

546 Why Should I Be a Member of the Church?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Many people today say, "Jesus, yes; but the church, no." They want to be Christians but not members of any "organized religion." Some people have decided to become Christians "at large" or to establish small "house churches"; but they disdain the organized church with elders and deacons mentioned in the New Testament. But can a Christian please God and live apart from the church? Is attending church and being a church member optional? Or can a person just live a good life without the church and without the association of brothers and sisters? Should Christians be church members?

In trying to understand the place of the church in God's plan and scheme of things, the first thing we must do is see the connection between Christ himself and the church. There are a number of passages that show such a close relationship one can hardly think of Christ and not also think about His church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus responded to Peter's confession that He was the Christ, the son of the Living God, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (that confession) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The church itself is built upon the fact Jesus is the Son of the Living God. Jesus built His church, and it belongs to Him!

In Acts 20:28, Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." When I think of the purchase price Jesus paid for the church, I can only conclude that the church must have been very important to Him. People only die for the things that are most important in their lives. If the church were that important to Christ, it ought to be that important to those who love the Lord and want to follow in His steps. I might add that the church is the only thing mentioned in Scripture that Jesus purchased with His blood. For this reason, we cannot please God and act as if the church were an optional matter.

Paul said that the church is so closely related to Christ that it may be called his body, suggesting that the church is how God is working in the world today. In Ephesians 1:22-23 Paul said, "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things in the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." The head and the body are so interconnected that they should never be divided. Christ without the church is like a head without its body. Those who want Christ but reject the church need to think through their theology. The church was Christ's idea.

In Ephesians 5:25-27 Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." Christ loves the church with the same fervor that a husband loves his wife. When people criticize and slander the church, Jesus must feel the pain. How would you feel if people said ugly things about your family? Jesus thinks of every member of His church as His family.

Paul also reminds us that Jesus is "the head of the church" and "the Savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23). The church does not save; the church is the "saved." Christ is the Savior of the church. In Acts 2:47 we learn that the Lord adds the "saved" to His church. If you are saved at all, the Lord has added you to His church. If you are not in the church, then (Biblically speaking) you are not among the saved. You see, the church is not an optional thing that you can take or leave at your will. It is the Lord's called out body of people whom He has saved, whom He loves, and whom He purchased with His own blood.

It is for this reason that Paul said, "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11). People need to be careful with what the Lord has founded. You cannot substitute something else in its place. You cannot build your own spirituality, your own arrangement, or your own church and expect to please the Lord. Jesus the Lord said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted" (Matthew 15:13). Man-made religion doesn't work with God. Some think they can reinvent the church, but it may end up back-firing on them. The Lord's foundation is the only one.

Now, we ask, "What was the church like in the New Testament?" The word "church" refers to an assembly, a congregation, that was called together for a specific purpose. After Paul had established several congregations on his first missionary journey, he returned to those congregations, strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14:23 says, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Later, in Philippians 1:1 Paul wrote "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons."

These were organized churches with established leaders. They were visible congregations, meeting at set times and in set locations. Paul mentions many of the members of the church at Philippi or Rome or Corinth by name. Yes, sometimes churches met in some family's house. But in those days a large house could hold a congregation. In some cases, congregations met outside or in caves. You have to remember that the church was often persecuted and considered illegal. The earliest church buildings date about 250 AD. Although they could not openly show themselves, they were well organized.

When the church of the New Testament was faced with a problem, they brought it to the apostles and later to the elders of each congregation. They did not get mad and start their own churches with their own doctrines and their own ways. The Hebrew writer gave instructions to members of churches in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." God wants us to fulfill His plan and purpose for the church, not reinvent the church with our own ideas and designs.

David said about the temple in Psalm 122:1, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" We too ought to be glad when we meet today with the household of God, that is, the church. The church is God's temple today according to 1 Corinthians 3:16. I must tell you, that some of my most treasured moments have been spent with God's people worshiping and serving. My dearest friends are fellow members of the church. They have helped me and blessed me richly through the years. I look forward to being with my spiritual family at church each Lord's day. I am glad when they say, Let us go to church.

