

Finding A Church

By Michael Horton

A Brief Guide for the Discriminating Worshiper

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"How can I find a church where I will hear Christ preached from his Word, without all the fluff and distractions?" That is a question I have asked myself on many occasions. It is easy to understand the concern and even frustration that accompanies the search for the right place to worship. First, as with product labels, it is important to recognize what church labels mean and don't mean.

Reading Labels

If you were raised in Europe, choosing a church might not be so difficult. After the Reformation, each denomination was given its own "sphere," so that if you were born, for instance, in an Italian canton in Switzerland, you would be Roman Catholic, while a person born in French-speaking Geneva would probably be Protestant. Sometimes whole nations (or the ruling monarch's family line) shared a common confession: The Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Church of Sweden, the Dutch Reformed Church, and so on.

When America became the haven for groups that wanted to "start over" in the New World, bring the Gospel to natives, and escape persecution in their state churches, many simply brought their Old World understanding of regional state-churches. For instance, the New England Puritans established Congregationalism and barred Quakers and Roman Catholics from citizenship. This was actually more civil than the policy pursued in Europe at the time, where dissenters were arrested and sometimes even executed.

By the time our nation was founded, however, it was clear that there would be no officially state-sanctioned church for the American republic, but that Americans would be free to follow their consciences. This arrangement, with all its benefits, has nonetheless created a free-for-all in which denominations compete for souls. This freedom fueled the creation of hundreds of new sects and cults in the nineteenth century-everything from Mormonism, Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses to health-food cults, radical Pentecostal sects, and groups that drew their membership by making predictions about end-times prophetic events. The last two centuries have been an exercise in cafeteria-style spirituality, or what a friend in England calls free-enterprise religion. The issue is not so much truth, which ought to be defended and passed on, but "whatever works for you;" in other words, selecting a church is a matter of taste.

This explains the labels' origins. How do we read them? First, there are the traditional Protestant denominations that built and shaped most of America's institutions well into the twentieth century: the Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Reformed (Dutch, German, Hungarian, French), Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans and Methodists. The first major break in Protestantism came between the Lutherans and the Reformed, but other Protestant denominations (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Episcopal) are part of

the Reformed or Calvinistic family tree (note: while Arminian Baptists often trace their lineage back to Anabaptism, Calvinistic Baptists regard themselves as those who dissent from Calvinism only on the issues related to covenant theology and the sacraments). In other words, they shared a common belief about God, humanity, Christ, salvation, and other essentials, but they differed on other important issues. For instance, Congregationalists believed that the churches should be independently governed by the congregation; Presbyterians argued that the New Testament word "presbyter," meaning "elder," implies a form of church government based on brother-elders in a given area ruling the churches, and the Episcopalians insisted on a hierarchy of pastors (bishops) over other pastors (ministers). Historically, the form of church government, and not disagreements over the way of salvation, has divided these churches.

In the 1800s revivalism and frontier individualism led to an explosion of cults and sects. Self-proclaimed "prophets" drew many people away from traditional Protestant churches and many of these are now established groups: the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Cumberland Presbyterians, and a host of Pentecostal groups. Pietistic groups (mostly of Lutheran descent) added divisions to the ranks. They came to believe traditional Protestantism lost its first love by emphasizing doctrine. These includes the Brethren denominations, Free Churches (Evangelical Free, Evangelical Covenant, etc.), and a host of independent Bible churches that were born over the last century and a half. Many of them officially adopted the dispensational theology of J. N. Darby by the mid-twentieth century.

Meanwhile, the traditional Protestant denominations themselves began to tolerate and then embrace the Enlightenment, with its belief in human goodness, natural explanations for everything, and the rejection of the need for divine intervention, revelation, or salvation. During the first half of the twentieth century, these "mainline" denominations experienced major schisms. This has contributed scores of new denominations to the religious landscape. For instance, in the Presbyterian family alone, where there was once one Presbyterian Church in America, there are now many: the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA), which is the largest and, generally speaking, the most liberal body; the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the largest of the groups separating over liberalism; the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), a doctrinally conservative Calvinistic body which was the first group founded in the separation from the PCUSA; the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA), also known as the "Covenanters," with their roots in Scotland, consisting of those who believe that Scripture requires the singing of Psalms only and without instrumental accompaniment; and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), which is committed to a less doctrinally defined position on the specifics of reformed theology. The Korean-American Presbyterian Church (KAPC) is also a significant denomination and is quite conservative on Scripture but with considerable latitude in worship and the interpretation of Reformed distinctives. While there are many splits in American Protestantism, there is also a constant ecumenical drive to reunite divided churches, so long as there is a common orthodox faith. Many of the denominations just mentioned enjoy close fraternal relations.

