

CHOOSING A CHURCH:

GOSPEL PRINCIPLES FOR FINDING A HEALTHY GOSPEL COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a very transient culture where people, unlike previous generations rarely remain in the same job, much less live in the same place for their whole life. In fact the average western family will move several times during the years of raising their children. This transience has become no less a problem for the local church. On top of this, because of the uncontrolled fragmentation of Christian denominations since the Second Great Awakening, this has led to an untold number of church choices. When you take these, plus all the unhealthy reasons people leave their current churches, this leaves way too many opportunities for the average Christian family to have to seek out and choose a new church.

Gone are the days of Paul when every small town and hamlet had its own church, the church at the city of “blank.” In spite of how much we would not like it to be so in principle, we must face this reality head on with all of its warts. In what follows, we will face this challenge with the simplest, and most biblical criteria we can lean on to offer a simple and usable paradigm for navigating the options in picking a healthy church for you and your family. The goal is to identify a church where you will grow in Gospel grace, and not necessarily the place with the biggest menu of options and services.

Interestingly enough, this is just as relevant to the brand new Christian and somebody who is genuinely exploring the Christian faith for the first time. Because modern evangelistic techniques have been so event-oriented and disjointed from the regular life of the Church for so long (things such as crusades, camps, “outreach events,” “street witnessing,” and various forms of publication) some seekers and brand new Christians sometime find themselves exploring the Christian faith and not a clue where to begin finding a church.

But it is important for them for another reason, and this applies as much to Christians as well. And that principle is this: ***You will normally conform to and practice the faith you are converted to.*** This is to say, your personal expression of your faith, will reflect what has been modeled for you.¹ Think about it for a minute. If you are converted by a Pentecostal tradition, that will most likely be the one you identify

¹ Modern sociologists note how people’s beliefs conform to the group they identify and are socialized with. Peter L. Berger & Thoman Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Random House, 1966)

with and gravitate towards and so on with Non-denominational, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc. If you have come to faith or worshipped for some time in a very emotionally driven church, it will reflect in your own. If you have cut your teeth in a very academic and bible study oriented tradition, your personal faith and practice will likely look very similar.

What this also means is that not only will you develop the good patterns of a particular church tradition, but you will normally pick up its baggage as well. However, what is actually more important than the actual traditions themselves, is the patterns and rhythms of spirituality represented locally in each. In other words, it is what is practiced that is the far more important issue than the tradition itself. Let me offer an example. I sit squarely in a theologically Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, one which I am quite in agreement with and committed to. However, my tenure within these circles I have seen many churches, though theologically in agreement with me, in absolute disobedience in regard to living out the Gospel and making disciples. On the other hand, I have experienced churches that were not as well informed theologically in the details per se, but understood, communicated the Gospel, and made disciples much more effectively than some in my own tradition. Therefore these would command my recommendation for a seeker or new Christian before some of some of my own Reformed ones. Why? Because it is the normative daily rhythms of a church that are most important to spiritual formation and discipleship. This explains how even two churches in the same town and of the same denomination could be radically different in their effectiveness for the great commission.

However in order to distinguish a healthy Presbyterian Church from an unhealthy one, or a healthy Baptist church, or Non-denominational church from an unhealthy one, you need some basic Gospel criteria to discern them with. Unfortunately most of us do not know what that good Gospel criteria is for discerning what an healthy local church looks like. *Even more unfortunate is the fact that the reasons most of us pick one church over another, more often than not, has little or nothing to do with the Gospel and the great commission!* In fact, as we will see below, much of our typical criteria for deciding where to make our church home is most of the time very subjective and contrary to the Gospel, if not purely selfish and all out hostile to it. Therefore before jumping into the right criteria with which to identify a healthy church, we will look at some of the typically wrong reasons for choosing or leaving a church.

