

Abide in Her: A Case for the Requirement of Church Membership for Every Christian

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To Chassidy, my wife who loves his bride.

ABIDE IN HER: A CASE FOR THE REQUIREMENT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN

Decorpulation¹ has been circulating among Christians. This has to do with the confusion surrounding the question: Are all Christians required to join a local church? Widespread consensus, at least among American adults, says that membership in a local church is unimportant. Evangelicals are also divided on this issue. In this paper, I argue that (regardless of the formal process) meaningful membership, defined as abiding in a local congregation, is a requirement for all believers unless they are providentially hindered. It is required for a Christian to function in their identity fully, follow specific commands of Scripture, and flourish in their faith.

By first looking at differing positions on this issue in part one, I will then, in part two, defend my position theologically by identifying the nature of the church, the Christian, and which commands a Christian can only fulfill in the context of a local church. Then, by examining anthropology, church history, and statistics, I will demonstrate the necessity of church membership for a Christian's flourishing.

Church Membership is Unnecessary and Unbiblical

There are some things that could providentially keep Christians from weekly and physical gathering with a local body of believers—professional obligations (ie, having to work on Sunday), caring for a parent who is passing away, or (as we have recently experienced) a pandemic. These, however, are rare occasions. A more popular consensus among Americans is that being an active member of a local church is just not that important.

Church Membership is Unnecessary

¹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 13.

“Recent headlines about the church have been dominated by the word *leaving*,”² says Brett McCracken. For example, a March 2021 Gallup Poll headline reads that “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.”³ In analyzing this poll, Jeffery M. Jones says that “Americans’ membership in houses of worship . . . [dropped] below 50% for the first time in Gallup’s eight-decade trend.”⁴ When Gallup first started measuring church membership in 1937, “it remained near 70% for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.”⁵

Another example comes from the 2022 “State of Theology” by Ligonier Ministries. Working with LifeWay Research, the “State of Theology” reported that when asked if joining a local church was obligatory for every Christian, 36% of U.S. adults agreed, while 56% did not.⁶ American evangelicals were also divided on this question, as only 68% agreed versus 26% who did not agree.⁷ The most recent “State of Theology” (2025) reports that now only 61% of evangelicals agree that every Christian has an obligation to join a local church.⁸

What are some reasons for this decline and disagreement? One reason is the increase of *nones*—those who do not claim to have a religious affiliation.⁹ Jones writes, “Over the past two decades, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religion has grown from 8% in 1998-2000 to 13% in 2008-2010 and over 21% over the past three years” (2018-2021).¹⁰

² Brett McCracken, *The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 87

³ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup News*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

⁴ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

⁵ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

⁶ *The State of Theology*, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>.

⁷ *The State of Theology*.

⁸ *The State of Theology*.

⁹ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

¹⁰ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

“As one would expect,” he continues, “Americans without a religious preference are highly unlikely to belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque Most of the rest of the drop can be attributed to a decline in formal membership among Americans who *do* have a religious preference Over the past three years, the average has fallen to 60% from 73%.¹¹ Age is also linked with this decrease.

Jones says, “Church membership is strongly correlated with age, as 66% of traditionalists—U.S. adults born before 1946—belong to a church, compared with 58% of baby boomers, 50% of those in Generation X, and 36% of millennials.”¹² The decline is also trending among Generation Z.¹³ “The decline in church membership, then, appears largely tied to population change, with those in older generations who were likely to be church members being replaced in the U.S. adult population with people in younger generations who are far less likely to belong.”¹⁴

“For much of American history,” writes Ligonier,

The influence of Christianity resulted in a high rate of church attendance, and church membership was normative. Yet increasing secularization in the United States has led to more Americans identifying as nonreligious. In addition, the entrenched cultural value of individualism makes it unsurprising that most Americans deem church membership as optional for Christians. Given the Bible’s assumption that those who claim to follow Christ will also join a local body of believers (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 11:18; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:9; 1 Peter 5:1-5), it may be surprising that only 68 percent of evangelicals view church membership as obligatory. This may indicate the influence of an individualistic worldview within the church, as well as challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and ever-increasing access to viewing various churches’ services via the internet.¹⁵

¹¹ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

¹² Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

¹³ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

¹⁴ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority.”

¹⁵ *The State of Theology*.

