

Ecclesiology

Semester 2 – Topic 2 – Characteristics of a Healthy Church

Randy Thompson
Valley Bible Church
www.valleybible.net

Introduction

Josh Harris in “Stop Dating the Church; Fall in love with the family of God” notes: “We are a generation of consumers, independent and critical. We attend church, but we don't want to settle down and truly invest ourselves. We're not into commitment — we only want to *date* the church.” Commitment in the local church is lacking. We live in unique times compared to the early church. In the early church, there was one church in every city (Tit 1:5). There were no choices for choosing a church. You had no option to leave one church and shop for another. You couldn't choose a church based on friendships or affluence, the building, varying shades of doctrine, etc. You had to get along with the members, submit to the elders, and work through issues in a biblical way. You couldn't just run away when things were difficult. You also could not survive as a Christian without connection to a local body (you cannot today either, but church daters do not realize that).

So it is not surprising that we do not find a dedicated list of the qualities to look for when shopping for a local church. What we find instead is simply the biblical characteristics of a local church that is striving to honor God and walk in a way that pleases Him.

Today and next week we will look at some of those characteristics of healthy churches. These aren't necessarily in any special order, but there are some that logically/theologically go first.

A High View of God

The pursuit of the knowledge of God is the highest pursuit.

²³Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴but **let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,**" declares the LORD. Jer 9:23-24

God's creation displays His “invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature,” which “have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom 1:20). Yet, it is only in God's word (His specific revelation) that we see God's self-revealing of His character and works (See Psalm 19 for a description of both).

Our understanding of God and what we think about Him affects us deeply. When we understand God for who He has revealed Himself to be in His Word, all other affections fall away and we are driven to our knees in worship. Having a proper God-consciousness is critical to living a life pleasing to God. When we see the high and lofty King for who He has revealed Himself to be in His Word it drives us to our knees in worship; it moves us to deep love for our creator; it cultivates a heart motive to obey, please, honor, and glorify Him.

Does the church fear God?

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Prov 9:10

Is the glory of God the church's passion?

⁸“I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images. Isa 42:8

Are the members pursuing their highest purpose of glorifying God?

This is the ultimate purpose for everything. To glorify God is to show His character in our motives, thoughts, words, and deeds. We glorify God when we live in a way that those around us can see God's character in us (Ex 33:17-23). All aspects of life provide a wonderful opportunity to display the life of Christ living through us (Gal 2:20).

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever **you do, do all to the glory of God.** 1 Cor 10:31

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and **it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;** and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Gal 2:20

Does the church tremble at God's Word?

^{2b}“But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word. Isa 66:2b

Is God the central focus of the church's worship (corporately and individually)?

¹⁴—for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God— Ex 34:14

²³So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything *against* which the LORD your God has commanded you. ²⁴For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. Deut 4:23-24

A High View of Scripture

A healthy church holds to a high view of Scripture. This is held as a general rule among the congregation and certainly among the leadership. Its leadership and congregation hold fast to the faithful word (Tit 1:9). They love the Word.

⁴⁷I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. Psa 119:47

⁹⁷O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. Psa 119:97

¹⁴⁰Your word is very pure, Therefore Your servant loves it. Psa 119:140

Does the church hold to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures?

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. God is its source. The Bible is the inspired (God-breathed), plenary (inspired in equal parts), verbal (extending to the very words), infallible (not wrong), inerrant (completely without error) in the original manuscripts Word of God (2 Tim 3:14-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; Titus 1:2; John 17:17; Matt 5:18; 22:31-32; Gal 3:16).

Does the church view the Bible as authoritative? Does it believe the Bible is the only rule for faith and practice? Is this pervasive at the church or is it lip service (e.g. professes this but then uses human wisdom apart from God's truth as a standard for faith and practice)?

An appreciation of the Scriptures' qualities is necessary to understand the need for obedience to God's Word. It is impossible to neglect the Bible when we truly accept it as His very Word – His complete moral will for His children. God has spoken in His Word and has spoken in a way that His will is clear to His church. If we love the Lord then we will seek to be obedient to His commands (John 14:15, 23).

Does the church view the Bible fully sufficient for all matters of faith and conduct? Is it fully sufficient to meet all the spiritual needs of God's people? Is this pervasive at the church or is it lip service (e.g. professes this but then uses secular means to address spiritual problems)?

¹²For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Heb 4:12

Does the church seek to obey Scripture's precepts, apply its principles, and appropriate its promises? (James 1:22)

²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. James 1:22

Does the church hold to biblical positions that are culturally unpopular like views on sin, hell, creation, and the exclusive nature of salvation in Christ alone?