LOOKING FOR A CHURCH IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS

In my experience over the years attending various churches, and especially as a church planter, I have been presented with many reasons for embracing or rejecting a Church. Unfortunately in my experience, very few of them stemmed from a deeply reflective understanding of the Gospel. The lion's share of them have usually had their roots in the self-centered preferences of the individual. Simply put, we live in a consumeristic culture, and therefore, if we are totally honest with ourselves, we naturally have been trained to think as consumers about the church as well. This is myself included. Let me give you an example of my own error. I have been trained to value theological soundness because of my education and so it has naturally become one of my primary criteria for choosing a church. There is no doubt that this is an important one, but now with greater hindsight, I can look back and see where I chose to worship

and embrace churches **only** for their theological commitments without a balanced look at the other aspects which are also important. Some of these other commitments that I saw neglected at “theologically sound” churches was NT emphasis on community, discipleship, spiritual nurture, and pastoral care. On the surface, one might look with respect at me for the principled choice of choosing a church on theological grounds, but actually all these other characteristics are as theological as an emphasis on theology itself. Here then my own experience exposes my own previously shallow and truncated view of the church. A way that I may objectify this is that for all the correct theology in some of these experiences, nobody was coming to faith in Christ in some these churches over several year spans of time. From a New Testament perspective, this might raise serious questions about how theologically sound such churches in fact are! In other words, if you pride yourself at being “theologically correct” and yet nobody is coming to Christ, then one must question the correctness of the theology or at the very least, the order of priorities. Theology is meant to serve the advance the Gospel, not be celebrated like a trophy.

Now as a Church planter I hear every possible reason imaginable for people to come or not come to our church or another. When boiled down, most of them sound like this:

“I am thinking about dining at your buffet. I see you have rotisserie chicken and steak tips on the menu, but me and my family are looking for the honey baked ham. Will you be getting the honey baked ham soon, or should I go look for another buffet?”

We live in a fast-food culture here in the west. We want what we want, when we want it, and by-golly we are darn used to getting it on time. This is the world we live in and none of us are immune to it. Many things are just conveniences that are not evil in and of themselves. But most of us, on a day to day basis, remain unaware how they lull us into a deeper and deeper stupor of self-centeredness. Now if you see yourself in this, don't beat yourself up. We look for churches like this partly because the church has trained us to do it this way. The Church at large has succumbed to using consumerism in its approaches to hook us. Instead of being a prophetic voice to challenge us out of our complacency, the Church has instead often chosen to mute its own prophetic witness to the culture by becoming like it by affirming us in our ignorance and complacency and letting us stay there. Evangelical publishing houses belch book after book propagating one fad, gimmick, or “strategy” after another to get people to church for every reason other than the Gospel. The church itself is most guilty of removing the offense of the cross and adapting to the culture as much as possible to get people in its doors at any cost.²

² This plan of adaptation to the culture, sociologists refer to as *adaptation theory*, is the idea that the Church must “adapt” to the culture in order to survive. Peter Berger, has suggested that to the level Churches have tried to adapt to modernism they have also declined, and much to the contrary, those that have remained as he terms it “dripping” with the supernatural have grown. “The Descularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in The Descularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 2-4.

SO WHAT MAKES A HEALTHY CHURCH?

The wording for the title of this section is chosen carefully. Notice I did not say, “what makes a good church.” This is where the subjectivity enters the equation thereby obscuring what the church is meant to be. What is “good” may vary greatly from person to person because it indicates preference and preferences always serve the self. What is good to you may not be good to me. More importantly, what may be good to God, is often very different from what is good to us humans. As an example I might recall how recently I was talking about how the New Testament calls us to bring our needs to God, and that God only promises to meet our needs, not our wants. On top of this, what we think we need may in fact be different from what God thinks we need. Specifically in my own life, it was some serious life events, including kidney disease, that moved me toward the Gospel and away from a previously self-destructive lifestyle. I can look back now and know for sure I would have never prayed for kidney disease. But I would also admit that I do not see myself as having made these changes without some of these life events to cause the reflection.

So with the contrast between the “good” church and the “healthy” one. Being a healthy church, unlike a “good one” can be somewhat objectified. You see a “good church” to you or me may be described in the following ways by people who recommend it:

- “It has a good children’s ministry.”
- “It has two services”
- “The pastor’s sermons are very engaging”
- “There are a lot of people my age”
- “They are very active in the community”
- “The Pastor is very entertaining”
- “They have a couple’s ministry”
- “They have a youth group”
- “They have a great worship music program”
- “They have vacation bible school”
- They have small groups”
- They have a very transcendent and holy service”

Also, all of these can be turned into the negative, that is, they can actually be used for justifications for rejecting what is in fact a “healthy church” that does in fact, to one degree or another, actually conform to the New Testament vision for a church. For instance:

