

WHY JOIN A CHURCH?

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"Why should I join the church?"

Can I give reasons from Scripture why anyone should join a church? Did the Christians in New Testament times formally join churches or did they have more of an informal relationship? Did the churches in the days of the Apostle Paul have a membership list? How do I respond to the rising tide of opinion that says church membership is merely an unbiblical tradition and an unnecessary formality?

First, let me state that I cannot provide verses in context that specifically state that the Church of Jesus Christ must have an official membership roll. However, I also cannot provide verses that say that worship services must begin at 8:30 or 11:00 am. I also cannot provide verses that state that a church must provide a Youth ministry or Bible study groups that begin a 9:45 am either. Even without specific biblical support for these ministries and services, churches that operate this way seem no worse off than those who don't.

However, when it comes to the issue of church membership, I am inclined to stand with those who believe that there is strong biblical support for the requirement.

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BIBLICAL INDICATIONS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

To start with, we encounter the word *church* throughout the New Testament. In the great majority of instances the term refers to a specific local church like that in Rome or Corinth. Sometimes when we read of the church the reference is to what's often called the church universal, that is, all Christians everywhere. But when you read "church" in the Bible, it almost always means "local church."

The New Testament Epistles were written to individual churches in individual towns or cities..... Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, ...etc.

At the very least, the local church was the fellowship of the followers of Jesus Christ in a particular area. We know that they met together, worshiped together, prayed together, baptized together, took communion together, ordained their own leaders ... etc., as the born-again family of God. But did people actually join this fellowship in some official way, or was it a mutually-assumed and less formal association?

A. The New Testament church practice of keeping a list of widows makes sense in the context of membership

We know that churches in the days of the Apostle Paul made and maintained at least one type of list. *1 Timothy 5:9... "No widow may be put on the list of widows," Paul instructs Timothy, "unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,"* (NIV). As easily as the churches had lists of widows, they could have had lists of members. There would be no difference except for length for a church to keep a widows' list and a membership list.

B. The instructions for church discipline make sense only in the context of membership

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gave us instructions on how the church should respond when someone within the church persists in living like an unbeliever. We read of a specific case of this in 1 Corinthians 5 and how the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, instructed the Christians in the church at Corinth to handle it. In verses 11-13 Paul says, *"But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner-not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'"*

There was a sexually immoral man in this church. Was Paul simply telling them not to let this man come to church with them because he was acting like an unbeliever instead of a Christian? No, he couldn't have meant that, for we know from other places in this letter (cf. 14:24-25) that unbelievers were welcome to attend church meetings. Even when they obeyed Paul's instructions to "put away from yourselves the evil person" and considered the man an unbeliever, they would have allowed (even welcomed) him to come and sit under the preaching of God's Word like any other person in town. So in what sense would they have "put away" ("remove"-NASB, "expel"-NIV) this man?

The best way of explaining how they would have "put away" this man is to understand that they removed him from the membership of the church and generally stopped associating with him outside the church meetings.

Notice that Paul refers to those who are "inside" and to those who are "outside." **Outside of what?** As we've noted, anyone could attend their meetings. This kind of language can only refer to a definite church membership of converted people. For what authority does a group have to remove someone who is already "outside" and not a member of the group? You can't fire someone who doesn't work for you. You can't appeal to a court to discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so.

These people in Corinth had voluntarily committed themselves to a formal relationship and they knew who were official members of the church and who were "outside."

Church discipline must be done by the "church" (Matthew 18:17) and occur "when you are gathered together" (1 Corinthians 5:4).

- Who is to gather together?
- How do you know who the "church" is?
- How do you determine who does and does not have the right to speak and vote on such matters?
- Does the person subject to discipline have the liberty to bring in his extended family or coworkers who have never been to the church, or even people off the street, and expect them to be given an equal say with those who have been faithful to the church for years? No? Why not?

Do you exclude them from involvement because they've never been part of the church? Then what about the person who attended once five years ago? Or those who came at Easter and Christmas last year? Or those who regularly watch the church services on television or listen to them on the radio, and perhaps even send money, but never enter the building? Or those from distant cities who visit several times each year because of family members in the church? Obviously, Biblical church discipline must be limited to a specific group and that must mean the church members.

C. The meaning of "the whole church" in 1 Corinthians 14:23 makes sense only in the context of membership

The earthly founder of the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul, wrote to this new body of Christians about their many difficulties, including how to bring order to their public worship. He began 1 Corinthians 14:23 with, *"Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, . . ."*

Who did he have in mind when he referred to "the whole church"? The only realistic answer is "the church members." That's why one commentator, working with the original language of this text, translates it *"If then the whole church assembles together and all its members"* [emphasis mine] and notes "(the last two words are not in the Greek but are naturally to be understood)."¹

Imagine the leaders of the Corinthian Christians walking into the gathering of the church for worship one Sunday. Would they have known by looking, or would they have had some way of deciding, whether "the whole church" was there? Surely they would have known who was supposed to be present in a churchwide meeting and who was missing. But how else could they have known when "the whole church" was "together in one place" without knowing who was a member and who wasn't? This implies a verifiable membership.