How does the church handle the Word? What kind of hermeneutic does the church follow?

Knowing and doing what God has said is important. When being diligent to handle accurately God's Word, we will apply a plain, literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic. This method takes the plain literal sense while understanding the historical, immediate, and wider contexts and the uses of figures of speech.

What doctrinal scheme does the church use to understand the distinctives through biblical history (dispensational or covenantal)?

An Emphasis on Doctrinal Soundness

A high view of Scripture will drive a church to value doctrinal soundness. The church will pursue the truth in both knowledge and application. They will "be diligent to present themselves approved to God ... handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

Where does the church stand on the major areas of theology?

Bibliology – Doctrine of the Bible (revelation, inspiration, historical reliability, canonicity, translation, illumination, interpretation, and the authority of the Scriptures)

Theology Proper – Doctrine of God (nature and character of God Himself – arguments for His existence, His attributes, His names, His decree, the Trinity, and God the Father)

Christology – Doctrine of Christ (Preexistence, incarnation, humanity, earthly life, deity, kenosis, hypostatic union, impeccability, death, resurrection, present and future ministry)

Pneumatology – Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (His deity, procession, and works)

Angelology – Doctrine of Holy Angels, Satan, and Fallen Angels

Anthropology – Doctrine of Man (his origin, makeup, and fall)

Hamartiology – Doctrine of Sin (its origin and definition, original sin or the sin nature, imputed sin, and the Christian and sin)

Soteriology – Doctrine of Salvation (including topics such as election, substitution, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, regeneration, forgiveness, justification, and eternal security)

Ecclesiology – Doctrine of the Church (its definition, purpose, organization, and ordinances)

Eschatology – Doctrine of Last Things (death, heaven, hell, the rapture, the tribulation, the millennium, the second coming, the resurrections, the judgments, and the eternal state)

Is the church concerned with teaching sound doctrine? (Tit 2:1)

¹But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. Titus 2:1

Are the beliefs biblical? Are beliefs consistent?

Is the church arrogant regarding their theological positions?

^{1b}Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. 1 Cor 8:1b

Does the church practice the doctrines it claims to believe and teach? Do they prove themselves doers or merely hearers of God's Word?

²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.
James 1:22

An Emphasis on Discipleship

The passage that presents our Lord's command to make disciples is Matt 28:19-20. This is Jesus' "great commission" – His last command to His disciples.

¹⁹"Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰*teaching* them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matt 28:19-20

The only imperative in this passage is "make disciples". "Go", "baptizing", and "teaching" are participles that modify or describe the main verb of "making disciples". These activities characterize disciple making; they are the "how" of disciple making.

"Go" is literally "having gone". It assumes an active pursuit of the lost (Luke 19:10). To whom are we to go? "All the nations", which includes family, neighbors, workmates, strangers, and even different countries. This going is to increasing spheres personally removed from myself (Acts 1:7-8): near, farther, even farther, and very far.

¹⁰"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19:10

⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both **in Jerusalem**, and in all **Judea and Samaria**, and even **to the remotest part of the earth**." Acts 1:7-8

"Baptizing" has to do with identifying individuals with Jesus Christ. An act of obedience by the new disciple that shows their desire to follow Jesus with their entire life. It is an outward expression of what has happened in the inner person. It is a sign of entrance into God's family and of pledged submission to His Lordship.

"Teaching" is not just giving knowledge, but teaching a lifestyle – "to obey all that the Lord commanded". Those that surrender to Christ for salvation, identifying themselves with Him in baptism, must be trained to observe all that He commanded. This process continues until each believer is presented "complete in Christ" (Col 1:28). Movement towards Christ-likeness marks a believer; a professed conversion does not make a true disciple. Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine..." (John 8:31).

This is not a trivial effort. Jesus made disciples by **personal effort and time**.

¹³And He went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. ¹⁴And He appointed twelve, so that they would be **with Him** and that He *could* send them out to preach, ¹⁵and to have authority to cast out the demons. Mark 3:13-15

The goal of discipleship is not to make replicas of ourselves, but of Christ. Therefore, all disciple makers must be pursuing growth in their own relationship with the Lord.

¹Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 1 Cor 11:1

Does the church emphasize disciple making?

Does the church practice fishing or pond cleaning?

Are efforts at local and foreign missions an important part of the church's ministry?

Are all activities of the church focused some aspect of disciple making?