- “It does not have a children’s ministry.”
- “It has has only one service”
- “It does not have a youth group”
- “The pastor’s sermons are boring”
- “There are no people my age”
- “They are not very active in the community”
- “They do not have a couple’s ministry”

- “Their music sucks”
- “They don’t have vacation bible school”
- They don’t have small groups”
- They don’t have a traditional service” (or)
- They don’t have a contemporary service”
- The Sermon was too long”

Now we need to understand I picked this short list because these are very innocuous, and not wrong in an of themselves. There are some of these things that you will even find at Sacred Journey Church like a sermon, children’s ministry, etc. However, you will look in vain within the pages of the New Testament to find any of them as criteria for choosing a church community. In fact, early church did not have much time for such non-essential luxuries. The Gospel in the 1st - 3rd centuries could cost you your life, and so the reasons for gathering with the body of Christ demanded much more substantial reasons, the very same type reasons that are rooted in the call of discipleship in the New Testament.

Thinking about the above list, it is helpful to add the phrase “I chose this church because...” before each statement. So as an example, I one might say “I have chosen this church because they have a great worship music program.” But that may actually expose a self centeredness in your life about what you want, rather than living through Gospel values. In other words, you are choosing a church because you like “blank” and not because of a change of heart and mind to serve others in the Gospel. This may reveal an idolatry of worshipping the way you want, rather than serving. And for what it is worth, I have seen this sin in both the proponents of contemporary and traditional worship advocates, and actually sometimes worse in the traditionalists than the contemporaries.

Or you might also say, “I chose this church because they have a great children’s program.” That is fine, we have one at Sacred Journey too, but we are very clear that we are not doing it to disciple your children for you. We only go up to eight years old to serve parents in a way that allows them to participate in the teaching and worship without distraction so they can become better parents spiritually at home. But my experience is that often many parents who have “children’s ministry” high on their list of criteria for finding a church, often do so either out of a feeling of spiritual inadequacy or even worse, laziness and disinterest. I meet people here in the North East all the time who were originally disinterested in church until their children were born, and are now sensing some twisted obligation to get their kids some “exposure to religion and spirituality.” Yet all the while they themselves want to remain unhindered in their pursuit of their career and material things without God’s interference. This preference may indicate your own spiritual laziness.

Here is another, “I chose this church because they are active in the community.” At Sacred Journey we want to be active in the community too, but sometimes this motivation actually reveals a “do-gooder” motive that has nothing to do with Christ and the Gospel. In this way of thinking, we look for a social club or church institution that make us feel good about ourselves, rather than actually serving people with pure motives. We as people with corrupt motives often run the risk of serving people and the community, not because we really care about them, but because we care more about

painting ourselves in a good image. We can easily fall into making ourselves feel good where we gain the praise of men, rather than God.

Here is one I have actually heard a lot that kills me: "You do not have any people my age at your church." Ironically, I usually get it from long time Christians in their 40's to 60's at SJC. We do have a lot of younger folk. But this one has to be pointed out because it speaks so relevantly to the poor spiritual health of the average christian because of a lack of discipleship in the evangelical culture at large. When they should be feeding on meat, they are still on milk. When they should be on mission, they are still looking to be coddled rather than looking at young Christian families as opportunities to be discipled and to grow as they disciple. I find that a larger part of the rank and file Christians in their middle and late age are by and large spiritual infants who cannot think of anything but where they are most comfortable on Sunday mornings. Like I said, much of this is because the church at large has trained them to be this way by being derelict in its duties. But at the end of the day, each and every Christian (and those who are just kidding themselves into thinking they are) will answer for themselves. They will not be able to in the end point the finger at the church. They will answer for themselves.

One I also cannot leave out is, "I chose this church because of their very holy and transcendent service." Often today, it is the new and improved church growth gimmicks and styles that are often on the criticism chopping block. But this twisted self-centeredness is no less true, sometimes even worse (in my experience) in the traditional churches. I have even seen aged financial supporters of traditional churches start pulling their giving to manipulate a leadership that was trying to re-contextualize their services. This unbending obsession with traditional worship often reveals a very dark and sinful service of self, a preferential desire to have it "my way" which is alien to the Gospel. It may also reveal a dark sense of wanting a lofty experience of holiness to give a false sense of religious satisfaction to a hypocritical heart. I might also add that some of the more liturgical traditions still tend to attract a lot of nostalgic academic and intellectual types of whom it actually reveals a pride of being "cultured" and a form of class distinction. For many, the upper crust of society gravitate toward higher church worship styles as a form of religious cultural elitism.