D. The instructions for pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership make sense only in the context of membership

Paul wrote to Timothy in *1 Timothy 3:1*... *"This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work"*.

In other places the New Testament also refers to a bishop, or "overseer" as the NIV and NASB render it, as a pastor or elder (Acts 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5-7).

But what or whom does he oversee? How can he provide spiritual oversight if he doesn't know exactly those for whom he is responsible? A distinguishable, mutually-understood membership is required for him to fulfill his charge.

Down in verse 5 it says of an overseer, *1:Timothy 3:5*... *"for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"*

The local church is compared to a family. Is anyone a casual member of a family? No, membership in a family is a very definite thing.

Acts 20:28... *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (NIV)* Paul instructed the elders of the church of Ephesus, "keep watch over yourselves and all the flock" (Acts 20:28).

How could they fulfill their responsibility as undershepherds to "all" the flock unless they knew who was part of "the flock" and who was not?

These leaders of a growing church in a large city needed some means of identification of those for whom they were to "keep watch." A simple membership list is the logical solution.

In Hebrews 13:17 is a word addressed to those under such overseers:

Hebrews 13:17... *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."*

For whom will the leaders of a church give an account - everyone who comes in and out of their church services? No, it has to be a limited group of people - the members of the church-for whom they will be answerable.

Otherwise, how can church leaders be responsible for someone until they know he or she is committed to their care? The Bible's instructions for pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership can best be obeyed when there is a well-defined church membership. Pastors and Church leaders must know who they are responsible for and who they are not responsible for.

Perhaps you like me are persuaded that the churches in the days of the New Testament had some sort of membership commitment and that people joined the churches instead of "drifting."

Are there other Biblical reasons why Christians should be members of a church today? Here are some . . .

BIBLICAL REASONS FOR JOINING A CHURCH

A. You prove that you're not ashamed to identify with Christ or His people

Jesus said (in Mark 8:38) that if anyone is ashamed to identify himself with Him on earth then He will not identify Himself with that person when he or she stands before God in the Judgment. Joining a church is one of the plainest ways of saying you're not ashamed to identify yourself with Jesus and with His people.

Jesus certainly made a formal commitment to identify Himself with His people when He left Heaven to come to earth and die as a man. Can, then, one for whom Christ died be reluctant to identify himself formally with the others for whom Christ died? California pastor John MacArthur explains and asks further, "You have been joined together with Christ. . . . You bear His name. Are you ashamed to belong? . . . Shouldn't you be willing outwardly to identify with the visible, gathered members of that group to which you eternally belong?"⁵

When you join a church you make it clear whose side you're on. You're telling the family of God that you're part of the family too, and that you don't want to be considered on the "outside" (1 Corinthians 5:12-13) any longer.

B. You stop being an independent Christian and place yourself under the discipline, instruction, and protection of other Christians

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus set up an accountability system. When a professing believer starts living like an unbeliever, those in the church who know about it are to confront him about his sin. First, one is to go to this person, and then, if he will not listen, the one is to bring one or two others along for a second conversation. The goal is to restore him back to full fellowship with the Lord and his fellow believers. If he persistently and unrepentantly refuses to return to the Lord, the final step is to report the matter to the church. Then everyone in the church has the chance to win the person back. And if he continues in his sin, the church is to withdraw fellowship from him as the final means of showing him his need to repent.

If you aren't part of the church, they have no authority over you and cannot do what Jesus said to do. Unless you join the church, your independence places you outside the way Jesus wants things to happen. Incidentally, when Jesus says in verse 17 to bring this matter "to the church," how do you know who should be notified (and who should not be) unless there is a formally recognized membership?

Hebrews 13:17 tells us to obey the leaders of the church and submit to them because they keep watch over our souls. The leaders of the church are to "watch over" you by providing spiritual protection for you and caring about your growth in Christ. You place yourself outside that spiritual watchcare unless you join a local church.

C. You participate in a stronger, more unified effort of God's people to obey Christ's command to reach others

The last thing Jesus said before returning to Heaven is known to Christians today as the Great Commission. *Matthew 28:19-20* where Jesus told His disciples (and us), *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen."*

I've met a few people who weren't interested in church membership but who were zealously witnessing to others about Christ and trying to make disciples for Him. Since they do so well what relatively few Christians do at all (i.e., share their faith), why emphasize church membership to them? They need to see that joining a church is like putting one candle with many others. They will give off more light collectively than the one lone candle ever could, and together they will have a greater penetration into the world's darkness.

