

## **“MUST I BE A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH TO BE SAVED?”**

This can be an emotionally charged question, and the answer is often misunderstood. Many times, people who ask this question are trying to justify living a Christian life apart from any attachment to a local church. The idea became popular several years ago that salvation is only about a personal relationship with Jesus, and involvement in the church, while perhaps a good thing, is not necessary to be saved. It has nothing to do with salvation. At least, that's what we're told. There are millions of people who will tell you that they are spiritual, but not religious. And in some cases, what they mean is that they believe in God, perhaps even in Jesus, they might pray. But they don't openly practice any particular religion by assembling with a church for worship. But, is it possible to love God, to serve the Lord Jesus, and live your life by the teachings of God's Word, and not be an active part of the church? It doesn't matter what you or I think. What matters is what God's book says.

**Ephesians 5:30-32 “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”**

You know, whatever the church is, Paul says that it is *one* with Christ Jesus. So, what is the church? What does it mean to be a part of it? And must I be numbered among it in order to be saved?

As I stated earlier, the question under consideration today is a relatively recent question. Despite the unfortunate misunderstandings and consequent divisions in religion today that have turned a lot of people off to Christianity, the fact is that until the last several decades, people who wanted to practice Christianity tried to do so within the scope of a local church. But the idea has been gaining steam that church membership is superfluous. Some even believe that it's a mark of disingenuous or even hypocrisy. I think that notion has arisen from the unfortunate scandals and abuses of Christianity that have been so visibly publicized in recent years and people have a distaste for what they think of as 'organized religion.' Sometimes people see hypocrites in the church and they say, Well, I'm better than that and I'm not part of a church; I have a personal relationship with God and I don't need the church.

We've also seen a rise of televangelism in the last half century. These independent ministries have muddied the water and confused people about the church and their relationship to it. There are people who think that they are a member of a television church somewhere. The problem is compounded by the fact that many don't understand *what* the church is. They don't understand its purpose in the world.

You may think that being a member of the church simply means “going to church.” Actually, that phrase isn't technically correct. It's a little misleading. Now, we can speak of the church assembled, in a literal assembly, and I guess in that sense, loosely, we could talk about “going to church,” if you mean going to the assembly of the church. But really, a Christian can't “go to church.” The church isn't a building; the church is the people who make it up. A person assembles with the church, but really he doesn't “go to church.” We use phrases like that because we have lost sight of what the church is.

Many also misunderstand what it is to be a member of the church. Did you know that the Bible never speaks of people “joining” the church? We hear that phrase all of the time, but the Bible never uses it. The scriptures don’t ever talk about having your name written on some type of church roll, yet people use terms and concepts like this because they don’t have a true understanding of the church.

Sometimes people misunderstand the question itself. Someone may think you’re asking, Will I be saved *because* I’m a member of the church, implying that Christians believe that simply because men look at them as having some association with the church, or having their name written on a church roll, or attending worship assemblies, by virtue and merit of that fact, that they are saved. But that is not the question. It’s not, Will I be saved because, in the eyes of men, I’m a member of the church? That is putting the cart before the horse, and it is also misunderstanding church membership is. The question is: Will I be saved if I am NOT a part of the church? Are people out here who are not a part of the Lord’s church going to heaven? Are they saved in Christ Jesus? Those two questions are entirely different.

To explain that, let’s look at what happened when the church was established. We know that Christ has a church. In other words, men didn’t come along and think up the concept of a church out of thin air.

**Matthew 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”**

So, Christ has a church. But what was He talking about? Constructing some type of building, like the temple stood amongst the Jewish people for so many centuries? An ornate cathedral? Was that what He meant when He said, “*I will build My church?*”

**Acts 2** is where Christ fulfilled His promise and His church was established. We don’t read anything about the building of an edifice. It was something entirely different. Peter preached Jesus to the lost multitude there on the day of Pentecost. Those people were convicted of their sins and they wanted to be saved.

**Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”**

Now look closely at verse 41.

**Acts 2:41 “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”**

Well, what were they added *to*? Look at verse 47.

