

“Which Church is God’s Will For Me?”

Jonathan Anderson

“Should I stay in my church or find another one?”

This is one of the hardest questions for a young pastor to answer. Sometimes it comes from a selfish heart--"The music pastor won't let my son play the drums"--but often it comes from someone who genuinely wants wisdom.

For example, if someone comes to you with this question, and the circumstances revolve around difficulties with their church leadership, giving counsel can get dicey quickly. Imagine the culpability on our hands if we actually encouraged or empowered a divisive, dissentious, disgruntled young family to go against godly (though imperfect) leaders whom God has actually placed over them simply because we didn't hear the whole story. We have all seen the ‘facts’ handed to us which presented a clear-cut case of unbiblical and ungodly leadership which couldn't shepherd itself out of a wet paper bag, only to find out afterwards that the case-changing evidence which vindicated the leadership and indicted the disgruntled sheep had been omitted. “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13).

On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine a worse scenario than preventing a true sheep from breaking away from disguised wolves because we so quickly encouraged them to serve where they are and remain loyal. After all, every church has its fair share of flaws, right? In a world where false shepherds love to feed themselves by fleecing sheep and goats¹ alike, I'm not comfortable with blind encouragement towards loyalty to every social gathering that calls itself a church of Jesus Christ.

Early on in my ministry, I crippled myself in these conversations because I imagined myself as the judge over the trial. To me fell the responsibility of weighing the evidence, giving a verdict, and to them fell the privilege of marveling at my wisdom and insight, rejoicing that their baby was still in one piece. That thought is wrong for so very many reasons. Besides the fact that I lack Solomonic wisdom, I am never the judge of another's church, no matter how much wisdom I have. I felt an impossible responsibility to give a verdict about leaders, philosophies, and convictions held by ministries of which I was largely unaware. Yet, I have seen the foolishness of thinking that I could gain that kind of information from one conversation and, more importantly, that I was even supposed to sit as a personal judge over others.

There is a better way. Instead of making a personal judgment call and trying to micro-manage people's lives, we must simply tell them where God desires for them to worship and serve. Now, I realize that the use of the word ‘simply’ in that last sentence might seem as absurd as foregoing the flashlight and ‘simply’ turning the planet until you are in daylight. “How can we possibly presume to tell someone which church God wants anyone to go to?” you may be wondering. Fortunately, we don't have to presume. God tells us in His word *precisely* what His will is for His children if they will but inform their minds with what Christ's church really is, and submit to it in their heart with their lives. If God is passionate about His people (Zeph. 3:17), if He loves His church (Eph. 5:25), if

¹ Granted, the verb ‘fleecing’ doesn't work here. Feel free to substitute ‘milking’ or any other activity that you could do with a goat to make money off of them at their expense!

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involvement in the church is important for the edification, strength, unity, and maturity of His children (Eph. 4:10-16), then we can be sure that a true knowledge of God in His Word gives us everything we need to discern where God wants us to worship, serve, and be equipped (2 Pet. 1:2-4, 19-21). God wants you to go to a church that has the following *non-negotiable realities*:

1. *God’s Voice Is the Only One Heard in the Church*
2. *Qualified Men Lead the Church*
3. *Kingdom Membership is Manifested in Church Membership*

Or, very simply,

1. *Preaching of the Word*
2. *Qualified Leadership*
3. *Church Discipline*

Let me be candid—this list of non-negotiables has temporal limitations. Due to the climate of American Evangelicalism, the way one articulates what the unchanging church of Jesus Christ actually is will change in order to faithfully stand against the common errors of the day. You would be right to ask how a *non-negotiable* could be on or off my list based on circumstances within the American church. Allow me to explain using an illustration from church history.

In the English Reformation, hundreds died opposing the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. For English Reformers, their short list of what constitutes a church included primarily the preaching of the word, and the proper administration of the Lord’s Supper. I agree, I concur, and do not doubt that they died for a cardinal doctrine—the sufficiency of Christ’s once and for priestly work on the cross (not to mention that the propitiatory mass worships a different Christ than the one in the New Testament!). Now, for them, church discipline wasn’t necessarily in the forefront, because Rome practiced church discipline (and disciplined Protestant bishops under Mary with capital punishment!). For me, my list doesn’t include *proper administration of the ordinances* because that isn’t the particular threat to the gospel in any Protestant churches right now that I am aware of. So, yes I am admitting that this document has a life span. It may not be that helpful for untaught Christians who are asking the exact same question 500 years from now. However, what makes a true church is unchanging, just like the gospel is unchanging. So, regardless of the fact that *transubstantiation* will always be a heresy I didn’t put it on my list because of the climate I live in. Similarly, regardless of the fact that English Reformers didn’t put church discipline on their list,² it was just as much an essential of a true church then as it is now.

