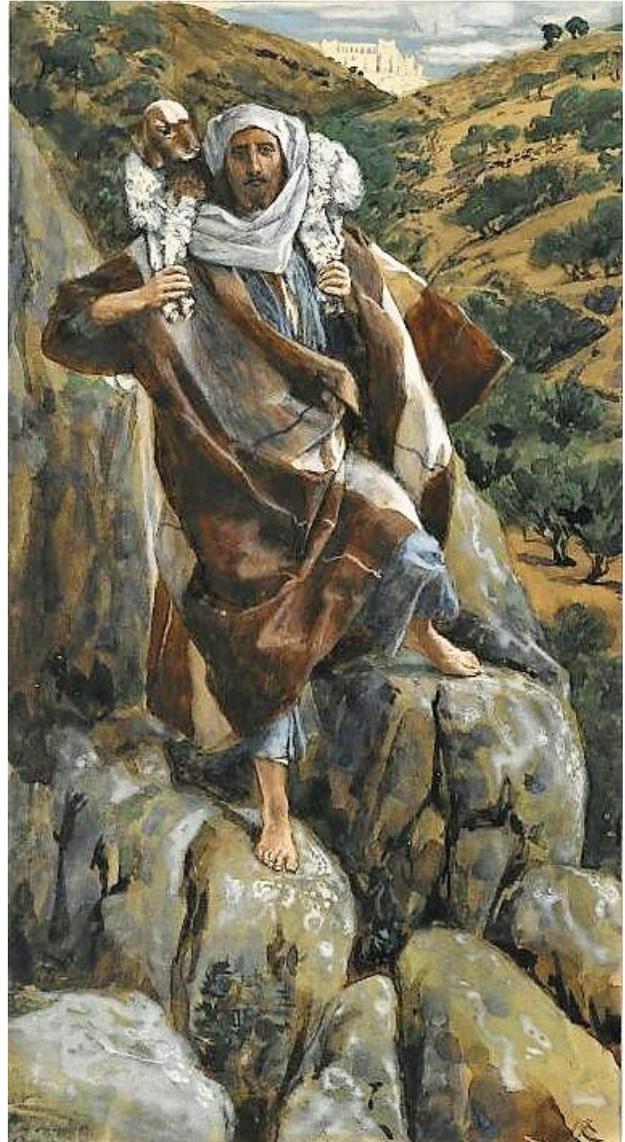
Sadly, we have encountered many a wounded believer who traces their departure from the church to an autocratic pastor who overstepped the proper bounds of authority. The bitter wounds from this can last a lifetime. When we look at Jesus and the apostles, they led with utter grace and humility.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt 11:29)

We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. (James 3:13)

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight... not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2-3)



James Tissot's *The Good Shepherd*

One example of gentle leadership in our own congregation is how we have dealt with sexual sin among new guests who attend regularly. Instead of beginning our ministry to them by bringing up their sin, we have invited them to begin a weekly Bible study in their home. After several months of exposure to the word of God, each person or couple has come to the conclusion that they should repent of their immoral life-style, and submit their sexual behavior to the standards of Christ.

4. Titles are Taboo

As elders and pastors, we have asked the congregation not to use titles when addressing us, such as “Pastor Chris,” or “Pastor Matt.” Adding this title only creates a clergy / laity distinction and perpetuates an unhealthy expectation of the leader, and a lower view of the church member.

You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (Matthew 23:8-10)

5. Major on Millennials

Based on the historical background of Judea in the first century, it was typical for a young man of 15 to complete his studies and begin meeting with a local rabbi to learn more about the Torah and the Prophets. This was apparently the case with our Lord as well. When the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Jesus and Peter asking for the money, there is no mention of the other eleven disciples, implying that they were under 20 years of age, for Moses had told the Israelites,

Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this... half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the Lord's offering. (Ex 30:13-14)

Since the eleven disciples were exempt from this tax, they must have been somewhere between 15 – 19 years old.



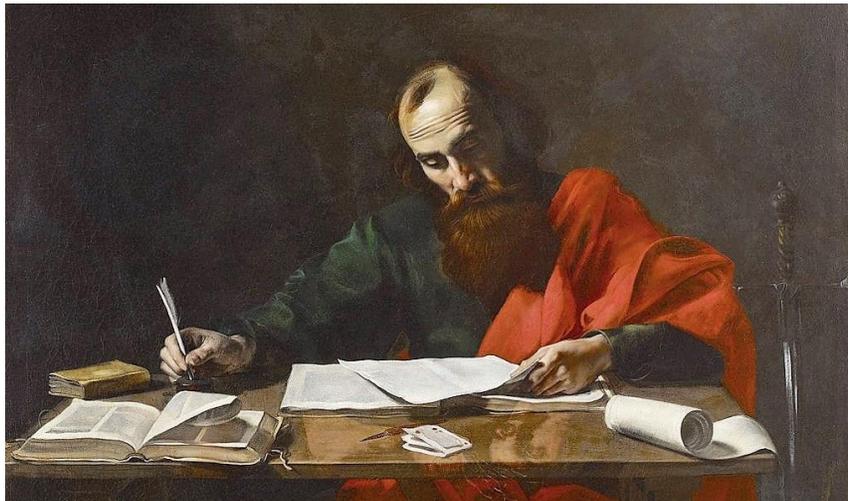
William Holman Hunt's *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple*

