

How to Choose a Church: Part 4 Convicted Commitment to Mission and Purpose

Introduction: Businesses, marriages, and churches can struggle with the same thing. Each of these can start out with clear intentions and direction but get bogged down over time. For a business, a growing number of employees, complexities of business law, or pressure of the bottom line can affect quality or mission. A marriage starts out with an intention to love and honor, but when kids, mortgage, job, and activities come, along with failure, the love and pursuit of a husband and wife can wane, and though the focus is on the kids, the connection fades.

A church faces the same friction. A church can start with the goal of proclaiming the truth and reaching the lost, and in the beginning there is a purity in that venture: there are no programs other than setting up chairs, involvement is high (if you're there, you serve), and mission is clear. Everyone knows each other, cares for each other, and prays together. But over time things change. People move away and in. Leadership changes. Demographics change. Things become more complex, budgets must get approved which means committees must be formed, air conditioning needs to get fixed, children's ministry needs coverage, and so on. None of this is bad, but it all adds up to a change in focus. Existence becomes important and ability to risk goes down, or at least what you were willing to risk at one time. The church can exist in this way for a while, but eventually it becomes to stagnate, attendance goes down, conversions are rare, and there's no vision for the future.

In this last week of *How to choose a church* we want to look at a church's commitment to Biblical mission and purpose, and if they are still on mission or have moved past it.

Understanding God's Heart for the Church

Good news is FOR EVERYONE (Acts 20:21)

"testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

The apostle Paul had a God given, Christ ordained protocol: *he would be a chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus to Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel* (Acts 9:15). This gospel ministry would be carried out to Jews, to those in power/authority positions, and to all those who did not fit either category. His mode of operation was to go to a city and head to the Synagogue first, to his countrymen, and explain Jesus from the Scriptures. After he'd be rejected (which was every time) he would then turn to the non-Jews of the city. This is exactly what happened in Ephesus. After 3 months in the Synagogue, he taught in the Hall of Tyrannus to the point that *"all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."* (Acts 19:10)

The good news of the gospel is for all people, for all nations, for all languages, for every tribe. Paul was born into a Jewish family but also a Roman citizen so he had his feet in both worlds. But he did not reach out to kings because he was a king or Greeks because he loved mythology. He reached beyond his comfort zone, his economics, upbringing, training, and personality to share with any and all the message of faith and repentance. A church should **absolutely be a reflection of the makeup of the location it's placed in**. As the city/town grows in diversity, so should the church. A church in rural Illinois that's major industry is farming will look differently than one in downtown Chicago. When a church has a homogenous feel in a heterogeneous place, **they risk being out of step with their mission**.

Good news is FOR SINNERS (1 Tim. 1:15-16)

"The saying is trustworthy and deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me as the foremost,

Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life."

Healthy churches WILL see fruit of the gospel, both in growth of believers and the redemption of unbelievers. A mark of a growing disciple is the making of more disciples, which God does through the power of His grace and we are there as His witnesses. We have talked about churches preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God, including sin, suffering, and sanctification, and now we see that a church should proclaim good news of repentance and faith to everyone, but primarily to **sinners**. Notice three parts to this message:

- **Paul recognized the depth of his sin** - Until one understands the depth of his sin he cannot understand the depth of God's grace and mercy. Paul considered himself unworthy because he persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9), which is bad. But all of us, when we look at the breadth and height and width of our sin could testify that we are UNWORTHY of anything let alone grace. A healthy church proclaims bad news as BAD, rather than trying to soften the blow at this level.
- **Paul did not stay in his sin** - A healthy church preaches grace to wretched sinners, and grace that transforms completely. Paul understood the depth of his sin but also knew that God's grace allowed him to work harder than anyone at the ministry God called him to (1 Cor. 15:10). The message of the gospel is that God saves the worst of the worst (even me) and loves them so much and died for the complete record of sin that someone can now live righteously. A message of forgiveness without a message of transformation is half a message. We are called to be *born again*, which means we believe and are transformed to **follow Jesus as Lord**. When we believe but do not follow, it's like we are still-born. Paul's message was ALL grace, grace to save and grace that sustains.
- **Paul's life became a testimony to those who would believe** - There was no difference for Paul between sharing the gospel and sharing what God did in his life. His testimony of grave sin which lead to forgiveness and transformation was a driving force in his interaction with people. Unfortunately, we lose the zeal to share out stories because we **forget** how bad we were, **we lose** the passion to see others saved, or we somehow think **we are good** and others are simply bad. A healthy church will have a healthy view of grace, of growth in putting off sin, and growth in sharing the gospel with others.