We could go on, but what is important here are two major observations: First, none of these criteria that we often use to define a "good church" are found in the New Testament and therefore do not define a healthy church the way the New Testament does. Second, such subjectively preferential criteria, more often than not, reveal a self-serving set of motives lying beneath our subconscious that even we ourselves are often unaware of. The bottom line is that the motives for which we choose a church often reveal a very deeply seated focus on the self and self-idolatry rather than the humility of the Gospel.

The Marks of a Healthy Church

So after considering the subjectivity problem of defining a good church, it is time for us to go to the New Testament to identify some basic objective marks of what makes a healthy and biblical church. Let me start off with a small analogy from linguistics though. In modern linguistic theory there is something called transformational grammar.

In this school of thought, all sentences have what they call a “deep structure.” This means that no matter how complex the sentence is, two sentences that look different on the surface can have an identical deep structure. The simplest way to explain this is the difference between an active and passive sentence. For example: The active sentence “John hit the ball,” is actually identical in meaning to the passive sentence, “The ball was hit by John.” The deep structure in both is John / hit / ball. Both say the same thing, just with a different surface structure.

This is a helpful analogy when we talk about the Church, because many times, churches can have the same surface structure and seem the same on the outside, but deep down, are radically different in their thought, focus and teaching. In the same way, two churches might have the same deep structure, but their surface structure looks quite different. As an example, there are many churches that have a nursery and children’s ministry like SJC (surface structure), but may not have the practice of raising up healthy disciples who have been trained to engage culture with the Gospel (deep structure) in the same way. When one considers a possible church, we need to take the time to critically examine it and get down to the deep structures that define it, and not what strikes us on the surface. I cannot count the times people have come visited us and made a decision in one visit! Wow, did you make the decision like that with your spouse? On top of that, no questions, no reflection, and no investigation into what really drives us. It takes digging to find out what a church is truly about, and when you pursue these questions and criteria diligently from a biblical perspective, you may in fact find that you should reject the church you would have preferred at first and choose one that may have been your last choice based upon preference.

Mark 1. The Mission of Making Disciples

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus gives the following command to his disciples and the Church ever after.

Matt. 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The mission of the Church is to make disciples. Period. What is important about this verse is the teaching aspect of it. The command is to make disciples first and then teach them which implies the ***ongoing process of discipleship***. We do not make “converts” but disciples, that is “gospel learners.” For many, discipleship is a class that a new Christian goes through or something that is done with a college student ministry and so on. But much to the contrary, being a disciple of Christ is a new identity that we are to be constantly learning to live out in the daily grind of life. When we come to faith in Christ, we step into the process of discipleship that only takes place in the context of the Church community.

It is this mission of “making disciples” that is the core “deep structure” of the New Testament church. As you are looking for a church, this should be your chief concern, the rudder to your boat *per se*. It is the key to navigating the waters and quicksand of

modern church pop-culture, gimmicks, and marketing spin on the one hand, and the substance of the Gospel and true spiritual formation on the other.

Let me offer a quick objective example: You may be inclined to choose a particular church because of their entertaining children's ministry, which is not a bad thing. However, in spite of all the fun your child will have there, what if the content of the preaching to your soul as a parent is grossly lacking. What if this Church's preaching is only full of practical "how to's" and pithy sayings that may entertain, but never calls you out of your selfishness, your comfort and your daily sinfulness to walk more deeply with Christ? Do you think this will eventually affect you as a parent? Yes your child is being entertained, but you are being lulled into a spiritual stupor that in the end is going to cause you and your spouse to not be the kind of spiritual leader of your children need you to be. *Lets be real here, what do you think is going to have more of an impact on your child spiritually, the two hours a week in the children's program or the kind of Christian you are in front of them all week?* As a pastor, I deal with more people who left the Church because of their parents than because of the church itself. Don't fool yourself. Where your kids end up spiritually will mostly be up to you. You, not the well meaning sunday school volunteer you will want to blame it on someday, will answer to God for the eventual spiritual health of your children.