The Reformed denominations are closely affiliated with the Presbyterian ones; in fact, the tradition is often called "the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition." Many churches in

Europe are part of the "regional churches" mentioned earlier. They have a different history-not because of doctrinal differences, but because they came from a different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historical background. For instance, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the oldest Protestant denomination in America, has its roots in the Dutch Reformed Church. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was brought to North America by those who belonged to a more orthodox Reformed denomination in Holland. As more recent immigrants (from the late 19th century to the present), CRC members were generally much less aware of, much less infatuated by, American evangelicalism (i.e., revivalism). However, that is changing and the CRC now accepts contemporary worship styles, controversial church growth programs and the ordination of women to all offices.

As a result, many churches left the CRC. At first, some remained independent, while others founded the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC). In recent years, the United Reformed Churches (URC) was founded as an effort in part to unite churches of the Reformed confession and to reach out to non-Dutch communities.

There are smaller ethnic churches, such as the Korean Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), with roots historically in the German Reformed Church. The RCUS refused to enter the United Church of Christ, which was a mid-twentieth century attempt to unite Congregationalists and the Evangelical (Lutheran) and Reformed Church.

That brings us to the Lutheran family tree, which is considerably easier to explain. The largest Lutheran denomination is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the result of a merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The second largest is the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, which is much more doctrinally confessional, that is, true to its confession of faith. The Wisconsin Synod is, generally speaking, even more conservative.

With the exception of the Reformed Episcopal Church (REC), which separated from the mainline denomination over creeping Roman Catholic, "high church" influences, Episcopalians in America, much like their counterparts in England, Canada, Africa and Asia enjoyed unity until recently. The growth of liberalism led to the formation of a "church within a church" called the Episcopal Synod of America, which is a non-geographical jurisdiction that would allow a traditional Anglican in Detroit to be ordained by an evangelical bishop in Dallas, if his Detroit bishop is a liberal churchman. This coalition is still within the mainline denomination, but meets separately and carries on its own activities. The group consists of traditional Anglicans, who oppose liberalism and in most cases the ordination of women, and is a mixture of those who are low-church (evangelical) and high-church (Catholic) in their leanings.

Congregationalists generally do not have a confession of faith or catechism. Presbyterians use the Westminster Confession and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms; the Reformed use the "Three Forms of Unity"-the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort; Lutherans use the Book of Concord, which includes the Augsburg Confession, and they employ Luther's Smaller and Larger Catechisms; the Episcopalians have the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion for their confession. Each of

these confessions and catechisms was written during or just after the Reformation. To the degree that a denomination or church judges its preaching, teaching, worship, and church life by these standards, it is "confessional." Most mainline churches today either ignore their confession or allow their ministers and officials to reject their official confession of faith. Many conservative evangelical off-shoots do the same, not from an outright rejection of sound teaching so much as an apathy toward doctrine, creeds, confessions, and the catechetical instruction of youth. In both cases the result is the same: A generation of professing Christians that is unaware of its own beliefs enough to be able to question and search.

Be careful not to read labels too closely. For instance, although the United Church of Christ (not to be confused with the Churches of Christ or the Disciples of Christ) is the nation's most liberal denomination, judging by its avant-garde policy-making, it may be possible to find a decent UCC parish in your neighborhood. In fact, it is possible that a PCUSA (mainline) congregation in the neighborhood might actually be more committed to the Reformation faith than a church that belongs to a more conservative evangelical branch of Presbyterianism. It is not likely, but it is possible. You can't always judge a church by its name these days!

Make Sure Your "Church" Is A Church

Until this century, Christians of all types believed that there are true churches and false churches. Just because it says "church" over the door doesn't mean it is one. That is why the reformers drew from Scripture two undeniable marks of the true church: It is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered.

To be sure, the reformers knew that this happens in varying degrees. For instance, even in a conservative Protestant church, one might be disappointed with the handling of a certain text. One might be absolutely convinced that the preacher was in error in his explanation. But that does not mean that an otherwise sound church should no longer be regarded as a true church. The reformers meant that it had to be a church in which the clear preaching of the text focused on Christ's promise to save sinners. In other words, the preaching of the Law and the Gospel must be clearly affirmed and proclaimed in the local parish, if it is to be considered a true church. When a denomination or a church officially rejects the Gospel or any essential teaching of the Nicene Creed, it commits apostasy and is no longer part of the visible body of Christ. Individuals within it may be saved, but the congregation or denomination has officially severed itself from Christ's visible church.

The second mark of a true church is that the sacraments are affirmed and employed alongside the Word as a means of grace. Traditionally, Reformed, Presbyterian and Lutheran Protestants have argued that "rightly administering the sacraments" surely entails infant baptism and the rejection of any view of the Lord's Supper which reduces it to a mere symbol or memorial. Again, this does not mean that people who disagree with this definition are not really Christians; it is a question of what properly constitutes a rightly ordered, visible church.

If a church fits these definitions, you may want to overlook other problems. When taste, rather than truth, is the criterion for choosing a church, people will place music style, programs, and children's activities at the top of the list. The most essential issue is this: Is

this a place where God and his revelation in Christ's person and work is clearly declared, and where people are serious about growing in Christ through Word, sacrament, prayer, evangelism, and missions? Is this a place where my children will be trained in addition to the instruction they will receive in the home? Will they grow up hearing the Gospel?

