



Why Should I Join the Church?

By
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Introduction

Josh Harris wrote a book that begins like this: Jack and Grace met through a mutual friend. From day one they seemed to be the perfect match. Grace was everything Jack had always wanted. She was beautiful, outgoing, and caring – always there when Jack needed her.

For the first five months they were inseparable. Jack could hardly think of anything but Grace. He didn't need to look further, he told friends. 'She's the one.'

Now, three years have passed. Jack still enjoys being with Grace, but the spark is gone. Grace's flaws seem more obvious. He's not sure he finds her as attractive as he once did. And he's beginning to resent all the time she wants to spend with him.

One night, when she asks if they can define the nature of their relationship, Jack blows up. "We're together, aren't we?" he asks angrily. "Why isn't that enough for you?"

Obviously, Jack isn't ready for commitment. And it's unclear if he ever will be... There are millions of Jacks walking around today. And Grace isn't a girl. Grace is a church.

"*Why should I join the church?*"¹ That is a good question to ask, a question often asked, but seldom answered well. New Christians are quite prone to ask such a thorny question. They also go on to ask things like:

"Can you show me from the New Testament that I'm supposed to *officially join* anything? If I come and worship as often as the members, if I fellowship with these believers as much as anyone else, if I profit from the teaching and other ministries of the church, and if I actively demonstrate love for my brothers and sisters in Christ here, why should I formally join the church?"

There is an uncomfortable – if fuzzy – logic to these questions. But as with most of our assumptions and questions, they have their birth in our incomplete and rather self-centered

view of God and His plan for us and His kingdom. I want to look at how God's Word answers the question "Why should I join Stanley Park Baptist Church?" It is a question that needs to be answered.

1. Biblical Indications Of Church Membership In New Testament Times

The word *church* is found throughout the New Testament. In the great majority of instances the term refers to a specific local church such as that in Rome or Corinth. Sometimes when we read of the church the reference is to what's often called the *church universal*, that is, all Christians everywhere. But when you read "church" in the Bible, it almost always means "local church." Of the word "church" the Louw-Nida Lexicon says:

The term "ecclesia" was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by **well-defined membership**. In general Greek usage it was normally a socio-political entity based upon citizenship in a city-state...²

At the very least, the word "church" was used to refer to the fellowship of believers in a particular area, who of course met together, worshiped together, prayed together, ate together etc. But did people join these local expressions of fellowship in a *formal* way, or was it a less formal association? We should note that:

A. The meaning of the word "join" in Acts 5:13 makes sense only in the context of formal membership

In Acts 5:13 we read of the reaction of the non-Christians in Jerusalem after word got out about what happened to Ananias and Sapphira after they lied to the Holy Spirit. It says, "*No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.*" The same word is used in Acts 9:26 referring to Paul's attempt to join the disciples following his conversion. It is not a word that speaks of a casual, come-or-go relationship.

The word "join" that Luke uses in Acts literally means "to glue or cement together, to unite, to join firmly." It doesn't refer to an informal, merely assumed sort of relationship, but one where one chooses to "join" others conscientiously. That sort of language only makes sense in the context of a formal-type membership. I guess you could say that when we are joined to Christ and formally join the church, we're literally "stuck with each other!"

That same "glue word" is used in the New Testament to describe being joined together in a *sexual relationship* (1Corinthians 6:16) and being joined to the Lord in one spirit in salvation (1Corinthians 6:17). And it's the very same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 5:11 where he says "*not to keep company with*" any so-called brother who continues in immorality, but rather to "*put away from yourselves the evil person.*" Clearly this kind of language only makes sense if a formal membership is in view.

B. The instructions for church discipline make sense only in the context of membership

In 1 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul instructed the Christians in the church at Corinth on how to handle a particularly distasteful and difficult matter of church discipline:

¹¹ But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. ¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you. 1Corinthians 5:11-13

Was Paul simply telling them not to let this sexually immoral man worship with them? He couldn't have meant that, for the church's ministry might lead to his conviction and repentance (14:24-25). While the church was to "expel the wicked man" and treat him as an unbeliever, they would have encouraged him to sit under the preaching of God's Word. So in what sense would they

have "expelled" this man? The best understanding of Paul's instructions is to understand that they would remove him from the membership of the church, forbid his partaking of the Lord's Supper and generally stop associating with him.

