

choosing a church

Giles Cattermole helps us with an important decision



Matt 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 YouTube videos they used instead of sermons were really cutting-edge. He'd have no problem bringing his mates along, even if all they did was chill and eat pizza.

Jacob was in a similar position. He'd attended a small chapel while growing up 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 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 that the Bible was being taught.

What made Matt and Jacob choose their churches? What motivated you to choose yours? Perhaps you're just starting to look for a church after coming to university or becoming a Christian. Later, you might be sent away on placement for a couple of months or be off to another part of the country for your first 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,¹ and that God does the work of growing his church.² Growth is both in breadth, as more people turn to Christ, and in-depth, as each believer becomes more like Christ.

teaching the Bible

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



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God's Word is the means by which he grows his kingdom. Throughout the whole Bible, God's Word creates, sustains and sanctifies.³ It grows God's people. It's why the church of Acts 2 was devoted to the teaching of the apostles,⁴ and why the apostles in Acts 6 devoted themselves to the ministry of the Word.⁵ 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 the Bible is never taught in isolation. Word ministry goes with prayer.⁶ A Bible-teaching church will be one that prays together. 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 according to what he has revealed to us in his Word. Bible teaching is not just something that the pastor does. As each of us speaks God's Word to one another, the church will grow.⁷ 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 teaches 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.⁸ 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 (perhaps) of wisdom.

Remember: 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, 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.

when we choose a church, it needs to be one that will teach us the Bible

Matt's church was great at reaching students, but it wasn't reaching them with God's Word. Jacob's church was teaching the Bible, but it wasn't reaching Jacob, let alone any friends he might have invited there. Both 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; how well a specific church reaches you and your friends might vary over time. Go somewhere that will most effectively help you bring your friends to Christ. Pray for discernment and wisdom. ■

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. Acts 2:42-47
7. Ephesians 4:15
8. Hebrews 10:25