

How to Find a Safe Church

Most churches distribute literature on what they believe and what core values are, and these messages are predictable across many denominations. What differs is the meaning behind the beliefs and values. To exercise discernment, you must ask questions and observe closely.

1. A Safe Church Will Prioritize—You Guessed It: Safety

- a. Signs on the inside of women's bathroom stall doors for info on getting help for domestic violence, unexpected pregnancy, addictions
- b. A well-trained, robust security team
- c. Occasional abuse-aware, trauma-informed comments during sermons, with assurance of help from pastoral staff
- d. Child care: background checks on all workers, superior training to assess for danger in the home, mandated reporting, at least two adults per children's group, safety protocol for child pickup

2. Assess level of patriarchy:

- a. Positive pulpit reference to female authors and ministry figures (we can learn from women, too)
- b. Equal reference to men and women in sermon illustrations
- c. Women worship leaders, ministry leaders, announcers
- d. Women reading Scripture and/or praying in services

3. Marriage Stance

- a. What are exceptions to the permanence of marriage?
- b. Which takes priority, marriage permanence or *physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual safety for all individuals in the home*?
- c. How does each person receive support in a dysfunctional marriage? *Is one partner prioritized over the other?*
- d. How are healthy marriages modeled?

- e. How are unhealthy marriages supported to grow into healthy marriages?
- f. Is there an emphasis on “complementarianism” (default setting gives more power to the man; even in dysfunction, the woman compensates for the failures of the man through more submission, more prayer, etc.)?
- g. Would a woman be properly supported if she sought help for herself in a problematic relationship?

4. Grace and Gospel-Centeredness

- a. What do they mean when they say “gospel”? Does it simply mean being “saved”, or is it taught as a lifestyle?
- b. How often do you see or hear the word grace?
- c. Does each sermon point to how the gospel is at work in your life today?

5. What are expectations for members?

- a. Are members guilted into responsibility for others’ salvation? (Think: evangelism as the “cost of admission” to the group; emphasis on personal task of bringing people into the church; lack of focus on God’s sovereignty and work of the Holy Spirit to reach hearts)
- b. Is the spotlight on observable actions (behaviorism) or inward heart work? (Is spirituality measured by works/performance or by the fruit of the Spirit?)
- c. Are members pressured to serve? (Are seasons of hardship respected? Are seasons of needed growth before service acknowledged? Are members welcomed and invited into relational serving?)
- d. Does the church/member relationship feel contractual? (What is the trade-off for the privilege of membership? Does it feel more like a contract wherein each person holds up their end of a bargain, or a ministry?)
- e. Are members expected to adhere to prescribed “rules”? (Is there a prescribed, linear map for inclusion? Is the focus on behavior or

spiritual growth within relationship? Does the church dictate what behaviors are expected for spiritual growth?)

- f. Is there an emphasis on tithing and giving? (You can expect an occasional mention of the merits of giving, but is this a theme attached to spirituality and expectation?)

6. Is the church focused on gospel-centered transformation?

- a. Does the church talk more about God's expectations of you, or of Jesus' work on your behalf?
- b. Does the church teach what a relationship with Jesus looks like?
- c. Is there an intentional effort to create space for relationships that lead to spiritual transformation?

7. How is leadership structured?

- a. Is there a plurality of leadership (indicating unity, power distribution, and accountability)?
- b. How is leadership determined? (Are there prerequisites like training, track record, and one's (hopefully Christ-like) effect on others?)
- c. Are leaders accessible? (Could you get emergency help from a trusted leader in a personal crisis? Are trusted leaders involved in and concerned about your life?)
- d. Is there an emphasis on church authority that extends to the home, and a single-person spiritual authority in the home? (Or is the emphasis on responsibility, protection, and provision?)

8. Is there regard and support for people in difficult seasons of life?

- a. Published info on counseling services that includes referrals to licensed, vetted therapists

- b. Inclusive helping programs such as Divorce Care, Grief Share, Stephen Ministry
- c. Authenticity modeled by leadership that creates a culture of safety and vulnerability
- d. Support for freedom from addictions, porn use
- e. Grace and support for those in growing seasons; “pouring into” instead of taking energy from these populations

9. How is God presented?

- a. Is God a loving, just, protective, safe Father, or an angry, demanding authority figure?
- b. Are members encouraged to seek solace in a God who welcomes them, through the incarnated Jesus Christ?
- c. Is God presented as Someone who must be pleased, or as one who is already pleased with his children through the work of Jesus Christ?

10. Is lament valued?

- a. Is there space for individual and corporate lament? (as opposed to everyone needing to be happy all the time)
- b. Is it okay to not be okay?