

## How to Find a Good<sup>1</sup> Church: A Regular Person's Guide

This is a blunt guide to how to find a church. There are reasons, usually doctrinal ones, that I have placed things in a negative or neutral category. They are explained in the endnotes.

1. What is the name? This is far from foolproof, but gives some initial signals in your search.

Positive	Negative	Neutral
Bible Church <sup>2</sup>	Denominational affiliation <sup>3</sup>	Community Church <sup>4</sup>
Baptist Church <sup>5</sup>	Presbyterian Church <sup>6</sup>	Church with no "middle" name <sup>7</sup>
	Methodist Church <sup>8</sup>	
	Anglican/Episcopal Church	
	Catholic Church <sup>9</sup>	
	Latter Day Saints <sup>10</sup>	
	Kingdom Hall <sup>11</sup>	

2. What is the doctrine of the church, sometimes called the doctrinal statement or statement of faith? In other words, what do they say they believe?

Positive	Negative
A detailed statement of beliefs	A very brief statement <sup>12</sup>
Bible is inerrant, God's word, sole authority	King James Only <sup>13</sup>
Trinity	Jesus is "lower" than God the Father
Creation in six days <sup>14</sup>	Open to evolution <sup>15</sup>
Man's total depravity; man is dead in sin <sup>16</sup>	Man is weak, sick, or generally OK <sup>17</sup>
Virgin birth and deity of Christ	Does not believe in miracles <sup>18</sup>
Literal bodily resurrection of Christ	Spiritual resurrection
Salvation by repentant faith alone	Salvation by some kind of works
Eternal security: true believer cannot lose his salvation	True believer can lose his salvation
Substitutionary atonement	Example or government theory of atonement
One way of salvation	Wideness in God's mercy; other ways to God.
Lordship of Christ	Optional to believe Lordship of Christ
Second coming with details like the millennium and rapture <sup>19</sup>	General eschatology that just says "second coming" and general judgment <sup>20</sup>
Dispensational <sup>21</sup>	Covenant <sup>22</sup>
A real place called Hell	Denies or downplays eternal punishment for the lost.
States that sexual immorality and abortion is sin.	Accepting of homosexuality or other sexual perversions; weak on abortion.
Baptism by immersion for believers; memorial view of the Lord's Table.	Baptism for anyone; real or spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Table.
Says that some Holy Spirit gifts have ceased for today	Believe all spiritual gifts continue today—tongues, healing, etc. <sup>23</sup>

3. What is the practice of the church? When you visit, what do you see? Do not just form an opinion on a single visit; if you have to visit only one time, visit Sunday morning's worship service. Ask about the prayer meeting and other meetings of the church to see what you can learn.

<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Reverent behavior and attire	Worldly, loud, anything-goes attire
Organized	Sloppy
Service and humility	Performance and showy
Long sermon	Short sermon
Sermon that explains and applies a part of the Bible	Sermon that talks on a topic, infrequent reference to the Bible, heavy on application
Services include congregational participative worship	Service focuses on worship team up front
Service includes prayer, giving, Bible reading <sup>24</sup>	Bible is on the back burner, prayer is not genuine
Prayer meetings are well attended	Prayer is de-emphasized
Several meetings per week	Sunday morning only meetings <sup>25</sup>
Appears that the church follows the doctrine and constitution	Church does not seem to be following its constitutive documents <sup>26</sup>
Regularly practices baptism and the Lord's Table.	Rarely are the ordinances observed; the Lord's Table is "tacked on" to the end of a service.
Clear teaching to believers, may include explicit invitation to salvation	Always includes "invitation to the front" at the end of every service <sup>27</sup>
Preaches about sin and its consequences <sup>28</sup>	Avoids the subject of sin <sup>29</sup>
Supports church-planting, evangelizing missionaries	Supports missions that are involved in much social work
Atmosphere is free from distractions	Pay-for coffee shop; lighting and seating like a movie theater; carnival-type atmosphere
Many members seem to be involved	Pastor does everything
See evidence of active evangelism outside the church	No evangelism; no missionaries.
Church has various kinds of people in it	Church is all young or all old or all white or all... <sup>30</sup>
People are friendly and interested in you	People are cold and indifferent
A wide variety of Bible passages are taught over the course of weeks and months <sup>31</sup>	Repetition is evident in teaching on things like Psalms, the sermon on the mount, John 3, and the Old Testament Law
Seems to be a close connection between pastor and people	The church is huge and there is little chance to talk to the pastor

4. What are the associations of the church? You can look at the mission agencies and missionaries that are supported (if any); the type of children's ministry (Awana, Truth Trackers, Kids-4-Truth, etc.); and the other organizations with which the church is affiliated.