**Acts 2:47 “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”**

You know, this verse can clear up a lot of confusion, and it answers a lot of questions. What is the church? It is not a building, because the Bible says that people are *added* to it. It’s obviously not talking about these people being moved inside a literal building. Verse 41 tells us that “*about three thousand souls*

*were added unto them.*” So the church is made up of *them*. Who are they? The number already in Christ on the day of Pentecost, including the apostles, those who were already saved. And those from that day forward who were being saved in obedience to the gospel were added unto them, “*to the church*” (verse 47).

The second thing we need to see is that God does the adding—not men. That tells me that the church is a divinely appointed institution—not a human one. There are many groups that have bylaws that say that a person has to be voted into the church or accepted into the church. Friend, the church in Acts 2 didn’t have any bylaws aside from the gospel that was preached by the apostles. And men were added by God to that church when they were saved. I cannot overstate how significant and important that is! Nobody voted them in. They were simply made a part of it by virtue of their faith in Christ and their obedience to the gospel.

Thirdly, the Bible doesn’t make any distinction between the time a person is saved and the time they become part of the Lord’s church. Unfortunately, preachers today plead for people to be saved and then they encourage them to “join the church.” But that’s not what the Bible teaches. In fact, the Bible never gives one single indication that anybody was ever saved and then encouraged to go join the church. Rather, the Bible clearly shows that a person is added to the church by God when they ARE saved. There’s not one bit of difference between those two things. Being added to the church equals being saved.

When you divorce yourself from all of the unscriptural notions that most people have about the church, and you see it through the lens of the New Testament, it becomes a lot clearer. The people who were baptized on the day of Pentecost didn’t come out of the water, dry off and ask Peter, “Do I need to join a church?” or “What church am I now a member of?” You see, there was only ONE church: the one that Christ established, that He died for, that He purchased with His blood.

**Acts 20:28 “...to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”**

Those people understood, when they understood the gospel, that when they obeyed the gospel and were thus saved, that they were becoming a part of the Lord’s church. God counted them as members of Christ’s body by virtue of their salvation, and that was that. There was no other process to it. They were added to the church upon their having been saved.

By the way, what does the word ‘church’ mean? It actually comes from a Greek word *ecclesia*, which means *called out* or *an assembly*. In other words, it means those whom God has called out of the world by the gospel and separated unto Himself in salvation. Now, when I’m saved, I may still be physically in the world, but I’m no longer of it spiritually. I become a citizen in Christ. I’m now a member of Christ’s kingdom and a part of a community of saved believers in Christ. Now, please understand: I am not saved merely because I associate myself with the church. Rather, I am numbered among the church because I am saved.

Now, what are the practical implications of all of that? Let’s look a little closer at the passage in Acts 2.

**Acts 2:41-47** “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

You see, the Lord added them to the church when they were saved, and they, the church, continued in worship together and common association one with another. It certainly doesn’t appear that all of these people were just freelance Christians. They were part of a community of faith and service that worshipped and prayed and worked and served the Lord together.

The book of Acts is a record of early church history. It shows time and time again that the church was a functioning unit of believers knit together. When disciples were made from city to city as the gospel was spread throughout the world, congregations were established and left behind by the apostles to carry on the worship and the work of that local church.

**Acts 11:26** “And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”

**Acts 20:7** “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them...”

**Acts 14:23** “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

**Acts 14:27-28** “And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them and how had had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples.”

**Acts 15:4** “And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.”

Later, when Paul wrote his letters to various congregations:

**Romans 16:5** “Likewise greet the church that is in their house...” (regarding Priscilla and Aquila)

**I Corinthians 11:18** “For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.” (rebuking the Corinthians for their abuses of the Lord’s supper)

And we could go on and on and on. My friend, the idea of the church, as a local group of Christians who come together on a regular basis for worship and edification, is found all throughout the New Testament. So, again, I remind you that the Lord adds to the church daily those who are saved (**Acts 2:47**).

Now, there are several terms that are used in the bible to describe the church. One of them compares the church to a body.

