

Shopping for a new church can be a miserable experience. In this short article Pastor Sean Harris answers the question:

*“What are the top ten things you would look for in a church, if you were shopping for a new church?”*

First ‘shopping’ for a church is a terrible word to use to describe the difficult process of finding a new local NT assembly of believers to unite with in covenant membership. But it aptly describes the process of visiting churches and praying for the will of the Lord to be revealed. So having said that, the first thing I would do is establish the biblical criteria I am looking for in a church and then use the Internet to compare and examine churches without having to visit them. More research means fewer churches I have to visit. The goal would be to narrow down the choices and then visit several different services to get a better sense of the true nature of the church. With that brief introduction, the following ten points attempt to describe the criteria I would use in looking for a church.

1. The preaching would have to be primarily and thoroughly expository<sup>1</sup> in nature with a strong emphasis in teaching<sup>2</sup> the Word of God in a text-driven manner verse by verse. I would have to see that the words on the pages of the Bible is what is driving the direction of the sermon<sup>3</sup> and the preacher is committed to proclaiming the whole counsel of the Word of God<sup>4</sup>, including the exclusivity of marriage being necessary for cohabitation and limited to one male and one female.<sup>5</sup> A failure to carry a physical<sup>6</sup> Bible to a pulpit (stand) would be a huge red flag for me; I am not looking for a life coach and witty conversation each Sunday.<sup>7</sup>

2. The pastors, elders, and deacons would have to be males only, and furthermore, men that I could respect.<sup>8</sup> The pastors would have to preach in person. I could not attend a church where the pastor preaches to me via video projection on a screen from another site or via a DVD.

3. The church as a whole would have to be solid on what the gospel<sup>9</sup> is and how one is converted or born again.<sup>10</sup> If the church practiced a ‘sinner’s prayer’ invitation or taught that people are saved by asking God to save them in a prayer,<sup>11</sup> I would cross that church off the list. I would want to see that the pastors understand that the gospel permeates all aspects of the Christian life.<sup>12</sup> Repentance toward God and faith in Christ<sup>13</sup> alone would have to be established as the hallmarks of what a man must do to be saved. I would have to sense that the preacher’s understanding is that it is God Who saves,<sup>14</sup> and salvation cannot be manipulated through man-made techniques.<sup>15</sup>

4. The church would have to practice baptism by immersion for professing believers only.<sup>16</sup> While I respect my Presbyterian brothers in Christ, I believe they are way off on baptism, and I think it is a holdover from the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions.

5. The doctrine of the church would have to fully affirm the essential fundamentals<sup>17</sup> of the Christian faith to include the verbal plenary inerrant inspiration of the original manuscripts of both the Old and New Testaments<sup>18</sup> and use a translation I respect for its accuracy.<sup>19</sup> I could not attend a church that believed God used an evolutionary process to create man.<sup>20</sup> The

pastor would have to affirm the existence of Adam as the first man and Eve as the first woman<sup>21</sup> for me to be a member in that church.

6. I would have to see that the church was focused on global missions,<sup>22</sup> church planting, and evangelistic growth, as well as discipleship.<sup>23</sup> Supporting more missionaries at fewer dollars would be a red flag that the church doesn’t fully understand the relationship between sending churches and partners on the field.<sup>24</sup> How serious the church is about teaching children the Bible would be an excellent litmus test to measure how serious the church takes its mission to disciple converts.

7. The church would have to practice church discipline<sup>25</sup> and maintain a legitimate roll or membership. If members could join the church without so much as even an interview with a pastor or elder, that would be a red flag to me that they do not take church membership seriously. I would not attend a church that did not practice a congregational<sup>26</sup> form of government. Having elders would be a plus but only if the congregation elected the elders.

8. I would have to be confident that my tithes and offerings were being managed wisely and the leaders were good stewards of the money given to the church.<sup>27</sup> If the church has property, it is imperative that the buildings (nurseries) and grounds are being maintained to the glory of God. If the church looked like a dump,<sup>28</sup> it would be a serious red flag pointing to a lack of leadership and direction in the church.

9. The church could not have a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the

Spirit than the gospel and the LORD of the gospel.<sup>29</sup> This might manifest itself in a culture of emphasizing the worship ‘experience’ versus the primacy preaching of the Word. If the church believed in a second baptism of the Holy Spirit as necessary for assurance of salvation or the requirement to speak in tongues to affirm salvation, it would be off the list.

10. I would have to sense that there wasn’t an air of arrogance or a culture of exclusivity in the congregation because of a sense of doctrinal superiority (sometimes present in Reformed Churches) or because of a sense of ‘rightness’ on the KJV Bible or the presence of personal holiness conduct such as ‘our women don’t wear pants’ (sometimes found in IFB churches). On the same note, if the congregation was exclusively white (or black), that would be of great concern to me.<sup>30</sup>

While this list might not be as exclusive as it could be, it should provide a sufficient framework to begin to construct your own list of criteria as you diligently seek the Lord’s will concerning church membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 8:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:27

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:11

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20:27

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:5-6

<sup>6</sup> Christ’s use of a scroll in Luke 4:17 is an example worthy of emulation in so much as it communicates the primacy of the Scripture

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2

<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 3

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

<sup>10</sup> Acts 3:19, John 3

<sup>11</sup> Acts 16:30-31

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 1:27 (ESV, NKJV)

<sup>13</sup> Acts 20:21

<sup>14</sup> Jonah 2:9

<sup>15</sup> John 3:1-8

<sup>16</sup> Acts 8:36-38

<sup>17</sup> To include the Virgin Birth, Deity of Christ, atoning physical death, bodily resurrection and the literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ

<sup>18</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>19</sup> ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 1-3

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:45, 1 Timothy 2:13

<sup>22</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

<sup>24</sup> Acts 11:22

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:12

<sup>26</sup> Acts 6:3-5

<sup>27</sup> Titus 1:7

<sup>28</sup> Haggai 1:4

<sup>29</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3 (ESV, NASB)

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 12:38; Revelations 5:9