In contrast, consider the potential negative impact on your efforts to talk about Jesus if you don't join His earthly body. John MacArthur says we should ask ourselves, "How wonderful can Christ be if we're not even committed to being associated with His church?"⁶ How believable is our testimony of the goodness and greatness of Christ if we don't want to identify openly with Christ's family?

D. You have a greater opportunity to use your spiritual gift "for the profit of all"

At the moment of salvation when the Holy Spirit comes to live within a believer in Christ, He brings a gift with Him. 1 Corinthians 12:4... *"There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit,"* Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4. He continues in verse 11, *"But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills."* For what purpose does God gift each Christian? The answer is in verse 7: *"But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all."* God gifts you individually so that you will use your gift "for the profit" of others. You have a greater opportunity to do that when you use your gift in and through local church membership.

Yes, you can use your spiritual gift for the good of God's people without joining a church. But in a lot of churches, many of the ministry opportunities are available for church members only, and for good reason. The church wants to know that you stand with her doctrinally and support her ministry goals before you're asked to minister in certain positions. Besides, remaining outside the membership of the church may say more about your desire to serve than you intend. "Not joining the church," according to MacArthur, 'is saying, 'I don't want to serve the only institution Christ ever built.'⁷ So the best way to maximize the effectiveness of your spiritual gift is to use it "for the profit of all" in a local church as a member.

E. You openly demonstrate the reality of the body of Christ

"Now you are the body of Christ," Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, *"and each one of you is a part of it"* (1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV). But how can we see the body of Christ? When you join a church, you make it visible. You give a living demonstration of the spiritual reality of the body of Christ. You show that even though you are an individual, you are a part of the body, you are joined together with others. You take the body of Christ out of the realm of the theoretical and give it a meaning that people can see.

As pastor and author Ben Patterson puts it, "To join a particular part of the body of Christ is not to bring something into existence that was not there before. It is simply to make actual what is spiritual, to prove that the spiritual is real."⁸

F. You demonstrate your commitment, not to "spiritual hitchhiking," but to "the proper working of each individual part" in the visible body of Christ

Some time ago in the magazine of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, a writer made an interesting observation about the hitchhiker. He wants a free ride. He assumes no responsibility for the money needed to buy the car, the gas to run it, or the cost of maintenance. He expects a comfortable ride and adequate safety. He assumes the driver has insurance covering him in case of an accident. He thinks little of asking the driver to take him to a certain place even though it may involve extra miles or inconvenience.

Think about the "spiritual hitchhiker" who has settled all his major questions about the matters and has definitely decided where he wants to attend church, but now wants all the benefits and privileges of that church's ministry without taking any responsibility for it. His attitude is all take and no give. He wants no accountability, just a free ride.

This is not meant to discourage those who are attending a church to find answers about Jesus Christ and are still uncertain about their eternal destiny. If that describes you, your first priority is to come to Christ rather than to come for church membership.

Neither is this intended to deter those who are sincerely and actively seeking God's will in a decision about a church home. Sometimes that decision cannot be made quickly. A wise person evaluates a church carefully before joining its membership. A "spiritual hitchhiker," however, has no real intention of joining the church, at least not soon. He only wants to enjoy its advantages without any obligation on his part. He wants convenience without commitment, to be served rather than to serve. But every true Christian is to be committed to *"the proper working of each individual part"* (Ephesians 4:16, NASB) in a local church. When you join a church, you're saying you believe in taking your "individual part" and that you don't want to be a "spiritual hitchhiker."

G. You "exhort" new believers to the same "good works" of commitment to the local body of Christ

In the familiar passage on church commitment, *Hebrews 10:24-25* says, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

Notice the command to "consider one another" that is associated here with church involvement. Bear in mind the message you give to other believers, especially new believers, if you do not join a church. What are you modeling to new believers when you remain uncommitted to the local church? Do they see your example and learn that the church isn't important enough to join? Do they get the message that the Kingdom of God is not worth such an investment of yourself? Do they interpret your actions as saying that the work of God does not deserve a full commitment? **On the other hand, joining a church is one way of "exhorting one another" as this passage puts it, "to love and good works."**

When you do join the local church you provide a positive example that says, "This is worth being a part of and I recommend it to you."

BIBLICAL RESPONSES TO THIS MESSAGE

Now that you've read these things about church membership, what should you do?

