

A Guide to Church Shopping

(Found on blog.higherthings.org)

I'm going to give you a few things to think about on your shopping trip - twelve in case you're counting. And then twelve dos and don'ts. Why twelve? No particular reason except that 12 happens to be one of those biblical "lucky numbers" like 3, 7, 10, and 40. Twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, twelve foundations under heavenly Jerusalem. It's better than six.

The first four are the really big ones. Tie them to your foreheads and bind them on your wrists next to your WWJD bracelet. The other eight are there to round out the list and give you some things to think about while you're sipping your latte at Starbucks on Sunday morning and pondering where to go to church. [First the list, then some explanation on each one in order.] So here goes.

TWELVE DOS AND DON'TS FOR CHURCH SHOPPERS

Do shop for churches "concentrically." Start with the congregations closest to where you live. The closer you live, the more you can be involved in its life. Can't find a decent church within a reasonable distance? Perhaps your living room might be the start of a new congregation in the area. That's how many churches got started. But don't start there.

Do be so kind as to leave your name, address, and phone number so that the church can contact you if they want. Don't feel compelled to leave an offering, unless you truly desire to make one. (Don't let my budget committee see this one!)

Do attend more than one service before moving on. Don't let your first impression be your only one. Churches, like people, have bad hair days too.

Do make arrangements to speak with the pastor of the congregation as soon as possible.

Do introduce yourself to congregation members and talk with them. You'll learn a lot. Don't sit on the fringes. Christianity is not a spectator sport.

Don't get sucked in by programs and music. Remember, this is worship, not entertainment. Music can be manipulative.

Don't lead with your heart; use your head. Christianity is about the objective fact of salvation in Jesus Christ, not feelings.

Don't be put off if the service seems out of touch with the culture. The Church is supposed to be the embassy of a kingdom not of this world.

Don't expect any congregation or pastor to be perfect in practice.

Do plan on joining. Church shopping should be a temporary phase, not a way of life.

Do look and listen for Jesus Christ crucified in the middle of everything.

Do pray that God would lead you to a faithful, Christ-centered, sacramental, liturgical congregation that proclaims the faith of Christ crucified and risen for your salvation.

1. Is the church Christ-centered?

A spoked wheel without a hub can't spin. It can be missing a spoke or two, or even be slightly out of round, but without the hub at the center, the wheel won't work.

Without the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of the sinner and the life of the world firmly in the middle of a church's teaching, preaching, and practice, its hold on Christianity will be tenuous at best. Being "biblical" isn't enough. Some churches like to say they're "Bible-believing"

churches. That sounds good, but the Bible wasn't nailed to a cross for the forgiveness of your sins. Christian churches are "Christ-believing," and you can't get more biblical than that.

It's all about Jesus, or it isn't particularly Christian. It's not about how much I love Jesus, but how Jesus loves me (and you) to death. It's not about what would Jesus do (WWJD) but what did Jesus do for you (and for the world) (WDJD4U).

2. Is the church confessional and creedal?

A creed is a formal statement of belief, a church's public confession of what it believes, teaches, and confesses.

"Doctrine divides" and "Deeds not creeds" you say. Yeah, I read the bumper stickers too. It's all nonsense of the first order! The Christian faith is not something you make up as you go along. And it doesn't come through private one-on-one conversations with God while driving on the freeway. The Ethiopian had the company of Philip along with the Scriptures in his chariot (Acts 8:26-40). And he wasn't driving the chariot!

The Christian faith is "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). In other words, what we believe is what Christians have always believed since Pentecost. Look and listen for things like the Apostles' creed, which goes all the way back to the 2nd century. Or the Nicene creed (AD 325). Or even the Athanasian creed (5th century). Lutherans have a whole book called the Book of Concord which was pulled together in 1580. It's our public statement of what we believe and don't believe. Now that's confessional!

You say, "But that's a bunch of old stuff written by dead guys. What about today?" I say, "Look. The church has been around longer than Billy Graham, Dwight Moody and the last crusade at Anaheim Stadium". We're talking almost 2000 years of history here. As the old saying goes, "Those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat its errors." The old creeds keep us from reinventing the faith and praying to our "Father-Mother in heaven" or whatever other paganism is in style these days.

