

This article is meant for two groups of people. First, it will be helpful to those who believe that church membership is good and right, but who have never thought about the Scriptural foundation for it. Second, it ought to serve those who have doubts about joining a church: those who think it is unnecessary or even sinful.

What I want all who read this to do is come with a willingness to be molded by the word of God and do what it says without hesitation. Listen to the voice of the Great Shepherd in His holy word.

The format is this: a text of Scripture with a brief explanation, with the Scriptural texts in canonical order. There is also a brief summary at the end. May the Lord bless you as you ponder His word.

**Proverbs 18:1:** “He who separates himself seeks his own desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom.”

Why would someone desire to be separate from the body of Christ? Proverbs answers and says that it is because he seeks his own desire – he is selfish. He does not like wisdom. He does not want the wisdom that comes from being accountable to God’s people in His body.

**Matthew 12:30:** “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.”

If someone does not gather with Christ, this person is against Christ. How does this apply to going to church? At times in the New Testament, the church itself is identified with Christ. For example, when Jesus confronts Paul on the road to Damascus, what does He ask him? “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?” Paul was persecuting the church, but Jesus asks him why he was persecuting Christ Himself. Why would he do that? The church is the body of Christ and is so intimately related to Him that to persecute the church is to persecute Christ Himself. Just as the wife and the husband become one flesh and so to injure one is to injure both, so Christ and the church are united in such a way that to do something to one is to do something to the other. The New Living Translation translates the last phrase as, “Anyone who isn’t working with me is actually working against me.” If we are not gathered with the local church, it is not because we are too spiritual to be there or that we are neutral in regard to Christ. We are working against Him when we refuse to gather with the local body of believers. We hurt the witness of the gospel to this world when we neglect the body of Christ.

**Matthew 18:15-17:** “<sup>15</sup>If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Here is one of the main texts when talking about church discipline. If your brother or sister sins (not just against you, but sins in general and you find out

about it), then it is your responsibility as a brother or sister in Christ to show him his fault. This is done in private, so as to provide minimal embarrassment. If he repents, then praise God that you have won him back. You have done your duty to your brother. If, however, he refuses to repent, then it is your responsibility to tell one or two other trustworthy people and take them with you to confront this person. This is done so that the person may know that this is a serious thing and so that witnesses might confirm what has happened. If he repents, then your duty in this regard is done. If he persists in his sin, not repenting of it or showing any sign of repentance, then it becomes the responsibility of the whole church to confront him. How this is done is not specifically spelled out, but the idea is clear: if a brother or sister persists in sin even at the loving, faithful urging of others to repent, then it is the Christ-commanded duty of the church to confront them and, if necessary, kick them out of the fellowship. Note, however, that the goal is not to kick them out. The goal all along is there in v. 15: to win the wayward brother back. The whole process should be bathed in prayer and executed with utmost love and affection for the brother.

**Luke 4:16:** “And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.”

The God-given way of public worship while Jesus was on the earth was the Sabbath synagogue service. Jesus’ habit was to attend these. In light of this, the question to ask someone who does not attend church is: are you better than Jesus? The God-given way of public worship since the time of Jesus has been the church gathered on the Lord’s Day. Shall we say that what was good enough for Jesus is not up to our standard?

**Acts 5:13:** “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.”

The context of this verse is the story of Ananias and Sapphira, whom God struck down for lying. After they were struck down, the text says that “great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). The church continued its ministry in Jerusalem and no one else dared join them. What does this mean? The verb translated “join” here is used elsewhere of sexual relations (Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16) and even of the union of Christ and the church (1 Corinthians 6:17). The word does not just mean a loose association. Its most basic definition is “to glue, fasten together.” It is much more than simply an association; the picture is of two entities becoming one. In this passage, the meaning that comes across is that no one dared join the membership of the church – no one dared to fasten himself to this group. No one wanted the responsibility that came with becoming one with the church.

**Acts 20:28:** “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.”

A flock of sheep is not an indeterminate number of fluffy animals, at least not to their shepherd. The church is likened to a flock of sheep; the pastor is their shepherd. Just as an actual shepherd must know which sheep belong to his flock,

and just as an actual shepherd bears responsibility only for those sheep in his flock, so the pastor must know which people belong to the church, for his responsibility is for them and not all Christians. He oversees the local body of believers, a local body that is determined by membership. He is not responsible for every Christian within a five mile radius, but only those in his church.

