

What About “Local” Church Membership?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

“Is a person required to be a member of a local church? Can he just be a Christian at large, without a ‘church’ affiliation?”

Before we address this question specifically, let us lay a broader foundation concerning the use of the term “church” in the New Testament.

The English word “church” is derived from the Greek *kurikon*, meaning “belonging to the Lord.” The word was used for the meeting place of early Christians.

The actual word in the original New Testament text that stands behind the modern rendition “church” is *ekklesia*. The etymology of this word signified “called out.”

It is now generally conceded that the basic sense of the term as it was used is “assembly” or “congregation,” while still retaining the suggestion of a “called out” assembly (i.e., God’s assembly.) In a **non-religious sense**, the word was used of public gatherings (see Acts 19:32, 39-40).

How “Church” Is Used in the New Testament

In a spiritual sense, the word *ekklesia* frequently rendered “church” is employed in the New Testament in three major ways. And each of these has serious responsibilities attached to Christ’s disciples.

First, “church” is used of the people of God **universally**. This organism was equivalent to the “one body” (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18) for which the Lord died (Acts 20:28). When one is immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16), he automatically is added to that body of saved people who constitute the church (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 12:13).

There is no such thing in the Christian age as being saved and not being a member of Christ’s spiritual body, the church. In Ephesians 5:26, Christ is described as the Savior of the body, which elsewhere is identified as the church (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, 24).

Some religionists refer to “the church invisible,” but that is a non-biblical and non-sensical concept. The church consists of people, and they are **not invisible**.

Second, the New Testament *ekklesia* also refers to the Lord’s people in a certain community — in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11), in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), or in some other city. John refers to the seven congregations in the early chapters of the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 1:4, 11).

When Paul and his companions traveled about, preaching the good tidings regarding Jesus, wherever men and women surrendered to the truth in gospel obedience, local churches were established (cf. Acts 14:23). These new Christians joined together for the purpose of corporate worship and fellowship in serving their Master.

This was not some **optional plan** improvised by the whims of the missionaries. It was a divinely orchestrated **pattern of organization**.

Finally, the term “church” also may be employed of a body of people who have been **brought together** at a certain place and time for the purpose of worshipping God in the company of one another (1 Cor. 11:17ff; 14:34; 3 Jn. 10). Christians are admonished not to neglect these assembly meetings. Regular worship gatherings are God’s plan for his disciples to encourage one another toward love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25).

What About Church Membership?

In view of the question submitted, we must focus more closely upon the second usage of “church” as outlined above.

It is a bit of a mystery to me as to why someone would ask: “Must I be a member of a local church?” Especially is this true in light of the abundant information on this theme in the New Testament.

Think about the following considerations relative to the local church.

The Unity of the Church

In the early chapters of Acts, following the establishment of the church, there are numerous references acknowledging the “togetherness” of the early saints (Acts 2:42, 44, 46; 4:23-24, 31-32).

God never intended for Christians to function as isolated islands in a sea of worldly-oriented people.

The body is not “one member, but many” (1 Cor. 12:14). It would be very difficult to miss Paul’s point of emphasis when he spoke of the spiritual body of Christ as being “fitly framed and knit together through that which every member supplies.” He takes note of the cooperative efforts of individual Christians “according to the working in due measure of each several part” for the increase of the body “unto the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16-17).

This divine goal can hardly be achieved if children of God meander about operating “solo” with their congregational membership in their pocket!

It is not without significance that when Paul came to Jerusalem, following an escape from a dangerous circumstance in Damascus, he immediately attempted to “join himself to the disciples” of that city. Once their initial fear of him was alleviated, he was accepted (Acts 9:26ff).

Community Worship

Various New Testament texts make it clear that the early disciples **assembled together** as a body of people for the purpose of worship on the Lord’s day (Acts 2:42; 20:7-12; 1 Cor. 11:17ff; 14:1-40; 16:1-2).

How could a Christian ever be admonished for forsaking an assembly (Heb. 10:25) if he is not even obligated to be a part of a local church?

Elder Oversight

God structured the individual congregation around an organization plan.

Christ is the head of his church wherever it exists (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18). Ultimately, he is the head of his church in every city throughout the world.

However, in local churches where qualified men exist (1 Tim. 3:1ff; Tit. 1:1ff), the local body of believers is supervised by a group of men identified as “elders.” They are also known as bishops (overseers) or pastors (shepherds).

The members are to **submit to their overseers** in matters of expediency (1 Thes. 5:12; Heb. 13:17) and regard them highly for their work’s sake. While these shepherds are prohibited from arrogating themselves to the position of “lords” over their flock (1 Pet. 5:3), their exemplary leadership is to be revered and followed.

Serving under these men in special areas that implement other important tasks are deacons, teachers, evangelists, etc.

If Christ did not intend for his people to be a **closely-bonded Christian family**, why did he organize the local body in this way?

Why Do Some Resist Local Membership?

Occasionally there are those who are not affiliated with any local group of saints. There may be under **unusual** circumstances some rationale for this. But frequently there is not.

It may be the case that a Christian has moved into an area where there is no local congregation of the Lord’s people. Where such is feasible, he may need to drive to a city of reasonable proximity where he is able to locate a good church.

If one is not able to assemble with a local church, he should worship on the Lord's day in his home and then seek to win others to the truth. Then, a new church can be established in his town according to the New Testament pattern.

The same plan may have to be initiated if there is no **faithful church** nearby (i.e., one with whom he can worship and work conscientiously).

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to find maverick disciples who simply **do not want** to identify with any local church for any number of personal reasons.

Some folks are so **inflexibly opinionated** that they cannot tolerate being in proximity with any Christian who does not yield to their every dictum. Leave him alone. It is better that they are isolated.

Sometimes there are those who do not wish to be held responsible for their conduct. They want to come and go as they please. They do not want to be accountable for faithful attendance, consistent giving, or any other responsibility. They do not intend to have their lifestyle monitored. And so they repudiate the idea that they should be under the oversight of elders.

In a word, they want the "name" of being a Christian, but without the commitment that goes with the name. And perhaps most of all, they do not intend to be in an environment where they might be subject to the discipline of the local congregation.

Such folks may entertain the illusion that they are serving God. They are not. They have simply failed to understand one of the most basic aspects of Christian service.

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Scripture References

Acts 19:32, 39-40; Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 1:18; Acts 20:28; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 5:26; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18, 24; Acts 5:11; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:4, 11; Acts 14:23; 1 Corinthians 11:17; 3 John 10; Hebrews 10:24-25; Acts 2:42, 44, 46, 4:23-24, 31-32; 1 Corinthians 12:14; Ephesians 4:16-17; Acts 9:26; Acts 2:42, 20:7-12; Hebrews 10:25; 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:3

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