Are the members actively involved in varying aspects of disciple making or just the leaders?

An Emphasis on Evangelism (A Sincere Concern for the Lost)

This could go under disciple making above, but it deserves mention as a key point in a healthy church. A church can say they have an emphasis on disciple making, but only focus on the "teaching to observe" or "baptize" aspects and under emphasize evangelism, either by direct teaching or implicitly by simply not evangelizing.

In order for someone to turn from their sins and trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they must first hear the gospel (1 Cor 15:3-5). No one can believe unless they are told about Jesus (Rom 10:14-17), therefore, believers must be equipped (1 Pet 3:15) to explain the gospel to be obedient to the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20).

The two primary motivations for evangelism are love for Christ and love for people. Jesus the Christ is our great God and Savior (Tit 2:13). He sacrificed Himself for our sins. We love Him. The expression of our love is obedience to His Word (John 14:21-23; 2 John 1:6). Jesus' command to us is clear – make disciples (Matt 28:19-20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Therefore, we should strive to obey out of love for our Savior.

The second motivation for evangelism is love for people. Our example is Jesus' love for mankind.

⁴But when the kindness of God our Savior and **His love for mankind** appeared, Titus 3:4

¹⁶"For **God so loved the world**, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

⁸But **God demonstrates His own love toward us**, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Rom 5:8

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of **His great love with which He loved us**, Eph 2:4

⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth **To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood**-- Rev 1:5

We can also see the Apostle Paul's love for people in his direct description of his heart and the great amount in which he suffered to bring the gospel to the unsaved.

¹I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, ²that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, Rom 9:1-3

¹Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. Rom 10:1

¹⁹For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. ... ^{22b}I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. 1 Cor 9:19-23 (see 2 Cor 11:23-29 for all Paul endured for the sake of the elect)

Do the church leaders and congregation have a heart for the lost?

Does the church equip the congregation to know the gospel well?

Does the church equip the congregation to share the gospel effectively?

Does the church include the congregation in outreach efforts in the community and world?

An Emphasis on the Clarity of the Gospel

The gospel has become muddled and confused among many churches. The message has been culturalized to make it palatable in order to not offend. God does not desire to meet our felt needs, give us our “best life now”, fix our self-image, or to become our “friend”. Man’s greatest need is freedom from the penalty and power of SIN. This is possible only through Jesus the Christ. The gospel is the good news of God’s grace to sinful mankind. It is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). Therefore, we better get it right! In a nutshell...

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**, ⁴and that **He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures**, ⁵and that **He appeared** to Cephas, then to the twelve. 1 Cor 15:3-5

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

⁸But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Rom 5:8

All people, everyone, have sinfully rebelled against their Creator and are therefore guilty of eternal death. But He loved us so much that He sent His Son to pay the penalty for our sins, to die the death that we deserve. He offers salvation from sin to all who exercise true saving faith. Upon exercising true saving faith, we enter into a personal relationship with our Creator, we are born again (made new), the debt of sin is forgiven, and the power of sin over us is broken.

Points of the Gospel

Grace – Eternal life (a quality of life now and quantity in heaven forever) is a free gift. There is nothing I can do to earn or deserve it.

Man – I am a sinner. I have transgressed God’s law and am guilty before my Creator. My sin has caused a separation between me and God and I cannot bridge that separation on my own.

God – God is merciful, therefore does not want to punish me. He is also just and therefore must punish me because I am sinful.

Christ – Jesus loved me so much that He humbled Himself and became a man. He died on the cross and rose from the dead to pay the penalty for my sins.

Faith (Repent and Receive) – I must exercise true saving faith in Jesus Christ alone to forgive my sin. I repent from my sin and receive Jesus as Lord.

Leaving one of these points out of a gospel message can present a warped view of God’s character, man’s position before God, Christ’s character or work, and the means of salvation. This can lead to presenting an incomplete gospel or a different gospel (Gal 1:8-9).

“...part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.” *Introductory Essay by J. I. Packer in the Banner of Truth’s reprint of John Owen’s “Death of Death in the Death of Christ”*

Does the church present the complete gospel message?

Does the church soften the gospel message to make it palatable?

Does the church have ministries in place that move the congregation to increasing circles of disciple making, including cross cultural missions?

An Emphasis on the Equipping Ministry of the Church

Part of disciple making is “teaching to observe all that Jesus commanded” (Matt 28:19-20). Therefore, we see that the local church’s responsibility is to equip the body to do the work of disciple making.