**1 Corinthians 5:4-5:** “<sup>4</sup>When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup>you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

**1 Corinthians 5:11-13:** “<sup>11</sup>But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup>For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup>God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”

The context here is the disciplinary action that the church should take against the man who is sleeping with his father’s wife. Paul tells them that when they are gathered together they are to deliver the man to Satan, or, as he says a few verses later, to “remove the wicked man.” When who is gathered together? The local church. How would they know that they are gathered together if they did not have members? Also, from what are they removing him? It could refer to physically removing him from the building they were meeting in. Or, it could refer to removing him from the membership roster (or something like it). The basic idea is that they must take action against this man and his sin. They must show that they no longer have church relations with him. They do not condone how he lives his life. This may have meant removing him from the building in which they met, though not necessarily. I think it absolutely meant that they remove him from whatever form of membership roll they had. If they did not have membership rolls (or something like them), then how did they know who belonged to their fellowship? From what was the wicked man removed? When Paul says that they do not judge outsiders but are to judge insiders, we must ask, “Inside and outside of what?” The obvious answer is the church, but how would they know who was in and out unless there was some sort of membership system in place.

**1 Corinthians 12:27:** “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.”

**Ephesians 1:23-24:** “<sup>23</sup>And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, <sup>24</sup>which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

The church is likened to a body, which has definite bounds to it. My body is not the body of someone else, and vice versa. Christ has a body, which is the church. Note here that Paul is speaking to a particular church in a particular place at a particular time (as opposed to the universal church): yet he says that they are Christ’s body. Each particular church is Christ’s body, His definite, observable, definable body. If each church is His body, should we not expect that each church should be just as definable as a human body is? Also, if the church is Christ’s body, how we view the church and interact with the church has

tremendous implications for how we view and interact with Christ (see Matthew 12:30).

**1 Corinthians 14:23:** “Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?”

The phrase that I want to look at here is “the whole church assembles together.”

What does this mean? Does it mean the universal church? No; that would be impossible this side of heaven. It means a particular church (in this case, the Corinthian church). Paul is writing about when the whole Corinthian church is gathered together. How do they know when the whole church is gathered together? If there is no membership, if membership is not a requirement, what criteria do they use to determine when the whole church has gathered together? The underlying assumption is that there is a membership system at Corinth and they know that the whole church is gathered together when all the members show up. This also has implications for church attendance. Paul assumes that *all* the members of the church would be assembling regularly, not just some or most, but all, the whole church. How many churches can say that their whole church had assembled in the last year? Note that all of this is an assumption on Paul’s part. Church membership is never spelled out specifically in the New Testament (at least not in the sense that it is in many church’s constitutions). I think that the reason for this is because it was such a fundamental assumption that it was not necessary to write about. Much like the Trinity, church membership is never mentioned by name in the New Testament, but, also like the Trinity, all 27 books bear the unmistakable marks of it.

**Ephesians 2:19-21:** “<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.”

The metaphor that I want to focus on in this passage is in v. 21: the church as temple. The body of Christ is likened to a building, specifically a temple. A temple building is a definite structure: there are a certain number of bricks, a certain amount of mortar, a certain number of shingles, etc. When you see a temple, you know that it is a temple and not a grocery store. A particular church is definable like that as well. It has a certain number of people in it – a certain number of members. When you see a church roll, you know that that church is made up of x-number of people; and you can look at the roll and see who makes up that particular church. The point is this (which is similar to the points made about Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12:27; and Ephesians 1:23-24): just as a temple is definable, so is the church by its members. It is not a free association of whoever happens to be there on a given Sunday, just as a temple is not just a free association of whichever bricks are gathered on any given day.

**Ephesians 4:11-16:** “<sup>11</sup>And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; <sup>15</sup>but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

This is a beautiful picture of the church. In and among the church we grow and attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature. In and with the church we cease being children, tossed by the winds and waves of unbiblical doctrine. In, with, and to the church we speak the truth in love, growing up in all aspects to be like our glorious head, Christ. Look at the last sentence and take out the modifying clauses; it reads, “from whom [Christ] the whole body...causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” The whole body of Christ – the whole church – causes the growth of the body. In other words, the whole church participates in and can even be called a cause of the growth of individual believers (for how else can the church grow but by the growth of the individuals who make it up?). Stated negatively, an individual believer who is not intimately involved in the life of the church is, at the very, very least, gravely stunted in his spiritual growth because of his lack of involvement with the body of Christ. In fact, I cannot imagine (and the New Testament never presents) a growing, spiritually healthy Christian who is not actively involved in church life. According to the New Testament, there is simply no such thing.

