

Q. Can you recommend a church in my area?

A. This is certainly one of the most common questions I receive. I suppose it comes from questioners who have come to see that there is a discrepancy between what they see in their Bibles and what they see in the local churches they have attended. Years ago, I used to try to find churches in the person's area that taught sovereign grace and, if I could find one, also taught New Covenant Theology. For reasons I will explain, I no longer do this. But I do have a recommendation for those who are looking for a church.

Why I No Longer Recommend Churches

1. Many churches today violate at least one of the Bible's rules for assemblies and/or often, as did the Pharisees, add their own legalistic rules that put people in bondage (such as making people feel they must always attend an assembly, keeping a Sabbath day, not allowing women to wear pants [whereas the Bible merely says they should dress modestly], elevate one man to the position of a pastor who Lords it over the brethren, and so forth).

2. The entire system of the institutional church is unbiblical. The Bible never speaks of "going to church." The assemblies didn't have a person with the title of pastor who gave sermons week-after-week while everyone else stared at him from pews. In fact, the New Testament saints didn't meet in special buildings called churches with sanctuaries, altars, narthexes, naves, and so forth (see "Are You Meeting in God's House?") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/godshouse.htm>). They didn't have pulpits with clergymen (they didn't have clergymen!) standing on them to speak or sitting in big chairs facing the rest of the people (see "Does Your Church Have Chief Seats?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/chiefseats.htm>)). They didn't assemble even in simple, country church buildings.

3. The word "church" is unbiblical. King James ordered that the scholars working on the King James Version translate the Greek word *ekklesiā* as "church" as a way to maintain the established church with him as its head in England. In other words, "church" was a purposeful

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mistranslation of *ekklēsia* designed to mislead the people into supporting the institutional church.

As I explain in "The Parable of the Mustard Seed" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par4mustard.htm>) and "*Ekklēsia* or Church, Does It Matter?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/ekkleisia.htm>), the churches we see around us are part of a deception, a grotesque that grew up in place of the *ekklēsia* Jesus built. Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, wrote, "Nowhere nor in anything, except in the assertion of the Church, can we find that God or Christ founded anything like what churchmen understand by the Church" (*The Kingdom of God is Within You*). And Particular Baptist essayist, John Foster (1770-1843), wrote, "I am strongly of the opinion that churches are useless and mischievous institutions, and the sooner they are dissolved the better" (letter, 10 Sept 1828).

Please don't misunderstand me as saying that there aren't Christians in the institutional church. There are. But they are, in a sense, kidnapped, held spellbound by a Pied Piper.

Given these circumstances, how can I recommend a church in any area? I cannot. Some churches may be better than others, but all are part of a false, unbiblical system.

What I Do Recommend

If I don't refer people to churches, what do I recommend? I suggest that Christians start an assembly of called out believers, or *ekklēsia*, in their own homes. Why?

1. In house assemblies, authority doesn't lie in a clerical hierarchy. No one lords it over anyone else (Mark 10:42-45). All are brothers (Matthew 23:8). Yes, some will stand out as spiritual elders, but their role (not office) is to care for the flock, to see that everyone is spiritually fed, and to watch out for error and protect against wolves in sheep's clothing. Thus, they (in an assembly of any size, there will be multiple elders) will fulfill the role—not office—of shepherds or pastors (*poimēn*—one who tends a flock). Others will help physically as servants (*diakonos*) of the assembly.

As I have explained many times before, when Paul was heading toward Jerusalem with the knowledge that he would likely be arrested and eventually executed, he met with the elders of the *ekklēsia* in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). In this meeting, he told them that he was

entrusting them "to God, and to the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32). Paul did not entrust them to any man or group of men or to any institution. He put them under the care of God and God's gracious Word. Authority lies in the Scriptures. When the *ekklēsia* meets, it meets as a called out or elected (by God) assembly—a congress, parliament, diet—to read, expound upon, and discuss the Scriptures so as to come to a better understanding of them as the rule for their lives.

What each of two or three speakers says at each meeting is assessed by the others (1 Corinthians 14:29), with the elders acting as pastors or shepherds and using the gift they should have of "properly handling the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) to make sure that the flock is not straying in its doctrine or practice.

2. As I said earlier, the Bible nowhere speaks of believers going to church. The believers *are* the assembly. We are always assembled, spiritually, before God.

The Bible also speaks of the *ekklēsia* in a local sense as being in a city. But it is never spoken of as something apart from us that we go to, nor is our coming together locally ever spoken of as a duty. You might immediately think of Hebrews 10:25. "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as you see the Day approaching." The institutional church is fond of quoting this verse and teaching that it says we are to keep going to church in order to get people to feel obligated to attend meetings. But, in fact, this is not what Hebrews 10:25 is saying. You can read more about this in the article, "Hebrews 10:25: What Are We Not To Forsake?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/hebrews1025.htm>).

The local *ekklēsia* did not meet in special church buildings. Aside from evangelistic meetings—which were held in public places such as the temple, the synagogues, markets, the school of Tyrannus, and so forth—the *ekklēsia* met privately in, or according to (*kata*), houses or families (the same Greek word, *oikos*, means either "house" or "family").

