



Why Join a Church?

A message from the
ORTHODOX
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BY MARK BROWN AND LARRY WILSON

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Alice was livid! This was the first time she had visited this church. “The last time too,” she thought. The church had celebrated the Lord’s Supper. “I’ve been a Christian for four years and the pastor had the gall to tell me to stay away from Communion,” Alice fumed. “Well, he didn’t exactly say that. What he did do was ask those who are not right with God *or his church* to take steps to get right before coming to the Lord’s Table. He included *me* just because I’m not a church member. How dare he! What a pharisee!”

It’s not uncommon in our day for sincere followers of Christ—like Alice—to view joining a church as an option. And given the other options—Christian books, recordings, videos, radio broadcasts, TV broadcasts, Internet resources, parachurch groups, etc.—joining the church is sometimes high, sometimes low, on the list—if it’s even on the list! Many (like Alice) get upset if they visit a church that asks people not to take the Lord’s Supper until they are members of a local church. Many (like Alice) have never regarded committing to a congregation to be all that important—or all that agreeable. It’s usually a great shock to them when they are told that, historically, Christians have regarded joining a church as essential, not optional.

Is this historic Christian conviction arbitrary? Is it pharisaical legalism? Does God’s Word have anything to say about this question of church membership? We think it says plenty. In fact, God’s Word sets forth at least *ten reasons* why every professing Christian ought to join a local church. Let’s consider them.

Our Lord Jesus Christ commands church membership

First, our Lord Jesus Christ commands his followers to join a church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells his disciples, “I will build my church.” He pictures the church as the temple of the new covenant,

and those who confess that “Jesus is Lord” are the building blocks in this new temple (Matt. 16:16; 1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:19–22).

In Matthew 28:19–20, our Lord Jesus confirms and expands his earlier statement by commanding his followers to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. Fulfilling this Great Commission entails bringing converts into church membership. Why do we say that? Because part of the Great Commission is a command to *baptize*. Now, Holy Spirit baptism adds us to the invisible church (1 Cor. 12:13). But we are not to keep our salvation invisible. We are to outwardly express it (Rom. 10:9–10). Water baptism outwardly and visibly symbolizes this invisible reality.

Acts 2:41 tells how the apostolic church implemented this principle: “So those who received his word *were baptized*, and there *were added* that day about three thousand souls.” According to the New Testament, to be “baptized” is to be “added.” Added to what? Acts 2:47 gives the answer: they were “added to their number,” that is, to the visible “church” (κῆν). Evidently, the apostles kept track of those who were baptized and could count them.

Christ *commands* us to be baptized. By commanding us to be baptized, Christ therefore commands us to be added to the church. In other words, he commands us to join a church. He wants our relationship to him to be honest and observable (Matt. 10:32). He also wants it to be corporate (Heb. 10:24–25).

The Old Testament teaches church membership

Second, the Old Testament teaches that believers should join a church. In the Old Testament, being an Israelite was not principally a matter of race or nationality. Rather, an Israelite was a person who belonged to God’s covenant community. God commanded circumcision as a sign of that relationship, as a token of union with him and membership in his covenant community, Israel (Gen. 17:7, 10–11). The New Testament identifies this old covenant community, when Moses brought it out of Egypt, as “the congregation [church] in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38).

If you were an alien, you had to receive circumcision to become a member of Israel before you could celebrate the Passover (Ex. 12:43–45, 48). In other words, you had to “join the church” before you could come to the Passover meal. If you were not circumcised, regardless of your background or faith, you were to be excommunicated from the people of God (Gen. 17:14).

Can you see the parallel with the New Testament? Baptism is New Testament circumcision (Col. 2:11–12). It marks your addition to the new covenant community, the church (Gal. 3:27, 29; 6:15–16; Phil. 3:3). The Lord’s Supper is the new covenant Passover (Luke 22:7–8, 14–15, 20; 1 Cor. 5:7). Just as a person had to be circumcised to become a member of Israel before he could celebrate the Passover, so a person now has to be baptized to become a member of the church before he can take the Lord’s Supper. This is precisely the pattern which the apostles followed. Those who “were baptized” and “were added” to the church roll were the ones who participated in “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:41–42, 47).