The notion that we can "be the church" but not be a part of any local congregation is a human idea. God's people assemble with one another. The Hebrew writer said, "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25). In the New Testament, when a Christian quit assembling with the church, he was falling away from God. He was leaving the faith. He was hurting himself and hurting the church by returning to the world.

An elder decided to visit a member of the congregation who had stopped going to church. He came to the door that cold evening and exchanged greetings with the member. The member knew why he was there, though not a word was spoken about his absence from the church. They sat quietly by the fireplace. At one point the elder approached the fireplace and pulled one of the burning coals away from the others and off to itself. For a while it still burned bright, but eventually that coal without the heat of others around it began to lose its luster. Much faster than normal, its flame went out. The member got the message: we need each other.

Solomon said, "Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). People in the church make each other stronger, better, and more faithful and committed. Each Christian needs the example of love and faith that his brothers and sisters give him. Each Christian needs to so live and so love that he provides an example of commitment to the cause of Christ. Saying, "I love Christ, but I won't go to church," sends a mixed signal. It says I love God, but I will choose which commands I will obey and which I will not. Such a person really is not obeying God but is obeying himself and his own wishes.

Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart." God knew that his people needed the strength and love that each one could give the other to grow and to remain strong in faith. Two are better than one, because they have each other.

Where would each of us be without good teachers and good examples? In the early church God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). God knew that His people needed training and equipping to do the work that He called them to do: to take the gospel to the world, to build up the church, and to render help to the needy.

Through the years, the church has been so good to Jackie and me. Over twenty years ago, when our four children were small, my lovely wife Jackie had to be in the hospital for several days with a back problem. We had no physical family within 500 miles. The church was our family. The church we attended in Senatobia, Mississippi, helped us with food and cleaned our house. An older lady, Mrs. Edwards, watched our children when we had to go to the doctor. The hardest year of our lives was made better by the goodness of people who loved and cared for us. We can never forget that we had loved ones who helped us when we needed it.

When Katrina destroyed much of Louisiana and Mississippi, churches all over middle Tennessee and Kentucky raised funds to

send to their brethren affected by the hurricane. I watched truck after truck loaded with supplies and food and water go to churches, where the needed items were distributed. No red tape, just brothers and sisters helping brothers and sisters. One church of 100 members in Gonzales, Louisiana, fed 300-500 people every day for weeks. Churches gave millions of dollars to relieve this disaster. They didn't get much publicity, but the people there knew where to go to get help. And they got it from God's people.

There is no greater honor, no greater blessing, no greater privilege, and no greater joy than to be a child of God. You can be one today, if you will. The Lord opens His heart and hands reaching for you with the gospel. If you will accept the gospel—that Jesus died for your sins, was buried and arose on the third day—by believing in Him, repenting of your sins, confessing His name before others, and by being baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins, then you too can be a child of God. You can be His child, an heir of eternal life. Won't you do that today?

Someone says, "Phil, you just don't understand. We had a bad experience at church and won't be going back." My friend, many times the problem is not with the whole church but with an individual who has not acted as he should. The Bible teaches that when a fellow Christian sins against you that you are to go to that person privately and talk to him, trying to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15). Many times people, rather than following the instructions of the Lord, simply quit and separate themselves from the godly people they need in their lives. Don't quit the church over some rude brother or sister. Talk to that person and work it out.

I became a Christian many years ago because of Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. I committed myself to Him. I want to go to heaven and live with Him forever. My pride is not as important as going to heaven. I'm not going to let anything or anyone come between my God and me. I will always have to deal with rude, selfish, and immature people; but if the Lord was gracious enough to forgive and put up with me with all my sin, I can be gracious enough to forgive and put up with those who sin only a little against me. I don't want to risk my soul, because I couldn't get along with a brother or sister in the church. I'd rather forgive and be forgiven than die lost.

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