

Summary of Christian Denominations

One of the most important things for every Christian is to find a local church where they can worship God, learn about him, be in fellowship with other believers and serve. It is God's will that every believer in Jesus Christ be actively involved in a local church. It is not an option if you truly want to follow God's revealed will for your life. However, finding a church can often be confusing since there are so many different ones and it is hard to know the difference between them. This guide has been put together to help young Christians understand some of the main differences between the various churches they will find in their community and to help give some biblical guidelines by which to choose one where they can best serve the Lord.

*Excerpt from The Bible Has the Answer, by Henry Morris and Martin Clark,
published by Master Books, 1987*

It is certainly understandable that even a very earnest and sincere seeker after truth would be confused over the religious situation today, with hundreds of denominations, sects, and cults in Christendom alone, as well as hundreds more in other countries and cultures, and with new religious movements arising almost every day. Nevertheless, God has provided adequate instruction for us to enable us to "know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6) if we really want to do so.

There are three criteria which are especially helpful in evaluating a particular church or movement: the teachings of its leaders concerning the Bible, concerning Christ, and concerning the way of salvation, respectively.

1. Attitude toward the Bible

The Bible claims, many hundreds of time, to be the written Word of God. The Old Testament Scriptures were accepted by Christ and the apostles as divinely inspired and completely infallible. Jesus said: "The scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35). With respect to the New Testament, He promised His apostles that "the Holy Ghost shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26), and that "the Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

Therefore, during the first century, the apostles who had been with Christ, had witnessed His resurrection and had received these promises, gradually wrote down the Gospels and Epistles which now comprise the New Testament. These were readily received and recognized by the early Christians as inspired Scriptures. The apostles claimed that these writings were divinely inspired and authoritative, and true Christians have always accepted them as such.

Finally, the last of the apostles, John the Beloved, near the end of the first century, was enabled to look prophetically into the future ages and to write down the last of the true Scriptures, the book of Revelation. This completed God's written words, "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add

unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life" (Revelation 22:18,19).

These last words of Christ's apostles give us a most important rule. The Scriptures are fully inspired, even to the very words, and those who would add to them or take away from them are, to the extent they do so, false teachers.

In general, cultists have been guilty of "adding to" the Scriptures, claiming either that the writings of their own founders were divinely inspired or that the interpretations of their leaders were uniquely necessary and authoritative. Modernists and liberals, on the other hand, have been guilty of the even more serious error of "taking away from" Scripture, culling out or allegorizing those portions which they decide are unscientific or unreasonable to modern man. The true teacher, however, will accept all the Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, as the infallible Word of God.

2. Attitude toward Christ

A true Christian teacher will gladly accept and proclaim Jesus Christ as He is, true God and true man. "Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is the antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22). "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (2 John 7). "There shall be false teachers among you, who privately shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought (that is, 'redeemed') them: (2 Peter 2:1).

Error concerning the person of Christ can take either the form of the ancient Gnostic heresy, which denied His true humanity, or that of the modern Agnostic heresy, which denies His true deity. The latter considers Him to be a great man and great religious teacher and leader, but rejects His virgin birth, His sinless life, His substitutionary atonement, and His bodily resurrection and ascension. Any cult or denomination or religious movement which does not clearly and forcefully proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ both as the perfect Son of man and the only begotten Son of God, "the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8) is false, and should be rejected.

3. Attitude toward Salvation

The gospel of Christ is "the power of God unto salvation, to everyone that believeth" (Romans 1:16). The word "gospel" means "good news," not "good advice." It does not tell us what we must do and not do in order to earn salvation, but rather what Christ has done to provide salvation as a free gift. "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Every other religion under the sun, whether pseudo-Christian or non-Christian, panders to man's pride by teaching him there is something he can do to earn, or to help in earning, his own salvation. Only true Biblical Christianity recognizes man as he really is, utterly lost in sin, destined for eternal separation from God. The gospel, "by which you are saved," is the glorious news that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:1,3) and that we can be saved by grace, through personal faith in Christ, plus nothing else whatever! Any religion which teaches otherwise is, to that extent, false. Paul said, "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that you have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9). One who is truly saved by God's grace in Christ will, of course, then seek to follow Christ and His Word in all things, not to earn salvation, but in love and gratitude for His glorious gift of cleansing and everlasting life.