Ministry is gospel driven, not "me" driven (Acts 20:24)

*"But I do not account **my life** of any **value** nor as **precious to myself**, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to **testify to the gospel of the grace of God.**"*

Paul received clarity for his life: proclaim and suffer. One of the reasons he was so effective and influential is the fact he never wavered from that task. In fact, he was counter cultural to how he viewed his life. In a time like ours that needs **validation of identity** or sees self as **most precious**, Paul viewed his life completely different. His goal was to finish the race that was started for him when Jesus met him on the way to Damascus, and the entirety of life was driven by that. In other words, life was not about Paul, and thus the church and ministry **was not about him either**.

We live in a day that there are ministries for all kinds of things, and are limited only by ones imagination. It is true that **true gospel ministry should be broad and wide**. The church is the *ekklesia*, the called out ones, and though we serve and love each other we must also work hard to love and bless those **outside of the church**. But herein lies the **key to knowing if ministry is valid or simply an artificial covering to**

give people opportunities to do stuff they like: *is the ministry about and for you, and does it tie directly to the gospel.* Paul did a lot of different things, but the main thing was to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. That means that ministries should not revolve around us but are designed to point people back to the gospel. When churches structure ministry around the felt needs of people, we truly do a disservice to them because we can give a false sense of security, of belonging, or even of salvation. This can easily happen even when the intentions start out best. This is sometimes what happens in the "Business as Mission" world, where the business is designed to bless and point people to Christ, but in the end all the time is given over to running the business.

The Heart is Always the Target (1 Tim. 1:5)

*"The **aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.**"*

Aiming at external conformity is tempting...oh so tempting. We can instill discipline, rules, punishments or rewards to get people to line up the way we want them to. Churches can have them serve, give, and attend stuff, can get involvement in the community and even fill the donation boxes for Christmas, but that may mean nothing positive eternally. Paul's charge and goal for the church was **love from a pure heart**. **Purity of heart** is essential to be in God's presence (Ps. 24:3-4), is what is precious to God (1 Pet. 3:4), and can only be created by God (Ps. 51:10; Titus 3:5; Rom. 6:17). Love as Biblically defined must start with God (God is Love), and also involves us loving Him so we can properly love each other. This purity of heart that leads to Biblical love can ONLY BE PRODUCED by God through His grace and the work of Jesus on the cross. This happens as we become more dependent on grace, more trusting in Christ, and thus more obedient in life.

The churches goal is never about artificial change. That is also why the churches goal is not too simply to get a lot of people to attend. God changes the heart. We point people to He that can. Once the heart changes, **everything changes**. Now there is the proper motivation, purpose, and strength to actually conform to Christ since He transformed our heart. That is why the church must be a place where:

*"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the name of the Lord **from a pure heart.**"*

2 Timothy 2:22

God's DESIRE is for all to come to salvation (1 Tim 2:4)

"...God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

We will dive deeper into this beautiful and difficult passage in a few months, but for now we will simply say this: *God's heart or desire IS to see all people saved.* We remember that there are two expressions of God's will, as I Howard Marshall said, *"We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what He actually **does will to happen**, and both of these things can be spoken of as God's will."* In other words, God's heart displays His love and compassion, and His sovereign choice reveals His justice and glory. But for every church, we remember this once again: that God desires all people to be saved, and that God made provision in Christ's death for salvation to all who would believe.

How would we summarize all of this for the church? A healthy church cannot forget her mission, and she cannot let distractions, busyness, and the tyranny of the urgent distract her from this. Churches will have many things going on in it life, but if it neglects the mission of the gospel it falls short. It also must share the **complete gospel** and not cut corners by offering something cheap and easy simply to feel better about more people coming.

Understanding the Purpose of God's Household

Doctrine Lived Out Fuels & Unifies (1 Tim. 4:6, 16)

*"If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being **trained in the words of faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed...Keep a close watch on yourself and on your teaching** Persist in this for by doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."*

One of the reasons that Paul left Timothy at Ephesus was because of the problem of false teachers who had come in and taught both false doctrine and from a bad conscience (1 Tim. 1:18-20). There are a couple of things that Paul continually pointed Timothy to: **know and keep the doctrine you've been taught, and live it out loud.** **Doctrine**, or the foundational teaching of Scripture, is the foundation for our life. Every part of Scripture is immensely practical and is intended to transform our thinking, our desires, and our obedience. Scripture teaches that there is a **unique, intertwined, and intentional** relationship between what we believe and how we live, between our study and our life, between our orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Every church will feel the tension. Do we teach or do we reach? Do we focus on the needs of church members or focus on those outside and try to reach more? Do we look inward or outward; spend resources on members or on potential members? In some ways the tension is good. It forces us to evaluate, to think, and to pray to make sure we are moving where God would have us go. Much like a family that must carve out some mom & dad time without neglecting the kids, a church must evaluate whether they are neglecting major Biblical commands.

