

SO YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A CHURCH HOME?

Good! You need to be involved in a local church. Maybe these few tips will help you find the place that the Lord has for you...

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The most important thing to remember when choosing where to hang your hat is: “Don’t be unnecessarily critical.” It has been said before but it bears repeating: “If you find the perfect church, don’t join. You will spoil it!”

What you need to seek is a place where, with all of its strengths, and in spite of its faults, you can become an active participating member, both to be served and, more importantly, to serve others.

GETTING STARTED

The best place to begin is by taking the following three steps — in order:

- 1. Ask Around.** Personal referrals by others you know and respect are always best when shopping for anything. Another satisfied person may be your tip to the place that is for you.
- 2. Shop Around.** Search the Internet. Search for “Bible Church [and the name of the town in which you are looking]”. Look on church web pages for “About” which will likely tell you something of the church’s beliefs, about the leadership, and affiliations. Most churches have sermons on line. List to the preaching. Is it from the Bible? If not, you need to look further.

Denominations can be an indicator, but not always. Some denominations will almost never help a Christian mature, while others give a greater chance for spiritual growth.

A church that makes contact with you after your visit, either in writing or by phone, is trying to say they are interested in you. Because the church may not have your contact information, or may have simply made a mistake, be willing to make contact if they don’t contact you. If you wish to unite yourself with a body of believers, make the first move, even if they do not.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

A New Testament Church

The first question to tackle is, “*What is a New Testament Church?*” There are four marks that must be present, otherwise a church is not a church, no matter how “churchy” it may otherwise appear to be. First, a New Testament church preaches the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-10). A New Testament church preaches and teaches the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 4:2-5). Be wary of entertainment rather than biblical preaching.

Second, a New Testament church administers the sacraments of Baptism (Matthew 28:18-20), and the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). How these sacraments are administered is a subject in another booklet. The point here is: do they faithfully administer these two ordinances of the church?

Third, a New Testament church will exercise church discipline as an act of love when necessary (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5). This is a key issue to ask about when considering a church. Most churches, under a false guise of “love” either do not know what church discipline is, or worse, they know what it is but would never dream of doing it.

Fourth, a New Testament church has a vision for evangelism and missions. Without this, a church is failing to act on Christ’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8), and is therefore not a New Testament church.

Look for and insist on nothing less than a New Testament church that bears these marks.

The Word of God

The first thing of importance in the life of any church is their involvement in the Word of God. Acts 2:42 says that the early Church “*continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine.*” A major doctrinal issue to consider is whether the church is “God-centered” or “man-centered” in its emphasis. Is glorifying God the goal, or is it pleasing people? Is God’s sovereignty emphasized, or is man the measure?

Ask to see a copy of the church’s statement of faith. Is it orthodox? Does it seem balanced? Is it so vague that a person could believe anything and be comfortable there? Ask the pastor or one of the elders any questions you may have about the church’s doctrine.

We have the Apostles’ doctrine recorded for us in the Bible. Therefore the Word of God must be the sole authority for all matters of faith and practice. There are three areas in which to look for the Word in the local church.

1. *Bible Preaching.* Is preaching from the Bible an integral part of the Sunday service? This is the most important. The pastor ought to be feeding the flock of God from the Word of God. (1 Peter 5:2)
2. *Bible Teaching.* Different from preaching, teaching seeks to involve the learner in the process of discovering practical truths from the Word for themselves. It is often less inspirational but more instructional than preaching. Bible teaching is very important. (2 Timothy 4:2)
3. *Bible in the People’s Lives.* Does it seem like the people are involved in Bible oriented conversation? This takes a little more time and is harder to see. It is a good indicator of whether it is a Bible-centered church. After all, the church is the people, not just the pastor or the teachers.

Worship

Next, consider the church’s position and practice regarding worship. Different people like different styles of worship. You may prefer more formal worship, or less formal worship. Some like lots of singing while others like less. Some like formal liturgy, others don’t. Try some different types of worship and see what seems most profitable for you and, more importantly, most glorifying to God. Look for a place where the worship is heartfelt, and is balanced between joyous and reverent. Both are valid and important. Worship content and style are indicators of what is important in a local church.

Fellowship and Accountability

Look for fellowship within the Body. Are there home Bible study groups in which you can be involved? This is important in guarding against impersonal once-a-week Christianity. The members need the Body and the Body needs the members. The people need to be involved with one another.

