

Selecting The Right Church

By: Pastor David T. Holt

This brochure is to assist you in making one of the most important decisions in your life: selecting the right church.

Selecting a church home can be a difficult decision. The more people involved in this decision (i.e., spouse and children), the more difficult it becomes. It is my prayer that God will use this brochure to help you make the decision that is most in line with God's will for your life. A great prayer to pray even as you read this is Colossians 1:9, "Fill me with the knowledge of Your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

I know first hand how difficult selecting the right church can be. When my wife and I were in seminary, it was the first time (and might be the only time!) in our life where I was not on staff with a church. We actually got to visit churches for the purpose of selecting the right one for us. Yes, we were "church shopping." It was interesting because I was desirous of a church with strong worship, whereas she was looking more for solid teaching. Lest you think I didn't care about the teaching, remember I was getting solid teaching in my seminary classes everyday. It took us one full year to finally make a decision that we both felt good about. I never thought it would take this long. I hope it doesn't take you this long.

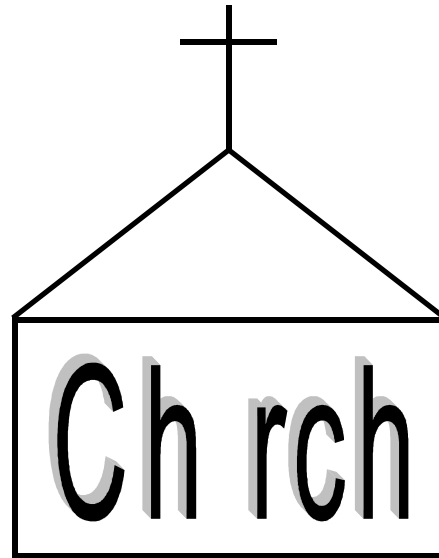
One way to speed up the process of selection is to request written information from all the possible churches you are considering. After prayerfully reading the literature you may be able to quickly eliminate some churches based on the criteria in this brochure and upon the criteria that is uniquely important to you (i.e., strong children's ministry, small groups, etc.).

I want to assure you that I am not writing this to try to persuade you to be a part of First Evangelical Free Church. **I desire for you to be where God wants you to be.** I simply want to give you some solid, biblical truths to consider as you make this important decision. Don't make your decision on convenience, comfort, or emotion. Rather, base it on biblical truth and the leading of the Holy Spirit. And remember, don't expect to find a perfect church; there isn't one. Someone once said, "If you find the perfect church, don't join, because if you do, it won't be perfect anymore!"

How important is church anyway?

Before I address which church, perhaps we should consider whether church. In other words, how important is it that we be involved in a local church? I have heard many say, "I don't need church. I can worship God just as well in the woods by myself. And besides, the church is just full of hypocrites."

Yes, we can worship God alone in the woods (I love to do that when I am deer hunting!), and yes, every church does contain some hypocrites. However, that doesn't change the truth: "Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as some are in the habit of doing. But encourage one another and all the more as you see the



What's missing?

Day draw nearer" (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Living Bible's version of this verse is: "Let us not neglect our church meetings, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of His coming back again is drawing near." God clearly commands His people to be in vital fellowship with other Believers. The early Christians regularly met together in homes as well as in the temple (Acts 2:41-47).

God has not made us to make it alone. We need each other in our pursuit of God. Larry Crabb, a noted Christian counselor, says that "lifechange most often occurs when truth is shared in the context of a relationship." We need the truth and the relationships that a church body can provide. Chuck Colson, of Prison Fellowship, adds: "Of course every Believer is part of the universal church. But for any Christian who has a choice in the matter, failure to cleave to a particular church is failure to obey Christ. For it is only through a confessing, local body of Believers that we can carry out the work of the church in the world.... If we don't grasp the intrinsically corporate nature of Christianity embodied in the church, we are missing the very heart of Jesus' plan" (*The Body* p. 277). St. Augustine gave us food for thought when he said years ago, "He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother."

So, despite all the church's weaknesses, failures, and hypocrisy, we still need to be vitally involved in a local church in order to:

- Worship God with others,
- Be taught the Word of God,
- Fellowship with others,
- Be held accountable to obey God,
- Practice the "one anothers," and
- Find a meaningful place of service!