There was no division of the brethren into clergy and laity. While the elders were to have the gift to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:24), others could also speak. As I have explained in "Does God still directly communicate with His people?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/directrevelationqa.htm>), "Once God put all of the knowledge He wanted his people to have into

the assembly through the gifts of knowledge, tongues, and prophecy—and all of this was recorded in Scripture—then He stopped giving those gifts." Nevertheless, although much of 1 Corinthians 14 concerns these gifts, the point of the chapter is to teach how the *ekklēsia* is to be conducted. So, we can learn from 1 Corinthians 14 that two or three men can speak in turn during a meeting (verses 27 and 29), that the speakers can be questioned, or judged, by the others (verse 29), that the women are not to speak (verse 34), and that all things are to "be done to build each other up" (verse 26).

3. The *ekklēsia*, not the church, is God's assembly. Because the churches have so many unbiblical practices, attending them can be counterproductive to spiritual growth. I recommend either finding a doctrinally sound *ekklēsia* meeting in someone's house (which may not be an easy task) or starting one in your own home.

How to Start an *Ekklēsia*

Two or Three: All you need are two or three believers (Matthew 18:20), at least one must be a man to do the speaking, and it is better to have more than one speaker but not absolutely necessary. A believing husband and wife, or a believing husband and wife and their children, can make a local *ekklēsia*. Women should wear a head covering (see the article, "The Head Covering") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/headcovering1.html>), though I would not press this point for a woman believer who is not yet convinced on this subject.

Keep It Simple: We are trained by attending institutional churches to think of meetings as big productions. The Bible never pictures the *ekklēsia* in this way. My recommendation is to keep the meetings low-key and friendly.

Prayer: A man should begin and end the meeting with prayer.

Be Prepared: Since we are no longer receiving direct revelation, I suggest that speakers prepare what they will read or speak about beforehand. They should want to help the *ekklēsia*, not glorify themselves. They should also expect that they may be questioned after they speak. The questions should not be daggers designed to bring someone down, but questions kindly and politely asked for the purpose of clearing up a point or establishing whether it agrees with Scripture. The focus should always be on helping the *ekklēsia* come to a better understanding of the truth, not in promulgating pet theories.

If something can't be cleared up, it is best dropped until God helps someone understand it better another time.

Simply reading from the Bible, with or without comments, is fine, especially for someone new to speaking in a meeting. Preaching (the Greek words for this in the New Testament are *kērussō*, which means to herald; *euaggelizō*, which means to announce good news; *diaggellō*, which means to carry a message through or announce everywhere, and *kataggellō*, which means to announce or proclaim) is a tool for public evangelistic meetings with unbelievers. It is out of place in the *ekklēsia*. In the *ekklēsia*, the point is to teach, exhort, encourage, and edify.

Eat the Lord's Supper: Jesus doesn't say how often to eat the Lord's Supper, but I'm of the opinion that frequently (at least once a week) is better than infrequently. For the symbols that should be used, see, "What Kind of Bread and Fruit of the Vine Are We to Use?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/lordssupperelements1.html>). Unleavened bread recipes can be found by Googling "unleavened bread recipes." Eating the bread and wine is an ordinance that is for believing, baptized Christians only.

Serve the bread and wine along with a fellowship meal (which doesn't have to be anything fancy). A man should pray before dividing out the unleavened loaf; he should pray again before dividing out the wine (Matthew 26:26-27; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25). I think it is a good idea to mention in the prayer the symbolism of the bread and of the cup of wine. There is no need for everyone to drink out of a common cup; it can be poured out from that cup into individual wine glasses. Jesus did not expect His disciples to drink only a thimbleful of wine. Tiny portions are an invention of the institutional church. But no one is to drink so much that he or she gets drunk. I consider anything from about one-half of a wine glass to about three-quarters of a wine glass to be the limits for most adults. If there are baptized children, they should drink far less.

Music: I think I will make music the subject of another article. But I will say that unless you are agreed about the music you will have, I would counsel that it is better to leave it out rather than have it become a source of contention. I will also point out that the music in the *ekklēsia* has the same purpose as speaking. Its purpose is not to get people putting their hands in the air and waving them around. Praise and worship music has become so central to, and such a large part of, modern churches that many people think of it as the reason

they go to church. This is a serious misconception. It is a throwback to medieval Catholicism. At that time, everything was pomp and show and music, all done with the goal of inspiring a so-called attitude of worship. There was little to no teaching. Yet, the Bible never calls an *ekklēsia* meeting a "worship service." The primary purpose of the meetings of the *ekklēsia*, as we have seen, is teaching. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that its music also has this purpose: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16).

If the music is not teaching and admonishing in wisdom with grace, if its words do not actually teach a doctrinally sound lesson, then it does not belong in the meeting. In my opinion, this eliminates most contemporary Christian music.

Lone Christians and Women

Until your circumstances change, if you are a lone Christian who knows of no one else interested in starting an *ekklēsia*, or if you are a group of women with no man to speak in an *ekklēsia*, you will not be able to start an *ekklēsia*. This may make you yearn for Christian fellowship, but keep in mind that God knows your circumstances, and He knows what is best for you at this time. Pray and continue in your personal Bible study. It may also be good to serve needs in your community where there could be other Christians you might meet who would share your interest in starting an *ekklēsia*. In the meantime, remember that you are a member of Christ's *ekklēsia* that is always in spiritual assembly before God.

Conclusion

In summary, I cannot recommend a church anywhere in the world. If you are attending one and are happy with it, fine. I once attended institutional churches, too. But not any more. It is simple and easy to start a house *ekklēsia*, and doing so is what I recommend that the saints of God do.

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