The New Testament presupposes church membership

Third, the New Testament assumes that every convert joins the church. In the New Testament, conversion implies being added to a visible, local church (Acts 2:41, 47; 14:21–23). In New Testament times, it was unthinkable that a person might embrace Christ and then decide not to join Christ’s church. In fact, the concept of joining the church was so deeply ingrained that *those who were not church members were regarded as non-Christians* (Matt. 18:17). Biblical Christianity is always intensely personal, but it is never private or individualistic.

In this light, consider how strongly the New Testament emphasizes the *corporate* or *group* character of Christianity. For example, the New Testament speaks of believers as *together* forming the body of Christ, the household of faith, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of saints, the holy nation, the people of God, the family of God, etc. In apostolic times, every convert was expected

to join a local church, if at all possible.

Salvation involves church membership

Fourth, salvation involves joining the church. In the Bible, coming to Christ and coming to his church are closely linked. Today people often view them as two different things—they trust Christ in an evangelistic meeting, and then they think about whether or not to join a church. Sometimes they never join a church. But in God’s Word, coming to Christ and coming to his church are closely related. *Inwardly* you turn to God and cry out for him to save you through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. *Outwardly* you identify yourself as belonging to Christ by professing your faith before the church and continuing in worship, learning, and witness with that assembly (Rom. 10:9–10; Matt. 10:32; Acts 2:41–42; Heb. 10:25). In the Bible, to belong to Christ is to belong to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13, 27; Rom. 12:5; Eph. 5:29–30). Biblically, Christians serve Christ, not in independent isolation, but as living members of his body.

The Bible’s prescriptions for church order imply church membership

Fifth, the Bible’s many prescriptions for church order imply that God expects believers to join local, organized congregations. God sets admission requirements (Acts 2:47). He provides for expelling someone from the church (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4–5). He ordains that there be leaders (or officers) like pastors, elders, and deacons (Eph. 4:11–12; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1–13). This assumes that Christians will join churches, for how can you have officers without members to elect and follow them? Where would pastors, elders, and deacons come from? What would they be for?

The seven letters of Revelation 2–3 were written to seven churches. First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus are called “the Pastoral Epistles” because they were written to pastors of churches. In 1 Timothy, after giving instructions for prayer in public worship (2:1–8), for women in public worship (2:9–15), and for qualifications

for elders and deacons (3:1–13), the apostle Paul explains, “I am writing these things to you so that ... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is *the church* of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (3:14–15). You see, the Bible’s many prescriptions for church order imply that God expects believers to join local, organized churches.

Many biblical commands imply church membership

Sixth, there is even more in the Bible that you are unable to obey unless you join a church. Christ commands, as well as invites, his followers to *celebrate the Lord’s Supper* (Luke 22:19). But he opens the Lord’s Table only to those who are baptized members of his church (see “The Old Testament teaches church membership,” above).

God commands Christians to *love the brethren* and to serve them (Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 2:17; 1 John 3:14). But who are the brethren? Those who visit a church service once? Twice? Repeatedly? Are the brethren those who claim to be fellow believers? The Bible warns that such claims may be false. How can believers regard others as fellow believers unless they are objectively identified and held accountable as such by being received into a congregation of Christ’s church?

There is a spirit of individual autonomy prevalent today; it despises authority. This is nothing new (2 Pet. 2:10). But God commands his redeemed children to “respect those who ... are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12) and to “obey those who rule over you” (Heb. 13:17 NKJV). But how can you do that unless you have joined the church over which they are overseers? How can you “respect” and “obey” your spiritual leaders unless you have such leaders by being a member of a church?

We could give many more examples, but these should be enough to show that there are many biblical commands which believers cannot obey unless they join a church. Accordingly, if you refuse to join a church of Jesus Christ, you are failing to obey the Lord, and that is sinful.

The pastoral care of Christ's sheep necessitates church membership

Seventh, the care of Christ's sheep is impossible without church membership. God instructs the elders to exercise pastoral care and oversight, to shepherd his flock. The flock which God has placed under their care is the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). The elders are to focus their attention on those who have joined the church in which God has made them overseers (1 Cor. 5:12). But visitors to the church—even regular attendees—are not under the jurisdiction of the elders. Unless they join the church, how can they be adequately shepherded? Moreover, the Good Shepherd knows his sheep by name and is known by them (John 10:3-4, 14). Do not his undershepherds need to do likewise (1 Pet. 5:1-4)? How can they shepherd the flock unless they know who belongs to it?

