

Must I be a Member of a Local Church?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from Internet Sources)

Introduction:

- A. When one is baptized, the Lord adds him to the church universal; however, the scriptures teach that one must serve the Lord as a faithful, active member of a local assembly of Christians.
 - 1. Gal. 3:26-27; Acts 2:47; Luke 17:20-21

I. CHRISTIANS AND LOCAL CHURCHES

- A. Identifying with a local church - Acts 9:26-28
- B. There are 33 distinct local churches mentioned in the New Testament.
 - 1. Phil. 1:1; Acts 16:15, 33
 - 2. These 33 local churches consisted of Christians in a geographic area that gathered together as local churches.
 - 3. Scriptures speak of the church gathered together, as well as not assembled together - Acts 14:27; 1Cor. 11:18, 20, 14:28
 - 4. The Divinely mandated activities of the church cannot be conducted by individual Christians who elect to do so apart from the other disciples who constitute the local church
 - a. Assemble for edification - Heb. 10:25
 - b. Assemble to commune with the Lord - 1Cor. 11:18-34
 - c. Practice discipline - 1Cor. 5:4
 - d. Appoint elders - Acts 14:23-27
- C. Saul desired to join himself to the church at Jerusalem - Acts 9:26-28
 - 1. "Join" - Greek kollao - "descriptive of close and intimate relationships; to glue or cement together, generally, to unite, to join firmly" (Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, by W. E. Vine)
 - a. Kollao is indicative of the importance of membership in a local church; it connotes firmness and immovability in a relationship
 - 2. When one "joins himself" to a local church, one becomes an identifiable and contributing part, one who views his membership very seriously.
 - a. One who is not ready to leave at the sign of any problems, whose feelings are not easily hurt or one who steals away surreptitiously
- D. The church in Jerusalem did not accept Saul at first - Acts 9:1
 - 1. They were well within their rights and responsibilities; membership in a local church is a blessing and privilege, not a right or an entitlement
 - 2. Fellowship is and always will be a conditional matter
 - a. Eph. 5:10-11; 2John 9-11
 - b. Based on current knowledge, the church in Jerusalem was correct in not accepting Saul.
 - c. However, when Barnabas offered proof that Saul was a faithful Christian, they extended fellowship
 - 3. The purpose of New Testament mentions of letters of commendation
 - a. 2Cor. 3:1; Acts 18:27

b. Paul is not disparaging these letters of commendation. After all, he was well known among the Corinthians and it was insulting to think he needed introductory letters. David Lipscomb wrote: "Against the usefulness of such letters in general Paul here says nothing. Such letters of commendation deserve notice as an important element in the early church. A Christian traveling with such a letter from any church was certain to find a hearty welcome at any other. They guaranteed at once his soundness in the faith and his personal character, and served to give a reality of the brotherly love existing between those in Christ" (A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, pg. 47).

- c. Unconditional fellowship is not only unscriptural, but it also unnecessarily risks accepting divisive and unfaithful people.
- d. Notice the twofold responsibility: It is the responsibility of the Christian to join himself to a local church, and it is the duty of elders and the local church to determine whether they are in fellowship with the Christian

II. MEMBERSHIP IS INHERENT IN THE COMMAND TO ASSEMBLE

- A. Heb. 10:23-25 - Notice the language, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...."
- B. The writer is addresses specific people (ourselves, a group of persons that constitute a collectivity united by identity and purpose), and a specific act (assembling, the practice of coming together for a Divinely mandated purpose).
- C. This assembling is not presented as optional or without serious consequence when ignored - Heb. 10:26-31

III. MEMBERSHIP MANDATES ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN A LOCAL CHURCH

- A. Local churches have Divinely assigned work - 1Tim. 5:16, 3:15; Eph. 4:16
- B. Each member is to contribute to the work of the church; his time, energy, and resources cannot be given by proxy.
 - 1. One cannot fulfill this responsibility as a member at large, randomly meeting from place to place.

IV. MEMBERSHIP REQUIRES SUBJECTION TO THE ELDERS

- A. The most common reason some elect to be members at large: they maintain an independent spirit at un-Christ-like levels
 - 1. They want to attend and participate according to their own standards and do not wish to be informed or directed by another
 - 2. They want to avoid the limits imposed by commitment to a local church
- B. Elders in a local church - 1Tim. 3:4-5, 5:17; 1Peter 5:2; Heb. 13:7, 17
 - 1. Elders are part of God's safeguard for individual Christians as well as for local churches.

Conclusion: One cannot be a faithful Christian without being a faithful member of a faithful local church. Pure, Biblical Christianity requires that one be an active member of a sound local church, one practicing only the "doctrine of Christ" - 2John 9-11