Some general guidelines for identifying churches. (this summary was prepared by Prison Mission Association)

Roman Catholic – Catholics believe that the Pope is the representative of Jesus Christ on the earth and that he has authority over the Church. The Roman Catholic Church did not actually start with the Apostle Peter as it often claims, but rather gradually developed over about 400 years into a very highly organized, structured institution. The Catholic Church has a very strict hierarchy of authority all the way from the Pope to archbishops, bishops and priests. They believe that the traditions of the Church have equal or more authority than the Bible. Roman Catholics believe that eternal life is something we *cannot* be certain of in this life and it is only obtained through practicing certain rituals and traditions in the Church. This includes baptism (usually as an infant), confession of sins to a priest, taking Holy Communion and avoiding certain mortal sins. Most Catholics believe that you must work for your salvation and that it is not a gift of God through faith alone. There are other practices in the Catholic Church which are not scriptural, such as the adoration of the Virgin Mary, praying for the souls of the dead, praying to the Saints, etc.

Lutheran Churches – When Martin Luther broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century he rejected the idea that good works could earn salvation for a person and that the traditions of the Church had equal authority to the Bible. Lutherans believe that salvation is by faith alone through God's grace and that the Bible is the final authority for our faith. Lutherans, however, still believe that a person needs to be baptized and, like the Catholics, they baptize infants. Lutherans also believe that believers need to take communion each week, but they only give communion to people that are members of their particular Lutheran denomination (or synod). They believe that God grants a special grace when they take communion, but unlike the Roman Catholic belief they do not believe that the bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Christ.

Mainline Protestant Denominations – These include many different types of churches that formed after the Reformation when Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church. Historically they have all accepted what is known as the Apostle's Creed, which

was a statement of faith developed in the 4th century to summarize the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith.

The Apostle's Creed.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. AMEN.

Most mainline churches, however, no longer believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible. Likewise, many do not believe that a person must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through individually trusting Him as savior. In many cases they do not preach from the Bible, but rather the sermons are focused on social issues. The most common mainline churches are United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ (Congregationalists).

The next groups of churches are known as **Evangelical or Fundamentalist** churches. These churches tend to be much more conservative in their theology than mainline denominations. They emphasize that the Bible is the revealed Word of God and that every person must have a personal relationship through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. These churches generally believe that those that trust Christ as savior have the gift of eternal life and those that do not have Christ are destined to an eternity separated from God in eternal punishment. These churches tend to emphasize the importance of Christian living and encourage their members to live up to the moral and ethical standards of the Bible. The difference between an Evangelical and a Fundamentalist church is somewhat hard to determine. Fundamentalists tend to put a stronger emphasis on teaching Bible doctrine, they also are sometimes very legalistic in terms of the rules they expect Christians to live by. Evangelicals are more interested in helping the physical needs of people and tend to be somewhat less argumentative and dogmatic than Fundamentalists.

Baptists are probably the largest group of Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches. There are many different Baptist denominations as well as Baptist churches that are independent. Some might be more legalistic than others. They emphasize the authority of the Bible and the need for personal salvation. They also believe that it is important for a person to be baptized in water by immersion after they have made a profession of faith, although they do not believe that baptism is necessary to be saved. Baptists also believe that once someone has trusted Christ he cannot lose his salvation because he sins (called the doctrine of eternal security). One can find a wide range of attitudes among Baptists

from very formal and strict, to much more relaxed and informal in their worship. Southern Baptists are the largest Baptist denomination.