Therefore, it is not God's will for any Believer to fend for himself, but rather to be vitally connected with other Christians in a local, Bible-believing church body.

After reviewing what God says about assembling ourselves together, I trust you are convinced of how important your participation in the local church is. Now we are ready to examine some biblical criteria for selecting the right church.

Criteria for Selecting the Right Church

The simplest way to approach this decision might be to ask yourself this important question: Where **can I grow the most and serve the most effectively?** In most situations, God would want you in a church where these two are taking place. In some cases, one of these might outweigh the other. For example, God may call you to a church family where you can grow the most, but for a period of time there won't be much ministry there for you. We have had numerous people come to First Free to receive healing from past hurts. I know of a couple that came for three years and simply received. God did not want them to do much serving during this time. Now, however, they are healed enough to serve and are doing so very effectively.

On the other hand, God may call you to a church to minister, even though it may not be the place of greatest spiritual growth for you. In such cases, you will need to supplement your growth through tapes, books, and other means. We have a couple that left First Free for almost three years in order to minister in another church's youth program where their daughter was involved. They were not challenged to grow as much in that other church, but they knew God had called them there to minister for this special season of time. These two examples are probably exceptions. **In most situations, God wants you in the church where you can grow the most and serve the most effectively!**

Unfortunately, in our very individualistic, consumer-oriented culture, many select a church merely on the basis of "how well it meets my needs." This is why America has so many church-hoppers. A church-hopper is someone who hops from one church to another based on what best meets his/her personal wishes. Many times such people are avoiding commitment and the hard work that is involved in building quality relationships.

The following are some of the most important items to consider in selecting the right church home for you (and your family, if that is relevant):

1. Is God's Word Accurately Taught?

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"(2 Timothy 3:16).

This is the most important consideration in choosing a church. If God's Word is not faithfully and accurately taught, then sooner or later other things will get off base. God's Word, the Bible, must be the foundation for all beliefs, doctrines, and practices of a church. You need to be in a church where the leadership *"correctly handles the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15). You need

to be in a place where the Bible is believed to be God's infallible and inerrant word. When I went away to college someone gave me some sound advice: "David, find a church where people bring their Bibles, believe them, and use them."

If you are in a church where there is serious doctrinal impurity (especially if it relates to essential areas of salvation in Christ alone), then you should seriously consider whether or not to remain in that church. *"Do not be unequally yoked..."* (2 Corinthians 6:14). *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work"* (2 John 10-11).

2. Does it Teach Salvation by Faith Alone in Christ Alone?

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Concerning Jesus, the Bible says: *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"*(Acts 4:12).

God wants you in a church that accurately teaches and preaches salvation. We are reconciled to God by His grace through faith in Christ alone (Romans 5:1). If you are in a church that teaches salvation by baptism or good works or anything other than Christ alone, this is not biblical. If a church is not accurate on something as foundational as salvation, how can you trust its other teachings? As the return of Christ gets closer, God's Word says that many will fall away, believe deceitful teachings, and even accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires (see 1 Timothy 4 and 2 Timothy 3-4).

3. Am I Challenged to Grow Spiritually?

Next to the issue of the Bible and the doctrine of salvation, this perhaps is the most important item to consider in selecting a church. I often hear people say, "I go to my church because I feel comfortable there." My friend, I hope you go to a church that properly makes you uncomfortable. By uncomfortable I mean that you are challenged and stretched to grow in Christ. We need to be challenged to go further with God. We need to feel God's conviction. We need to be where people will *"spur us on to love and good deeds"* (Hebrews 10:24-25). The late Leonard Ravenhill, a noted authority on revival and prayer, once said, "I want to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." This is my desire as a pastor.

God wants each of us to increasingly grow into Christ-likeness. Maturity takes time and occurs in phases. The apostle John describes growing from a child, to a young adult, and finally to an adult (1 John 2:12-14). You need to be in a church that challenges you to go deeper and deeper with God. We should never stop growing in our intimacy with God. One of the most encouraging comments I receive is when people tell me that they have grown more at First Free than any other church they have been a part of. We are seeking to have numerous small-group opportunities that help people progressively mature in their walk with God, because we recognize that Christians need much more than Sunday morning can give them.

