

How to Choose a Church

Moving to a new place with family, work or as a student usually means looking for a new church community in which to participate, grow and serve. This guide is specifically for new students here in Durham who are typically choosing a church for the first time. Hopefully it will be useful for anyone choosing a church.

There is always a danger that a church leader giving guidance on these things just gives a series of pointers leading to the inevitable conclusion that you should go to their church. As a check on my own inevitable bias, I spoke to a friend who is a minister of a different denomination from out of town to see what he said. What emerged from our conversation is included in what follows.

Look first for church that is passionate about the gospel, about spreading the gospel and which worships in a way that helps your engagement with God and discipleship. Churches will have different styles and emphases but fundamentally they should be concerned about the gospel, the Bible and making then growing new disciples. Look for a place where you can thrive as a believer.

Look for a church that is generous hearted in its evangelicalism – that both holds its convictions deeply but respects and values the contribution of other churches with whom they may not agree on secondary issues but with whom they can have fellowship on essentials. Standing clearly for gospel truth is vital. But exclusivity, superiority, a sense that they are the only true church, extending the essentials to less important matters or personal hobby horses are all danger signs.

Look for a church that will teach you. A focus on teaching from the Bible is essential but not in a simplistic way that doesn't get you to think deeply or analytically but instead helps you grasp it more deeply and live it out in practice. Lifestyle preaching has its strengths but does not take us very deep in Bible learning. Narrow preaching that focusses on a few favourite themes will take you deep in a few areas but it will also make you narrow or shallow in your appreciation of the immeasurable riches of what God has to say to us in Scripture. If the church has no organised way of engaging with Scripture beyond the pastor's favourite text or themes – avoid.

Look for a church that gets the right balance between activities specially for students and integration with the rest of the church. Preparing well for church after University means getting out of the student bubble and learning to relate to other people too. It also means having some activities and opportunities that take account of your special status as a student.

Student organisations and groups have some significant value in dealing with issues relating to students and there is an important place for this in church too. If you are too involved in student Christian activities to plug into church properly you've got your priorities wrong.

It is also pretty unhealthy in church if there is kind of spiritual apartheid so students never get to interact with non-students. The church is meant to be a body not a series of parallel channels. Look for an integrated and balanced vision of how students relate to the wider church.

Look for a church that will help prepare you for years ahead. Being a student is a special opportunity to learn quickly and think deeply about Christian faith and about how God might lead you in the future in career or church.

Look for a church that it would feel comfortable to bring a non-Christian friend along to. Good churches offer opportunities to bring guests that you could imagine bringing someone along to as well.

Look for a church where you can encounter God. The rational, truth-based, word-focussed part of discipleship is essential for healthy Christian living. So too is meeting God powerfully in the Spirit. It deepens and solidifies faith in more experiential and emotional ways. Chasing experiences is not healthy but pursuing God and knowing him deeply involves our whole selves longing for him, his word and his glory.

Which seems like a pretty good note to end on!

Grace and peace in the Lord Jesus

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