

#5 “Where Should I Go to Church?”

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There is no doubt that the desire of God in His Word is that the church gather together corporately. The very definition of the word church (*ekklesia*) implies that we assemble ourselves together. The word was used generally to mean, “A gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.”[1] Applied to believers, it clearly means assembling ourselves together for worship. The meeting of the local church is thus an assembly of the called of Christ, though it should welcome those who don’t know Christ and kindly confront them with truth. This gathering time for believers is a place to confess common faith, doctrine, and belief. It is a place to worship God, rejoicing and celebrating His victory over death one Sunday morning two thousand years ago (Acts 20:7). It is a place of imperfect people who seek to become more like Christ and who challenge one another to love and good deeds. It is an opportunity to give to meet the needs of one another and those around us (1 Corinthians 16:2). It is a place of forgiveness, repentance, and, if necessary, discipline (Matthew 18:15-17). It is a house of prayer (Mark 11:17) and an opportunity to be taught by those who are gifted in preaching and teaching (Ephesians 4:10-12). Hebrews 10:23-25 says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” Thus, the assembly of believers that we call church is an opportunity to keep our hope in tact as we see evidence of the Spirit working in the lives of one another. It pushes each of us on toward further righteousness, and it is an opportunity to hold the confession that is ours corporately. As we thus grow in sound doctrine, we increase in our unity and maturity.

This understanding of church is really helpful in deciding where we should attend. There are a plethora of options available as we live in a religious society, no matter what the atheists and naturalists might try to tell us. Even their lack of religion is a worship of something. We all are designed to worship, and unfortunately, most worship the wrong things, the wrong gods, and the wrong ways. God has said how we should worship Him, namely in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). Thus, if a church has wrong doctrine or a wrong approach to Scripture, thereby undermining the truth aspect of worship, we should not attend there. The church is built upon the rock of a solid doctrinal understanding (Matthew 16:16-18), and if this isn’t in place, the visible church may not be the true church. Thus sound doctrine is extremely important. That a church approaches God’s Word as infallible, inerrant, and authoritative is crucial. Many churches say they do, but then they deny a literal interpretation of various passages that are clearly not symbolic or metaphorical in nature. This we need to be wary of. We should seek to be a part of a church that seeks to teach and be taught the whole counsel of God (Matthew 28:20). That they believe Jesus to be the Son of God and the sacrifice for sins is essential. The doctrine of the Trinity is also important in that they understand that God, Christ, and the Spirit are

all One. It must be clear that they believe salvation to be by grace through faith by the work of Christ on our behalf. Additionally, repentance should be taught as necessary for faith (Luke 13:5).

Sound doctrine is far and away the most important criterion for choosing which local assembly to be a part of. The church is the “pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) which is founded upon truth, indwelt by the Truth, and led by the Spirit into all truth (John 16:13). Truth is supported, developed, and applied to life as we learn sound doctrine. Doctrine is not something in a binder in the pastor’s office, but it is what we believe. Doctrine is thus an absolute that must be applied personally to our thoughts and beliefs. In order to be saved, we must confess sound doctrine along with repenting and trusting Christ by faith. There is an intellectual assent to true propositions about God and Christ that we must accept. But it cannot and does not stop there. If we want to grow to maturity in Christ, we must continue to learn sound doctrine, holding fast to it so that we can think and live rightly. Our doctrine cannot and should not stop at a minimalist confession of faith, for the call of the Christian is to learn as much as we can about all that Christ has commanded us (Matthew 28:20). Our confession should be that we believe whatever the Bible says.

In addition to truth, proper worship is to be done in spirit. If we are not saved, we cannot worship God in the right spirit because we need to have our spirit reborn. Thus, the gospel must be made clear to those who might be visiting or who have been invited by friends. Secondly, Christians will not be in the right spirit if they have unconfessed sin. Thus, a church that takes sin lightly, articulates a defeatist mentality of always being in the old man or in bondage to self, or is made up of people who are unwilling to lovingly confront one another about sin is not a biblical church. Biblical love, a key mark of the church (John 13:34-35), cannot be mistaken for tolerance of sin. Thirdly, worshipping in spirit also implies that we yield to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can have all the right doctrine and say or sing all the right words, but, if our heart is not enraptured by Christ, we may not be worshipping at all. Worship has both spirit and truth components. The right words are a must, but so is a right heart attitude, a proper posture before a holy God, and thoughts that are not self-consumed or judging of others.

Finding a home church can be a journey and a challenge, yet we must pursue an association with God’s people with earnestness and eagerness. We need the teaching, the support, the encouragement, the prayer, and the fellowship that is fundamental to the proper functioning of life in Christ and to the body of Christ. Church burnout, hypocrisy, or sin of any kind in the church is not an excuse to “do church on our own.” It may take time, even years, before we are able to find others of like mind and heart, but we must never cease to love the coming together of the faithful. Church by definition is a corporate calling.

If we find ourselves in a place that is spiritually lifeless with people who are not spirit-filled and growing, we may need to look elsewhere. If we find ourselves in a place that is minimizing truth or not teaching the full counsel of God, we may need to move on. We

won't ever find a perfected church this side of eternity, but we should seek to be part of one that is passionately pursuing perfection according to the truth of God's Word and actively seeking God's refining and reviving work. The church doesn't have to be a burden of performance, stress, inefficiency, hurt, and hypocrisy. Neither is it to be entertainment for selfish consumption. It is to be a coming together of God's people to encounter our Lord in worship in spirit and in truth. May the Lord provide such a place for all who desire it, and may we do our part to see that such a place does indeed exist.

[1]Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Ekklesia". "The New Testament Greek Lexicon".

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