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# SHOULD I JOIN A CHURCH?

The Bible teaches that the church is the company of those who are committed to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The Master said **"Upon this rock I will build my church"** and the foundation to which He referred was expressed in the glorious testimony of Peter **"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" [Matthew 16.16]** This passage indicates that the church is made up of those who make confession of faith that Christ is the Son of God and pledge themselves to Him.

It follows that those who belong to the church will seek to obey Christ's teaching and live to His glory. The New Testament teaches that we cannot do this alone, it is a corporate responsibility. On the day of Pentecost the church was formed, and the early chapters of the Acts reveal clearly that it was essentially 'a fellowship'. Those converted from sin unto God should seek to serve the Lord in daily living individually and together.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

As the Gospel was carried into regions afar, worshipping groups were formed into local churches according to a biblical pattern. Thus we discover a church in Antioch, a church in Ephesus, a church in Corinth and so on. These churches differed in their needs and in their problems. Some were strong spiritually, others weak, but the one outstanding feature of them all was that they were made up of those who were committed to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. All were conscious of their relationship with Christians everywhere but recognized a local assembly to which each was responsible.

Churches are glad to welcome within their influence those who are seeking to discover the truth of the Gospel, and one of the chief aims of a local church is to bring together those who will search the Scriptures in order to be made wise unto salvation. [2 Timothy 3.15]. Communicant membership of the church, however, is possible only for those who do confess Christ as Lord.

## MUST I JOIN ?

Belonging to a particular church is vital to the Christian. In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as **'the Lord adding to the church' [Acts 2.47]** There was no spiritual drifting. Those who came to know Christ were committed at once to the local church where they were instructed and shepherded and where they submitted to the teaching and direction of those whom God appointed for their good **[Ephesians 4.11-12]**.

It is not enough for folk to profess to be saved and then to 'pop in' where they please Sunday by Sunday, or worse, only when the fancy takes them. Spurgeon used to call people like this **'birds of passage which nest nowhere'** as drifting

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arises from a misunderstanding of the Christian life. Men are saved out of the world and into the church to serve Christ not singly but as part of the body over which He is head. Many of the duties of the church can only be honoured when the people of God work together, and the discipline of the church is impossible when individuals decline to join.

### **THE FAMILY DISCIPLINE**

Pastors and officers are not appointed to domineer but they are called by God to lead and can only do this effectively if the folk respect that calling. Hebrews 13.17 says **“Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves; for they your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”** Useless to complain that the work is not progressing if you are absent half the time or if your giving is less than reasonable. To refuse to follow the lead of those whom God has appointed to guide the work is to nurture anarchy and speedy decline. Church officers have a difficult task; they make prayerful decisions with care to arrange things to conform to Scriptural principles and for the edification of the people; their supreme motive will be the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Respect their decisions even if you have certain preferences that are not theirs. Accept the local arrangements, giving credit for spiritual integrity, and remember that every church is far from perfect.

Scripture teaches very clearly that there are offices of pastor, elders and deacons in the church and that these have the responsibility of rule over the membership. The minister has probably spent years in specialized training; this does not make him faultless but it does give him an added claim to be heeded, particularly by those who profess to believe that Christ has called him into the pastoral office. The elders are appointed by the church membership, not as a board of management but as those who have leadership in the work of God bearing the Holy Spirit's commission, and this authority must be recognized.

There is a sad stress on 'democracy' these days. In the New Testament times folk recognize that Christ is the head of the church. Today we acknowledge this with our lips but so often behave as though men are in charge. The Lord Jesus Christ has shown us in His Word what the church should be and that in matters of conduct there are biblical principles to be observed. He has commissioned leaders to shepherd the flock and these are to be heeded for the office they hold. Pastors and deacons have been appointed by God and endued with ability for office, therefore their lead should be followed unless there is a clear infringement of a biblical principle. Obedience to the Word of God, not a majority vote, is the required standard.

### **WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES ?**

Membership in a church carries responsibility. Perhaps this is why some people are content with the unscriptural position of attending services week by week without joining. In some churches the only thing to be gained by membership is responsibility! But this is surely a privilege to be embraced.