It is important to note that Paul refers to those who are "inside" and to those who are "outside." Outside of what? This kind of language only makes sense if it refers to formal church membership. A group has no authority to remove someone who is already outside-of or not a member of that particular group. You can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so. The language used here implicitly expects formal church membership.

Jesus plainly expected church discipline to be exercised by the members, (Matthew 18:17) and Paul says that serious matters should be dealt with when the entire church is "*assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus*" (1 Corinthians 5:4). This only makes sense if formal membership is in view, otherwise who has the right to speak and vote on such matters? Does the person subject to discipline have the liberty to bring in his extended family or co-workers who have never been a part of the church, and expect them to be given an equal say? Clearly, the guidelines for Biblical church discipline only make sense if there is formal membership. Further...

C. The metaphors used to describe local churches (flock, temple, body, household) make sense only in the context of membership

The New Testament uses several metaphors to describe churches. Four of these metaphors in particular – flock, temple, body, and household – are used to refer to individual congregations and are word-pictures that expand on the concept of being "joined together" (*cf.* Acts 20:28; Ephesians 2:21; 1 Corinthians 12:27, 1 Timothy 3:15). Each of these metaphors is best understood in a setting of specific church membership, for they are words of relationship and community.

A flock of sheep isn't a random collection of ewes, rams, and lambs. Shepherds know their flocks. They know which sheep are theirs to care for and which are not. Sheep belong to specific flocks. This is also the way it should be for God's spiritual sheep. A temple building, just like a church building, shouldn't have any loose bricks or blocks. If it does, something's wrong. Each one of them has a definite place. "There is no place," said an English preacher long ago, "for any loose stone in God's edifice."³ Sheep are not allowed to wander around where they want; bricks, once placed in a wall, are expected to remain there.

The same analogy is true for a human body. Your body isn't a casual collection of loosely related parts that you keep in a drawer until you need them, with the possible exception of teeth and hair! All your parts are inextricably joined. These verses teach that we are all members of the Body universal, but I believe that these verses also teach that we are to be formally joined-to and accountable-to a local expression of that Body. The same can be said for the term "family." Two of the key hallmarks of being a part of the family of God are unity and love, and they are best demonstrated by joining a local congregation. British pastor Eric Lane adds:

God has given us four pictures of the church... not just to emphasize and prove the point by repetition, but also to say four different things about what it means to be a member of a church. To be a stone in his temple means to belong to a worshipping community. To be part of a body means to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community. To be a sheep in the flock means belonging to a community dependent on him for food, protection, and direction. To be a member of a family is to belong to a community bound by a common fatherhood. Put together you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently we are meant to fulfil these not on our own but together in the church. Now can you see the answer to the question why you should join a church?⁴

I believe that the NT reveals that formal membership in local congregations was both encouraged and practiced. But there are other good reasons to join a church:

2. Biblical Reasons For Church Membership

A. Joining proves that you're not ashamed to identify with Christ or His people

Jesus said (in Mark 8:38) that if anyone is ashamed to identify himself with Him on earth then He will not identify Himself with that person when he or she stands before God in the Judgment. Joining a church is one of the plainest ways of saying you're not ashamed to identify yourself with Jesus and His people. John MacArthur writes: "*You have been joined together with Christ... You bear His name. Are you ashamed to belong? Are you ashamed to bear that identification with other believers of like precious faith?... Shouldn't you be willing outwardly to identify with the visible, gathered members of that group to which you eternally belong?*"⁵

Jesus certainly made a formal commitment to identify Himself with His people when He left Heaven to come to earth and die as a man. How then can we be reluctant to identify formally with the *others* for whom Christ died? When we join a church, we are telling the family of God that we're part of the family too, and that we're not an "outsider" (1Corinthians 5:12-13) or a "Lone Ranger." Secondly, joining the church means that...

B. You stop being an independent Christian and place yourself under the discipline and protection of other Christians

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus talked about accountability and discipline. When a professing believer starts living like an unbeliever, those in the church who know about it are to confront him about his sin. The goal is to restore the sinner back to full fellowship with the Lord and his or her fellow believers.

Church *discipline* is really an act of love, done for the offender's own good and protection. Otherwise, the end result is to be handed over to Satan. The final step in this system of accountability, is to report the matter to the church. Now, if you aren't part of the church, the congregation has no authority over you and cannot do what Jesus said to do. Unless you join the church, your independence places you outside both the protection and the "*headship*" of the church and outside of what Jesus desires for us. As Hebrews 13:17 says:

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

How can the spiritual leaders of the church "watch over" anyone, or provide spiritual protection for those who are not part of the flock which they care for? Joining a local congregation makes sense based on this teaching. Thirdly, joining the church means that...