One caution in this area: do not treat all "Awana" churches as if they are the same. Awana has strayed from its more fundamental gospel orientation of years ago and is not necessarily a signal either way at this point.

MAP

### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is no perfect church, so don't bother trying to find it.
- <sup>2</sup> A church that is not afraid to say in its name that it believes in the Bible.
- <sup>3</sup> We recommend churches that are not denominationally affiliated. Large groups do not often stay conservative and orthodox for long. Many have become compromised in one or the other areas of doctrine or practice. Furthermore, no hierarchical church governmental arrangement is provided for in the Bible, meaning that it is more Biblical to have an independent local church with no hierarchical control over it.
- <sup>4</sup> Sometimes such churches are going out of their way to not offend; sometimes they are downplaying doctrine. Other times that's just what the name has been, and it is a very fine church.
- <sup>5</sup> A church that is not afraid to say in its name that it believes things that have been distinctive Baptist beliefs for centuries.
- <sup>6</sup> Infant baptism.
- <sup>7</sup> See the note on the community church.
- <sup>8</sup> Generally do not believe in eternal security of the believer.
- <sup>9</sup> Works-based salvation; infant baptism; extra-biblical doctrines and authorities.
- <sup>10</sup> The Mormon cult believes in a different god than the Christian; they believe Jesus was a creation of God whereas true Christians believe Christ is not only the Son of God but God the Son. They believe in works-based salvation ("we are saved by Jesus Christ *after* all that we can do").
- <sup>11</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses cult believes in works-based salvation; denies a literal Hell.
- <sup>12</sup> Such a statement is very broad by nature and suggests that the church doesn't place importance on what is believed.
- <sup>13</sup> This indicates an inordinate focus on manuscript/translation issues and likely a skewed doctrine of inspiration.
- <sup>14</sup> Gives you an idea that the church *really* believes the Bible according to its plain reading.
- <sup>15</sup> Science is a competing authority with the Bible.
- <sup>16</sup> A Calvinistic belief.
- <sup>17</sup> Arminian, Semi-pelagian, or Pelagian beliefs.
- <sup>18</sup> The Bible is a supernatural book; God is the supernatural God. If you demur on miracles, then you cannot really believe Christianity.
- <sup>19</sup> Stating these doctrines indicates that the church takes the Bible seriously in all its parts. It does not shy away from difficult passages of the Bible. It indicates a literal understanding of passages that mention things like "1000 years" and so forth.
- <sup>20</sup> The church does not know the details of God's prophetic program, or deems it unimportant.
- <sup>21</sup> The Bible is interpreted literally; it is viewed as being the progressive unfolding of revelation from God to man. Israel is distinct from the church and has a future in God's program as a literal nation.
- <sup>22</sup> The Bible is viewed as the unfolding of the covenant of grace from beginning to end. Israel has replaced the church.
- <sup>23</sup> These gifts were connected to revelation from God; this opens the question of whether the church believes it has a complete revelation of God in the Bible.
- <sup>24</sup> These activities are obligations given by God in the Bible to the church.
- <sup>25</sup> Can indicates laziness, lack of desire, lack of commitment on the part of leadership and membership. The NT church met daily and desired to do so.
- <sup>26</sup> This indicates a severe lack of integrity. For example, a church that hires a pastor that disagrees with its doctrine and constitution has a real problem under the hood.
- <sup>27</sup> Make no mistake: the gospel is very important. However, in the church, believers are supposed to be taught and not repeatedly given John 3:16. The church is not the primary place where evangelism happens.

### **End Notes, Continued**

<sup>28</sup> Genuinely believe that sin is a problem and that people need to be rescued from it. Are clear that sin is an offense to God.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the leadership and membership believe that preaching about sin will be offensive.

<sup>30</sup> The lack of diversity indicates a current or potential future problem in the church.

<sup>31</sup> You can see this by looking for a sermon recording section on the church's website and see the history of the teaching ministry.