

**Putting First Things First (Reaching the lost)
“Do I Have to Go to Church to Be a Christian?”**

Intro: We have a challenge on our hands. Today many people do not feel the need or obligation to be part of a church. Last spring a Gallup poll revealed that 32% of Americans considered themselves “nonreligious” and never attend church. Only 40% of Americans consider themselves very religious and attend church every week or almost every week. I suspect that a good number of those who profess to go to church every week are fudging a bit on the numbers, more likely expressing what they would like to think they do, rather than what they really do. But even if we took all these people at their word, it is clear that attitudes toward church attendance have changed; and that even many so-called religious people have opted out of church.

There are many reasons:

Some find that church services interfere with needed time for rest or entertainment after a hectic workweek.

Some believe that church services offer nothing that they really need; and that time is better in other activities.

Some believe that they are as good as the people who go to church and that church attendance will have little moral effect in their lives.

Some have a distaste for “organized religion”, perhaps having a negative attitude about church problems or appeals for money.

Some see no connection between being a Christian and being a church member. More than once a person has told me, “I read my Bible and pray. I can worship God in my home. I don’t need to go to church.”

So what could we say to these people who may ask, “Do I have to go to church to be a Christian?” Why does one need to be a part of the church and assemble and work with others? Or to put it another way, “Did God ordain organized religion?”

Maybe we could simply encourage them to pay more attention to what they are reading in Bible about the church.

Becoming a Christian and becoming a member of the church are simultaneous acts.

To become a Christian, to be saved, is to become a part of the church in the general sense. Simply put, the church is the saved.

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body (Eph. 5:23).

By God’s will the saved were organized into local congregations. God’s purpose for the church includes membership in a local church.

Even the first respondents to the gospel in Jerusalem were deemed by their response to the gospel to become a part of the church at Jerusalem.

And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

The KJV translated, "the Lord added to the church such as should be saved." Though the Greek word "ekklesia" is not present, the concept of a numbered body of believers is. The Greek expression

"God by the same action that saves places the person in the redeemed community. Nor is the church in the Bible an invisible body. It is always treated in the NT as a visible community of people, identifiable and distinct from the surrounding world. The church is a part of God's redemptive plan. Not only is a visible fellowship part of God's saving action, but it is also the context in which the salvation is lived out and the new life actualized. Moreover, the church is the means of communicating the saving gospel." (Everett Ferguson, p. 205)

So in Scripture we see that the proclamation of the gospel not only resulted in saved people, but local congregations.

And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (Acts 18:8)

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:1-2)

The conversion experience itself brings disciples who are converted to Jesus into a relationship with one another. Disciples are drawn together by their common faith and their common commitment to do God's will.

These communities of believers were organized by God to enable them to function properly and effectively.

Communities of believers need leaders to guide the congregation. God gave qualifications for elders to do this.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, (Titus 1:5)

Communities of believers need servants to enact congregational purposes.

God gave qualifications for deacons to serve this purpose.

God ordained "organized religion".

God's commands necessitate association and work with other Christians.

The command to worship in breaking bread.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-24)

The command to encourage others
and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

The command to collect funds to accomplish commonly agreed upon work.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

Because of the benefits of church membership or organized religion

Support in time of need

And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:44-45)

Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Spiritual guidance and correction

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and 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; (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

A sense of fellowship and belonging

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

Conclusion: The issue finally becomes, what the nature of the religion that God ordained for the disciples of Jesus. The answer to that is that God ordained "organized religion". He wanted disciples to worship and work together and to enjoy the benefits of a shared faith.

This attitude, I fear, may have more to do with American individualism and anti-establishment tendencies than with any real theological or Biblical understanding. (

It's illogical to say that you are merely part of the worldwide, universal church, yet refuse to gather with the segment of that universal church that exists in your geographical area. It would be like claiming you have a car, when the right fender is in Phoenix, the engine is in Tucson, and the wheels are in Paradise

Valley! You don't have a car; you have the beginning of the inventory for a junkyard. It just won't function until the pieces are put together.