If a church can't put down in writing what it believes and teaches, maybe it doesn't believe anything at all.

3. Is the church sacramental?

Isn't that the capital of California? No, that's Sacramento, which, though it shares a verbal connection, has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the sacraments. Believe me; I live in California.

"Sacraments" are rituals established by God in which God reveals Himself to be gracious to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Don't be surprised that God works through rituals. He's always worked through rituals. Even in the Garden, there was a ritual. Don't eat from a certain tree in the middle. Eat from any other tree, including the Tree of Life, but not that tree. An action and a word - ritual. In the old testament, God worked through the ritual blood sacrifices of the temple and the ritual of circumcision. In the new testament, He works through Baptism, the preached Word, and the Lord's Supper.

God is sacramental; so are we. That's how He wants to deal with us. Deal with it.

As long as we're talking sacraments, let's talk baby baptism, shall we? Sacramental churches baptize their babies. This isn't some kind of weird medieval magic or religious superstition. It's simply the recognition God promises to work through Baptism to make Jesus' death and resurrection personally our own. In Baptism, we are individually and personally buried with Jesus in His death (Romans 6:4). It's our washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). The cross says, "Jesus died for all." Baptism says, "Jesus died for you."

Baby baptism has been around since Jesus commanded His disciples to "make disciples of all the nations" (Mt 28:19-20) and the first households were baptized (Acts 2:29). Anyone who says, "The Bible doesn't say to baptize babies," is arguing from a vacuum of silence. The Bible doesn't say not to baptize babies, either. And the Bible doesn't say to "dedicate" them, so I'll see you, raise you, and call the hand. Only occasionally in the early centuries did anyone challenge baby baptism, but they were challenging the status quo not a novelty. It wasn't until the 16th century and the Reformation that some fringe types starting baptizing the already baptized because they didn't like Roman Catholics; hence the name "Anabaptists" (ana = again, baptizo = to baptize, anabaptist = to baptize again). The Anabaptists were the theological forerunners of many protestant Christians in America today.

What a church says about baby baptism tells you a lot about what it believes concerning salvation. If salvation is a transaction in which God does His part and we in turn do our part, then baby baptism makes no sense at all. Better to wait until the kid is old enough to decide and seal the deal for himself.

But if salvation is entirely God's doing, accomplished in dead Jesus on the cross and given to us freely, gratis, by grace, without our works or decisions, while we are still spiritually stone cold dead (Ephesians 2:4), then baby baptism makes all the sense in the world. The kid does nothing except get wet and kick a little bit; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do it all. "By grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Let's not throw the baby out of the baptismal bath water.

As long as I'm tooting the sacramental horn, a few words for the wise about the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper consists of bread and wine (yes, Virginia, that's bread and wine, not crackers and grape juice or whatever else someone might serve up on the Sunday menu) together with the words of Jesus spoken on the night He was betrayed: "This is my body given for you." "This is my blood shed for you." You heard Him right. The bread is Jesus body, and the wine is Jesus blood. Not represents, symbolizes, signifies, stand for, or any other clever way of ducking the word "is." Don't ask me how, I don't know; I just work here. It just is. "Is" still means "is" in sacramental churches.

Sacramental churches tend to have the Lord's Supper frequently, usually weekly or even more. That's because they actually believe you receive something important, namely, the body and the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. If all you get is bread and wine and a fond memory of Jesus, three or four times a year is enough. You may as well go to brunch. The bread and wine are usually better at brunch than in church anyway.

Sacramental churches usually tend to practice some form of "closed communion." It tends to come with the confessional territory. Some congregations are fairly open, others are tight as a drum. Some ask that you speak with the pastor before you approach the altar, others want you to take 100 hours of classroom instruction and a driving test. The point is that the Lord's Supper is not a "y'all come down if the Spirit moves you" kind of meal. Neither was the Passover that came before it.