This being the case, we want to emulate Jesus' empowerment of these young men by calling our young people into leadership while still in their youth. Currently, we have three men who share the pulpit that are in their twenties. A 19-year-old has written a play for our church to perform at Easter. These same young people went to Mexico for a week to reach out to the poor, the children, and the prisoners with the gospel. We expect them to be the backbone of our congregation in the years ahead.

6. Embrace of Healthy Doctrine

We have no desire to ride the bandwagon of today's theological trends toward universalism (the belief that all paths lead to God), liberalism, cheap grace, sexual immorality, feminism, erasing the wrath of God and the doctrine of hell, etc. We embrace the truth and teach it publicly without regard for what the world might say. We hope to share the ethical implications of scripture with gentleness, but nonetheless hold to the standard of Christ himself.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim 2:24-26)



Valentine de Bologne's Paul Writing His Epistles

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16)

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Tim 4:1-4)

7. Shared Pulpit

We believe it is better to have several men preaching than one single man. Jesus and Moses said that 'in the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact is confirmed.' So when our people hear the scriptures interpreted and applied by a single pastor, they might conclude that certain teachings are merely his opinion. But when they hear several men confirming the same truths in slightly different ways, it adds weight to the veracity of scripture. It also adds variety to each Sunday's preaching style.

Paul told the Corinthians to

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. (1 Cor 14:29)



Giovanni Paolo Panini's *Paul Preaching on the Ruins*

And lastly, Paul himself admitted to the Corinthians that

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (1 Cor 3:6)

One benefit of this policy of a shared pulpit is that each man has several weeks to prepare his sermon, adding to its quality and content. Over time we have seen several men develop into powerful preachers.

8. Peer Review

As a preaching team we share our sermon notes with each other, and invite the critique or suggestions for improvement from each other. Paul seems to indicate the wisdom of this policy:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. (1 Cor 14:29)

9. Power of Public Testimonies

We discovered this truth by accident. When one of our church members decided to share his life story and invite his friends, coworkers and relatives, our normal morning attendance of 45 climbed to 121, with over 50 visitors who were not church goers. The visitors kept remarking that they had never heard such a powerful message. Since that Sunday we have allocated more time on Sunday morning to hear personal testimonies from our men and women.

If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Cor 14:24-25)

10. Every Member a Priest

We encourage our church members to reach out and offer prayers for their unbelieving friends and family members, because God has given us the calling of the priesthood; we are to represent the unbeliever's needs to God, and represent God to the unbeliever until they themselves come to faith and join the family of God.

You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:5, 9)

11. Every Member a Minister

There is a natural tendency for church members to elevate the leadership and view them as a ministering professional class, creating a kind of clergy / laity separation. But we remind them that they are the ministers and we as elders and teachers are called to equip them for ministry. As the apostle said,

And [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... (Eph 4:11-12)

12. Ministry Directors or Deacons/Deaconesses

We believe that virtually every ministry should be initiated and led by a leading church member, whom the scripture calls servants (deacons or deaconesses, from the Greek word, *Diakonos*). Our children's ministry, hospitality, set-up, worship, prayer, and small groups are led by church members who have a passion for that ministry.

