

I'm Looking For A Church That's Not So ...

Introduction. America is a country on the move in many ways, and religion is no exception. Half of Americans have changed their religious denomination at least once in their lives — many several times — and 28 percent have switched faiths altogether (for example, from Catholicism to Judaism). This means that thousands of people are searching out a new church each year. They often research congregations in their area, ask around, and then personally visit the short list in a month of Sundays. Our lesson will look at some common criteria people consider in a new church.

I. "I'm Looking For A Church That's Not So Dogmatic"

- A. A caustic and callous approach does not draw men to Jesus — it repels them. A Savior lifted up on the cross is Heaven's magnet (John 12:32). The church has to present its message in love (Ephesians 4:15). It has no permission from a loving God to be hateful to the people He created (1 Peter 1:22; 2:17). No one wants to sit in a cold church — but warm and cozy is hard to leave.
- B. Does this mean that a church should not stand strong for truth? No. Doctrine is important (John 8:24; 2 John 9-11). The church is responsible to teach all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27) whether it is popular or unpopular (2 Timothy 4:1-5). It is to defend the gospel (Philippians 1:17; Jude 3), not compromise it (Galatians 1:8). Several issues both near and far concern the church at all times. On one hand, we deal with Catholicism, Calvinism, and Premillennialism, while on the other, we deal with divorce and remarriage, fellowship, and false teachers.
- C. Paul was both tolerant and dogmatic, loving and convicted. On the one hand, he refused to cave to Jewish teachers who wanted to bind outdated laws. He "gave place, no, not for an hour" (Galatians 2:5). He was also gentle (1 Thessalonians 2:7), tearful (Acts 20:31), loving (Philemon 1:9), and willing to "spend and be spent" for others (2 Corinthians 12:15).
- D. God desires His church to "comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" but also to "warn them that are unruly" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). So look for a church that speaks all the truth in love.

II. "I'm Looking For A Church That's Not So Judgmental"

- A. Some grew up in homes with hard fathers and fault-finding mothers. Others are in dysfunctional, abusive relationships. Some have been judged unfairly by peers or society for so long that they long for a place where they can just be themselves. The last outcome they want is more of the same at church. Most just long to be loved — and none of us like to be criticized.
- B. The church is composed of humble, kind people who know their imperfections. Like John, all faithful Christians have a hopeful future (Revelation 21:1-3), but many, like Paul, also have a regrettable past (Philippians 3:13). They have made their share of mistakes, dabbled in more sins than they care to remember, and battled addictions that have not been conquered easily. Since everyone has sinned, Christians understand, accept, encourage, and help each other.
- C. Christians know that pointing a finger at others leaves three fingers pointing back at themselves. They long ago memorized Jesus' admonition, "Judge not, that ye

be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). On the other hand, all of us should make judgments. The same Lord who said, “Judge not,” also said, “Judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Is this a contradiction? No, He does not forbid judging, but He does forbid unfair, hypocritical judging (Matthew 7:2-5).

- D. The church announces the righteousness of God (Romans 1:16-17; 3:22-25; Hebrews 1:8). It trumpets holiness, pure values, and endorses ethical standards. It urges sowing to the Spirit, and discourages sowing to the flesh (Galatians 6:7-8). Therefore, some sermons will encourage us; others will convict us (Acts 2:36-38). We benefit from both. So look for a church where you feel welcomed and loved — and challenged to grow spiritually (1 Peter 2:21-22; 2 Peter 3:18).

III. “I’m Looking For A Church That’s Not So Rule-Oriented”

- A. Surely a church has missed the mark if it does not teach and practice that “the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17). Majoring in minors — meat and drink — can cause people to miss majors — rightness with God, peace with others, and joy in the heart. The weightier matters of the law — judgment, mercy, faith — can be missed while tithing spices (Matthew 23:23).
- B. No group bothered Jesus more than the Pharisees who made up rules for God and bound them on His people but would not follow them (Matthew 23:4, 13). They were classic legalists in that they thought conformity to Law alone saved (Romans 10:3).
- C. On the other hand, while rules are not an end in themselves, they are necessary. Commands give structure; rules lead to freedom. Anarchy is the child of lawlessness. No one wants to be part of an institution or society without rules.
- D. God gave His Word to be loved, learned, understood, and obeyed — not ignored (James 1:21-25). The whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13; John 14:15; 15:10).
- E. Obedience is not legalism. Instead, obedience shows that we understand the spirit of the law (Psalm 111:10; 1 John 5:1-3). Christians are set free in Christ (Romans 14:1, 4), but ironically the way God gives liberty is through obeying the truth (John 8:24; 12:48-50; Romans 6:13-17). Submission is key to accessing God’s spiritual treasures (Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 5:8-9). The result (liberty) follows the cause (obedience). So look for a church that emphasizes the true need for rules — to show true love for God (1 John 2:3-5).

IV. “I’m Looking For A Church That’s Not So Old-Fashioned”

- A. Americans love their gadgets; none of us want to return to rotary telephones or typewriters. We are connected; we do not want to go back to waiting for a letter to arrive in the mail. We are mobile; horses might be a fun weekend, but no one wants to ride one to work every day.
- B. Why, then, would we want to go to a church that feels like we are stepping back in time? Why read from a book that our grandmothers read, sing a 100-year-old song, or take up a religion that has been around for 2,000 years?
- C. Good questions. For those who have not been in a while, we might point out that songs are still being written and that technology has arrived in most

congregations. Members follow sermons on their tablets, view presentations in Bible classes, and find verses and listen to sermons on smartphones.

- D. At the same time, some elements are always in fashion. Fulfilling man's basic needs does not go out of style. Every generation seeks out healthy vegetables, comfortable clothing, affordable lodging, and pure drinking water. Laughter, working, security, friends, learning, and relationships never go out of style.
- E. So it is with the church. It meets the perennial human needs of soul food and salvation. It addresses the inner man that longs to understand the big picture and find meaning in life (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11; John 10:10). It builds character (2 Peter 1:5-8), helps with relationships (Ephesians 5:25-33), and prepares one for the afterlife (Matthew 25:31-46). It also has a simple mission of evangelism (Philippians 1:3-5; 2:25-30), benevolence (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), and edification (1 Corinthians 14:26; Romans 14:19).
- F. The original church has no successor; it needs none. Some objects are more valuable with age. Antiques that originally sold for a few dollars may fetch thousands now. Land an ancestor purchased for a couple thousand may bring six figures. Established blue chip companies often make better investment sense than a start-up.

Conclusion. Perhaps the discussion is more nuanced than expected — the pool a little deeper than it looks on the surface. If this is the kind of church you are looking for, then you need to seriously consider the New Testament church.