

Hope Reformed Presbyterian Church

Baker's Dozen Series

Why Join a Church?

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Alice was livid! This was the first time she'd 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. "He asked 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!"

It's not uncommon in our day for sincere followers of Christ—like Alice—to regard joining a church as an option. And given the other options—books, tapes, videos, radio and TV broadcasts, Internet resources, parachurch groups, etc.—joining the church is sometimes low on the list—if it's even on the list! Many have never regarded committing to a congregation to be all that important—or all that agreeable. They are usually shocked to hear that Christians have historically regarded joining a church as essential, not optional.

Is this historic Christian conviction arbitrary? Is it legalistic? What does God's Word have to say about church membership? We think it says plenty. Please consider with us ten biblical reasons why every professing Christian ought to join a local church.

Jesus Commanded 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 new covenant temple, and those who confess that Jesus is Lord are the building blocks in it (Matt. 16:16; 1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:19–20).

In Matthew 28:19–20, 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're not to keep our salvation invisible. We're to express it outwardly (Rom. 10:9–10). Water baptism outwardly and visibly symbolizes this invisible reality.

Acts 2:41 tells how the apostolic church implemented this principle: "Those who gladly received his word were *baptized*; and that day about three thousand souls *were added* to them." Added to

what? Acts 2:47 gives the answer: "added to *the church*." This was the visible church; the apostles kept track of those who were baptized, and even counted them.

Christ commands us to be baptized. By commanding us to be baptized, he also 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. The Israelites were God's old covenant people. He commanded circumcision as a sign of that covenant relationship and membership in the covenant community (Gen. 17:7, 10–11). The New Testament identifies this old covenant community as "the church" (Acts 7:38 KJV).

If you were an alien, you had to receive circumcision to become a member of Israel before you could celebrate the Passover (Ex. 12:43–44, 48). In other words, you had to "join the church" before you could come to the Lord's Table. If you were not circumcised, regardless of your background or subjective belief, you were to be excommunicated from the people of God (Gen. 17:14).

Can you see the parallel in 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 (cf. Matt. 26:17–19; 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 has to be baptized to become a member of the church before he can take the Lord's Supper. Accordingly, those who "were baptized" and "added to the church" were the ones who participated in "the breaking of bread" with the apostles (Acts 2:41–42, 47).

The New Testament Presupposes Church Membership

Third, the New Testament assumes that every convert joins the church. Conversion includes being added to a visible, local church (Acts 2:41, 47; 14:21–23). It was unthinkable that a person might embrace Christ and then choose not to join Christ's church. In fact, 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.

The New Testament strongly emphasizes the corporate or group character of Christianity. For example, the New Testament speaks of believers as *together* being the body of Christ, the bride 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 joined the church. Until he did, he was not counted as a convert.

Salvation Involves Church Membership

Fourth, the biblical concept of salvation involves joining the church. In the Bible, coming to Christ and coming to his church are one thing, not two. Today people might trust Christ in an evangelistic meeting and later think about whether or not to join a church. Sometimes they never

join a church. But God's Word views coming to Christ and coming to his church as two parts of the same thing—kind of like the inside and the outside of full salvation. *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 Christ's 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 join Christ is to join 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.

Church Order Implies Church Membership

Fifth, the Bible's many prescriptions for church order imply that God expects believers to join local churches. 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 very fact 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?

In 1 Timothy, after giving instructions for prayer in public worship (2:1–8), for women in public worship (2:9–15), and for selecting elders and deacons (3:1–13), the apostle Paul explains, "I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (3:15). These rules would be useless unless believers were members of local, organized churches.

Many Bible Commands Imply Church Membership

Sixth, there are many more biblical instructions that you cannot follow unless you join a church. Christ instructs 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 second reason above).

God commands Christians to *love the brethren* and to serve them (Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 3:17; 1 John 3:14). But how do you recognize the brethren? Some people claim to be believers, but aren't. How can believers regard others as fellow believers unless they are identified as such by being received into a visible church that preaches the gospel?

A spirit of autonomy is 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 esv) and to "obey those who rule over you" (Heb. 13:17). But how can you do that unless you have joined the church over which they are overseers? How else can you know who God has placed over you?

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, refusing to join a church of Jesus Christ involves a person in numerous sins of omission, failures to obey the Lord.

Pastoral Care Requires Church Membership

Our seventh reason is related to the sixth, but we think it helpful to mention it separately. Biblical care of Christ's sheep is impossible without church membership. God commands the elders to exercise pastoral care and oversight, to shepherd his flock. The *church* is the flock which God has placed under their care (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). They 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 of the church 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 is in 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 (cf. 1 Cor. 5). If he repents, he is to be restored (2 Cor. 2:5–11). Such rescue and restoration is a chief 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 Christ's instructions on pastoral oversight and church discipline unless Christians become church members.

Practical Church Life Involves Church Membership

Eighth, there are many practical matters which the church cannot do very well without objective church membership. God commands, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). Churches have to call pastors, elect elders and deacons, adopt budgets, buy property, build meeting places, etc. These are very important decisions. But without objective membership, how is it possible to decide *fairly*—"decently and in order"—who does or does not have the privilege of voting?

Biblical Evangelism Demands Church Membership

Ninth, biblical evangelism is impossible without church membership. Much of today's evangelism stresses *getting decisions*. But Jesus commanded us to *make disciples*. The scriptural gauge of evangelistic success is not getting a large number of professed decisions; it is enlisting people into the privileges and responsibilities of following Christ. Biblically, 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 join the church. The Bible repeatedly stresses how vitally important the church is to the living, triune 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). The *church* was promised his special presence (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?

The authors are OPC ministers. Article used with permission.