**Ephesians 5:30 “For we are members of his body...”**

**Ephesians 1:22-23 “And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”**

That last passage teaches a wonderful truth: Christ filleth all in all. That is, He alone is the source for all spiritual blessings and endowment and bestowment, and that the church—His body—is the fullness of Him who filleth all in all. In other words, the church is the receptacle where we connect with all of the blessings and unsearchable riches that are found in Christ Jesus.

**I Corinthians 12:26-27 “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”**

Here, Paul exhaustively uses the metaphor of a physical body to illustrate the relationship of members of the church. How can that be, if Christians can function independently of each other? How can I serve the Lord with no association with the local church? What good is a hand, foot, eye or ear, as the apostle Paul uses for comparison, if it's not attached to the body?

Then again, the church is depicted as “*the bride of Christ*” in **Ephesians 5**. It doesn't say that we're all “brides” of Christ. It says that the church is His bride. Stop and think about the implications of shunning the church. Would you be offended if someone claimed to love you, but shunned your wife? Or your husband, whom you love? I would be. I dearly love my wife. She's the closest person to me in all of the world. If you reject, shun or hate her, you and I won't get along very well. So, how can people claim to love Jesus and shun His bride and want no association with her? You may say, Well I know a lot of members of the church who aren't perfect. Well, neither are you. You may say, Well they “go to church” but they're just a bunch of hypocrites. Yes, unfortunately, some are. Jesus even acknowledged that some of the people who claimed to follow Him would be hypocrites. But not all of them are. The church is made up of fallible human beings, but it is still His bride and Jesus loves His bride. The church is worthy of my service, my loyalty and my devotion by essence of the fact that I love its bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Did you know that there are also certain duties to God that you can only scripturally fulfill as a faithful and active member of Christ's body, the church? The church is to come together to commune (**I Corinthians 11:23-30, Acts 2:46, Acts 20:7**). The Lord's Supper is not just about eating bread and drinking fruit of the vine. The word ‘communion’ means *a common union or sharing in* those elements.

And the church must assemble together to do so, as the Lord Jesus instructed. I know people who get the idea that they can just get off in their hotel room or at their house, with some bread and some grape juice or whatever they choose to use, and have their own little communion and observe the Lord's Supper, but there's not one example in your Bible of that. Communion is God's people coming together to share in the remembrance of Christ's death.

**I Corinthians 16:1-2** teaches that I am to lay by a portion of my income for the work of the kingdom, including the relief of needy saints.

**I Corinthians 16:1-2 "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."**

It's very important to note that Paul did not only say for each person to set it aside. He said for that money to be set aside so there would be no gatherings when the time came to use those funds for their purpose. That implies that they gave what they had set aside to some sort of common treasury that was used for the relief of needy saints. Now, if Paul was simply telling those Christians to set aside or earmark some money at home, there would still have to be some sort of collection or gathering when he arrived. But he said he didn't want that. He wanted that money to be there, already gathered by the time he got there. He tells them to take care of this on the first day of the week, consequently the same day that the church came together to commune and hear preaching from God's word (**Acts 20:7**). So these were all things that are done not by individuals, but by the collective church.

Many of the early Christians were faced with temptations and pressure to denounce Christ, just like Christians today are. And many served God under the threat of bloody persecution. The Holy Spirit admonished those Christians as follows:

**Hebrews 10:25 "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."**

My friend, you simply cannot serve the Lord without a relationship to other Christians. And that relationship exists within the framework of the local church—a group of people bound together in faith, truth and love, who function as a body to carry out God's work in that locale. That, my friend, is God's plan. The Lord adds those who are saved to His church. What sense would it make then, for a man to say that he can be saved without the church because he has his own relationship with God? God adds all who are saved to the church, and the church is a functioning, assembling, praying, worshipping, giving, serving unit. Are you a faithful member of Christ's church? Not a denomination, now. Christ's church. It predates all of the denominations that men have built. Are you a member of the church that you read about in the New Testament? You don't become a member by joining it. The Lord adds you to it when you obey the gospel in baptism for the remission of sins. If you haven't done that, I hope you will today.