Down To Brass Tacks: What Do You Ask The Pastor?

If you can't judge a church by its label, how can you judge it? Here are some questions to ask the pastor:

- 1.** What is the church's view of Scripture? Is it infallible, the only ultimate authority for faith and practice?
- 2.** What is the church's confession of faith? Where does this particular minister stand on it and is it the criterion for the teaching and preaching of God's Word? If you really get "lucky," you might even find a church that still uses its catechism. A confession of faith is not equal to Scripture, but it does set forth what the church body believes God's Word teaches and expects us to know. A catechism is simply a means of instruction about that confession of faith, usually through a question and answer approach, with biblical texts supporting each answer. In many confessionally consistent denominations, one may find Sunday school curricula that follow a person all of the way from pre-school age to the twilight years. This is important, because it organizes our thoughts about God and reading of Scripture into a coherent, clear, and systematic whole.
- 3.** Is the service conducted as God's meeting with his people to give them his grace and for them to respond in thanksgiving? Or is it modeled on entertainment?
- 4.** Is Jesus Christ proclaimed as a moral hero or as redeemer? In other words, is he made to sound like Freud, Ben Franklin, a politician, and an end-times seer, or is the preaching concerned with "Christ and him crucified," as Paul put it?

If You Must Leave

Reformation Christians don't throw the baby out with the bath water in their rejection of the errors of Romanism. We still have a high doctrine of the church, and that is what makes it exceedingly difficult to leave a church or denomination that is corrupt. Often it is difficult to decide when the time comes to separate. If a local congregation departs from the faith, is it legitimate to stay on to try to change it, so long as the official confession of faith has not yet been finally rejected? I believe it is, and that God calls us to hold our churches and denominations accountable to their own confession. So long as this remains the official confession of faith, it is assumed that everyone in the ministry of that denomination agrees with its articles. If not, the individual ministers who, with their mouth, vow to preserve the confession are in fact doing the very opposite and are therefore dishonest. You are not the one who has to leave, because you are being faithful to the church's confession of faith and until the denomination officially repudiates that

confession, you are certainly free (but not required) to remain in it in order to bring it back to a practical confidence in that faith. Here, depending on the denominational polity, a process of graded church courts provides for orderly and just reforms.

Many readers may be part of a non-denominational church that does not have a formal statement of faith. How can you hold your minister to the preaching and teaching of the evangelical message if, by his own reading of scripture, he is convinced of another interpretation, no matter how strange? This is a more difficult situation. If the Word is not correctly preached (that is, a clear affirmation of the essential beliefs) and the sacraments are not correctly administered, with the ministers being accountable to someone besides themselves and their admirers, it is not a true church. Abandoning a sect is not only tolerable, but necessary. Reforming a church is difficult enough, but if a gathering of believers is not biblically minded enough to call itself a "church," and does not wish to think in that direction, the wisest move would be to prayerfully search out a church that is trying, feebly or faithfully, to be a true church. Whatever you do, resist the temptation—and it will be great—to abandon or reduce your attendance at church. This is not an option for the believer, although it is very attractive, especially when settling for the local menu is sometimes so unappealing.

A final note on this point. If you must leave, do so with charity and civility. Do not be noisy about it, making your departure a matter of the public record. Follow your conscience, but realize that the reason others may not see things your way is that they are simply not persuaded yet of the convictions that have motivated your move. You will need prayer, wisdom and advice at times like these.

Seeker Sensitivity

Finally, make sure the church you choose is "seeker-sensitive." This has become the new buzzword in church growth circles, and it is usually used as an excuse to legitimize the evacuation of all meaning, liturgy, dignity, and sense of transcendence and God-centeredness. The church is redesigned to meet the felt needs of the unchurched. After being asked what kind of church they would like to attend, the modern church marketing experts tell pastors how to build them.

So why should I suggest that the church you select be "seeker-sensitive?" In John four, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth." Notice that just as we place our confidence in our own denomination or congregation as the true church, Jesus tells us that it is not a matter of which mountain we worship on, because now God resides in the body of Christ, which is the church. God says worship must be in Spirit and in truth. That is, the Spirit and the Word must go together. There can be no activity of the Holy Spirit independent of the Word, and any activity of the Word depends on the Holy Spirit for its effect.

To be sure, we must be seeker-sensitive, but there is a very important distinction here: God says that he is seeking worshipers. The modern church growth concept is founded on

the error of Arminianism, that man finds God. So we cast aside worshiping God by his criteria (the Holy Spirit and truth) in order to be seeker-sensitive. After all, we are the ones who save people and bring them into the kingdom, right? That is the assumption. But if God is the seeker, our duty is to find a congregation where God is pleased with the worship, even though the message or style may be foreign or even offensive to the unchurched. If it is, it may be due to our personality or it may also be due to the Word of God simply doing what it does. If that's the case, we are in good company with the apostles, martyrs, and reformers before us.

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