

Ten Biblical reasons to be part of a local church

#1-7 adapted from *Blest be the Tie that Binds* Don Kistler on Church Membership
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We know that the church is not a new invention. The Greek word often translated “church” referred to God’s people in the Old Testament as well. Acts 7:38 speaks of “the church in the wilderness” (KJV) during the time of Moses and the exodus. However a new way of referring to God’s people was introduced in Paul’s epistles. We are the body of Christ. According to Eph. 5:30 “we are members of His body.”

Today we speak of the church in two ways: visible or invisible. The invisible church consists of all true believers throughout all of history. Membership to this is known only by God. The visible church is the covenant community that is recognized as Christians who gather together as local bodies.

There is good reason and inference from Scripture that God expects professing believers to hold their membership in a local body:

1. The New Testament churches were local, visible churches. They met in specific places.
 - Acts 11:26 tells us that the church in Antioch, where the disciples were first called “Christians,” assembled together for the purpose of being taught. They were gathered together as a church.
 - Paul wrote his epistles to specific churches in specific locations, with pastors and elders shepherding their flocks. E.g. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1, Gal 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1.
2. The local church is God’s tool for bringing His people to full maturity in knowledge and faith. Eph. 4:11-13: “He gave some as 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 to the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man” (NASB). These are actual pastors and teachers who are equipping believers. Acts 14:21-23 says that “The apostles taught, and appointed elders for every church.” See also Titus 1:5.
3. The Great Commission points to church membership (Matt. 28:18-20). Baptism, a sacrament of the church, is administered by one who is commissioned by a church body. Discipling and teaching to be obedient are also properly done in the context of a church with an ordained leader (elder) and a duly constituted church body.
4. Christ said that He would build His Church (Matt. 16:18). This is the only thing Jesus said He would build – not a seminary, high school, hospital, or baseball field. Yes, He is speaking about the true Church, comprised of all true members of Christ’s mystical body, but those members meet somewhere; they are taught somewhere; they worship together somewhere; and when they do so they are a local manifestation of the larger reality of Christ’s Church, His Body. True Christians want to be a part of what Christ is building. Believers want to manifest their association with Christ and His Church in any and every way possible.
5. The Church is one of two organisms divinely instituted by God for the spreading of His love and His gospel. One is the church; the other is the family. Membership is not optional in either one. By virtue of being physically alive, we are members of a particular family. We are not simply members of ‘the family of man,’ but we are also members of an individual, specific, local family. By virtue of being spiritually alive – born again or regenerated – we are members of the invisible Church, the family of God, and therefore must join ourselves with the actual reality of that concept, namely the local church.

The Old Testament practice of membership certainly shows the importance of this affiliation. Being an Israelite was not simply an issue of race and nationality, but an issue of being in covenant bond with God. Romans 9:6: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” What made someone a true Israelite was his relationship with the living God.

God commanded circumcision as the sign of acceptance into the covenant community (Gen. 17:7-10). In fact, God nearly killed Moses for not circumcising his male child. Abraham was not a Jew by birth, but by circumcision. Baptism is now the New Testament sign of acceptance into the covenant community (Col. 2:11). There was not only to be an inward reality, a circumcision of the heart, but an outward sign of that invisible reality. Time and time again God calls for an outward show of what has happened internally. Good works do not save, but they are visible evidence that a work of grace has taken place in the heart.

6. God’s people are repeatedly called to a visible place throughout Scripture. Nehemiah 1:8-9: “I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.” The people He is gathering are His servants and the people whom He redeemed by His great power and His strong hand (Neh. 1:10).

This was not a rote, empty religious practice, but it was a joy for those involved.

- Psalm 26:8 “O LORD, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells.”
- Psalm 27:4 “One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple.”
- Psalm 84:1 “How lovely are Your dwelling places, O LORD of hosts!”

7. Much of the Bible cannot be obeyed without belonging to a church as a member. Appreciating those who have charge over you (1 Thess. 5:13) is not possible if you are not in some official way under someone. Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls.”
8. When I asked my students if they had any input into this topic Matt Fields replied, “chicks.” It is true that the directive “Don’t be unequally yoked” (2 Cor. 6:14) becomes a lot more feasible if you spend time with like-minded believers. You are much more likely to find a godly, church-going companion, who has learned the pattern for marriage from the ideal of Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:22-33), by getting to know those who actually see it as a priority to belong to a church.
9. Belong to a church because it is commanded by God. Heb. 10:24-25 “Don’t give up meeting together.” How did they meet together? As mentioned above they met together with pastors and elders who faithfully guarded knowledge and instruct people (see also Malachi 2:7-9; 2 Tim. 1:11,14)
10. We should generally have the same view of things as Jesus. Eph. 5:25 says that “Christ loves the church.” So should we. How can we demonstrate this without being part of a local congregation? Love the church because Christ does. He bought the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). He gave up his life for the church (Eph. 5:25). We ought not speak derogatorily of something God has so highly esteemed.