On the other hand you may come across a smaller church without all the pomp and resources of the big one down the road, but the leadership are faithful, they teach the Gospel, and invest in people's lives. No it does not have all the bells and whistles and it does not have all the programs, but what it does have is the Gospel, discipleship, and the nurture of spiritual formation. Now which one do you think is going to form you into the kind of parent God wants you to be before your children and neighbors? Certainly a large church may in fact have these things, but it takes to serious investigation and peeling back layers to see.

Think about it from a parental perspective with me for a moment. Think about a small child and their natural dietary inclinations. Children love sweets. I have a two year old who goes around bragging with a sticky red smile when ever he gets a "pop." If I let him get away with only eating sweets and pops, he would. He would not eat vegetables, protein and many of the other healthy parts of a balanced diet. That is why often he has to eat his lunch or dinner before he gets his "pop." Left to himself, he would gorge himself on stuff that tastes great but fails to nourish him. Unfortunately, that is how many of us, even as grown adults, commonly respond to the Gospel and our church of choice. Much like my two year old and his food, we do not know what actually nourishes us spiritually and so we naturally gravitate toward what is easiest on the palate. We tend to prefer spiritual sweets over spiritual meat. The writer of the book of Hebrews makes the same observation:

Heb. 5:12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

The point here then is that as we look for a church and place to serve in the Gospel, this question of discipleship and spiritual formation is front and central. If it is not, you may

be picking what you subjectively feel is a “good” church for you and your family. It might in fact be a very unhealthy one which could eventually leave you and your children in a bad place spiritually, a place that you would not have chosen had you been able to see the logical outcome. We often say here at Sacred Journey that “we are a church for the unchurched and recovering evangelicals.” Some may feel that this is a snide way to say it, but that is easy to say when you are not the one who is reteaching the Gospel to people who have grown up in the evangelical ghetto and come to us broken, confused, discouraged and as much in need of the clear teaching of the Gospel as the unchurched people who walk through our door. It is often those who grew up evangelical, or at least going to church, who come to us with more baggage than those who do not. This is a serious problem, and I believe that most of it stems from well meaning church leaders preaching and teaching an incomplete and truncated Gospel.

Mark 2. Repentance

A young man who joined our community recently commented to me that he could not remember at any point in his Christian life ever hearing a sermon on “repentance” before coming to Sacred Journey. You can imagine the look on my face when I heard this. It was indeed surprising, but upon further reflection, I am not so surprised. So many preachers today seem to lack a centralized orientation toward the Gospel. Sermons, both liberal and evangelical are full of trite and pithy ideas that are weighed down under a pile of practical points for living in an effort to be relevant, but lack the Gospel call to repentance.

Ironically, and sadly enough, the one central thing the Gospel calls us to is repentance, the proactive change of mind and life to reorient our lives with the will of God. It is the heart of the Lord’s prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” John the baptizer came preaching “repent the kingdom of God is at hand,” and so with Jesus’ own ministry and that of the Apostles after him. The world is full of every touchy-feely and warm-fuzzy spiritual idea one can imagine, but it is only the Gospel that calls us to examine self and repent of not only what we do, but even what we say and think.

If your Church is not continually calling you to repentance of your works, prejudice, self-love, self-service and pride, your church may not be preaching the Gospel. The Gospel is a call to repentance. In my experience, many so called “conservative” churches unfortunately call their people to be moral and political rather than call them to repentance of their own sin and self righteousness. A moral or political emphasis is always a self-righteous, judgmental and pharisaical emphasis. The Gospel calls us to focus on our own sin, not that of our neighbor and the culture around us. The Gospel calls us to modal repentance by practicing it ourselves.

Lets point out four more marks real quick upon which to discern a faithful and healthy community. This takes us to what I believe to be one of the most important texts in the New Testament.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

This verse is very short, but profound. Here Luke describes for us what I call the rhythms of discipleship in the early church. These things are (1) Apostle's doctrine, (2) fellowship (community), (3) breaking of bread (sacrament of the Lord's supper), and (4) prayer. These define a Gospel oriented community. Another thing that we need to point out is Luke's description of the early disciples as "devoting themselves" continually to these things. These four things are fundamentally what discipleship looks like, and as you will notice, they are the normative practices of the church, not a short regimen for new converts. Rather, the entire ministry of the church through the apostle's teaching, sharing in community, experiencing the Lord's supper, and prayer, provide a *constant repetitive process* of spiritual nurture and formation for the community of faith. Lets briefly look at each.

