



Join or Die?:

Addressing the Question of Church Membership

In 1754 Benjamin Franklin published a cartoon called "Join or Die." It pictured a snake cut into eights representing the British colonies in the New World. Franklin argued that unless the colonies formed one body they would never be able to resist the powerful threat of the French and their Indian allies.

Considering the fierce enemies assaulting believers in every age (1 Pet. 5:8; John 15:19; Gal. 5:19) Franklin's plea speaks similarly to one of the most basic questions every believer has to answer: *"What is the relationship between the Christian and the church?"*

Increasingly, more people see less of a connection between the two. Sixty percent of Americans who never attend church during the course of a year view themselves as Christians.¹

But a sincere perusal of Scripture helps us to see that the relationship between the Christian and the church is much more significant than we might realize. In fact, contrary to the practice of most Americans God not only calls believers to attend church but to bind themselves to a local, Bible-believing congregation in a visible and vital way.

The Question of Attending Church

This question is answered definitively in Hebrews 10:25. *"Let us not ... (forsake) the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but (exhort) one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."* This verse requires *more* than regularly attending worship services, but it doesn't require *less*. Believers go to church. The writer says that church attendance is more important today than it was yesterday!

Both Catholics and historic Protestants have maintained that outside of the church there is no salvation. While allowing for exceptions, as a rule the only place God promises to save is in the church (Matt. 16:18-19). No one may claim to be united to the head of the church who disregards the body.

Believers understand that salvation is never merely a personal experience. The fall brought individualism; Adam and Eve hid from God and from each other (Gen. 3:7-8). God sought them out to become his worshiping people. Redemption creates a new community. The Bible speaks to God's people in the plural: *"Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker"* (Psa. 95:6). Believers, unlike unbelievers, cannot suppress their innate need to worship, along with other redeemed sinners, their Creator (Rom. 1:18).

The question of church attendance has never been a difficult one for true Christians. At almost no point in the history of God's people would someone who neglected corporate worship be regarded as a Christian. The more knotty question is, "Must I join a church? Must I pledge to meaningfully belong to a local congregation until for weighty and justifiable reasons I am called elsewhere?"

Necessity of Joining the Church

The difference between attending and joining a church is analogous to the difference between dating and marriage. The Bible clearly steers us toward the latter.

The Old Testament Assumes Membership

If the church is the covenant community of God, those who walked with God during the time spanning from Adam to Pentecost were church members with us. From the time of Moses to Pentecost, the visible church was coterminous with the nation of Israel. Outsiders entered that community through membership rites. They could not simply say, "I read Torah, go to temple, and tithe, so I'm part of the people of God."

Consider Passover: *"No foreigner shall eat it ... All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land"* (Ex. 12:43,48). Thank God that he has made it easier to join the church! But the principle of initiation into a visible community (through baptism and membership vows) remains.

Church Analogies Symbolize Membership

The members of the church are called living stones (1 Pet. 2:5) which are vitally connected together. The church is called a body (1 Cor. 12) which cannot be constituted only occasionally. The church is the family of God (Eph. 3:15), an image that assumes cohesiveness and commitment. The church is called the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2-3). A flock is not an abstract concept. Jesus says the flock can be numbered (Matt. 18:12).

Pastoral Care Requires Membership

Elders are responsible for the souls under their care (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17); believers must submit to the oversight of their shepherds. *"We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work"* (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Such a reciprocal relationship of oversight and submission requires more than church attendance. It calls for a membership commitment.

The Great Commission clearly points to church membership (Matt. 28:18-20). Baptism, discipling and teaching are all to be done in the context of a visible church with an ordained leader and a duly constituted church body. For this reason, the historic church practiced membership and developed The Apostles' Creed as a rule for church membership.

Church Discipline Requires Membership

Church discipline is a gift that God gives to the church for the maturity of her members and the purity of her body. Matthew 18 requires that those who refuse to submit to church discipline are to be treated as unbelievers, that is, those who are outside of God's community of grace.

Although often misused, church discipline was practiced in the synagogue. In the case of the blind boy whom Jesus healed, his parents feared the Jews, for they *"had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of (or excommunicated from) the synagogue"* (John 9:22). Excommunication assumes communication, a word that implies intimate participation.

Sanctification is Connected to Membership

Sanctification takes place in the context of union with Christ and other believers (Heb. 2:11-12). If you want to grow in grace commit yourself to a Christian community whose members will sometimes disappoint you. Attendees often scatter when problems arise; members stick out church problems and grow. Those who never join a church rarely learn to submit to Christ. To join a church is to bend your neck under the yoke of Christ. This yoke is not heavy or burdensome but it is a yoke (Matt. 11:28-30).

Your loved ones also benefit from your church membership. There may be valid reasons why some of us have a long list of churches we have attended. But long-term membership in a church communicates to those around us the kind of commitment that is rare today.

Expressions of Living in the Church

Prioritize Worship (Heb. 10:25)

Corporate worship should never be reduced to a duty. But unless we know our duties we may never learn to delight in them. Some of us skip worship more often than work. Some of us wouldn't miss an episode of American Idol, but aren't bothered by missing worship. Some of us may be altering our future family tree by attending worship with less frequency than our parents did. We need to learn to say "no" to things that conflict with corporate worship.

Prioritizing worship also means coming to meet with God first, not our friends. Suppose all your church friends moved away and were replaced by an entirely different but orthodox congregation. Whether you would maintain your membership or not depends on your priorities.

Maintain the Unity of the Church

Cultivate your deepest friendships among God's people. While Scripture requires us to separate from the schemes of wicked men (2 Cor. 6:17; (Is. 52:11-12) we cannot shun unbelievers but must love even our enemies (Matt. 5:44). But our primary commitment is to God's family. Such commitment will also encourage us to handle disagreements with care and keep us from unwarranted division.

Give and Receive Instruction and Discipline

If we want to know God's will for us the most important thing we can do is go to church. Believers welcome the preached word "*not as the word of men but as is in truth, the word of God.*" Those who attend carefully to the preaching find that it "*effectively works in them*" (1 Thess. 2:13). It also works through them. Living in the church means edifying your brothers and sisters through your time, talents, and resources (Rom. 12:4-8).

Church membership is a gift and a duty. It's sort of like making your children eat their desert. Christ saves and sanctifies sinners in the church. Where else would we want to be?

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¹ Accessed on July 30, 2012 from <http://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/45-new-statistics-on-church-attendance-and-avoidance?q=church+attendance>