

"A Church Member"

Many people want Jesus, but they're not sure about the church. Some have quit organized religion and others have started worshipping at home. Hello, I'm Phil Sanders and this is a Bible study, In Search of the Lord's Way. Well what does the Lord say about church membership? Is it the will of God?

Welcome to *In Search of the Lord's Way*, where we search the Scriptures to find the Lord's way to please our Father in Heaven. Thanks for sharing this time with us. We really appreciate hearing from you that you're watching or listening. And we want to be a part of your life each week.

Many people today say, "Jesus, yes; but the church, no." They want to be Christians but not members of any "organized religion." Others have decided to become Christians "at large" or to establish small "house churches"; they don't want to be part of the organized church with elders and deacons that's mentioned in the New Testament. But can a Christian please God and live apart from the church? Is attending church and being a church member optional? Or can a person just live a good life without the church and without the association of brothers and sisters? Should Christians be church members?

I'm told that eighty percent of Americans believe that you can be a good Christian and yet not be a member of any church. This seems odd to me, since the New Testament is full of references to the church. People forget the church is made up of the called-out people of God, who are saved by the blood of Jesus and who are devoted to following Him. The church is not some man's idea but it's God's. And if you could be a member of the church Christ, the church that He built, and if you believe and practice what the Lord teaches, wouldn't you want to be a part of that church? The good news is that you can be a member of the Lord's church.

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Larry Owsley will lead us now in song, we'll read from Hebrews 10:22 to 25, and we'll look at what the Bible says about being a member of the church.

Our reading today comes from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 22 to 25. "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." That's a reading from the book of Hebrews, God's Holy Word. Let's pray together. Father we're thankful that we can draw near from a sincere heart with faith that is fully assured. And we pray Father that you'll help us to stay committed to you, and together with the others as the church gathers together. And may Your will be done on earth Father as it is in heaven. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!

In trying to understand the place of the church in God's plan and scheme of things, the first thing that we must do is see the connection between Christ himself and His church. There are a number of

passages that show such a close relationship that one can hardly think of Christ and not also think about His church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus responded to Peter's confession that He was the Christ, the son of the Living God, and he said "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (that is the confession) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The church itself is built upon the fact that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. Jesus built His church, and it belongs to Him!

In Acts 20 and verse 28, Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "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." When I think of the purchase price that Jesus paid for the church, I can only conclude that the church must have been very, very important to Him. Now people only die for the things that are most important in their lives. If the church were that important to Christ, it ought to be that important to those who love the Lord and want to follow in His steps. I might add that the church is the only thing mentioned in Scripture that Jesus purchased with His blood. For this reason, we cannot please God and act as if the church were an optional matter.

Paul said the church is so closely related to Christ that it may be called his body, suggesting that the church is how Jesus Christ is working in the world today. In Ephesians 1:22 to 23 Paul said, "And He put all things in subjection under His (that is Jesus') feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." Now the head and the body are so closely connected, interconnected, that they should never be divided. Christ without the church is like a head without its body. Those who want Christ but reject the church need to think through their theology. The church was Christ's idea.

In Ephesians 5:25 to 27 Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." Now Christ loves the church with the same fervor that a husband loves his wife. When people criticize and slander the church, Jesus must feel the pain. How would you feel if people said ugly things about your family? Well, Jesus thinks of every member of His church as His family.

The apostle Paul also reminds us that Jesus is "the head of the church" and "the Savior of the body" (Ephesians 5 and verse 23). Now the church is not the Savior but the "saved." Christ is the Savior of the church. In Acts 2:47 we learn that the Lord adds the "saved" to His church. Now if you are saved at all, the Lord has added you to His church, you're a church member. If you're not in the church, then (Biblically speaking) you're not among the saved. You see, the church is not an optional thing that you can take or leave at your will. It's the Lord's called out body of people whom He has saved, whom He loves, and whom He purchased with His own blood.

And it's for this reason that Paul said, "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3 and verse 11). Now people need to be careful with what the Lord has founded. You cannot substitute something else in its place. You can't build your own spirituality, your own arrangement, or your own church and expect to please the Lord Jesus. Jesus the Lord said, "Every plant which My Father, heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted" (Matthew 15 and verse 13). Now man-made religion doesn't work with God. Some think they can reinvent the church, but it may end up back-firing on them. You see, the Lord's foundation is the only foundation.

Now, we ask, "What was the church like in the New Testament?" The word "church" refers to an assembly, a congregation that has been called together for a specific purpose. Now after Paul had established several congregations on his first missionary journey, he returned to those congregations,

strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14 verse 23 says, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church (that is every congregation), having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Now later, in Philippians 1 and verse 1 Paul wrote "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (that is bishops and elders) and deacons."

Now these were organized churches with established leaders. They were visible, recognizable congregations, meeting at set times and in set locations. Paul mentions many of the members of the church at Philippi or Rome or Corinth by name. Yes, sometimes churches met in some family's house. But in those days a large house could hold a congregation. In some cases, congregations met outside or in caves. You have to remember that the church was often persecuted and considered illegal. The earliest church buildings date about 250 AD. Although they could not openly show themselves, they were well organized.

