

Faith Pulpit

A Church Worth Choosing

“For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10).

It is an old truism that if you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it, or you will spoil it.

Families in this country move once in about five or six years, and usually the believers among them will face the concern of finding a church to join. Of the standards they observe in making their choice, all the doctrines and practices might be summed up by asking, Is this a place where they feel comfortable? Is the church friendly and warm? Is it evidently Biblical in doctrine and practice? Does it fit the denominational name and convictions? Considering the famine in the land, their choice might not be easy, but if they have such a choice, they might well look for a church which not only meets these more obvious criteria, but also meets the following less obvious (but just as important) ones.

1. God-honoring Concern for the Lost

Until the coming of radio, and for some time after that, genuine conversions seemed to happen often in church services. At that time people were earnestly debating whether the church service was for the unsaved, because the unsaved were coming to church. At that time, the evening service was often the only mental action in town, and it was a diversion to go to hear what the preacher had to say. That held true into the 1950’s; both churches in which I was reared were seeing conversions almost weekly. Everyone there was aware of the presence of lost people and of new converts, and that awareness, however automatic, informed all that went on. The goal was to so honor Christ and genuinely worship Him, that the unsaved would see the reality of Christianity and turn to Him.

If lost people were known to be present, the service tended to take on an evangelistic concern. The music set a high tone to lift up Christ. The announcements should not contradict the presence of the

Holy One. The mention of money was minimal, and sometimes guests were invited not to give to the offering. The preaching, even to the saints, often had something for the lost or the new converts. If you invited a lost friend to your church, you did not much worry that the service would be an embarrassment. Now in hindsight we see how it worked.

The great change came about a generation ago. As amusements became more and more available within our culture, something went wrong with the Evening Evangelistic Service. The lost were rarely there. If they came to church at all, it was probably to the morning service, and then out of habit or guilt. Without that awareness of lost people being present, a change began to take place in many of the churches.

Local churches became “The Church of the Believers.” Even the lost people who might have been there knew the language and the procedures. The fundamental churches became more and more clubby, and the saints became toughened to accept fun and games. Elements that once would have seemed out of place now were introduced to keep our own people coming back. We hardly expected awe of God or of holiness. We learned to tolerate a near carnival atmosphere in order to interest our attendees.

It should be no surprise that some churches went beyond that point. Those took up the idea that perhaps the way to reach the lost is to offer them what they already enjoy. Give them fun and games. Give them their own music. Give them comedy. But hardly anyone seems to remember that long ago the church tried that experiment. The church became worldly and theatrical to make the pagans feel comfortable, and New Testament Christianity all but disappeared until the Reformation of the 1500’s.

2. God-honoring Commitment to Each Other

If they have any choice, earnest believers are looking for more than a friendly welcome, worshipful music, and a Biblical statement of faith, good as those may be. They likely are looking for earnest Bible preaching which will apply God’s Word to their daily living. Hence, Paul told Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2) and to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). Such preaching, he said, would involve reproving, rebuking, and exhorting “with all long-suffering and doctrine” (v. 2b). This is not a call to cold-hearted preaching where a love for the hearers is not evident, but rather this is a call to preach the Word because of one’s deep-seated concern for the spiritual condition of the hearers (“for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine ” v. 3). As Paul said elsewhere to pastors, “feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28b). God’s people want a place where they and their family can be built up in the faith, or at least be protected from evil and unbelief. This comes from a caring church family concerned for one another. Paul reminds us that God is the One Who has “given more abundant honor to that part which lacketh: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care

one for another” (1 Cor. 12:24b, 25).

3. God-honoring Contentment to Obey God’s Word

To this point I have treated the subject from the member’s point of view. But how does this line of thought bear on the minister? What does this say to the pastor of a no-growth or slow-growth fundamentalist church? If he rejects the entertainment pattern, how does he view the local church? If it is not a place of entertainment, is it then a brotherhood of believers? Is it a school of holiness? When those outside regard us with skepticism, even antipathy, might we not fall back on the consolation that we desire to be faithful in our obedience as individual members and leaders in our churches to God’s Word?

The pastor has to resist any despair of seeing no adult decisions after his sermons. There is a time for planting and watering as well as harvesting. Paul tells us that “it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful and then shall every man have praise of God” (1 Cor. 4:2–5). The pastor must assure himself that he genuinely loves God and stands in awe of Him. He rejects all that is tawdry or flippant in the service and his goal is to lead his people through his personal example and his preaching ministry into faithful obedience to God. Among William Carey’s rules for the missionaries was the one which resolved “To abstain from whatever deepens India’s prejudice against the gospel.” The earnest church will observe that same principle as it aims to please its Lord.

In that same spirit the pastor will find ways to instruct all who take part, that the services will convey spiritual reality and Biblical awareness. On that basis we may hope to see the members taking fresh heart to invite friends and relatives to the services, demonstrating affection and concern for each other’s well-being and desiring to be faithful to their God. If we do not prepare for that, we are unlikely to see it happen. If we do not prepare for that, our churches may well become stagnant and ones to which we will hesitate to invite our friends or to entrust our children.

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