Mark 3. The Apostle's Doctrine

The Apostle's doctrine was nothing less than the teaching bequeathed to the Church by the ministry of the Apostles. That deposit is now the Bible. Simply put, a church needs to have a high view of the Bible as the word of God and teach it as God's word to guide us in the Gospel and how to do his will. The clear teaching of the Bible is often obscured in two ways. There is the liberal side that does not take it seriously, but rather just uses it as a discussion starter. If your church does this you could be placing yourself and your family at risk spiritually, especially your children.

On the other hand, there is a hyper-literal pedantic fundamentalism that boasts in its faithfulness to the Bible. This error is often more insidious because they hold up the bible like a trophy, but through a fundamentalistic hyper-literal reading it is taken out of context, the Gospel is twisted, and used as a tool of psychological abuse and manipulation. In this vein, the Gospel is often reduced to a formula, a "sinner's prayer" or a "decision" rather than a holistic life orientation toward discipleship. In such churches there is a constant emphasis on behavior, guilt, and conformity rather than on God's grace. I have spent a lot of time pastoring people who have come out of these kind of churches and can tell you it is not pretty what these charlatans do to vulnerable people who are just looking for the true hope of the Gospel. Any good preacher and pastor will have a serious respect for the bible as a two thousand year old document that needs to be read carefully and thoughtfully, contextualizing it for the culture and yet with great fidelity to the core message of repenting and believing the Gospel.

Mark 4. Community

Community is one of those ubiquitous aspects of the church that is somewhat inherent, and yet one of its biggest failures; so self evident on one hand, and so elusive on the other. Needless to say, some churches do it well, and many more not well at all. I was recently at a spiritual formation class that we are running for the Sacred Journey community and we have opened it up to people from other churches as well. One of these people remarked that as much as he loves his church's worship service and is committed to it, they have never done community well. Interestingly this is one of those churches that are actually above average in their commitment to doctrine and theology. This is to say that theology is an area where they often outstrip other churches. On the

other hand, one still needs to ask how balanced this theology is if community seems neglected and a failure, even to a very committed member.

At Sacred Journey it is common to hear us talk about both Gospel and community. It is not enough to have mere doctrine lest you end up with a cold and emotionally detached theological society. This can become an orthodoxy that is bereft of feeling, compassion and the ability to connect with people who are searching for truth. Still it is also not enough to have community without the Gospel and the faithful biblical teaching lest you end up with a social club or clique where everyone feels welcomed, yet is never convicted of sin and moved toward repentance. *A local church's commitment to community in relationship to biblical teaching is always foremost in defining whether or not it is a biblical and healthy church.*

Mark 5. Breaking of Bread (The Lord's Supper)

The Lord's Supper is one of the two sacraments of the Church. There is so much that can be said about the Lord's supper that we cannot begin to touch on here. So I will limit it here to two major ideas, namely the nurture of faith and repentance. The Lord's supper has undergone a serious devaluation in high-church and liberal settings as well as evangelical. For the high church and some of the liberal church traditions, it has become a sort of religious exercise that gives us a feeling of religious sentiment, but lacks the power of the clearly preached Gospel with it. The problem is just as bad in many evangelical circles because it has come to be viewed as more of an occasional memorial that is done quarterly or annually. In either case it has been reduced to a form of mere symbolism and sentimentalism.

The Lord's table was practiced every Sunday in the early church, and sometimes even more often. One of the key reasons among many was that it provided a continual opportunity for repentance and keeping short accounts with God. Paul's words in 1 Cor. 11:28 *Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup,*" describe how the Lord's table is to orient our lives toward repentance. While practicing the Lord's table weekly is preferable, what is more important is that the Lord's table be seen as an important part of the spiritual life of the church. Practicing it every week is no hill to die on, but the accompanying teaching of the clear Gospel and the continual call to repentance is the substance that we need to be most concerned about.³ The continual call to repentance is the core content and practice of the table which is what makes it so important.

Mark 6. Prayer

Prayer is one of those things that speaks for itself. A church without active prayer is like a marriage without conversation. It lays the foundation of everything and without it, the relationship is greatly hindered or left for dead. This is of course the hardest of them all to objectify, and what is most important is that we are practicing it ourselves.