Charismatic and Pentecostals make up another large group of Evangelical/Fundamentalist churches. These churches also believe in the importance of the Bible and personal faith in Christ. They also practice believers' baptism by immersion, some may say it is a testimony of faith, like the Baptists, others might say it is a necessary act in order to be saved, quoting Acts 2:38. Charismatic churches believe that the miraculous sign gifts that are described in the New Testament are active and being practiced in the church today. They often have people speak in tongues during their meetings, they believe in faith healing and believe that miracles will take place if believers pray for them. Most Charismatic churches believe that a person can lose his salvation if he is not walking in fellowship with the Lord. The Assemblies of God is the largest Charismatic denomination.

Holiness Churches are another group of Evangelical/Fundamentalists. These churches believe that a person should seek personal holiness in their life and they emphasize the importance of the activity of the Holy Spirit in a person's life, however, they generally do not practice the miraculous sign gifts. These churches also believe that a person can lose his or her salvation. Holiness churches include Free Methodist, Wesleyan, Christian and Missionary Alliance and Nazarene churches.

Christian Church/ Church of Christ. This group of churches is very independent. They do not organize into denominations although they have close fellowship among the various local churches. The thing that most of these churches have in common is the importance they place on water baptism. They teach that believers should be baptized immediately after making a profession of faith. Most also believe that you can lose your salvation. Some of these churches are very legalistic and exclusive, to the point of saying that only people that belong to their church are truly saved. Others are more open. In some churches they forbid the use of musical instruments in worship.

Non-Denominational Churches. These churches tend to be biblically conservative and orthodox in their teaching but they are not associated with organized denominations. They might use the title Bible church or Community church in their name. They can also have a wide range of practices. Some might have very contemporary worship services. They often have a wide variety of ministries for people such as divorce care, substance abuse counseling, food pantries, etc. While many of these are very good churches, a person will want to check out their beliefs and practices carefully before getting involved. Since they do not have a particular denominational structure they are open to believe almost anything they wish. Although part of a denomination, the Evangelical Free Churches are very much like these types of churches. There are also a host of newer churches that are loosely affiliated, though not part of a traditional denomination, this includes the Vineyard and Calvary Chapel.

Cults. These are groups that do not hold to traditional, orthodox beliefs about the Bible, salvation and the person of Jesus Christ. They often emphasize the importance of

belonging to their particular church over and above the universal Body of Christ. These churches should be avoided. The main cults are Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and the Unification Church.

Personally I recommend a church that is conservative biblically and that emphasizes the need for personal salvation and faith in Christ. I do not recommend Charismatic churches. I believe it is important to worship in a church that believes in eternal security. Find a church where you are able to get something from the messages and that has ministry for the entire family. The church should be welcoming and you should feel comfortable in the worship.

To find churches that are closely affiliated with Prison Mission Association you can contact the Grace Gospel Fellowship (1011 Aldon SW, Grand Rapids, MI, 49509, Tel. 616-245-0100, www.ggfusa.org) or the Berean Bible Society, (P.O. Box 756, Germantown, WI, 53022, Tel. 262-255-4750, www.bereanbiblesociety.org)

Reason why you should be part of a church.

- God desires that you devote time to worship Him and focus your attention on things beyond this temporary world.
- You will be refreshed, uplifted and inspired during the time you spend in worship.
- Your children will receive moral and spiritual training that will give them guidance throughout life.
- You will develop a support network of solid, caring people that will be there to help you through difficult times in your life.
- You will be challenged to consider serious issues about life such as morality, justice and eternal values and it will help you develop a worldview that is beyond your limited life experiences.
- You will be building a spiritual strength and intimacy with God that will help you through difficult seasons of your life

Things to look for when considering a church.

1. Do the teachings of the church agree with your understanding of spiritual truth? I strongly recommend that you seek a church that teaches from the Bible and holds to it as the final source of spiritual authority.
2. Do you feel comfortable in the church, do you enjoy the worship style, the music, the length of the service, etc?
3. Are you getting anything out of the messages? If not, you may want to look for another congregation.
4. Do you feel welcomed and part of the congregation? Can you become involved and be an active participant in the life of the community?

5. Are there activities and programs that will help you develop as a total person?
Educational programs, recreational events, social gatherings, service opportunities, etc.
6. Does it have good children's, youth and family ministries that will help you grow together as a family unit?