

**IX** 9Marks

**What Should  
I Look For  
in a Church?**



**Alex  
Duke**

**Church Questions**

## **Endorsements for the Church Questions Series**

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These minibooks are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

**Gloria Furman**, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

**Juan R. Sanchez**, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

“Where can we Christians find reliable answers to our common questions about life together at church—without having to plow through long, expensive books? The Church Questions booklets meet our need with answers that are biblical, thoughtful, and practical. For pastors, this series will prove a trustworthy resource for guiding church members toward deeper wisdom and stronger unity.”

**Ray Ortlund**, President, Renewal Ministries

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## Church Questions

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# What Should I Look For in a Church?

Alex Duke

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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*What Should I Look For in a Church?*

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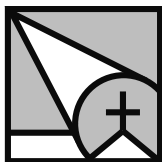
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After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

John 6:66–69







The first church I can remember was Expressway Church of Christ. They chose the name, I assume, because it was a church of Christ right next to an expressway.

I remember two things about the preacher: his name (Greg) and his caterpillar mustache. I remember three things about this church:

- The pew Bibles turned Jesus's words red. One page was all red. As a child, I believed this had to be the best page in all the Bible.
- The Lord's Supper happened every week. And if you missed it in the morning, you had to

stand up during the evening service to get what you missed.

- The mustachioed preacher named Greg ended every sermon the same way, with an invitation “to rise up out of that watery grave, a new creation, born again.”

One way or another, my parents’ divorce led to our departure from the church by the expressway. The details were fuzzy then and remain fuzzy now. At ten-years-old, I was either not privy to them or my elementary-school mind crowded them out in favor of stats about Major League Baseball and Pokémon cards.

We ended up at a megachurch—and when I say “mega” I mean mega. Attendees in the tens of thousands. My old church had a “sanctuary”; this place had a “worship center.” My old church had a few hallways; this place had a few escalators. My old church had pews; this place had individual seats, like an arena, only the “cup” holders were fit for communion juice, not \$10 Miller Lites. My old church had flannel-graph boards in the kid’s classroom; this place

had GameCubes and a gym with a basketball court—actually, four basketball courts. I don't remember much about my early days here, except that everything seemed jaw-dropping and spectacular. I felt like I'd risen out of a watery grave and into a game room of wonders.

As a child, I believed this had to be the best place in all the world. Imagine getting your milk from a cow who's lived in your backyard all your life. Let's call her Bessy. Now imagine that Bessy dies or gets swept up in a tornado or whatever and, suddenly, you have to buy your milk at a Walmart. But not just any Walmart, one of those Walmart SuperCenters that absorb several city blocks and attract eccentrics en masse. You might miss your long-lost bovine buddy, but if you're honest, you'll also be kind of mesmerized by this new land flowing with milk and Honey Nut Cheerios.

That's basically how I felt. The stark differences between church #1 and church #2 were more overwhelming than they were legible. It's like describing the difference between noon and midnight. Over the next eight years—from age

ten to eighteen, when I went off to college—this megachurch, though it looked like a mansion, became my home. God saved me under its faithful ministry. What stands out to me now, more than two decades later, is not its fantastic features but the faces of faithful men who pushed me to love and follow Jesus: Jonathan, Bobby, Rick, Matt, Dave, and others.<sup>1</sup>

I'm thankful for that church.

If we had more time, I could tell you about the church I joined my freshman year of college where—on Super Bowl Sunday 2008—the pastors dressed up as Tom Brady and Eli Manning. I could tell you about how their seats had real cup-holders, not for Miller Lites but for the complementary Cokes you could get in the lobby.

Or I could tell you about the church I went to for most of my college years. The nondescript one that sat between a field and another field. It was led by Pastor Steve and his perpetually gray five-o'clock shadow. It's where I learned about the beauty of the Bible and the majesty of God's grace to sinners like me.<sup>2</sup>

Or I could tell you about the church I went to during seminary, where the pastor explained that he was a “Calminian.”<sup>3</sup> It endured a church split that eventually became a church plant called, without even the slightest sense of irony, Unity Community Church.<sup>4</sup> This church wasn’t without its struggles, but it was—and is!—full of wonderful and godly people.

Or I could tell you about the first church I worked at in Queens, NY, with Vinny Nizzo—a deacon who looks and talks like a wise guy from *Goodfellas*. Vinny didn’t become a Christian until later in life, and he now writes poetry every morning and sends his edifying poems to hundreds of people every day before dawn.<sup>5</sup>

Or I could tell you about the church I work at now, nestled next to a big university and teeming with young families. It employs me to, somewhat bizarrely, teach the youth group and lead something called an “Ecclesiology Seminar.”

That’s the broad sweep of my church history. I could tell you more about each, but as I reflect even now on these churches, I’m filled with

gratitude. No church was perfect, but each has played a significant role in helping me to think about what makes a healthy and helpful church.

### **9Marks, Taco Bell, Expositional Preaching, and a Cheesy Gordita Crunch**

Of course, the goal of this booklet isn't to tell you about my church past, but to help you with your church future. I want to help you answer the question: "What should I look for in a church?" I've heard lots of good answers to that question. I've spent nearly the past decade working for a ministry called 9Marks whose sole mission is basically to help people answer that question.

My boss likes to say that 9Marks is like a Mexican restaurant. We use the same ingredients, but we just present them differently. Our meat, cheese, beans, and rice are expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, elders, discipling, missions, and prayer. Our delivery mechanism—our tortillas and our gorditas, our chips and our sopas—may