In Matthew 18:15-18, our Lord Jesus teaches his disciples how to deal with sin and conflict in the body of Christ. If a professing Christian is sinning and persists in stubborn impenitence, the church is to excommunicate him and to regard him as a nonbeliever (see also 1 Cor. 5). If he repents, he is to be restored (2 Cor. 2:5-11). Such rescue and restoration is an important goal of church discipline (Gal. 6:1). But how can the church do these things unless there is an objective distinction between those who are “inside” and those who are “outside” (1 Cor. 5:12-13)? It is impossible to obey our Lord's instructions on pastoral oversight and church discipline unless Christians become church members.

Practical church life involves church membership

Eighth, without objective church membership, there are many practical matters to which the church cannot properly attend. God commands, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40 NKJV). Churches have to call pastors, elect elders and deacons, adopt budgets, buy property, build worship facilities, etc. They have very important decisions to make. But without objective membership, how is it possible to decide “decently and in order” who has the privilege of voting on these matters?

Biblical evangelism requires church membership

Ninth, biblical evangelism is impossible without church membership. Much of today's evangelism stresses *getting decisions*. But our Lord Jesus Christ commands *making disciples*. The scriptural goal of evangelism is not to obtain professed decisions; it is to enlist people into the privileges and responsibilities of following Christ. Evangelism is not complete until converts are enrolled in the school of Christ and enfolded into the visible family of believers (Matt. 28:19–20; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:41, 47).

God's love cries out for church membership

Tenth and finally, God's great love for the church beckons believers to become an integral part of it. The Bible repeatedly stresses how important the church is to the living God. The *church* was on his heart in his work of creation (Eph. 3:9–11). The *church* was on his heart in his work of salvation (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 5:25). Christ has promised the blessing of his special presence to the *church* (Heb. 2:12; Matt. 18:20). If the church is so important to the Lord, shouldn't it be important to everyone who loves the Lord? How can you love the Lord and at the same time steer clear of that which the Lord loves? Doesn't this imply that every believer should openly identify with Christ's church?

We invite you

You've read ten reasons from God's Word why every professing Christian ought to join a local church. Please ponder them prayerfully. We hope that you will conclude that you should join a local church. But which local church should you join?

We invite you to make *this* congregation your church home. We offer a class for inquirers that can help you to find out who we are, what we believe and teach, and what we do. Perhaps taking that class can help you to decide whether or not to join this particular church. Taking it may also help you find biblical answers to some long-unanswered questions. Please feel free simply to ask our pastor about

this class. He'll be happy to give you more information.

Please join in membership with us and openly confess before men that by God's grace you are a living member of the body of Christ—the church.

HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THIS CHURCH

We invite you to prayerfully consider making this church your church home. Here are three different ways that people may do so:

- I. **By Profession of Faith in Christ.** If you have never publicly professed your faith, or if you are not a member of any local church, and you now know Jesus as your Savior, you may become a member of this church by professing your faith in him.
 - **Take the Inquirers' Class.**
 - **Interview with the Pastor and Elders.** This is a time to get acquainted, a time to ask any questions you might still have about this church, and a time to satisfy the men whom the Holy Spirit has appointed to oversee the church that you can sincerely answer the membership questions affirmatively.
 - **Publicly profess your faith in Christ** in a worship service by affirmatively answering the following membership questions:
 1. *Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?*
 2. *Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?*
 3. *Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?*

4. *Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?*

5. *Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?*

- **Receive baptism.** If you have never been baptized, then you must receive this visible sign of engrafting into Christ and his body, the church, at the time that you are received into church membership.

2. **By Reaffirmation of Faith in Christ.** If you have already confessed your faith in Christ in a church whose doctrine and practice differ from this church's, you may join this church by reaffirming your faith. This involves following a procedure similar to that of professing faith in Christ.

3. **By Transfer of Membership.** If you are a member in good standing in "a church of like faith and practice"—a church with which we have formal ecclesiastical fellowship—you should ask for a letter of transfer from your home congregation, and that church will transfer your membership directly to this church. The elders will receive your membership after you meet with them. After that, you will be publicly welcomed at a worship service.

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