1. *God’s Voice Is the Only One Heard in the Church*

² It is interesting to note that the neglect of this doctrine produced such a compromised situation within the visible Anglican church, that the Puritans of the next century (17th) realized that ‘Holy Discipline’ is a necessary function of any true church.

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The simple non-negotiable here is the Preaching of the Word. Each reality of a true church is a simple statement (the heading). I am also giving you a brief description for each of the three (underlined, and following in the explanation). The brief description makes for a more memorable outline, but the actual statement is my attempt to help an untaught Christian discern what is meant by the brief description. In conversation, I would try to use something like the full statement given in the heading. For instance, it isn’t necessarily helpful to tell a young Christian that the Word needs to be taught in church, if their pastor loads a man-made message full of biblical references. You have to be exposed to exposition of God’s word, taste it, and be transformed by it before you can really look at the cotton candy of what is called exposition today. It takes discernment to recognize a sermon made to sound divine, while the voice of the wizard encourages you to pay no attention to the pastor hiding behind the curtain.

Christ is the head of the church. This analogy has to do with authority and control (Col. 1:18-20; Eph. 1:20-23; 4:15; 5:23).³ In fact, it is common for Paul to couple and connect Christ’s authority and dominion over all things universal, with the even greater reality of his Headship and control over the church particular (compare following—Eph. 1:20-21 with 1:22-23; Col. 1:15-17 with 1:18-20; Col. 2:10 with 2:19). What this means is that Christ is in control over the church, He leads the church, governs the church, feeds the church with the spiritual nourishment necessary for growth and instruction necessary for our good. The way this happens is through the proclamation of God’s Word. If God is the head, then it goes without saying that the only mouth on this body is His! His is the only voice, His is the only message, His is the only plan and blueprint for ministry.

It is false to say Jesus’ voice is the only voice that matters in the church; rather, it is accurate to say Jesus’ voice is the only voice in the church, period. All other voices are imposters, and minimum wage shepherds (John 10:12-13). This is what Jesus refers to when He talks about His voice as a shepherd (John 10:3-4), and the dilemma of having competition between the voices of a stranger and the Shepherd. What happens is the true sheep hear Christ’s voice and don’t recognize the other (John 10:5). True sheep will follow the preaching of God’s Word. Christ’s church hears His voice clearly and follows joyfully, while there is static interference between the voice of a stranger and a true Christian’s ear.

In order to answer the question “Which church does God want me to attend?”, the sheep of Jesus Christ need to listen for Christ’s voice. Wherever there is a body of believers, you will inevitably hear the voice of God and not the voice of man, and you will see true sheep submitting to His voice and following His leadership (John 10:26-27).

Paul told Timothy, his disciple in the ministry and pastor at Ephesus, in both of his letters to maintain the reading and preaching of God’s word. Failure at this point renders all other ministry, labor, praying, discipling, observing of ordinances, meetings of needs, and singing of songs absolutely vain. For instance, in the first letter he wrote,

³ See also Wayne Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002): 145-202, for a helpful study on kefalh/, the Greek word for ‘head.’

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Until I come, give attention to the *public* reading of *Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be *absorbed* in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:13-16)

In his second letter he wrote,

I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

These are not lone occurrences in the pastoral epistles. If you think that the teaching of the truth, sound doctrine, holding to the faith, the entrustment—ensuring that God’s voice is the only voice in the church—is not a major concern, then consider these additional texts: 1 Tim. 1:3-7, 18-19; 3:2; 4:1-6; 5:17; 6:2-5, 20-21; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:2, 14-18, 24-25; 3:10-17; Titus 1:1, 3, 9, 10-14; 2:1, 2, 7, 15; 3:1, 8, 9.

This has been the positive instruction from God on how He wants us to find a church where His voice is heard clearly. It is helpful (and unfortunately necessary) to point out that the opposite of God’s voice being heard clearly is not God’s voice being silenced, but twisted, edited and altered. The opposite of God’s voice being heard exclusively isn’t God’s voice not being heard, but God’s voice competing and being overpowered by the voice of strangers, hired hands, and false shepherds. How do they do it? Here’s a short list from their playbook:

1. *Bring doubt about what God said* (Gen. 3:1—Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’”)
2. *Deny what God said* (Gen. 3:4—The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die!”)
3. *Affirm and quote God’s word but supply another meaning* (Jer. 8:8-9—“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us?’ But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made *it* into a lie. The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD, and what kind of wisdom do they have?”)
4. *Create your own message and overtly say, “Thus says the Lord”* (Jer. 23:16-22, 25-28, 32)

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5. *Call the Biblical message the ‘opinion of the preacher’ and contradict it with your own opinion* (Amos 7:10-17; pay attention to Amaziah, who labels Amos’ message as merely human, v. 11; calls him to stop prophesying, v. 13; and Amos turns right around and clearly speaks more of God’s word, vv. 16a, 17a)
6. *Distract from God’s word by focusing on what is marginal, academic, and fruitless* (1 Tim. 3-7)
7. *Affirm select parts of sound doctrine with the lips, deny holiness with the life* (Titus 1:16; 2 Pet. 2:1-3, 18-22; Jude 4)
8. *Twist and pervert the meaning of Scripture from its original intent* (2 Pet. 3:16)

As you can see, these tactics are timeless. It takes some time to show an untaught Christian what they must see in God’s word which would ultimately enable them to see the subtleties of the enemy. He does his best work within the church as an angel of light, not in the world.