But the tension is actually invigorating. They are not separate issues. The more we understand God's Word we understand the God of His Word, and that fuels our fire for our mission. Not only that, but it is the one truly effective way to get a whole church unified for its mission. We can rah-rah all day long about a particular outreach or initiative, but it may or may not float everyone's boat. However, when we are all reading and learning the same thing our hearts and minds will be knit together for the mission.

This is why **what we believe matters.** When we take a stand for a literal interpretation of Scripture and interpretations that stand opposed to cultural norms, we unite behind the truth. When a church begins to change the clear truth to accommodate, it WILL NOT UNITE BUT WILL EVENTUALLY TEAR DOWN.

ONE CAVEAT: It is also true that more knowledge alone will unite. It is always knowledge that is lived out by grace that shows an exercise of wisdom. Knowledge without faith leaves the head full but heart hard. Faith without knowledge cannot grow in wisdom and love. Faith and knowledge must work together to produce a true outcome.

Difficult Days necessitate Sober Endurance (2 Tim. 4:3-5)

*"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but have itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. **As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.**"*

Far from being an alarmist, Paul wanted the church of Ephesus to know what they were up against in the future. He wanted the church to be armed and ready since war was raging all around them. Things on this earth are and will go from bad to worse. We are experiencing in our culture what Paul told Timothy: there is a movement away from the truth, from reason, from sanity. Since people no longer **want sound teaching**, some churches decided to simply tell people what they want to hear and give

them what they want. But Pau instead gave a game plan to Timothy: **be sober, endure, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill the gospel ministry given to you.** No gimmicks, although there should be creativity. There should be a seriousness, a readiness, and a proactively. This does not mean everything should stay the same. We should be evaluating and willing to change the things that we can, but we never mess with the message or the Word of God.

What does this mean for a church? Does the church have clear doctrinal statements as to what they believe about pivotal issues? Does the activity of the church come OUT OF good teaching, or is it simply activity? Are they simply trying to be like the culture to reach the culture, and in turn have lost the clarity of the gospel and teaching? Are they ashamed of making doctrinal statements?

Understanding Preferences & Principles *in* the Church

Does Proximity Matter

Finally, a couple of other minor issues to address. First, the proximity to a church. If at all possible, being a part of a church in the area/neighborhood that you live would be ideal. If deciding between two that are relatively even, I'd always go with the closer one. Why? The church is true community and family, and it is next to impossible to have that unless you see the people of the church regularly, more than on Sunday.

Does the Size Matter

There are no numbers given to size of churches in the New Testament, and there are pluses and minuses with every size of church. What I would say is that in every letter Paul wrote he would name individual names, meaning that he had a relationship with real people, not simply numbers on a page. I'd always suggest going to a church where you can be known and can get to know the shepherds and leaders who lead. I've found some like getting "lost" in a large church where they can do their thing, leave, and not be noticed. This is not the purpose of the church.

What do I do about Preferences (Rom. 12:10)

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo (prefer) one another in showing honor.

You may have noticed we did not talk about a lot of the areas people usually ask about in terms of churches: children's ministry, music, and other programs for my family. This was totally intentional. We will put those things in the category of **preferences**, which does not make them unimportant, but definitely less important than what we covered above. If a church has a cranking children's ministry that my kids like but do not major on the truth or proclaim a clear gospel, I'd not recommend it. If it has the music YOU really like but not shepherd leadership, I wouldn't recommend it. If it has the program you have been waiting for but you will not be known or challenged to grow, I would not recommend it. Remember, preferences in a church are like preferences in your family. Very rarely do I get all my preferences, but I willingly give them up because I love my wife and girls (I rarely listen to music I prefer when we are all in the car!).

So that challenge is in front of us. Are we a Biblical church? What areas do we need to improve? Next week we'll begin walking through 1 Timothy verse by verse as we understand the **charge to the church** as Paul challenged Timothy. We want our aim to be the church God intended us to be.