A word of warning, and I mean this seriously. The Lord's Supper can kill you, and I'm not talking about catching some nasty germs by drinking from a common cup. It happened to some folks in Corinth who were elbowing the poor out of the food line at the church's potluck and coming to the altar as though they were belying up to a bar in Vegas. They got sick and died for the way they communed! (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). So don't get bent out of shape if the pastor says he doesn't think you ought to commune that day. He probably has your health and well-being at heart. You ought to thank him.

I recommend that church shoppers refrain from communing until they settle in at a place. The Lord's Supper is more than your little personal time with Jesus. It's a deeply communal form of worship, where believers are visibly united with each other in the one Body of Christ. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). That kind of unity suggest a certain sense of commitment, don't you think?

If you desire to receive the Lord's Supper as a guest in a congregation, please be so kind as to introduce yourself to the pastor beforehand and be prepared for some meaningful conversation. It

will save you potential embarrassment later, and it's the polite thing to do. Imagine sitting down to dinner, and all of a sudden, a total stranger comes through the door, sits down at your table, and asks you to pass the mashed potatoes. I think you'd at least want to know his name, wouldn't you? Enough said.

4. Is the church liturgical?

Smells and bells versus praise bands and projection screens. Everything from Gregorian chant to Jesus-palooza 2003. Welcome to Worship Wars!

I refuse to take up arms. Call me old fashioned, but I stick with the tried and true vintages, straight from the church's cellar. Liturgical churches use a fixed order of service that's more or less repeated from Sunday to Sunday. The repetition has been going on now for almost 2000 years, so it has a pretty good head of liturgical steam, if not smoke, behind it. Liturgical churches tend to use a book or some kind of printed order of service that wasn't made up from scratch on Friday. Projection screens belong in movie theaters, in my less than humble opinion. Don't we stare at screens enough every day?

Though it's often called "traditional worship" by those who engage in "contemporary worship," that's really only half the truth. Liturgical worship is historic worship, the way Christians have been worshipping for nearly 2000 years. Some of the phrases of the liturgy go all the way back to the new testament. Liturgical worship is also biblical worship, not in the sense that the Bible demands we worship this way, but that nearly every word of the liturgy is a quotation from Scripture. Liturgical worship is also Christocentric worship, with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness and life of the sinner right in the middle of everything. That's the important one, remember?

Liturgical services are usually two part affairs. There's the service of the Word, which consists of readings from Scripture and a sermon on one or more of the readings. And there's the service of the Sacrament, or Lord's Supper. Hymns and psalms are sprinkled in, along with the creed and a few other things like the offering. It can be a bit confusing to the newcomer. Historic liturgy, like decent red wine, is an acquired taste, especially for us brain damaged Americans whose fingers are always on the remote. But hang with it long enough, and you too can learn the age old new song of salvation along with the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.

"Do you have to worship this way," people always ask me. "Not necessarily," I say with a Gospel smile. "We don't necessarily have to do anything. But what else would you do?" OK, so I'm biased. String me up by my stoles and chasuble. Some people don't mind lurching around in a liturgical Yugo. For my money, the historic liturgy is a classic Bentley, which I try to keep in good running order and up to contemporary emission standards.

"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

OK, there you have it. The top four things to think about as you're shopping around for a church. If you haven't written me off as some kind of closet Catholic who's sniffed a little too much incense in his college days, then let's quickly move through the other eight in no particular order.

5. What does the church teach concerning the Bible?

Let's be clear. The Bible is the Word of God. Period. It doesn't just contain the Word of God or become the Word of God when you believe it. It is the Word of God, apparent warts and all. The Scriptures are inspired (literally breathed out) from God (2 Timothy 3:14-16). They're not intended to make you healthy or wealthy but wise to your salvation through faith in Jesus. The Scriptures are useful for doctrine, for rebuking (and we all need a little rebukin' now and then), for correction and for training. Watch how a church uses the Bible, especially those uncomfortable passages. If they're picking and choosing, they're probably making things up on the fly.

6. Does the congregation believe, teach, and confess the Triune God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - three Persons in one divine Being, as the only true God?

