



Part 4: What Makes a Good Church?

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Introduction

In the first three parts of this series, we have looked at the biblical foundation for the church. It has universal and local aspects and is composed of individual members. In this final study, we want to examine what makes a local church exemplary. There are several aspects that go into this. Of course, we must also recognize that no church is perfect and will fall short in certain areas. But the Scriptures do give us examples of churches that were singled out for particular praise by the apostles and our Lord. Below are just some of the areas where this was the case.

Doctrine

Perhaps no other area of church life is more highly emphasized than sound doctrine. Doctrine is simply the biblical teaching on a given subject. Churches that received high marks in this area were those who eagerly received instruction and tested its validity against the Scriptures. The Berean church was noted for having this quality (Acts 17:11). The church at Ephesus was also noteworthy because it rejected evil men and false apostles (Rev 2:2). In this sense they had clung to the teachings handed down by the apostles.

In today's churches, there are many doctrines that have been given up through negligence or compromised by false teaching. Below is a list of some key doctrines that are fundamental to the gospel and the Christian faith. (This list is *not* exhaustive!)

- Inerrancy of Scripture
- Inspiration of the Scriptures
- The Trinity
- Deity of Christ
- Virgin Birth of Christ
- Resurrection of Christ
- Literal Miracles
- Substitutionary Atonement
- Literal Six Day Creation
- Total Depravity of Mankind
- Salvation by Grace through Faith Alone
- The Exclusivity of Christ for Salvation
- Second Coming of Christ
- Literal Heaven and Hell

When examining the quality of a church, the first thing you should look at is their doctrinal statement. Good churches will have a robust statement of doctrinal beliefs that are supported by the Scriptures. This should not be the only consideration, because the church also needs to put those beliefs into practice. But a church that has no grounding in the teachings of the Scriptures is one that can be easily steered off course by false teaching.

Another consideration in this area involves the style of preaching. Good churches will have a plan for regularly and systematically teaching the whole counsel of God to the congregation (Acts 20:27; 2 Tim 3:16). One of the best ways to accomplish this is through expositional preaching. This is a method where entire books or portions of the bible are taught through verse by verse, chapter by chapter. This does not mean there isn't a place for topical preaching. But be wary of pastors and teachers that consistently deliver feel-good messages or that preach primarily from a few key texts like the Psalms, Proverbs, Sermon on the Mount, and other "upbeat" New Testament passages. A good preacher will not avoid the difficult or controversial portions of the bible.

Organization/Government

Another key area that will set apart exemplary churches is their governmental structure. Many good churches in times past have been brought down because of an unbiblical decision made by someone outside the local church that was forced upon a congregation (e.g. the Puritans, see part 3). Many mainline denominations today have fallen prey to liberal theology which denies many of the fundamental doctrines of the faith. This has led to thousands of vacant pews, false professions of faith, and lives unaffected by the transforming power of the gospel. Again, church polity is not the only thing to blame for this, but it is a significant contributing factor.

However, this does not excuse all congregationally governed churches from internal problems. Some churches have pastors that rule as ecclesiastical dictators over their congregations, while others have congregations that treat their leaders like puppets. Exemplary churches will strike a good balance between the pastor's authority over the flock, and the congregation's governance of the church (Heb 13:7, 17, 24). A wise shepherd will rule with a gentle but firm hand. A wise congregation will follow their pastor's lead joyfully so as not to be a grief to him. This arrangement is meant to be mutually beneficial for all.

People

Another key ingredient in making a good church is the people. Many churches today are able to get people through the front doors, but few have congregations where every member is actively participating in the ministry. One of the unfortunate carryovers of Catholicism is the idea of a clergy-laity distinction. Under that kind of thinking, the clergy were the ones who engaged in the work of the ministry while the laity (or “common” people) did little more than warm the pews. That idea is thoroughly unbiblical! God has gifted every believer for service, and those gifts are to be exercised within the context of a local church.

A couple modern-day issues that have fueled the problem of non-serving church goers are easy-believism and an exclusive emphasis on getting people saved. If that alone was the mission given to us by Christ, then it would make sense to have seeker-sensitive services to try and get as many people as possible to make decisions for Christ. But Christ saves people in order to serve Him (Eph 2:10) and directs pastors to shepherd them all the way to glory (Heb 13:17).

