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CHOOSING A CHURCH HOME

By Michael J. Wilkins
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CHOOSING A CHURCH HOME

Many have experienced the joy of becoming a part of a church that meets their needs for worship, instruction, fellowship, and outreach. But many of us, too, after becoming part of a vital church ministry, are forced to leave that fellowship behind as a job change or the pursuit of higher education takes us across the city or across the country. Others find that a church which once seemed comfortable is no longer compatible with an evolving lifestyle or theology.

Finding a new church home can be as confusing, and as important, as choosing a new place to live. We often find ourselves looking for a twin to our former church, a search that almost always ends in frustration. Even if we find a similar church, we may discover that with the changes in our lifestyles, that type of church no longer "fits."

As we look for criteria upon which to base our decisions, we must first search out what the Bible says about the elements of a healthy local body. But when we get down to applying these biblical criteria to the local church, we find that no church emphasizes them in the same way, and no church carries them out perfectly. Besides, each of us has different needs and personal preferences. How can we pursue biblical standards while looking for a church in which we feel comfortable?

I have found that the search takes time, requires diligent study of the biblical criteria for a local body, and requires prayer and spiritual sensitivity. As I have contemplated my own experience and my understanding of the Word, I have developed three tests for the local church. Based on one of the classic passages on church involvement, Hebrews 10:23-25, these tests may be summarized by the terms *balance*, *order*, and *harmony*.

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BALANCE

First, determine whether the church you are considering attempts to balance the majority of the biblical criteria for a congregation. Quite often churches are strong in one or two areas, but weak in others. In the long run, the strongest churches are those that attempt to develop a balanced and well-rounded ministry. Try to determine if the church is solidly founded on the truth of the gospel and is not involved in some doctrinal distraction.

When we were young Christians, my wife and I considered joining a church fellowship that was beginning in our area. While we understood the necessity for strong leadership, we were disturbed by the group's emphasis on the founder's authority. We later learned that the group was a cult. Doctrinal imbalance can be discovered by looking at the church's confession of faith, by listening to the teaching of the pastors and leaders, and, if possible, by attending a new members' class.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts, "Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23). He suggested that stability in the local church is vitally related to its grasp of biblical doctrine.

Look for balance in other areas as well. While most churches tend to focus on certain ministry emphases appropriate for their cultural environments, you may find that you are stifled by an overemphasis. Look for balances of teaching and practical outworking, worship and godliness, spontaneity and structure, evangelism and social awareness, opportunities to serve and opportunities to be served. Keep in mind that though a church may meet your immediate needs, it may not hold the potential for keeping up with your spiritual development or changes in your family. You should be able to get a feel for balance in these



and other areas within two or three visits to the church.

One vital step that can help you sense the heartbeat of the church is to set up an appointment with one of the leaders—the pastor, one of the pastoral staff, or one of the elders or deacons. Go with a humble, teachable spirit, yet be direct with your questions about the church.

You might ask a doctrinally-oriented question such as, "Where does this church stand on the issue of the inerrancy and authority of the Bible?" The ramifications of the church's beliefs about both are far-reaching.

A question such as, "What is the goal of your outreach program?" may help you see if the church is truly concerned with reaching the world for the sake of Christ, or reaching the community for the sake of the church's growth program. Evaluate the goals of the church's ministry in the light of your perceived spiritual needs. Try eliciting responses through open-ended questions such as, "What kind of person is your Sunday school program (or youth group, or discipleship group, etc.) attempting to produce?"

Looking for a balanced church is a relatively subjective matter, because no two individuals will desire the same balance. It may be helpful to analyze your own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of the church. You may find that the Lord wants to use your strengths to build up weak ministries of the church. In the same way, the church's ministry emphases may stimulate growth in your weak areas.

ORDER

While it should not stifle spontaneity and freedom for the Spirit to move as He wills, a church needs order if God's will for it is to be accomplished (1 Cor. 14:33). Look for evidence of order in such areas as worship and exercise of



gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:40), pursuit of holiness (1 Tim. 4:8), preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4:14-16), financial collections (1 Cor. 16:2), and ministry to various groups within the church (1 Tim. 5) and community (Mt. 25:31-46).

Try to determine also if the church knows where it is going, and if it is moving toward its goals. Hebrews 10:24 tells us to "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Some kind of thoughtful process is necessary for accomplishing goals.

Few churches would deny the central importance of fulfilling the Great Commission, but not all have carefully mobilized for carrying it out. Is the pastoral leadership equipping the saints to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-16), or is it a spectator church, where the pastoral staff does the work of ministry and the people come to watch the show? Good biblical leadership is essential to help guide, model, and lead the way to biblical goals, but the leaders must not do all the work.

HARMONY

Paul exhorts the church at Ephesus to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), and, strikingly, the instructions that follow are vitally linked with harmony within the church (Eph. 5:19-21.) Are the many voices of the church you are considering blended into harmony?

