

# in search of a church



Just in case you ever *had* to leave church at Matthias, it's worth knowing what to look for in a church. In the Bible, the word 'church' just means gathering or assembly – even a riotous mob can be called a 'church' (Acts 19:32). But *Christ's* church is a very special gathering: his body, his bride, his building project (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 5:25-27; Eph 4:11-16).

Of course, the saying goes, 'If you find the perfect church, don't join it – you'll only ruin it'. The only perfect church you'll ever find is the one gathered around Christ in heaven, a church where we are gathered already and is also our eternal destiny (Heb 12:18-24). On earth though, it'd be a mistake to go searching for the perfect church. If no church is perfect, then what matters when you're in search of a church?

Here's what we'd look for ...

## Honouring the Bible as God's word



The Bible is sufficient for knowing God. God reveals himself and his purposes in and through His word. It is here, in the Word of God, we meet and discover Jesus Christ, who is the head of the Church. Christ died for the church, He loves His church, He is present in it, and He sustains it and rules it by His word. As we submit to His word the Bible we submit to Christ as our Lord.

When looking for a church to belong to, look for a church that doesn't just talk about believing the Bible, but honours the Bible as God's word in practice: by teaching the Bible in faithful preaching and pastoring, in group and individual study of the *whole* Bible.

*"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" – 2 Timothy 3:16 ESV*

## The centre: the cross of Christ and 'justification by faith'

There are two non-negotiable truths that explain what makes a Christian, two truths that can't be separated, twin truths that must be at the centre of any church:

1. The finished work of Christ on the cross – God has restored our broken relationship with him through his Son Jesus willingly bearing the punishment we deserve. Christ has won salvation for us 'once for all' (1 Pet 3:18).
2. 'Justification by faith' – this means that we're declared right ('justified') with God simply by trusting in Jesus & his death for us. There's nothing we can add or contribute to our salvation; we simply put our trust ('faith') in Jesus' death. Our salvation is by 'grace' – God's gift to those who deserve only punishment.

Denying the wonderful truth that we're saved only through Jesus' death in our place undermines the confidence that the blood of Jesus, our great high priest, really has washed us clean (Heb 10:19-22). In the end a gospel of 'Jesus plus what I do' is a false gospel, as Paul's fiery letter to the Galatians indicates.

If you're in search of a church, ask some hard questions:

- Does the church say that we need to add our works to Jesus' work on the cross in order to be saved?
- Do they believe we can be confident now of God's acceptance?
- Do they focus on what we have to DO or what Jesus has DONE?



*"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* – Ephesians 2:10 ESV

## Truth and love



The church is Christ's body, being built (Ephesians 4:11-16). So look for a church that is a building site, where the building materials are 'speaking the truth in love' (Eph 4:15). If the Bible is being faithfully taught as God's word and God's truth, then churches should be characterised by truth, love and obedience.

When you're in search of a church, look for a church where:

- the truth is spoken in love, not afraid to teach the hard things so people grow to maturity
- there's a warm welcome for outsiders, genuine relationships, sharing of lives
- there's a passion to see non-Christians come to trust in Jesus
- there is a real dependence on God

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* – Ephesians 4:15-16 ESV

## Practicalities

You need to find a church where you can actually meet with other Christians around the Bible, so it needs to meet regularly at a time when you can go. You can't love people if you don't know them, so look for a church where you can get involved in other people's lives – where you'll be able to encourage others and be encouraged.

And remember, it's always a two-way street when it comes to settling in – you need to make an effort to get to know people as much as they'll try to welcome you in. Be wise when searching for a church, but be humble and helpful once you've joined.

## When is a church not a church?

Sometimes a gathering that claims to follow Jesus and calls itself a 'church' can be so far gone that it's not a Christian gathering at all. When is a church not a church?

- When it abandons 'justification by faith' (note the harsh words in Gal 1:1-10!)
- When it abandons Jesus, who is fully God & fully man (John 1:1; 1 John 4:1-3)
- When it abandons the apostles' words (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 John 4:6)
- When it abandons God's words for its own (Mark 7:1-13)

## Let's go church-shopping!

Forgetting the consumer mentality to church, if you need to go 'church-shopping' in the best sense of the word, then try testing a church against some biblical criteria:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Honours the Bible as God's word above its own word</i>										
<i>Centres on Jesus' finished work on the cross</i>										
<i>Teaches justification by faith</i>										
<i>Honours Christ as God</i>										
<i>A prepared bride (values holiness)</i>										
<i>A body being built (the truth is spoken in love) (values people &amp; their gifts)</i>										
<i>Expects the return of Jesus (encourages evangelism &amp; fears judgement)</i>										
<i>Meets regularly when I can go</i>										

This obviously leaves lots of room for churches to differ about things that don't matter, like how a church is organised. What other issues don't matter that much?

## And finally ...

If you ever feel you *have* to leave the church you're at, make sure you talk with friends and your small group leader or minister before leaving (unless you've worked out it's a cult, in which case run for your life!) The reason for this is that ... if you've noticed problems others haven't, they'd probably be glad to know ... or if you're leaving for other reasons, they'll be keen to pray for you and send you off.

And wherever you end up, make sure your life's passion is the same as Jesus' – building his church. Until he returns, Jesus has promised: **'I will build my church'** (Mt 16:18).