When the church of the New Testament was faced with a problem, they brought it to the apostles and later to the elders of each congregation. They didn't get mad and start their own churches with their own doctrines and their own ways. The Hebrew writer gave instructions to members of churches in Hebrews 13 verse 17, he said, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." Now God wants us to fulfill His plan and purpose for His church, not reinvent the church with our own ideas and designs. David said about the temple in Psalm 122 and verse 1, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" Well we too ought to be glad when we meet today with the household of God, that is, the church. The church is God's temple today according to 1 Corinthians 3 and verse 16. I must tell you, that some of my most treasured moments have been spent with God's people worshiping and serving. My dearest friends are fellow members of the church. They've helped me and blessed me richly through the years. And I look forward to being with my spiritual family at church each Lord's day. I'm glad when they say, Let us go to church.

Now the notion that we can "be the church" but not be a part of any local congregation is a human idea. God's people assemble with one another. The Hebrew writer said, "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 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" (Hebrews 10 verses 24 to 25). Now in the New Testament, when a Christian quit assembling with the church, he was falling away from God. He was leaving the faith. He was hurting himself and hurting the church by returning to the world. Once an elder decided to visit a member of the congregation who had stopped going to church. And so he came to the door that cold evening and exchanged greetings with the member. And the member knew why he was there, though not a word was spoken about this absence from the church. Well they sat quietly by the fireplace. And at one point the elder approached the fireplace and he pulled one of the burning coals away from the others and then he lift it off to itself. Now for a while that coal still burned bright, but eventually that coal without the heat of others around it began to lose its luster. Much faster than normal, its flame went out. Well that member thought about it and got the message: and that is that we need each other to keep our hearts warm.

Solomon said, "Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27 and verse 17). People in the church make each other stronger, better, and more faithful and committed. Each Christian needs the example of love and faith that his brothers and sisters give him. Each Christian needs to so live and so love that he provides an example of commitment to the cause of Christ, to

those surrounding him. Saying, "Well, I love Christ, but I won't go to church," sends a mixed signal. It says I love God, but I will choose which commands I will obey and which I will not. Now such a person isn't really obeying God but he's obeying himself and obeying his own wishes. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4 verses 9 to 12, that "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they will keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart." God knew that his people needed the strength and love that each one could give the other to grow and to remain strong in the faith. Two are better than one, because they have each other.

Now where would we be without Bible teachers and without godly examples? In the early church God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 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" (Ephesians 4 verses 11 to 13). God knew that His people needed training and equipping to do the work that He called them to do: and that is to take the gospel to the world, to build up the church, and to render help to the needy.

Through the years, the church has been so good to Jackie and me. Over thirty years ago, when our four children were small, my lovely wife Jackie had to be in the hospital for several days with a back problem. We had no physical family within 500 miles at that time. The church was our family. The church we attended in Mississippi, helped us with food and cleaned our house. An older lady, Mrs. Edwards, watched our children when we had to go to the doctor. The hardest year of our lives was made better by the goodness of people who loved and cared for us. And we can never forget that we had loved ones who helped us when we needed it.

When Katrina destroyed much of Louisiana and Mississippi, churches all over middle Tennessee and Kentucky raised funds to send to their brethren affected by the hurricane. I watched truck after truck loaded with supplies and food and water go to churches, where the needed items were distributed. No red tape, just brothers and sisters helping brothers and sisters. One church of 100 members in Gonzales, Louisiana, fed 300-500 people every day for weeks. You see, churches gave millions of dollars to relieve this disaster. They didn't get much publicity, but the people there knew where to go to get help. And they got it from God's people, the church. And I'm so grateful for what the church is doing all over everywhere, and what a difference it makes in the lives of people. I tell you, we need the church for good examples, we need the church for the teaching that they give, and we need the church for the help that they can give when we need that help. Let's pray together. Father we're so grateful for the joy and the love that we have found in brothers and sisters who are in Christ, who love You and who know You, and who live like Your son Jesus. Father help us to love one another and to love the church, just as You've loved the church. And may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!

Someone says, "Well Phil, you just don't understand. We had a bad experience at church and won't be going back." My friend, many times the problem is not with the whole church but with an individual or two who hasn't acted as he should. The Bible teaches that when a fellow Christian sins against you that you're to go to that person privately and talk to him, trying to restore the relationship (Matthew 18 verse 15). Many times people, rather than following the instructions of the Lord, simply just quit

and separate themselves from the godly people that they need in their lives. Don't quit the church over some rude brother or sister. Talk to that person and work it out, and draw close to Jesus when you do it.

Now I became a Christian because of Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. I want to live with Him forever. And my pride is not as important as going to heaven. And I won't let anything or anyone come between my God and me. I will always have to deal with rude, selfish, and immature people; but if the Lord was gracious enough to forgive me of my many sins, I can be gracious enough to forgive those who sin against me. I don't want to risk my soul by refusing to forgive a brother or sister in the church. I'd rather forgive and be forgiven than die lost.

There's no greater honor and no greater blessing than to be a child of God. And you can be one today, if you will. The Lord opens His heart and His hands, reaching for you with the gospel. And if you'll accept the gospel—that Jesus died for your sins, was buried and arose on the third day— and by believing in Him, repenting of your sins, confessing His name before others, and by being baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins, then you too can be a child of God. You can be His child, an heir of eternal life. Won't you do that today?

Well we hope that today's study about the church has blessed you. If you want a free printed copy or a CD of this message, "A Church Member," then mail your request to In Search of the Lord's Way, P.O. Box 371, Edmond, OK 73083 or send an e-mail to searchtv@searchtv.org.

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We do ask that you please visit one of the churches of Christ in your area. The church of Christ loves guests, and you'll be glad that you visited and worshipped with them. Well we'll be back next week, Lord willing. So we ask that you keep searching God's Word with us and tell a friend about this program, let them know that you watch. God bless you and we love you from all of us at In Search of the Lord's Way.