Basic, but it needs to be said. Many so-called "mainline" churches pray to a "Father-Mother" god or a Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier god in the interest of inclusivity and political correctness. This is more than a matter of words. If a church can't say "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" something has gone terribly wrong. The historic creeds and liturgy, if they are taken seriously, will help keep things in line.

7. Does the congregation believe, teach and confess that all people are by nature sinful in the eyes of God?

Yes, I know that all that "poor, miserable sinner" stuff can be a real blow to the self-esteem, but denial doesn't change the truth. Churches that deny we are sinners to the core tend to push for self improvement as the way to salvation, as though you have within you the power to change and improve. Remember, we're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.

8. Does the congregation teach that sinners are justified (declared righteous) by God's grace (His undeserved favor) through faith (trust) for the sake of Jesus (on the basis of His sacrificial death)?

Sounds amazing, but it's true. We're innocent in God's eyes all thanks to dead and risen Jesus. This is the central teaching of Christianity. Without it, a church can't really be called "Christian," no matter how religious it might otherwise appear. You may hear many religious and even inspiring things during the course of a service, but did you hear that Jesus Christ died on a cross, rose from the dead, and reigns at the right hand of God for the forgiveness of your sins and for His sake, pardon, peace, forgiveness, and eternal life are yours in His name? If you didn't hear something like that, then what you heard wasn't distinctively Christian.

9. Does the congregation distinguish God's commands, threats, and punishments from His promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ?

Ever read the Bible and wonder whether God is talking out of two sides of His mouth? Or even if He has two mouths? We call that the Law and the Gospel. The Law is what God demands from us - absolute perfection, not just a good try. The Law is a mirror, reflecting how bad things really are with us. It also instructs and guides us, and serves to curb some truly bad behavior. But the Law is always going to accuse you and make you feel bad about yourself. That's probably why people don't like to see the Ten Commandments in public places.

But don't despair! The Law is not God's last Word. You're a sinner, that's true. And Jesus is the Savior of sinners! That's even truer. The Gospel is "good news." (That's what the word "gospel" means - good news.) The good news is that Jesus bore your sin in His body on the cross. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, but to save it in His death (John 3:16-17). There is nothing we can do to save ourselves, and there is nothing we need to do. Jesus has already done it all - for you and for all. He said so when He died. "It is finished" (John 19:30). He calls you to believe that, trust Him, take Him at His Word and live in His freedom.

What about good works? Don't we have to do something to please God? Well, yes and no. We don't do good works in order to please God. We can't. But we want to do good works because we believe we are already pleasing to God on account of Jesus. Works always follow faith. When we believe that God is at peace with us in the death of Jesus, we're free to do what pleases Him. The Christian life is not about trying to become pleasing to God, but serving God who is pleased with us in His Son Jesus. It's not like the Army slogan, "Be all that you can be." It's more like, "Be all that you already are in Jesus."

10. What opportunities for teaching does the congregation have?

Disciples are made by baptizing in the triune Name and teaching (Matthew 28:19-20). Not one or the other, and not in any particular order. Baptism occurs once in a lifetime; teaching takes a whole lifetime. You don't need a weekly calendar crammed full of targeted small group Bible studies ("The Soccer Mom's Bible Study"), but a steady diet of Scripture and doctrine for young and old alike is a good sign.

11. Does the church have any practices that encourage people to behave in a strange or abnormal manner?

Major red flag here! Barking, babbling, uncontrolled laughter, fainting, fits, and convulsions are most assuredly NOT signs of the Holy Spirit's presence. They may be the sign of unclean spirits, in which case you don't want anything to do with this. If this is happening, leave that place immediately, do not pass Go and by all means do not collect \$200 (or contribute it). God is not a God of disorder but of peace who does things in a decent and orderly way (1 Corinthians 14:33,38).

12. Is the congregation in fellowship with other Christian congregations or does it stand alone?

Watch out for the "Lone Rangers" of religion, especially if they claim some "new revelation" or special teaching that no one else has. A new teaching is probably an old heresy recycled. The prophet Elijah once thought he was the only true believer left in the land of Israel. He was off by 6,999 (1 Kings 19:18).