**Hebrews 10:24-25:** “<sup>24</sup>and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>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.”

This is a key passage relating to church membership. As can be seen from the rest of the New Testament (especially the passage presented here), church membership (not just church attendance) is expected from all Christians. It is an underlying assumption in the New Testament church. Yet there were those who stopped going to church even in New Testament times. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes them (the participle used here has the force of a command, and is translated as a command in some translations) not to give up meeting with the church. The main idea of this passage consists of two positive commands: consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds and encourage one another. But the author must stress the negative command as well: not forsaking our own assembling together. You cannot fulfill the first two positive commands if you are not meeting regularly with the church. In not regularly attending church and being involved in church life, you not only break the command not to forsake assembling with the body of Christ, but you break the other two commands as well. Therefore, to forsake church going is itself a sin because it is breaking the command of God, but it involves the person doing it in other sins as well. Giving up going to church is not something to be taken lightly, as can be

seen in 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” These were people who had been involved in the church, but who left. John is bold enough to say that their continued lack of church involvement is an indication that they were never really saved to begin with. If they had truly been saved, John says, then they would have gladly continued in fellowship with us, the church. But because they were not truly of us (“not of us” is another way of saying “not a Christian”), they went out from us. His language is bold (bolder than I could be), but it is also unmistakable. Church membership, activity in the body of Christ, loving the brethren (see 1 John 3:14, where love of the brethren is an outward sign that one is saved) are serious matters, matters that the whole church should be concerned about. We should be concerned not because we prefer these things over other things. We should be concerned because the word of God is plain about them. We have commands from God that are not to be trifled with. We should be concerned because we love our neighbors as ourselves. If we truly love them, then we will want what is best for them, which is to grow in Christ, which can take place, according to the New Testament, only in the incubator of faith, the church. We should be concerned because Paul says that the church is a peculiar place where God displays His glory. We should be very much concerned that the glory of God shines as brightly as possible there. And we know that God’s glory shines brightest where His commands are gladly obeyed.

**Hebrews 13:17:** “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

Just to close out, we have this important text from Hebrews. The leaders of a church have a responsibility to guide the church into righteousness. They will have to give an account to God for how they have governed. They keep watch over the souls of the flock as a shepherd does the sheep of his. For what are they keeping watch? They are watching to see that none of their flock falls into temptation and sin. They do not because they want to control everything, but because it is the burden that God has called them to bear. They do it because they love their people and do not want them to go astray. Biblical church discipline is done in love and for the glory of God. It is nothing more and nothing less than a way of fulfilling the two greatest commandments. It shows love for God in pursuing His holiness and purity and fulfilling His commands. It shows love for neighbor in seeking what is spiritually best for them. It seeks for the one who is disciplined to be restored to God, to enjoy once again the fruit of fellowship with Him.

What is church membership?

Church membership is that wonderful privilege of formally joining together with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ, pledging together to love and serve Jesus and one another. It is not merely being on a membership roll. It is not the sure ticket to heaven (the book of life is not merely a compilation of the rolls of every church in the world). It

is a commitment to the welfare of a specific group of believers gathering at a specific place at a specific moment in history.

In many ways, church membership is like marriage. Can someone have a relationship with another person, yet never marry them? Certainly. People do it all the time. In fact, marriage-less, long-term relationships are becoming the norm among non-Christians. But is that what God would desire for them? No. God desires that two people make a formal commitment to each other for the mutual benefit.

Imagine this relationship: a man and woman have been dating for a couple of years. The woman finally broaches the subject of marriage; the man's response consists of "Don't try to change me" (or something insipid like that) interrupted by several "uhs" and "umms".

Is that healthy? Is that good? The man could say that they already enjoy everything a married couple enjoys, so why add to that?

So it is with church membership. A person can have a relationship with a church for years, without ever making a formal commitment to those people. Many people are like the man in our hypothetical relationship: he does not want the commitment that comes with formality. Without putting down real roots in a place, it is always possible (and easy) to pick up and leave, just like it is so easy to end a dating relationship.

Jesus calls us to radical commitment to Him and to each other. Let us not allow the ever-present, all-pervasive individualism of our culture infect us to such an extent that we miss that blessing of our Lord.