The local church is "out of tune" when individual members are consistently absent, singing all by themselves, singing to exalt themselves to the exclusion of the glory of God, or singing so loudly that others are drowned out. Look for harmony in the following realms: Are the gifts of the Spirit utilized for the service of all members (1 Pet. 4:10), so that loving service (e.g., teaching, mercy, helps, etc.) can build up the whole congregation? Does the worship service give you an opportunity to focus

on the Lord, yet allow you to become truly a part of a worshiping body? There are many forms and expressions of worship that we can learn from each other, but each form should enhance the joy, thanksgiving, and fellowship of the other believers.

FINAL CAUTIONS

As you look for a church, your preferences will be affected by several factors: past experiences in churches or ministries, your personality, your immediate needs. Because every local church has its own unique personality, our challenge is to lovingly accept the differences and uniqueness in each, and to allow each church the freedom to perform the ministry to which God has called it. Churches are like people—they need to be accepted for what they are and for the ministries God has for them. Comparison tends to rob the uniqueness that God has given to each.

Just as you and I are not perfect, but are in the process of being conformed into the image of our Lord Jesus, so you will never find the perfect church. You will probably not even find *all* of the features discussed here in any one church. Be wary of any church that upholds beliefs or practices that are contrary to Scripture, but recognize that the Lord desires to use us to help perfect the imperfect churches to which we are called!

From the very start, go as a participant, not as a critic. Even if you do not settle in the church you are visiting, if it is a Bible-believing church you will enjoy a time of worship with other believers. No matter how short your stay, you can practice the admonition to "encourage one another" (Heb. 10:25).

You may have only a few good choices of churches in your area, or you may have many from which to choose. In either case, be careful of adopting the "church-shopper" or



"church-jumper" mentality. The church-shopper continually goes around from church to church and never settles into a fellowship. The church-jumper settles for awhile, but when troubles or lack of excitement become evident, he jumps to another church. Seek the will of the Lord concerning your involvement and be ready to commit yourself.

The most important step in finding a church home is the first one: Go! You may find it easy *not* to go. Before you become involved, you will not feel a sense of commitment or the encouragement of close fellowship. You may be tempted to stay away altogether (many find it difficult to enter a sanctuary as a stranger). At these times, remember the exhortation of Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." As surely as the day of Christ's return is approaching, soon the day will come when your new church becomes a home, and you'll find yourself serving joyously and effectively as a member of this unique local body of Christ.

BIBLICAL CRITERIA FOR CHURCHES

What does the Bible teach about the purpose, function, and organization of the church? The need to find a new church home can provide excellent motivation for you to do your own study of the biblical teaching on the individual church.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is often regarded as the heart of his teaching on the purpose and function of the church. Paul's discussion ranges from sublime treatments of the establishment of the Church universal (Eph. 2, 3), to specific statements of the function of the church (Eph. 4:11-16), to practical exhortations directed to nearly every area of church life (Eph. 4:17-6:20). The letters to Timothy and Titus, written to young pastors, contain many of the organizational guidelines incorporated into local church government.

As you begin your study, consider the following basic elements found in New Testament teaching about the Body of Christ:

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST AS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church" (Eph. 1:22).

ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you . . ." (Mt. 28:19-20).

COMMITMENT TO THE WORD OF GOD AND SOUND DOCTRINE BASED ON THE WORD OF GOD

"If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a



good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" (1 Tim. 4:6).

TEACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD

"... Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13).

SOUND AND MATURE LEADERSHIP

"... Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12).

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16, cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-13, 5:17-21).

MEANINGFUL WORSHIP, INCLUDING INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE EXPRESSION IN MUSIC

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:19-20).

PRAYER

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority . . ." (1 Tim. 2:1,2).

FELLOWSHIP IN THE SPIRIT OF GOD

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXERCISING THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT TO SERVE THE REST OF THE BODY

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11, 12).

ONGOING DISCIPLESHIP

"I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you" (1 Cor. 11:2).

"And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2).



SIX DECADES OF BROADCAST MINISTRY

As a listener-funded ministry of Biola University, the purpose of the "Biola Hour" is to equip Christians to impact the world for Jesus Christ. This radio ministry also has the unique opportunity to present the gospel to the unsaved—as well as provide a biblical foundation from which Christians can grow.

On March 22, 1922, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) transmitted its first broadcast over radio station KJS, soon renamed KTBI to represent "The Bible Institute." This station was among the first to be licensed in the U.S. for strictly religious programming and featured devotional and educational programs taught by Institute faculty and guest speakers.

After the stockmarket crash of 1929, Biola and its supporters faced a grave financial crisis. In 1931, the Institute's radio station was sold for \$37,500 and renamed KFAC. Under the new ownership, Biola secured several hours of daily air time and was able to broadcast only a portion of its regular programs.

In 1932, Dr. Louis T. Talbot, then president of Biola and pastor of the Church of the Open Door, picked up the pieces of the radio ministry and broadcast the programs at his own expense. Biola reinstated the "Biola Hour" in 1937 as a part of its outreach.

The program gained momentum and its constituency grew—and by 1946 it was aired over most of the 183 stations of the coast-to-coast Mutual Network.

In 1952, Dr. Al Sanders began his guidance of the "Biola Hour" as producer, director and announcer—and he has continued his association with the broadcast over the past three decades. Today, the "Biola Hour" features the teaching of Dr. David Hocking and can be heard on stations across the United States and Canada.