McCracken comments, “The narrative has been that people—especially young people in Western culture are leaving the church, finding it unnecessary, or counterproductive for their spiritual quest. The reasons are understandable.”¹⁶ He pens,

Churches are full of sinful, work-in-progress people, after all, and problems inevitably arise. Interpersonal conflicts. Leadership scandals. Hypocrisy. Abuse of authority. #ChurchToo. Cover-ups. Apathy about injustice and the plight of the marginalized. Marrying faith too close to partisan politics. For a lot of “good vibes only” young people who have been reared on technology that allows them to filter out anything difficult or annoying, the church and its motley crew of often-frustrating people might seem like more trouble than it is worth. Furthermore, many Western Christians have been raised in a faith that puts heavy emphasis on the individual (“personal relationship with Jesus”) and little (if any) emphasis on the communal. If Christianity is mostly about doing your own thing with Jesus, then leaving church becomes easy to justify. If the church *adds* something to one’s personal spiritual walk, then great. But if it is a hassle or a hindrance, just ditch it. You can love Jesus without loving the church . . . or so the logic goes.¹⁷

For example, in his book *Mere Churchianity*, Michael Spencer writes the following: “For many of you, leaving the church may have been the most spiritually healthy thing you ever did.”¹⁸ “Jesus-shaped spirituality has nothing to do with churchianity. Following Jesus does not require you to pledge allegiance to a religious institution.”¹⁹ “Life as a Jesus-follower grows out of Jesus and the gospel, not out of the church.”²⁰

Jones concludes, “The U.S. remains a religious nation However, far fewer, now less than half, have a formal membership with a specific house of worship.” Mark A. Garcia agrees. He writes, “Among the songs of the sons of Korah we read, ‘Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God’ (Ps. 87:3).”²¹ But “these are not the days in which ‘glorious things’ are

¹⁶ McCracken, *Wisdom Pyramid*, 87.

¹⁷ McCracken, *Wisdom Pyramid*, 87-88.

¹⁸ Michael Spencer, *Mere Churchianity: Finding Your Way Back to Jesus-Shaped Spirituality* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2010), 57.

¹⁹ Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, 6.

²⁰ Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, 152.

²¹ Mark A. Garcia, “The Church: The Well-Ordered Church in a World of Distrust,” in *Theology for Ministry: How Doctrine Affects Pastoral Life and Practice*, ed. William R. Edwards, John C. A. Ferguson, and Chad Van Dixhoorn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 403.

spoken of the church.”²² While some may claim that formal membership in a local church is unnecessary and may even be a hindrance to a Christian’s spiritual growth, some go so far as to say that it is unbiblical.

Church Membership is Unbiblical

In his co-authored book *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*, Kevin DeYoung declares that in the opinion of some dissatisfied Christians, “the church as we know it is an unbiblical, historical accident at best and a capitulation to paganism at worst All we think of as ‘church’ . . . are the result of the church falling from its pristine state in the first century into the syncretistic, over-institutionalized religion that now passes for Christianity.”²³ He goes on to say,

Whether this fall from grace came in the second century after the last apostle died, or in the first few centuries where Greek thinking overtook Hebraic thinking in the church, or in the fourth century with Constantine and all the accompanying evils of Christendom, the fact remains the same: the church as we know it in the West has been corrupted beyond recognition. And on top of this, we have the record of atrocities committed by the church over the centuries.”²⁴

He refers specifically to Frank Viola and his book *Pagan Christianity*. Striking a chord with the disgruntled, he writes that, “when the Lord Jesus walked this earth, His chief opposition came from the . . . Pharisees and the Sadducees . . . history is repeating itself today. Contemporary Christianity has fallen into errors of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees,”²⁵ guilty of both adding and subtracting from the Bible when it comes to church.

Similarly, in his 2020 book *Jesus’ Broken Church*, Peter DeHaan claims that “church membership is not biblical. We made it up.”²⁶ He even goes so far as to confess his sin of once

²² Garcia, “*The Church*,” 404.

²³ DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*, 17.

²⁴ DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*, 17.

²⁵ Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*, rev. and updated (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 34-35, Kindle.

²⁶ Peter DeHaan, *Jesus’ Broken Church* (Michigan: Spiritually Hungry Publisher, 2020), 31, Kindle.