2. *Qualified Men Lead the Church*

The simple non-negotiable here is having Qualified Leadership. I would enjoy using the phrase ‘qualified elders,’ but that would actually confuse the issue in many people’s minds. I’m a fan of the biblical terminology and biblical substance, but you don’t want to turn someone off from a biblical church that has godly and qualified men giving oversight (because of some denominational tradition), yet uses some other term.

It is hard to over estimate the importance of church leadership. You may have heard the satirical phrase, “The monkeys are running the zoo!” Though I have never gone to such a proverbial zoo, I can imagine how chaotic and outright dangerous that would be in real life. The same danger threatens churches all over this planet. Unqualified leadership will potentially harm the sheep, confuse the gospel, let wolves in, and dishonor Christ.

God alone has authority in the church. As the head of the church, He has told us in His word how the church should be run. He has given a delegated authority to men who: 1) desire to bear responsibility for souls, 2) meet certain character requirements, and 3) are recognized as gifted for the task of leading. Paul lists for Timothy and Titus the necessary character requirements for church leaders:

Character Quality	1 Timothy 3:	Titus 1:
Above reproach	2	6, 7
Husband of one wife	2	6
Temperate, sober-minded	2	
Prudent, focused-discernment	2	8
Respectable	2	
Hospitable	2	8
Able to teach	2	

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Not addicted to wine	3	7
Not pugnacious	3	7
Gentle	3	
Free from the love of money	3	7
Manages his home well	4	
Dignified parent	4	
Not a new convert	6	
Good reputation with outsiders	7	
Having faithful children, who can’t be accused of loose living		6
Not self-willed		7
Not quick-tempered		7
Loving what is good		8
Just		8
Devout		8
Knows the Bible to sufficiently promote the truth		9
Knows the Bible to sufficiently refute error		9

This list is daunting! I am soberly evaluating my own weaknesses right now as I list them out. However, far from calling for perfection, they call for a life lived with such godliness that when an enemy of the gospel maligns and tries to reproach the elder, the whole slanderous project falls apart at takeoff since the elder’s character is manifestly known by the believers at his church and he is above reproach.

When it comes to answering the question, “Which church does God want me to attend?”, you have to avoid seeking to find leaders whom you want, you must find leaders whom God has designated in these two passages. Imagine finding the pastor of your dreams who happens to be characterized by ‘self-will.’ This man may be gregarious, funny and lively in the pulpit, and he makes all your visiting friends feel at home and comfortable. But what happens when the superficially ideal pastor struggles to not impose his will, seek his own ends, and pursue selfish ambition? How can this man on a weekly basis, think so little of himself that he will lose himself in what God has said, and unleash it for his people in such a way that Christ remains the head of the church? His own message, his own desires, his own goals will captivate him, and he will lead the church slowly, perhaps even unwittingly to some degree, away from Christ as he preaches himself (2 Cor. 4:5; 11:2-3). Clearly, every one of these qualifications are important.

Now, from an evaluation standpoint, you don’t have to go and spend 40 hours a week with every elder (or pastor, deacon, [insert leadership term of choice]) to see if elder #4 manages his home as well as elder #5. No, the issue is one of godly credibility and humility before the Word. When the church is given careful oversight by such men, you can trust them as God’s delegated leadership over your church! That is refreshingly simple. I understand there are so many who have been burned by bad leadership, but no

one has ever been burned by Christ, and He has ordered His church this way. We can trust Him entirely.

3. Kingdom Membership is Manifested in Church Membership

The simple non-negotiable here is Church Discipline. If you want to know which church God wants you to commit to, He wants you to go where the Christians are! That sounds utterly unhelpful, but hear me out. There are all sorts of gatherings that don’t constitute churches. No one, to my knowledge, has ever threatened to call the line at the grocery store a church (even though it may be bigger than many churches). Let’s suppose that a biblically qualified man, who was called of God, and gifted to teach, went to a Publix supermarket and began preaching the gospel. Is that a church? Your thinking, “Of course not, Jon, because that would only satisfy points 1 and 2, but not three.” Not so quick. Let’s send this same imaginary preacher, down the street to fulfill numbers 1 and 2 at the neighborhood Costco. Now we have membership, but still no church. What’s the difference? The difference is the nature of that membership. Membership in a church isn’t just an affirmation of the Christian to the truth of the gospel, but also an affirmation from heaven carried out on earth, that the members are forgiven, blood-bought sinners who have citizenship in the coming Kingdom.