4. Does the Worship Exalt Jesus?

Here is one of the areas that people find the most difficult in selecting the right church. Worship and music styles vary greatly today. It can be difficult finding a church that has exactly the style or format that we prefer. Like I said earlier, the more people involved in this church decision, the more challenging it can be. Youth and adults often prefer different music styles (understatement of the year, huh?).

Regardless of music style, let us remember that worship is to glorify God. Worship should not be evaluated on the basis of how it makes me feel, or whether or not it is comfortable to me. Instead, the issue is whether it pleases God and facilitates me giving thanks and praise to Him. To understand the biblical basis for our worship at First Free, please refer to my brochure [Why We Worship The Way We Do](#). You can get a copy by calling our church office at 608-782-6022.

5. Are the Lord's Supper and Baptism Administered?

God gave two special observances that are to be administered on a regular basis: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (communion). Acts 2:41-47 provides one of the most awesome patterns for what a church should look like, and in this passage we find baptism and the Lord's Supper.

A church needs to facilitate one's obedience in baptism and the partaking of the Lord's Supper. Believers need to be obedient in baptism after they have repented of their sins and trusted in Christ alone for salvation. Infant baptism is not biblical. For more on the topic of baptism, see my brochure [Biblical Baptism](#). Believers also need to regularly partake of the Lord's Supper in order to "*proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). John Calvin, the great reformer of the 16th century, said, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." (Institutes 4.1.9).

6. Are there Opportunities for Me to Serve?

Every Christian is uniquely gifted by God. As each of us has received a special gift from God, we are to use it to serve others (1 Peter 4:10). Jesus spoke in a parable of how we are to use our time, talents, and treasures to serve God and bless others (Luke 19:11-27). We are not to keep our abilities and gifts to ourselves. The local church is the ideal place to use one's gifts to minister to God and others. Discover your gifts and find a place where you can use them. Go to your church's leadership and offer to serve in some way. The best way to feel a part of a local church is to jump right in and serve in some way. Do not wait to be asked. Offer your services and experience the blessings that come from serving.

At First Free we offer a Spiritual Gifts Assessment. This is to assist you in discovering your gifts, temperaments, and passions. We believe that **when we minister in our gift areas, that is where we are the most fruitful and fulfilled**. Therefore, we want to assist people in discovering their gifts, so that they find a meaningful place of service instead of merely volunteering wherever there is a cry for help. If you wish to have a Spiritual Gifts Assessment done, please contact our church office.

7. Is the Leadership Godly?

The Bible gives very specific qualifications for church leadership (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1). Similar to my point about solid, biblical teaching: **if the leadership is not godly, then their unhealthy influence will trickle down**. Take time to get to know the leadership of the church. Do not expect them to be perfect, but ask yourself: "Is this church led by people who love Jesus and truly desire to do His will? Can I trust their walks with God? Are they teachable and open to feedback?"

If you come from a painful church background where you were hurt by the leadership, it may take you time to trust again. Allow God into that hurt, so that He can heal you. It is OK to take time for healing and to gradually work toward trusting those in leadership. I think you will find the leadership at First Free to be humble, teachable, and desirous of pleasing God. If we can help facilitate your healing in any way, please give us a call.

8. Is there an Emphasis on People?

The two greatest commands in the Bible are to love God and love others (Mark 12:28-34). So many churches find themselves engrossed in politics and procedures, which oftentimes leaves people feeling uncared for. The larger a church becomes, the more difficult it can be for people to feel connected. Once again, don't expect perfection here, but you need to be in a church that is seeking to meet people's needs. In order for this to happen, you need to take the initiative to get involved in activities that promote fellowship and caring. For us, our Bible Fellowship Hour classes and small groups are very important opportunities for you to feel a sense of community with the church family.