¹¹And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, ¹²**for the equipping of the saints for the work of service**, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. Eph 4:11-13

Is there an emphasis on quality Bible teaching?

¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15

Are there classes or training opportunities available to equip the body to do the work of service? (Eph 4:11-13)

What does the main Bible teaching time look like when the body gathers together? Is it repetitive, anecdotal stories, shallow, or extra-biblical or is it rich and deep? (Heb 4:12)

Is the main teaching time expositional, expounding what Scripture says in a particular passage, carefully explaining its meaning and applying it to the congregation?

¹³⁰The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple. Psa 119:130

⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also ... the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. Neh 8:5-8 (ESV)

¹⁸And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰how **I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ...** ²⁷**For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.** Acts 20:18-27

An Emphasis on Biblical Church Organization

The local church is to be organized for the purpose of ministry (Tit 1:5; Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; Acts 6:1-4). The leaders of the church are to be mature, character-qualified and gifted men (a plurality) whose task is to care, feed, protect, lead, and guide the body (Acts 6:4; 14:23; 20:17, 28; Eph 4:11-12; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 2:7; 5:12-13; 1 Tim 2:12; 3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17; Tit 1:5-9; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-3).

Does the church have a biblical form of government/leadership?

Are the leaders biblically qualified to be elders or deacons? (1 Tim 3; Titus 1)

Can the leaders accurately say, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”? (1 Cor 11:1)

Are the leaders full of the Spirit and of wisdom (Acts 6:3)?

Do the leaders live out the Scriptures? (Tit 1:9)

⁹holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. Titus 1:9

Does the congregation appreciate and highly esteem the leaders? (1 Thess 5:12-13)

¹²But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate **those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,** ¹³and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 1 Thess 5:12-13

Does the congregation obey and submit and be subject to the leaders? (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5)

¹⁷Obey your **leaders** and submit *to them*, for **they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.** Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. Heb 13:17

⁵You younger men, likewise, **be subject to your elders;** and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. 1 Pet 5:5

Does the congregation financially support the church's ministries (including the elders)? (Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17; 6:18; 2 Cor 8:3, 9:6-7; 1 Cor 9:14)

⁶The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches *him*. Gal 6:6

¹⁷The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. 1 Tim 5:17

¹⁴So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. 1 Cor 9:14 (see the entire chapter)

Is the church orderly? (1 Cor 14:40)

⁴⁰But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner. 1 Cor 14:40

Is the church raising up qualified leadership from within? (2 Tim 2:2)

²The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 2 Tim 2:2

Does the church have biblical methods of ministry or are they cultural?

Does the church practice restoration ministry (church discipline)? (Matt 18:15-17)

Has the leadership developed programs to bring personal care to individual members of the body?

An Emphasis on Biblical Fellowship

The Greek word translated "fellowship" can also be translated communion, partnership, or togetherness. This togetherness comes with responsibilities toward the members of Christ's body. Our motivation for striving to excel at relationships in our life (particularly within the body of Christ) is the incredible mercy and grace we have been shown. We once walked in those things for which the wrath of God will come. We have been chosen by God, separated from sin, and beloved by Him. Therefore, we should put on those qualities that build unity in the body (Col 3:5-15).

Scripture gives us many commands that have been termed the "one-another's" because they are commands directed at the relationship between believers. They describe how believers are to interact with and treat other believers based on their family relationship. Here is a partial list:

- Love one another (John 15:12; 3:16; 13:34-35; 1 John 4:11-12; 1 Cor 13:4-7; 1 Pet 4:8)
- Forgive one another (Eph 4:32; Col 3:12-13; Matt 18:21-22)
- Build up one another (Rom 14:19)
- Give preference to one another (Phil 2:3-4; Rom 12:10)
- Encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:24-25)
- Admonish one another (Rom 15:14)

- Edify one another (1 Thess 5:11; Eph 4:29)
- Serve one another (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10)
- Accept one another (Rom 15:7)
- Be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10)
- Be affectionate to one another (1 Pet 5:14)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet 4:9)
- Confess sins to and pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)
- Comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18)
- Live harmoniously with one another (Rom 15:15; 1 Thess 5:13)
- Show tolerance for one another (Eph 4:2)
- Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)

Is the church living out the one-another's?