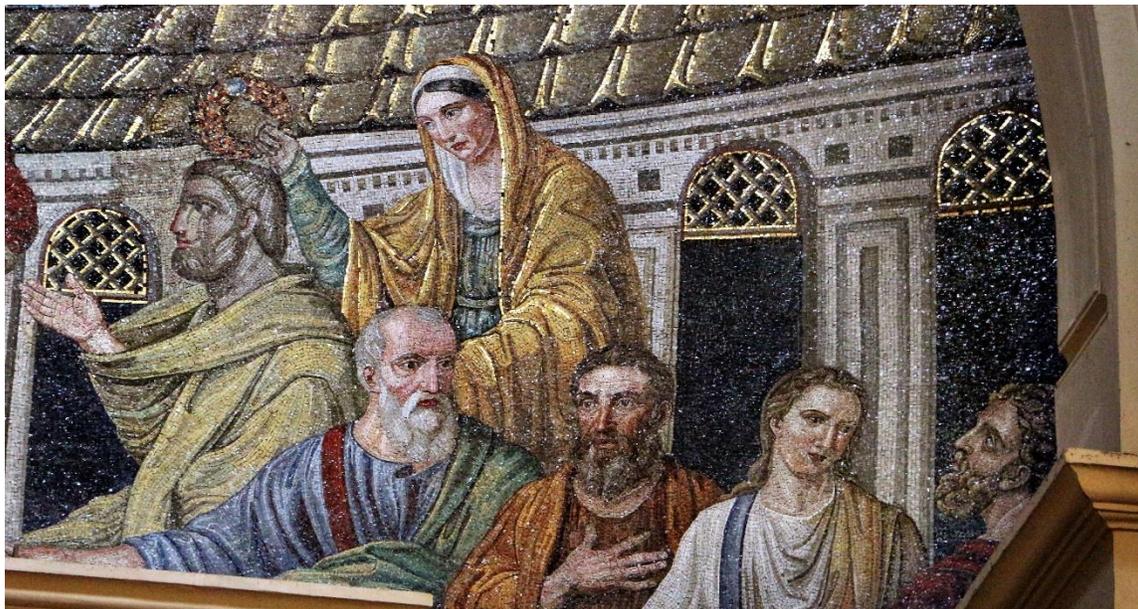
I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1)

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (1 Tim 3:8-10)

13. Every Member in a Small Group

There is no doubt from the record of Acts that every believer needs fellowship on an intimate level. We encourage all of our people to join or start a small group so that they can have this fellowship week by week, month by month.

Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)



Santa Pudenziana courtesy of Sailko CC BY SA 3.0

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they [the apostles] did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:42)

14. Special Honor for Members Who Serve Behind the Scenes

We try to publicly honor church members for their good character and love, especially when their ministry is behind the scenes of our public assembly. We will invite them to come forward for special commendation or prayer, or sometimes we write an article about them in our weekly newsletter. For this reason, our website is purposely designed with stories and photographs from our members, not from our staff and elders.

The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Cor 12:22-25)

15. Shared meals

Meals have a way of bringing people together. Our Lord Jesus said his most important words during the last supper. He describes his relationship with us as eating together. The early church shared their meals together, both at home and even during the 'daily serving' in the temple. At our church, we offer refreshments after the morning worship service and provide a church-wide luncheon after important gatherings. Having these available causes our people to spend more time together in fellowship and building friendships.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev. 3:20)



Matthias Stom's Supper at Emmaus

16. Shared Possessions

As part of our desire to be a church family, once a month we display a ‘sharing table,’ where members can drop off new or hardly used items they no longer need, and wish to make available someone else in the body.

John answered, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” (Luke 3:11)

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

17. Prayers and Supplications



Jenny Alexander Ivanov's *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene After the Resurrection*

Prayer is our lifeline with God. So twice a week we have a place and time for people to gather for prayer – in mid-week and on Sunday morning. We also ask our people to write their praises and prayer requests on a card on Sunday morning. These are collected and typed in an email, and distributed to our active members so that everyone can intercede for their requests.

praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, (Ephesians 6:18)

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people... (1 Tim 2:1)

18. It's the People, not the Performance

The facilities where the early church met together was never the theater. The believers met in homes, in the synagogue, in a portion of the temple, in the outdoors, or in a hall. This being the case, we shy away from gatherings where the stage with lights is the focal point, and the audience is kept in the dark. This paradigm conveys the message that the worship leaders and the speaker are the most important part of a service. But we wish to highlight the people themselves, and so we keep our overhead lights on, and foster a more interactive style of worship and preaching.

Synagogue is the place where people were ‘brought together’, the place of ‘gathering the assembly.’

Greet Prisca and Aquila... Greet also the church in their house. (Romans 15:3-5)

They went up to the upper room, where they were staying... the company of persons was in all about 120... (Acts 1:13-15)

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:1-2)

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes... (Acts 2:46)

And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. (Acts 5:12)

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. (Acts 12:12)

And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:15)

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. [Schole – place of leisure, discussion, a lecture hall.] (Acts 19:9)

They had theaters to use in Roman times. But we never hear of the church meeting there – only the idolaters in Ephesus who gather to riot against the Christian faith and worship Diana.



Tragic and Comic Masks, Hadrian's Villa

19. The Great Commission

The church at large has never had better knowledge of which tribes and nations on earth are still without the gospel. For this reason, we at Gateway would like to send out and support those cross-cultural workers who are focused on the least reached peoples. As the Apostle Paul described,

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

*“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.” (Romans 15:20-21)*