³ For my part, I believe strongly in weekly celebration of the sacrament in line with the practice of the early church. This helps keep repentance front and central in the practice of our spiritual lives.

Summary

In summary, it should be noted that the six marks or criteria I have listed here for discerning the spiritual health of a local church should be balanced against each other, but with a priority on the order that they are listed in. In other words, a church with a prayer group, but does not preach the Gospel and disciple well is not healthy at all. If the Gospel is preached well, it will lead to balance and spiritual life on all other accounts. We should also not make the mistake of seeing these things in programmatic ways. We need to note that these marks offer the greatest commentary on the leadership of a church. When looking for a church, you should find out as much as you can about the leadership and the ministry philosophy of the Church. The spiritual wellbeing of these men makes the watershed difference. However, if you can find all or most of these elements listed above in a church, then you have a good chance that you have competent spiritual leadership at the helm. Finally we need to understand that no church is perfect, and neither are you. The key is having a commitment to your's and your family's spiritual growth as disciples and being on mission. Being a disciple and being on mission calls us out of our complacency, to repentance, and to service of Christ as the risen Lord. A healthy biblical church is not a cushy spot you go to for two hours every Sunday morning to toss your money in the plate and buy God off for another week. It is to be a community of people pursuing Christ, fighting sin, battling spiritual mediocrity, and embracing the sufferings of Christ. If your church experience does not inconvenience you at all, it is probably not a healthy one. *A healthy church will unlikely be your first choice because it may lack the programs and the standard option package you are looking for.* Basically if the church makes you a little restless about how you are living your life before God, you may have found yourself a gem.

SHOULD WE EVER LEAVE OUR CHURCH?

The discussion of finding a church naturally leads to the question of leaving a current church, at least for those who are already Christians. Some may in fact question the legitimacy of leaving a church at all, at least because it sounds so negative. This then leads us to our primary and only real reason for leaving a local body of believers. ***That is mission.*** Mission is the heartbeat of the Church. It is what the Church is called to do. In Matt 28:19-20 which we have already mentioned, the mission of the church is to make disciples, and inherent in this is a command to go out into all the world. There are many who think the only proper movement of people in regard to the church, is moving into it, and moving out of it is always unhealthy. This is what I call the great big happy nest mentality. It is the view that there is only an inward flow into a local body and never out. It is also part of the foundation for the mega church mentality. We just want to grow churches bigger and bigger making them into massive institutions that look impressive, with just as impressive of buildings. There is nothing wrong with a really big church. Just "bigger" is not necessarily better. A thousand lives changed by the Gospel is better than five hundred, but packing people in does not speak to the quality of discipleship and outward mission. It could be a very healthy missional mega church that is making disciples like Mars Hill in Seattle or The Village Church in Dallas. Or it could be just herding cattle. Most heroin addict rock stars

are better at drawing a crowd than many churches. The ability to grow big is not indicative of Gospel success.

Mission therefore cannot be fulfilled only by an inward flow. If a church is growing numerically, that is good in theory, but if nobody is being sent out from it into outlying communities and other mission efforts, it is moving toward stagnation. It is like overeating. A person only needs so many calories in a day. After a certain point, many that are not used are stored in fat cells for later. However this process can go far afield and obesity can set in. We also know that what then happens is actually the destruction of the person. While the extra nourishment is stored it soon becomes a liability increasing blood pressure, stressing the circulatory system, raising cholesterol, creating diabetes and a host of deadly conditions that lead to early death. A church that is only growing in numbers may often masquerade as “healthy” but in fact is obese and actually dying. This then is also an appropriate point to mention that many churches (though not all) that grow into super churches, do so, not as much by reaching unchurched people, but rather by siphoning off families from the many other smaller local congregations. The smaller ones that do not have the big budgetary advantages and buffet of programs that appeal to our consumeristic preferences are made to suffer for the ever fattening Christian Disney World down the road. Therefore it behooves us to look critically at the deep structures of a church and how they are fulfilling the great commission biblically through making disciples. Another point is that if you are church leadership and have had your church for more than five years and have not participated in a new church plant, you are probably remiss as a steward of the gospel. It is the calling of the church to plant churches.