Is there involvement by older believers in the lives of younger believers? (Tit 2:3-5)

Is the church marked by sacrificial love? (John 13:35; Phil 2:1-4)

³⁵By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

Do the members care for one another and minister to each other's needs? (Heb 10:24-25; Gal 6:2)

²⁴and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Heb 10:24-25

²Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. Gal 6:2

Is there affection with in the body? (Phil 2:1; 1 Thess 2:8; 1 Pet 5:14)

¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, Phil 2:1-1

Is there unity in the body? (Eph 4:1-3; Phil 2:2)

²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Phil 2:2

Does the body value diversity (socio-economic, racial, cultural, age, gender, giftedness, talents, etc.)? (1 Cor 12:12-27; Gal 3:27-28; James 2:1-7)

An Emphasis on Biblical Service

Each believer has at least one spiritual gift. Spiritual gifts are not natural talents, but are freely bestowed spiritual abilities given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of service to the body of Christ (1 Pet 4:10).

¹⁰As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 1 Pet 4:10

Each believer is given at least one permanent (Rom 11:29) spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:7) which is to be employed to serve other believers as a good steward of God's grace (1 Pet 4:10). Spiritual gifts are given for the advantage of all (1 Cor 12:7), the edification of the church (1 Cor 14:26), the equipping of the saints (Eph 4:7, 12), and the glory of God (1 Pet 4:10-11). Therefore, each member of the body is important as each plays a unique part as they are gifted by God.

Does the body have a high percentage of members utilizing their spiritual gifts in some capacity? (Rom 12:3-8)

Are the members sacrificially giving of their time and stewardship for the mission of disciple making? (2 Cor 8:1-5)

Does the church leadership strive to ensure the congregation learns to engage in good deeds? (Tit 3:14)

¹⁴Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful. Titus 3:14

Are there opportunities to serve?

When to Leave a Church

***Note: It is very difficult to make this section complete (there are too many “what-ifs”) and have notes that convey the depth of discussion that occurred during the class. The overall context is love for the brethren and a desire for their being made complete in Christ.

Commitment to the local church is a priority with God; it should be taken seriously. We see this in the early church as Spirit-filled believers were committed to local bodies.

⁴¹So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴²They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:41-47

But does commitment mean that there are never reasons to leave a local body? Once you have made a decision to be committed to a local body, the biblical reasons to leave are few.

A good litmus test in other areas of church life that might cause you to consider leaving a church is if you are uncomfortable bringing your outreach person or your believing friend who is looking for a church to the church you attend.

- When false teaching on some fundamental truth is being taught or tolerated within the body.

⁶I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; ⁷which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! Gal 1:6-9

¹⁷Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. Rom 16:17

We should be careful here. Is the point “unbiblical” or simply not what you believe. There are many people whose theology is so eclectic that they will never be able to find a church home. They will hop from church to church in search of their peculiar beliefs and never settle down to be protected and cared for.

- When biblical life and practice is ignored; sin is tolerated.

¹It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. ²You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. 1 Cor 5:1-2

⁹I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 1 Cor 5:9

- When the church leadership is unqualified (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:6-9).
- When the ministries of the church are incapable of providing ministry to the members (1 Pet 4:10). Care must be taken here as well that real ministry needs are lacking and not felt needs.

There are other practical reasons why someone would leave one church and move to another.

- Moving to a new city

¹After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. ²And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, ³and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. Acts 18:1-3

However, we need to be careful with this. The example of Aquila and Priscilla from Acts is that they moved to Corinth from Rome due to ethnic persecution. It was not a preference. We have freedom to choose to live where we want, but the biblical principles of decision making apply here. Did we search the Scriptures to seek God's moral will to obey? Did we seek wise counsel? Did we understand what is the most "spiritually expedient" (best for God's glory and our sanctification)? Did we pray (a lot) before making the decision? Unfortunately, many people who decide to leave a church do so deceived into thinking they are doing it for spiritual reasons, but instead are doing it for selfish reasons. The unfortunate truth is that many who have left VBC to move as an option, not an imperative, have not fared well spiritually as individuals nor as a family. We must be careful to ensure we protect God's glory.

- Personal preference

Churches and we change over time. What was once a good fit may no longer be. Being committed to a church is not like marriage. There are not biblical commands prohibiting changing church like there are against divorce.

However, we should be careful with this. There are believers who change churches often who claim this reason when what they really are running from is intimacy and openness. Changes over personal preference should be limited.

Questions to Ponder

1. Are you committed to your local church? How is that demonstrated?
2. How involved are you in your local church? Do you participated in both "giving" and "getting" ministries?
3. How many times over the last five years have you changed churches?
4. What truths would you share with someone considering changing churches for personal preference?
5. What truths would you share with someone considering changing churches for heresy?