

What to Look for in a Church

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The purpose of this article is to provide some practical suggestions for finding a Bible-teaching church, whether you are new to an area or trying to help a friend or relative find a church. The following are some suggestions.

In this discussion we expect that the churches being considered are:

1. Evangelical (believe the Gospel of grace for salvation).
2. Bible believing (believe that the Scriptures are inerrant and sufficient for believers).

Interpretation and Teaching

The most important issue is to find a church that interprets and teaches the Word with consistency. Though most churches will say that they interpret and teach the Word consistently, you will need to narrow the investigation and consider only churches that interpret the Bible in a *consistently literal manner*.

This restriction excludes all “covenant (theology) churches,” even though many covenant churches believe the true gospel of grace. What are covenant theology distinctions? This may need a bit of explaining. The test to discover if a church is “covenant” is quite simple (although the issues are great!).

Two Revealing Questions

You simply ask:

1. “Do you believe in the rapture of the Church?”
If they say yes (so far so good), the second question is,
2. “When do you believe the rapture will occur?”
The likely answers are:
 1. Before;
 2. In the middle of; or
 3. At the end of the seven year tribulation.

If they say “before the tribulation,” you know that church *is not built on covenant theology*. It is as simple as that! The belief in and timing of the rapture may seem to be a trivial matter, but the underlying basis is made evident with these questions.

System of Interpretation

These questions reveal the system of Bible interpretation used. *Interpretation* is the very bedrock for understanding God’s Word. The Bible is truth! If parts of the Bible were allegory (as covenant theologians claim regarding prophetic prophecies) then that part of Scripture would be useless in the understanding of truth. While arguments over this question of interpretation have filled hundreds of volumes of books, the fundamental difference between these views is that the covenant theologians make no distinction between Israel and the Church. They believe Israel is the Old Testament Church and that the Church is the New Israel. The assumption necessary for rescinding the clear statements of promise to Abraham (see Genesis 12, 15, 17) in the Old Testament is the failure of national Israel to fulfill their duty in obedience to God. This, covenant theologians hold, “gives God the right” to change the terms of the unconditional promise made to Abraham and replace ethnic Israel with a “spiritual Israel” making the kingdom a “spiritual kingdom” of the heart. However, the testimony of the Lord is clear:

“Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: ‘If this fixed order departs from before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘Then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever’” (Jer 31:35,36).

Read the entire context of this passage. Notice that *the survival of Israel as a nation is as sure as the phenomenon of day and night*.

In a striking inconsistency, the covenantalists believe that the promises made to Israel were literal in the provision of a Savior but they punish Israel and deny them any further blessing in the future. It must be noted that with Israel in the land these days, the view that the land is a mere figure for heaven and a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men is eroding in the minds of some theologians.

Calvinism vs. Arminianism

This issue relates to how we see God and how we see ourselves. First, we must examine the role of God (a Trinitarian God is assumed). Is God sovereign or is He subject to any condition outside Himself? The “short hand” description of these two major views can be summarized as Calvinism or Arminianism.

Calvinists (the name is taken from John Calvin, circa 1550 AD) believe in God’s sovereignty in all things, even the salvation of the lost. Arminians (the name is taken from Jacob Arminius, 1560-1609 AD) believe God adjusts His plan based on what man does.

A point of clarification: A very popular form of Arminianism holds that God looks ahead and sees what a man will do and then elects him (or passes over him) for salvation on the basis of man’s choice. While the battle rages over this point, the popular trend is toward a *man-centered theology*--thus Arminian. This is evident in the self-help agenda that has become so popular in the last ten years. The (Arminian) result is that man has ceased to be dependent on God’s truth and has been taken captive by the thoughts, plans, ideas and solutions proposed by men which are to solve his problems.

There is no simple test for this view but the following question may cover the issue. *“Do you believe in God’s electing work for salvation?”* Of course the answer should be yes.

Lordship Issue

A third issue which has been revisited and popularized in the last 25 years has become known as the “lordship” debate. “Dispensationalism” (the name for the first point in this article) is often linked to the “anti-lordship” or “lordless gospel” camp. This is unfortunate and has no theological connection except that some dispensational teachers hold to a lordless view of the gospel. The “grace” (lordless view) proponents see salvation only as a legal transaction and expect no change of heart or actions. There is no evident commitment on the part of the would-be Christian. According to this view you may not be able to tell a Christian from a non-Christian--certainly not by examining the life!

Although there are varying degrees of differences in this matter held by various teachers, a simple question to ask is, *“Do you see the work of God in salvation as one step or two (or more)?”*

The two step view is as follows:

- Step one: Saved (justification is a legal term), and
- Step two: Sanctified (set apart) for service to God.

In other words, one may accept Jesus as Savior now and then submit to Him as Lord later.

The correct view of salvation is that it is a one step package. We have been granted everything pertaining to life and godliness at salvation (Eph 1). Growth and maturity is the normal process as we grow in relationship with Christ.

Spiritual Gifts

The last consideration is the view on spiritual gifts. Two representative views are that:

- 1) The early church gifts are all duplicated today. This includes the gifts of apostleship, healings, tongues speaking, etc...

- 2) The miraculous gifts ceased to be given after the apostles left the scene. This is the view we hold.

So the question is “*Do you believe the miraculous gifts are given today, like the gifts of healing and tongues?*” As with the rapture question, the real defining issue is not whether one speaks in tongues or not but whether God continues to reveal himself to individuals as He did in the time of the Scriptures.

Scripture clearly shows that the temporary gifts were used to validate the ministry of the apostles (1 Cor 14:22 and 2 Cor 12:12). Other “revelations of God” that are experienced by believers are subjective and personal and they are not open for study or review as are the Scriptures.

Doctrinal Points

One final word about these doctrinal points. It is one thing to loosely hold to an incorrect view. It is quite another to have a church *oppose* the correct view. The clarity of a view on a given doctrinal subject is a valid consideration in selecting a church. Not all churches will be strongly dispensational, Calvinistic, lordship and non-charismatic to the same degree. There must be a basic commitment to the correct view which should be evident before selecting the church for your family.

Other Important Factors

Although we have only dealt with doctrinal issues, there are many other matters that factor into a church choice:

1. Location (this has to do with involvement potential).
2. Philosophy of the church ministry (what does the church see as important and how they carry out that work).
3. How does the church see its role in society? What is the government of the church? What is the involvement level of the body in ministry?
4. What is the quality and focus of the worship services?
5. Are the people who are leading and attending the church people you could use as role models?
6. What is the testimony of the church in the community? Is it known for Bible teaching and evangelism?
7. Does the leadership seem aggressive about their tasks? Do they motivate the people to serve with their hearts?
8. Is there a good group of new believers in the church?
9. Do the surroundings make one feel welcome?
10. Are there opportunities for me (and family) to participate and serve during the week?
11. Is the preaching and teaching quality of the church sufficient for me (and family) to grow?

Choosing “Friends” Rather than a Good Church

We have not said anything about friends or style of ministry. Friends will come as we serve together. The preaching style should be judged on the question, “*Can I grow under the teaching of this ministry?*” In your search for a good church you may add more things to your list that are important for you that we have missed. Doctrines should not be negotiable in your choice of a church home. If the doctrines and leadership seem biblical as we have discussed them, it is likely that you have discovered a good church.