Another factor that drastically impacts the perception of the church is the attitude of the people. Exemplary churches have members that are consistently displaying the same attitude as Christ (Phil 2:1–8). They are known by love (John 13:35), showing genuine care and concern for one another. Many Christians today think this means pasting a smile on every Sunday morning. Often times believers *will* be joyful at the prospect of public worship on Sundays, but Christ does not call on us to display phony emotions around other believers if we are sad or troubled. One of the reasons we gather with other believers is to be exhorted and encouraged from the word of God. Good churches will capitalize on those who have the gifts of helps and showing mercy to welcome people into the assembly and comfort them (Rom 12:7–8).

Good churches will also aim to resemble the demographics of the community around them. This is not necessarily an essential for a good church, but it is something good churches should be aiming for. Within the universal church there are no ethnic barriers (Rom 10:12). Local churches should also reflect this in their membership. The age breakdown is another consideration. Churches comprised entirely of young people will often lack the maturity and experience gained through seasoned members. By the same token, churches made up of predominantly older members can lack the youthful zeal for evangelism

and ministry. Many mega-churches today gear their entire ministries around targeting white suburbanite 25–40 somethings. That group certainly does need the gospel, but Christ’s church is much broader than that. Sound, godly churches will be made up of believers from all walks of life, different ethnicities, and various age groups.

Lastly, good churches will have godly leaders. Charismatic personalities and charm are not necessarily synonymous with good leadership. Exemplary pastors and deacons are those who discharge their duties faithfully and with a servant’s heart. They will joyfully tend to the needs of the flock and lead others to serve by example. At times they may also have to use the shepherd’s rod to fend off the wolves (Acts 20:29). As was mentioned earlier, a good shepherd will declare the whole counsel of God while carefully guiding and guarding the flock. Paul compares this kind of ministry to building a structure upon the foundation of Christ using materials that will last — gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor 3:8–15).

Practices

One final category on this topic concerns the practices of a good church. Many churches today have orthodox doctrinal statements but give little or no heed to those documents when it comes to practice. A good church will put sound doctrine into practice. This means its activities will be centered around the Great Commission. Good churches will have a high level of involvement in the task of evangelism. They will also support the work of missionaries who take the gospel into new areas beyond the bounds of the local assembly. But they will also devote much effort to teaching believers so that the local church endures for the next generation.

Exceptional churches have a genuine recognition of their utter need for and dependence on the work of God. He is the one who enables the work of the ministry to move forward. Accordingly, good churches will devote regular time to personal and corporate prayer. Prayer is often the divinely appointed means to accomplish God’s divinely appointed ends. A church that doesn’t pray is like a car stuck in the mud, spinning its wheels. Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th century Baptist preacher, occasionally gave tours of the Metropolitan Tabernacle to visitors. He noted that the most important work of the church does not occur in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, but in the prayer room where believers gathered daily to pray for the effectiveness of the ministry.

Exemplary churches also give cheerfully of their finances to the work of the ministry. This does not mean that believers must give beyond what they are able, or that a church must be wealthy before it is good. But a church full of cheerful givers is able to better accomplish the task of the Great Commission (2 Cor 9:6–7). Giving is something that is commanded of the rich (1 Tim 5:17–19), and those who have the gift of giving can greatly aid the church with material provisions by giving generously (Rom 12:8). This is not to limit this only to those who are rich or so gifted. We are all told to give as the Lord has prospered us (2 Cor 9:7).

Good churches will also teach about the depraved sinfulness of mankind and the reality of hell. Some churches avoid topics like these because they make people uncomfortable. But the gospel includes a message of hope, that Christ has conquered both the penalty and the power of sin for those who believe. Salvation is not simply a ticket to heaven that makes life sin-free. A good church will help believers deal with the issues of sin and the ugly problems that result from it. Additionally, solid churches will not hesitate to exercise church discipline if necessary. Believers are called to live holy, separated lives (see part 3). This is not possible if the issue of sin is never addressed.

Music is another issue that has polarized and split many churches. The sound of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has captured the hearts and ears of many who see it this as the answer for reaching the younger generation with the gospel. There is not time or space to fully deal with the issue here. But suffice it to say that music in a worship service is intended as a means for believers to praise the Lord (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; James 5:13). One of the reasons this has been such a divisive issue in recent decades is that music has a unique ability to engage the emotions. While a repentant faith is certainly not devoid of emotion, emotions are not the driving aspect of Christianity. As such, good churches will wisely steer clear of the unchecked emotionalism that is common among CCM praise & worship times. Music is inherently emotional, but should also be used for teaching doctrine, as a memory aide, and always done reverently and modestly.

Conclusion

There are perhaps many more things that could be said on this topic, but hopefully this will provide some key pointers for evaluating the quality of a local church. And may ours be found just as faithful! ~AWB