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There is the duty of attendance. The church meets on Sunday and ought to be a complete family gathering. If you are there the church is enriched, if you are absent the church is the poorer; every absentee is missed every time! Scripture refers to the church universal as the body of Christ [**1 Corinthians 12**] the metaphor holds equally well for the local expression of the church. Without each member the church cannot function fully, the ministry of the whole is weakened. This lays upon each of us the responsibility to be in our place consistently each Sunday. The midweek prayer meeting and Bible study also deserve our loyalty. There are areas of the world where Christians would highly prize these opportunities for growth and fellowship which we often treat so lightly.

We live in an age when the church is not seen for what God intended it should be. Too often we have the idea of a preaching centre with a man giving a sermon and the congregation coming in to listen and going out again with perhaps a word of praise or criticism of the message. This is not the New Testament church. The church as Scripture describes it is an assembly where each plays a unique part and the element of co-operation together is vital. There are ministries divided amongst the members that can only be exercised by them and are for the benefit of all. The Christians used a word for this; that word is '**fellowship**' It is the expression of the love of Christ that links us together, and we are to love others as He loved us - in spite of individual faults [**Romans 5.8, John 15.12**] We are to contribute the one to the other in terms of understanding and warmth, overcoming personal likes and prejudices; this takes grace to practice. We tend to uphold the idea that the love of the church can be expressed by the man paid to show it. The pastor is there to visit the sick! The minister must knock on the doors in the district that folk may come! This is a travesty of the biblical teaching on the church.

Evangelism can only be properly accomplished by all working in fellowship. The church can only live according to the Divine design by expressing this depth of fellowship together. This lays a duty on each individual to bring whatever abilities he possesses to the life of the whole church. All are needed if the work is really to glorify the Lord.

There is an obligation to give for the work of the local church. The pastor has to be paid, not only that he might live but that he might live in such a way that he is worry-free and able to do his task efficiently. Modern standards and social conditions make increasing demands upon a pastor and his wife. Their home must be a testimony, they must be '**given to hospitality**' and such things as books are as necessary to a minister as instruments are to a doctor. Further, the good preservation of buildings must be seen to, decorating, heating, lighting and other facilities provided; and there must be provision for the support of missionaries and aid for evangelistic and teaching works which are over and above the usual Sunday services. Money is also needed for the expression of Christian love to the sick, the lonely and the needy [there are still many such].

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God has given much clear teaching in Scripture concerning our giving. It should be private. It should be proportionate to our income [may we recommend the biblical minimum of a tithe?]. It should be cheerful because it is an expression of the love we have for the Saviour. If every Christian gave in a realistic way the work of God would be more than adequately financed without worry.

Belonging to a local church demands loyalty. Some ministers are distressed because a large proportion of their congregations drift in and out, careless of their influence upon the church as a whole. We agree that there is nothing sacred about 11.30 a.m. and 7 p.m. but there is a scriptural basis for the keeping of the Lord's Day and the use of its hours for worship and service in separation from the secular pursuits that may be quite legitimate on a weekday. Your church will provide a suitable balance of teaching throughout the day. There will be devotion and evangelism with opportunities of service.

Be loyal to the arrangements at your local church in three ways. Attend the services week by week. Make it a general rule never to be absent from the church to which you belong, for the local church depends upon your presence at each service. This means that you will be loyal enough to resist tempting invitations to forsake your own church to visit another where there is a 'special' weekend with an 'attractive' speaker. If you are free from your own church activities on a weeknight to support a gathering in another church of like mind, that is a different matter, but on Sunday you are pledged to be where God has placed you. It is in this church that you will be systematically taught, and the pastor will seek to mount the pulpit steps with a message prepared with the needs of all his members in mind. It is divisive and disturbing to find that members drift hither and thither drinking in doctrines of every description. It may be valuable to gather with people from other churches from time to time for conventions and special services, but allow your church officers to guide your associations in these matters. There is nothing that will do more damage in a local fellowship than the formation of small cliques pushing a particular view and interpretation. Membership includes loyalty to the testimony of the church to which you belong: many doctrinal deviations might be avoided if this were kept in mind.

Lastly, remember that Christ through His church has the highest claim upon you. Scripture reminds us that **'He that loveth father and mother more than me worthy of me'**The outworking of this will affect many things. For instance, it is necessary that families should gather together but not at the expense of the work of the church of God. Warmly welcome visitors for tea on Sunday but bring them to church afterwards, provided they are not committed to another church. Visit your friends, on the understanding that for the honour of the Lord's name you have an appointment in the house of God on Sunday evening. God says **'Them that honour me, I will honour'** [1 Samuel 2.30].