C. We submit as we should to properly instituted authority, obeying God's command

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Romans 13:1

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ... 1 Peter 2:13

At Stanley Park, like most Baptist churches, we have organized ourselves according to the laws of the land and are operating as a recognized charity. We do this not just to comply with government regulations so that we can get a tax receipt at the end of the year, but so that we place ourselves above suspicion, so that we can do our ministry without hindrance, and

so that things are "done in a fitting and orderly way" as Paul counsels in 1Corinthians 14.40. We cannot properly submit to the legitimate authority of this land unless we formally join a congregation. Also...

D. You openly demonstrate the reality and unity of the body of Christ

"*Now you are the body of Christ,*" Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "*and each one of you is a part of it*" (1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV). But how can we see the body of Christ? When you join a church, you make it visible. You give a living demonstration of the spiritual reality of the body of Christ. You show that even though you are an individual, you are a part of the body; you are joined together with others. You take the body of Christ out of the realm of the theoretical and give it a meaning that people can see. Jesus said:

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

In contrast, consider the potential negative impact on the effectiveness and unity of the church, as well as the reputation of Jesus if you *don't* join His earthly body. John MacArthur says we should ask ourselves, "*How wonderful can Christ be if we're not even committed to being associated with His church?*"⁶ How believable is our testimony of the goodness and greatness of Christ if we don't want to identify openly with Christ's family? How can we talk about love and unity when we're not willing to make a formal commitment to each other?

E. You both encourage and exhort the church when you join the local body of Christ

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24-25

Notice the command to be considerate of others, especially encouraging others towards love and good deeds. I submit to you that *not* joining a local congregation is a discouragement to those who need it most. What are you modeling to new believers by *not* joining the local church? Do they get the message that the church isn't important enough to join?

There is also the matter of discouraging the leadership. Being a pastor or a key leader is hard work and discouraging because, as someone once said, it's like trying to herd cats or nail Jello to a tree. Time and again I have spent countless hours with people who were only too glad to receive ministry from the church, but not prepared to commit to give anything back. That hurts. I know that people have their reasons, but we need to understand that the very term “church” is a term of *relationship*, of commitment and fellowship. To say that we are a part of the “universal church” without formally joining it is rather like saying one thing and doing another.

When you join the local church, you provide a positive example both to new believers and leaders that says, "This is worth being a part of and I willingly join as an expression of my faith in Christ." We are, after all, instructed to encourage one another! True, no church is perfect or completely desirable. We are all human, we've *all* been hurt and we shall no doubt be disappointed with each other in the future. But allow me to quote Calvin, who said:

*“Where there is a good faith effort to maintain purity of preaching, lawful sacramental life, and discipline in earnest, one may conscientiously embrace a church even if blemished.”*⁷

Conclusion

I believe that there are many other reasons to join a local congregation, the visible if imperfect representation of Christ's Body here on earth. Suffice it to say that I believe the New Testament teaches implicitly the formal joining together of like-minded believers, both for their good, the good of the church, and for the reputation of Christ. There are no free-agents. Truth is, all of us at one time or another have joined groups and organizations and thought nothing of the duties and obligations imposed upon us. We cheerfully go to the meetings, recite the pledges, pay our dues, learn the secret handshakes, *et cetera*. Why should we be less willing to commit to the local expression of the church for whom Jesus died?

I believe that it is the implicit teaching of the New Testament that God desires for Believers to *formally* join with a local congregation as a visible sign of their being joined with Him.

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- 1 This message borrows heavily from “Spiritual Disciplines Within The Church” by Donald S. Whitney, Moody Press, copyright 1996
 - 2 Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (Vol. 1, Page 125). New York: United Bible societies.
 - 3 Joseph Hall, as quoted in John Blanchard, *More Gathered Gold* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 43.
 - 4 G. Eric Lane, *I Want to Be A Church Member* (Bryntirion, Wales: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992), p. 21.
 - 5 John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Commitment to the Church,” Tape GC 80-130 (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1994).
 - 6 MacArthur tape GC 80-130.
 - 7 John Calvin, (Institutes IV.1.12) Quoted in “Current Thoughts from Dwight's Corner” (Website, A.B.C. of the Great Rivers Region)