Does the church have an official membership? Many in our society recoil at the thought of official membership. While a church without membership may be a great church in many respects, a church that does have an official membership is more likely to have a greater sense of mutual accountability.

Fellowship includes service. Don’t look only to be served, but to serve.

Are there any programs to serve the community needs, or reach the lost with the gospel that you can plug into? What is the missions emphasis? A church, even a good Bible church, must have heart to serve or else it will become ingrown and stagnant. Sometimes the only reason these kinds of things are not happening is that no one has come along with the gifts to get them started. You may be the one God wants to use to get things rolling.

Particular Needs

If you have particular needs, you may want to find a church that is sensitive to them. Ministry to children is important. Some parents desire to keep their children in the worship service with them. Does the church allow this? Others prefer having the option of a children's ministry during the preaching. If that option is available, are the children taught God's Word? Is the teaching biblically based and Christ-centered?

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Watch out for *religious hype or emotionalism*. Much pomp and circumstance may make one feel very religious, but it does little to strengthen one's faith in Christ and walk with the Lord. By the same token, watch out for emotionalism. When someone tries to dictate to you the emotions you should feel or express, be careful. Emotions are a valid part of the Christian experience, but they are not the goal. We must not allow ourselves to be manipulated or forced into emotionalism.

Beware of "man-centered" doctrine. Many churches these days are more interested in pleasing man than in pleasing God, more about entertaining people than in exalting God. Beware of churches that are into the "church-growth movement" or consider themselves to be "seeker-sensitive."

Extremes in doctrine are also a warning signal. Some churches have a pet doctrine or practice that is over-emphasized to the exclusion of other important aspects of the Christian life. Some examples of this that are common in the Body today are ultra-charismatic vs. anti-charismatic disputes. Another is the subject of faith and prosperity. The bottom line on these and all such issues is the Bible. If we stick with the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible we will avoid much trouble.

Some churches have such an *emphasis on externals* (facilities, an altar, busses, programs, etc.), that the Lord is all but forgotten. Jesus said "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24) God's Word declares that temporal things will all be done away with (2 Corinthians 4:18). Our emphasis ought to be on God, His Word, and people, which are the only things that will last forever.

THE NEXT STEP

After you have looked and prayed and found a church that is faithful to preach the Word and where you can get involved, talk to the pastor. If it is a large church, you may be referred to an assistant pastor due to the very busy schedule that many lead pastors must keep. In either case, call and make an appointment telling him that you have been attending for some time and are interested in discussing what part you and your family might have in the Body.

When you meet with a representative, be prepared to ask questions. Be prepared to listen to the answers as well. Ask questions about the four marks of a New Testament church. Ask questions about children's ministry, opportunities for you to minister, etc. You may also wish to ask to see some printed material about the church and/or denomination.

When talking with the leaders of a prospective church, do not complain about your former church. Refrain from talking about all you have done for the Lord in the past, or hinting at what you can do for this church. Experienced pastors will be wary of you from the beginning if you do these things. After visiting with the pastor, you should be ready to make a decision.

When making this decision remember what was said in the beginning: DON'T EXPECT PERFECTION! Too many wish to find a perfect church. When they do not, they move on, never developing any roots. Many communities are full of Christians who play musical church, or the "Bless Me" game. They run from church to church never making a commitment and always leaving upset that things were not "just so." Often they go to the next church, bad-mouthing the previous one, while sowing seeds of division along the way.

May I suggest you make a commitment of at least six-months—maybe even a year. Get involved in ministry, teaching, praying, working with children, setting up chairs, or even cleaning toilets. Just get involved! Statistically, the average spiritual life expectancy of a believer who is not active in some type of ministry is very short.

If the church is one that has an official membership, join. Give of your time, talents, and money, and be part of the Body of Jesus Christ.

IN CONCLUSION

Do not put off the quest for a church home for you and your family. Each week that you are not in the fellowship of other believers, you will be making it that much harder to get started the next week. After missing a couple of weeks it will be easier to miss a few more. Then before you know it, you will be totally out of fellowship. This is dangerous for two reasons.

First because the Word says:

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24-25

By this we see that it is a command to be a part of a church.

The *second* reason is for survival. As was stated earlier, those who do not get involved in ministry in the local church will not last very long in that church. Worse yet, the believer who does not even attend with a nominal involvement often does not last at all. When the coal rolls away from the rest of the fire, it goes out. Because you are loved so very much, don't let that happen to you!