Now, I realize that the majority of ‘churches’ in America don’t practice discipline. There is a simple reason that I hold that church discipline is a non-negotiable of the church of Jesus Christ. It has to do with the nature of the church and the nature of church discipline. Church discipline (better, church membership) is the manifest delineation of those who are covered by the blood of Christ and forgiven and those who are still in their sins living in an unrepentant way.

There are a few passages which teach us church discipline (Matt. 16:18-20; 18:15-20; Titus 3:10-11), and there are several which teach how it was carried out in the NT church (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:16-18). In order to prove that church discipline is not just right, but actually a non-negotiable, I’m going to primarily focus on the two passages in Matthew. But in order to summarize the rest, let me make a couple comments about the purpose of discipline in general. 1) Discipline is for the purpose of purity of the church. 2) Discipline is loving to the church. 3) Discipline is loving to the person being disciplined. Let me assume that no one would argue the first two points,⁴ but the third causes many problems. The reason the process of discipline is loving to the person being disciplined is two-fold. When the church excommunicates someone from fellowship, they are simply saying that what God has said about anyone living an unrepentant lifestyle—they are still in their sin, outside the church, and unreconciled to God. It is loving because it alerts the individual to their need instead of strengthening the deception that they are a Christian when they aren’t. Secondly, it is loving to the person who is disciplined because the goal of church

⁴ It is obvious that eradicating cancer is loving to the body. In the same way, a father’s love is called into question when he would tolerate housing a stranger in his home who wants to kill his own children. This is why the warnings about wolves in the midst of the sheepfold are so alarming, sober and urgent.

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discipline is repentance and restoration— “If he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matt. 18:16).

Matthew 16:18-20⁵ is most helpful in this discussion for so many reasons, but I’ll simplify it to two. For starters, this is the first mention of the church in the entire Bible. It is no small thing that at the introduction of the church to humanity, Jesus teaches about discipline.

Secondly, notice verse 19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” This is actually giving a delegated authority to Peter (and all who lead the church with him, compare Matt. 18:1 with 18:18; cf. Jn. 20:19-23) to faithfully proclaim the gospel, and call sinners to repent. The call of the gospel includes “Repent... be baptized...” (Acts 2:38) as well as “many other words” including “Be saved from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40). When sinners repent, entrance to the church and gaining the promises of the kingdom are simultaneous (Acts 2:41-47). So, entrance to the church and entrance to the kingdom ought to be as identical as possible. In verse 19, there is also the statement that whatever is bound on earth shall have been bound in heaven. That means that when a sinner doesn’t repent of a sinful lifestyle when called to it (Matt. 18:15-20), the church must dis-fellowship with them and when this happens, that sin will have already been bound in heaven! This is a unique construction that Greek nerds call a future perfect periphrastic. What that means is that in the future (i.e., after Christ’s resurrection and Pentecost), when discipline happens in the church on earth, the same reality will have already been the case in heaven (i.e., the Kingdom of the Heavens, as it is called in Matthew).

The picture is the harmonic resonance that occurs between two perfectly matched tuning forks. When one is struck next to the second, you can actually grab it and silence its reverberating and you will hear the second one vibrating simply because of the harmonic resonance. This is like what happens in church discipline. God has desired that the church be the very vehicle where his children can have encouragement and stability in the evaluating of their faith. Outside the church, a regenerate individual would be helpless to be able to identify true and saving faith and to enjoy assurance. But inside the church, kingdom citizenship is reflected by church membership. When someone’s life pattern contradicts the gospel and they don’t respond to the appropriate loving advances of the church body (Matt. 18:15-17), then the excommunication leaves them on their own, outside the benefits of the church, in hopes that they would repent and be restored, enjoying the assurance that their faith is keeping them in a position of trusting in the finished work of Christ.

There are perhaps countless issues that will strengthen or weaken the church. These three, however, are certainly ones that *must* be in place for Christ to own an assembly as His church. There may be more *non-negotiables* (like the transubstantiation illustration above, which pertains to cardinal doctrines), but there are certainly not less. If you or someone you are seeking to advise finds him- or herself in a ‘church’ that doesn’t meet this criteria, encourage them to seek out their leadership and see if those

⁵ For audio download of my sermon “The Promise” on Matthew 16:13-23, see <http://ekklesiaconference.org/#/media/2011>.

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leaders are planning on moving in this direction of submission to Christ. If not, then they need to find a church. By understanding some foundational ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), we can have confidence that we aren’t judging anyone, but we are submitting to the head of the church, Jesus Christ.