A. Turn from living for yourself and follow Christ, the Head of the church

Membership in a local church does not mean that you are part of the body of Christ. Without Christ, church membership means nothing. Hell is filled with people who were church members. Before you respond to the challenge of church membership, you must make sure you know Jesus Christ, who is "***head over all things to the church***" (*Ephesians 1:22*). Your greatest need in life is not to be on the membership roll of a church; it is to be made right with God by the One who died for the church, who created the church, who loves the church, and who is returning someday for His true church.

What should you do? The Bible says you should repent and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15), i.e., the message about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To repent and believe in this way involves turning from living for yourself and turning in faith to Jesus Christ. Recognize that your sin has separated you from God (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 3:23). You've repeatedly broken God's laws and this excludes you from His family and from eternity with Him. Come to Christ, however, and He can make you right with God. Believe that His death can cleanse you from all guilt before God and provide you with all the righteousness God requires. This is infinitely more important than church membership.

B. Present yourself to the church for baptism as a symbol of identification with Christ and His church

Ten days after Jesus had ascended back to Heaven, the Holy Spirit of God descended upon the believers who were gathered in Jerusalem. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter preached that morning to the crowd that had gathered because of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. About three thousand people turned from their sin and believed that the crucified and risen Jesus was their Messiah and God. Then, according to *Acts 2:41*, "*those who had gladly received his word were baptized.*" If you have received (i.e., believed) the word about Jesus Christ, you should be baptized.

Baptism is a church ordinance commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19). If you have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you should present yourself to a local church as a candidate for baptism. By this means you will openly identify yourself as a follower of Christ and a member of His body.

C. Present yourself for membership in a local, New Testament church if you've been scripturally baptized and your membership is elsewhere

Have you come to Christ and been baptized? Then you should formally identify yourself with the people of Christ where you live. If you have moved, or for some other reason have membership in a church you no longer attend, you should unite with the believers of a Biblically-based, Christ-centered church where you can participate faithfully. (See Acts 18:27 and Romans 16:1-2 for a New Testament example of Christians who identified with and served with a local congregation even when they were in a place which might not have been their permanent residence.)

When I was in college I faithfully attended a local church. After about a year I realized that my membership needed to be in that church, not the one back home that I grew up in but now rarely visited. So I presented myself for membership in the church where I was worshiping regularly. Today I encourage students to become members of a church in their college town, because that's where they are most of the time. If they are home for the summer, I suggest that, if practical, they move their membership back to their hometown church for those three months. There are two good reasons for doing this. One, there's no guarantee that their plans won't change and that they won't be back either at their school or at that particular church in the fall. Two, this develops a healthy pattern of thinking "Join a church here" whenever they relocate. This habit will serve them well when they graduate and move away from college to who-knows-where, not to mention each of the several times they are likely to move in the coming decades.

D. Reaffirm the commitment implied in your present church membership

If you are presently a member of the local church you attend, you should exercise your spiritual gifts in and through that church (see Romans 12:5-6a). Membership implies commitment and activity. All the living parts of the body of Christ should be working and fulfilling their God-intended function.

Think about this: a member of a human body, such as a heart or kidney, cannot exist apart from the body, except by some temporary and artificial sustenance. But this isn't what it's designed for. In this sheer existence the organ doesn't fulfill its function in the body. It isn't nourished in the way God intended through the body, but subsists only through some synthetic way that provides mere maintenance but doesn't stimulate growth or development.

In the same way, a true member of Christ's body is *not designed* to operate independently or outside the body. An authentic part of Christ's spiritual body cannot be content while separated from the rest of His earthly body. That's because he or she is made for interdependence, not independence.

As wonderful and sophisticated as the heart is, it was never made to be just a heart, but a *part* of a *body*. It has no value to the body outside the body. And the heart itself can't thrive outside the body. As incredible and wonderful as you are, Christian, you were never made just to be an individual Christian, but a *part* of *body*. As every organ and every cell is God-created to be an active member of the human body, so every true Christian is God-created to be an active member of a local body of Christ.

Are *you* a true Christian? Are you an actively and Biblically involved member of a local body of Christ? "Belonging to the church," says John MacArthur, "is at the very heart of Christianity."⁹

Church membership involves many responsibilities, but we must never lose sight of the great privilege that it really is. "We must grasp once again," said Martyn Lloyd-Jones of London in the mid-twentieth century, "the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honor which can come a man's way in this world."¹⁰

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3 G. Eric Lane, I Want to Be A Church Member (Bryntirion, Wales: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992), p. 21.

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5 John F. MacArthur, Jr., "Commitment to the Church," Tape GC 80-130 (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1994).

6 MacArthur tape GC 80-130.

7 MacArthur tape GC 80-130.

8 Ben Patterson, "Why Join A Church?", Leadership, Fall Quarter, 1984, p. 80.

9 MacArthur tape GC 80-130.

10 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Knowing the Times (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 30.

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