

# choosing a church

*Giles Cattermole helps us with an important decision*

**D**ave had just started medical school. He didn't know many people, and was keen to find a lively and welcoming church. Ideally with free food. He soon found a large, student church near campus, with achingly cool people and awesome worship music. The viral video loops they used instead of sermons were really cutting-edge stuff, quality productions. He'd have no problem bringing his mates along, even if all they did was chill and eat pizza.

Gordon was in a similar position. He'd been brought up in a small chapel, and loved old hymns. He found what he was looking for on the other side of town, with a faithful congregation of about 20 stalwarts. He was the only student there, and he struggled to get to know the other folk over tea and digestives after the morning service. He couldn't always understand the King James Version, or the sermons, but he knew the Bible was being taught.

What made Dave and Gordon choose their churches? What motivated you to choose yours? Perhaps you're still looking for a church after coming to university or becoming a



Christian. Perhaps you know that you'll soon be sent away on placement for a couple of months, or you'll be off to another part of the country for your F1 job - and you'll be looking again. What will shape your decision? I want to suggest two practical questions you need to ask of any church you're considering attending.

- Does it teach people the Bible?
- Can I bring my mates?

These questions need some unpacking. But before we do that, let's remind ourselves that the goal is to glorify God, that God is glorified as his kingdom grows,<sup>1</sup> and that God does the work of growing his church.<sup>2</sup>

Growth is both in *breadth* as more people turn to Christ, and in *depth* as each believer becomes more like Christ.

## teaching the Bible

Dave's church doesn't appear to be strong on teaching the Bible. Gordon's does, at first glance. But why is Bible teaching important, and what does it mean?

God's Word is the means by which he grows his kingdom. Throughout the whole Bible, it's God's Word that creates, sustains, sanctifies.<sup>3</sup> It grows God's people. It's why the church of Acts 2 was devoted to the teaching of the apostles,<sup>4</sup> and why the apostles in Acts 6 devoted themselves to the ministry of the Word.<sup>5</sup> Paul stresses again and again to Timothy the importance of Word-ministry. For us today, this means that faithful Bible teaching is essential. A church without this emphasis will not help us grow. When we choose a church, it needs to be one that will teach us the Bible.

But Bible teaching is never in isolation. Word-ministry goes with prayer.<sup>4</sup> A Bible teaching church will be one that prays

and praises together.<sup>3</sup> Its corporate worship - sermons, prayers, songs, everything - will all be solidly rooted in God's Word. We praise God for what he's done for us, and pray for what he wants for us, according to what he has revealed to us in his Word. Bible teaching is not just something that the pastor or the music leader does.

As we all speak and live God's Word to each other, the church will grow.<sup>6</sup> A Bible teaching church should encourage everyone in their Word-ministry to each other. When we choose a church, we should look for one that is teaching the Bible in all its activities and through all its members.

### bringing your mates

This leads us to the second point. Because of course, we shouldn't just 'teach the Bible'. We should teach *people* the Bible. The emphasis mustn't just be on the transmission but on the reception, not just on being faithful to the Bible, but on being helpful to the hearer. In Hebrews we're urged to keep on meeting together to encourage one another.<sup>7</sup> When we choose a church, we need to consider how it communicates the message of God's Word to the people who meet there.

Some churches will be better at reaching students, some better with families, some with internationals, and so on. The building they meet in, the types and timings of meetings, the sort of music, the clothes the pastor wears, all these and more, are not matters of 'right and wrong', but they may be matters of wisdom.

It's vital to remember that it's not just about you: it's about *other* people. And that means non-Christians as well as Christians. Word-ministry grows the church outwards as well as upwards: it is the means of discipleship *and* evangelism.

As students, your mission field is most likely to be other students. Not always: some students have children, for example, and their family may be their priority. But whatever our mission field is, we need to consider the people we want our church to reach with the Gospel. If your friends are from very traditional backgrounds, an informal free church might be inappropriate. If your friends speak English as a second language, perhaps a church that uses old versions of the Bible might be unhelpful. If they love music, perhaps a church that has good music would be

preferable over one that doesn't.

*Dave's church was great at reaching students, but it wasn't reaching them with God's Word. Gordon's church was teaching the Bible, but it wasn't reaching Gordon or any friends that might have gone there. Both of them needed to find a church that faithfully taught people the Bible, and did it helpfully and winsomely.*

Looking back at our two questions, the first is absolute. If a church does not teach people the Bible, don't go there. The second is relative; it will depend on how well a particular church reaches you and your friends. Go somewhere that will most effectively help you bring your friends to Christ. Pray for discernment and wisdom!

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### REFERENCES

1. Ephesians 1:3-6,9-11
2. Colossians 2:19
3. Genesis 1, Exodus 20, Ezekiel 37, Matthew 4, John 1
4. Acts 2:42-47
5. Acts 6:1-4
6. Ephesians 4:15
7. Hebrews 10:25