There are other possible sub-reasons to leave a church, which unlike the above positive reason of mission, are unfortunately negative. With this it must also be understood that the choice to leave a church needs to be reached with thoughtfulness, prayer, caution, and a lot of self reflection as to motives. Most of all, any other reason than mission, for it to be legitimate as a basis for leaving, must still pass the mission test. Let me explain. Churches will always have problems, and the fact that a church has them does not in and of itself constitute a basis for leaving. Such an argument would be the same as saying when a marriage has a problem you just get a divorce and get out. Such thinking completely denies the beauty of the commitment made. Here is what I am saying though: For a problem in a church to be a “possible” foundation for departure it needs to in some way severely inhibit the mission of the Church. Another way to say this is that it needs to be such a problem that the church is not well fulfilling its role in the mission of making disciples and spreading the Gospel.

This is important because the mission of making disciples is what makes a church a church. A tool that does not work becomes useless for the workman. We saw this clearly in Jesus’ words the seven churches of Asia Minor in the Book of Revelation. Here Jesus threatened to remove the candle stick of some because they were no longer serving him and his mission faithfully. One minister friend of mine once told his congregation (who were particularly nostalgic about their little church) that he didn’t think God cared if they existed unless they were doing his will. I agree. Doing God’s will is the foundation of the local church’s existence.

So some of the things that might constitute a basis for considering departure from a congregation might be such things as; (1) false doctrine that clearly obscures the

Gospel and God's moral truths (denial of the Trinity, deity of Christ and major orthodox doctrines, or teaching loose moral standards for the church; but I would also include with this such things as prosperity Gospel, fundamentalism that truncates the Gospel to a formulaic decision and anything else that destroys the clear teaching of the Gospel); (2) Leadership who are in sin with a strangle hold on control (such sins as affairs, misuse of monetary resources and any other form of dishonesty to which they will not be accountable); (3) a hardened refusal to do mission (some churches are very happy with the way things are and have no burden to do mission which is just blatant disobedience to the great commission). These are just some examples of flagrant abuses that may make leaving a consideration, **but only after steps have been taken to rectify the situation and they are met with refusal.** It just needs to be said that leaving any congregation for anything that does not affect the great commission will not be legitimate. If your departure in some way is not oriented toward obedience to the great commission, your departure is nothing less than sin.

On the other hand, we need to say finally say that many people refuse to leave their local church on mission when they should, which is also sin and disobedience. Are you this person who has an exaggerated sense of loyalty to your current local church and very little sense of loyalty to the advance of Christ's Church on a bigger scale? I have experienced this a lot where I found myself talking to couples who have been at their current church for a long time and have now begun to feel stale in their Christian life and seem to be looking for the next step of growth. However because of a false sense of loyalty and duty to their current church, the idea of leaving is only seen as a negative. Having loyalty to your local church is very important, and even a move for the sake of mission should be thoughtful, prayerful and well considered. *It is a conversation that should be done with the leadership of your church and not independently.*

Unfortunately many have often been taught by their current church leadership that there is no place to ever move on, which is false and contrary to the New Testament. This often denotes a self-protective hoarding mentality among some clergy. If you are church leadership and believe and teach this, that people should never leave, not even for mission, you are in sin and will answer to Christ for it. Such situations make some Christians and families live under a sort of false guilt that they can never move on because that would be unfaithful, when in fact, the Gospel commands it! Do any of us really think Christianity spread the way it did by hoarding people in one place? No they came in, were discipled, and then were sent out into all the world.

Are you this Christian or couple, who feels you have become stale and are looking for the next step in your spiritual life? If you are, then you should really start praying about it and start the conversation with your church leadership. Think they will resist? They might, but they are still your authorities in the Lord, and not talking with them will rob them of the opportunity to be challenged by you and your sense of mission and a bigger picture of the kingdom.

So in closing, if you are being trained up as a disciple then you are being prepared as missionaries to your culture. It is not a right, but a duty to be on mission for the Gospel. That may call some of us to stay but also some to go. If you are at that place in your spiritual life where you feel that things are getting a bit stagnant and feeling like you need to grow in a new way, maybe God is calling you to mission of

helping plant a new church in your community. Maybe it is something even more radical. Only you and God can figure that out, but what is for sure is that God has called us to be in churches that make us into obedient disciples of Christ who are missionaries to our culture. This is not optional, but actually the calling of every true Christian. So it is your duty to look diligently for that place where that is going to happen in order for you, and your family to grow into the kind of committed Christ followers he redeemed you to be.