



HOW TO FIND A CHURCH HOME

Every year we get to see thousands of new students come to Denton to begin their studies at the University of North Texas. It's an exciting period of transition for everyone—new classes, new relationships, even a few new challenges. And one of the biggest challenges incoming Christian students face is deciding where they want to spend their Sunday mornings (or Sunday Evenings? Or Saturday nights?) gathering with a local church. Many have never even been in a position to decide on their own where to go to church. What should they be looking for? What are the next steps to getting involved? Do they even need to go to church at all?

This is a conversation we at the BSM have had countless times, and will happily continue having! But in an effort to make this difficult transition a little easier, we decided to write down a few thoughts:

First. Why should you even join a church? Why not just go for a hike and listen to podcasts of your favorite preacher? What's wrong with just meeting with other Christian students through a college ministry like BSM? Can't that be my "church?" Well, the short answer to that question is, "no" because, the Bible. The Bible knows nothing of a Christian who is not a member of a church. Throughout the biblical history of God's people we've seen just that: a *people*. Faith was never meant to be worked out individually, God saved us into a community. Think about how much of the New Testament is about loving *one another*. That's really hard to do listening to a Hillsong album in your dorm room. It can only happen in the context of relationships built within a church.

Now you might argue that you're a part of the "Big C" Church, that is, all believers universally, so why do you need to be a part of a local church? Well again, we turn to the Bible for an answer. In the New Testament we see very clear examples of the local pockets of the universal Church organizing themselves into local assemblies of members who have expressly committed themselves to one another—aka, churches. It's no accident most of the New Testament books are addressed to the likes of "the *church* of God that is in Corinth," or "to the *church* of the Thessalonians," specific, local congregations who gathered together regularly to build one another up under the teaching and authority of Pastors. These Pastors (synonymously called Elders and, very descriptively, Shepherds) were there to keep a watch over the souls of their members as those who would give an account to Jesus for how well they cared for their flock (the Bible tells us what Pastors should be like in places like 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9). Guys like John Piper, Ben Stuart or Judah Smith, while you can certainly benefit from their teaching resources online, are not your shepherds. They have no idea who you are.

Second. What should I be looking for in a Church? Is it how you like the music? Is the teacher relevant? Are there lots of other young people? Those aren't necessarily bad questions but they're definitely not on the rubric for what makes a healthy church. Instead, you should be looking for:

- **The Centrality of the Gospel and Biblical Preaching**
 - Colossians 1 says that Christ is Preeminent in all things. Does this church seem to think so? And when they preach, sing, and pray, do you walk away thinking more about yourself, or Jesus? The Gospel—the basic Christian belief that Jesus Christ came to save

helpless, broken sinners by dying on a cross and being raised from the dead—needs to be at the heart of everything in this church. And the Gospel is only revealed to us through the Bible. The Church should conduct all of its ministries, activities and life together with “Bibles open.” The Bible is the inspired and revealed Word of God, it’s our sole authority and the bread on which we live daily. Sermons should be rooted in the study of the scriptures, not in whatever topic or cool idea the Pastor wants to talk about that week. Songs should have scriptural references and biblical ideas, not just catchy, spiritual-sounding hooks. And any counseling, ministries and structures should have some warrant from the Bible.

- **Sound Doctrine**

- Remember, just because a church says that they’re Christian doesn’t mean it’s necessarily so. Do they believe in the trinity? In the inspiration of the Bible? In the atoning work of Christ on the cross? And while there are some big, non-negotiable issues that make a Church definitely Christian or not, there are some other, open-handed points of difference between Christian traditions. You should take these into consideration as well. After all, you don’t want to find yourself 6 months into a perfectly fine, Christian church and realize you have well-informed, personal convictions that differ on such doctrines as Baptism, the Lord’s Supper or the nature of election and predestination. Do some research, look at their statement of faith, ask lots of questions. I’d recommend you even have your parents or a pastor you trust from back home check out the “What We Believe” tab on their website and tell you what they think.

- **A Strong Sense of Evangelism**

- Why does this church believe it exists? Does this church seem to focus primarily on making already-Christians smarter or more comfortable, but never seems concerned for those outside its walls? Or is this church really serious about “social justice” projects and bettering the community, but never really calling sinners to repentance and belief in Jesus alone? The Church exists primarily to be the means of carrying out the local and the global purposes of the Great Commission from Matthew 28:18-20. We are to make disciples of all nations, individually and corporately. Does this church stress and equip its members to be evangelists in the city and around the world?

Third. Thoughts to keep in mind. Finding a good church home is a lot like finding someone to date. First of all, it takes time to see if there’s chemistry. Don’t make a decision about a Church from one interaction. Give it a few weeks (at least four or five) of regularly and consistently gathering with that church before you make a judgement about its merits and character. Get to know people. Get a sense for where the pastor’s going in the sermon series. Ask someone to lunch.

Second, we’ve all heard stories of men and women who have impossibly high standards for their future spouse, and end up calling off relationship after relationship because they have a knack for finding some quality or imperfection they just can’t get over. Churches are like people—in fact, they ARE people—and no one is perfect. While there are scripturally taught marks of a healthy Church that you need to look for, you also need to realize that no church will meet all of your preferences or expectations, be they in musical style, small group ministries, size, etc. Furthermore, no one at your future church home ever promised they couldn’t hurt you or sin against you. Grace and forgiveness are just as necessary for others as they are for yourself.

Lastly, remember, this is a commitment. Just like you can't have a God-pleasing marriage without saying "I do," you can't really be involved in a church without making a clear, formal commitment. Did you know they call Millennials the "Maybe Generation" because we're so notorious for flaking out, keeping our options open and delaying commitment? Don't fall into that trap. Commitment looks different from church to church, but it's no less than obedience to Hebrews 10:24-25 where we're commanded to meet together regularly (read: *weekly*, if at all possible) when the church gathers for formal worship. In most cases (and this is to be preferred) commitment also looks like formal membership in that church. And it's also regular involvement and interaction with other members outside of showing up on a Sunday, giving financially to support the ministry there, and serving in the various ministry capacities that church makes available.

Unlike Marriage, church membership is not "'til Death do us part." But it is a serious obligation. Once you prayerfully commit to a church, you've entered into a relationship with every other member in that church, and just like any good relationship you have to fight for it. But the good news is they're also fighting for you. This is an incredible display of God's wisdom and glory. By inviting you into a local church he is inviting you into a family that will care for you, provide for you, love you, and yes, even correct you when you need it (as we all sometimes do). And as many of you are leaving your earthly families back home for the first time, the promise of a new kind of family found in a local church must sound especially sweet.

Here are some other resources we found helpful:

"what should I look for when choosing a new church home"

<http://www.gty.org/resources/questions/QA121/what-should-i-look-for-when-choosing-a-new-church-home>

"looking for the 'right' church?" <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/becoming-a-christian/how-can-i-be-saved/finding-the-right-church>