David Gill, professor at North Park College, says, "We must have the community to support and correct our discipleship in the world. This seems so obvious, but our practice is so frequently individualistic. Christian discipleship is not for Lone Rangers (though in all fairness, even the masked man had Tonto as his sidekick). We must resist the individualism of our culture and cultivate deep and strong relationships with others. The challenges we face are formidable; without community they become impossible."

9. Is there Concern for the Lost?

One of the main reasons we are still here on earth is to share the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ with those who do not know Jesus. The church is to be like an army for God. Together we can accomplish more for God's glory than we can individually. Our mission is to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). You can often tell how serious a church is about following God by how strongly it practices evangelism and supports missions.

Our Sunday morning services are designed to be "seeker friendly." This means we want to be sensitive to those who don't know Jesus and explain things so that they will understand. Occasionally we have "seeker targeted" services. These are services directed entirely toward someone who does not yet know Jesus. Every Fall we have a missions' conference in which we challenge our people to make a financial commitment for the next year toward world evangelization. We are excited about what God is doing throughout the world and want to be a part of it!

Notice that none of the previous items have to do with being where you are the most comfortable. As stated earlier, God doesn't always want you to be comfortable. He wants us to be challenged and stretched to grow way beyond where we are presently. Now, if by comfortable you mean that you are so uncomfortable that your growth and service is hindered, that is an altogether different element. But sometimes we are uncomfortable because we are being challenged by the Holy Spirit, and this is a good uncomfortableness.

What if I'm not pleased with the present church I attend?

You might be reading this because you are considering a church switch. If this is the case, it is very important that you communicate with the leadership at your present church. **Never leave a church without talking to the pastor or someone in leadership.** Share your struggles and disappointments. Perhaps there is some misunderstanding that needs to be resolved instead of leaving. In any case, it is important for the leadership to know why you are leaving.

If there is unresolved conflict between you and the church you are coming from, especially if that conflict has to do with a specific person, it is God's will that you resolve that (as much as you are able) before switching to another church. *"So far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men"* (Romans 12:18).

Many people prematurely leave a church because of relational conflict. One of the main ways we grow in the Lord is through working out relational differences. This is why the Bible has so much to say about *"bearing with one another"* (Ephesians 4:2) and *"considering others better than ourselves"* (Philippians 2:3) and *"forgiving one another"* (Colossians 3:13). It is vital that we follow the principles in Matthew 18:15-18, Matthew 5:23, and Galatians 6:1 if we have conflict with another person. We are instructed to first go to the person privately and seek to resolve the conflict. We are not to

talk to another person about the conflict. We are not to gossip. So many problems in the church would be corrected if we just obeyed this one principle. Secondly, if we are unable to resolve the conflict between the two of us, then we are to mutually involve one or two others, preferably people who have been able to witness the conflict so as to provide objective input. If that is not successful, then we can ask the church leadership to become involved. So many personal conflicts and church divisions occur because we do not follow this pattern.

If you are about to leave the church you are currently part of, be sure you have the full release and blessing of the Lord. Make this a matter of serious prayer. Ask God to give you His clear leading. And once again, be sure you have communicated clearly to the leadership of your church and that you are not leaving any unresolved conflict with another person.

Final Word

God is building His church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her (see Matthew 16:18). God will always have a people. It is a privilege to be a part of His body. As the return of Christ gets closer, living for Jesus will become more difficult (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 1 Timothy 4:1); therefore, we will increasingly need the love and support of our church family. In addition, as the return of Christ gets closer, I believe we will see God's power manifested more.

It is a great time to be alive and to serve Christ in His church! **Don't miss out on being a part of God's end-time army!!!**

Take time right now to ask God to direct you to the right church for you (and your family if applicable). Jesus promised: *"...ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"* (Luke 11:19).

Duplication of this material is permissible if not for monetary gain.

First Evangelical Free Church
1950 Hwy 35
Onalaska, WI 54650
608-782-6022
E-mail: office@firstfree.org
Website: www.firstfree.org



Pastor David Holt has served as Senior Pastor of First Evangelical Free Church since 1990. He is a graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where he earned Master of Divinity, Master of Theology, and Doctor of Ministry degrees. He is married to Dede and they have four children.