“being sucked into this unholy institutional practice of church membership, at both the local and denominational level,” vowing never to do it again, and often calling it a fallacy.²⁷

Viola claims that “the church in its contemporary, institutional form, has neither a biblical nor a historical right to function as it does.”²⁸ For just one example, “The [first century church] did not organize themselves hierarchically” (ie, formal church membership). Basing his arguments on “theological grounds, historical grounds, and pragmatic grounds,”²⁹ to show how today’s church and most everything in it is unbiblical. I will now do the same, though not in that order, to show how meaningful membership, defined as abiding in a local congregation, is a biblical requirement for all believers. It is required for a Christian to function in their identity fully, follow specific commands of Scripture, and flourish in their faith.

Church Membership is Necessary and Biblical: It is How We Fully Function

“Church membership,” writes Jonathan Leeman, “is how we formally recognize and commit to one another as believers.”³⁰ “If you call yourself a Christian, but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend,” says Mark Dever, “you might be going to hell.”³¹ In referring to “that grotesque anomaly,” called “an unchurched Christian,” John Stott writes, “The New Testament knows nothing of such a person.”³² “There is no such thing as ‘you in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,’”³³ writes J.T. English and Jen Wilkin. “Christian individualism’ is

²⁷ Peter DeHaan, “Why We Shouldn’t Join a Church,” *The Fallacy of Church Membership*, February 9, 2022, PeterDeHaan.com, <https://www.peterdehaan.com/christianity/why-we-shouldnt-join-a-church/>.

²⁸ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity?*, 42

²⁹ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity?*, 39.

³⁰ Jonathan Leeman and Collin Hansen, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), Leeman, 75.

³¹ Mark Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 9.

³² John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 19.

³³ J. T. English and Jen Wilkin, *You Are a Theologian: An Invitation to Know and Love God Well* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 160.

an oxymoron.”³⁴ Gary A. Parrett states, “It is not individuals who are the *poiēma* of God; it is the church, the body of Christ.”³⁵ These candid statements are correct because of the connate nature of the local church and the local Christian.

The Local Church and the Local Christian

The church, according to Gregg Allison, “is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ It is made up of two interconnected components: the universal church and the local church. The universal church “is the fellowship of all Christians that extends from the day of Pentecost until the second coming.”³⁷ This universal fellowship, while very much actual, is conceptual as it incorporates “both the deceased believers who are presently in heaven and the living believers from all over the world”³⁸ making it impossible to gather together as we have been divided by space and time.

“This universal church (at least its living members) is manifested (by Christ, its head, and the Spirit) and manifests itself (through Christians associating themselves with one another) in local churches.”³⁹ They are its actualization. The local church, comprised of local Christians, is “equipped by the Holy Spirit with Spiritual gifts for ministry. These communities regularly gather to worship the triune God, proclaim his word, engage non-Christians with the gospel, disciple their members, care for people through prayer and giving, and stand both for and against

³⁴ English and Wilkin, *You Are a Theologian*, 160.

³⁵ Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 32.

³⁶ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29. Kindle.

³⁷ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

³⁸ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

³⁹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 31.

the world. Local churches “have a specific space-time address.”⁴⁰ They have been providentially “assembled in a historical reality,” just like the local Christian (Acts 17:26).

There are many metaphors for local churches and their members in the Bible. “The images the biblical authors use to describe Christians and their relationship to the church in the New Testament,” explains Mark Dever, “presume that Christians are members of local churches. We will look at three of these related metaphors to see that “all who are ‘in Christ’ are *de facto* ‘in the church’ and constitute its members,”⁴¹ that church membership is a requirement for all Christians.

A Building and Stones

First, the local church is referred to as a building. Paul tells the church of Corinth that they are “God’s building” that is being built upon the foundation of Christ. They are “God’s temple” (1 Cor 3:9-17).⁴² Likewise, he tells the Ephesian church that they are “members of God’s household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” with “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” This “whole structure” is “joined together” and meant to grow “into a holy temple in the Lord.” He tells them that they “are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph 2:20-22).

Related to this building metaphor, the Bible refers to Christians as “stones.” Peter tells God’s elect that as they “come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:4-5).

⁴⁰ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 31.

⁴¹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 30.

⁴² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references come from the ESV.

To Paul, “the church resembles stones in a building, laid on top of the foundation, which is Christ.”⁴³ (“Even more intimately, [the church] can be described as . . . God’s family (v 19b). From the concept of a ‘household,’ it is a small step to the idea of a house or a building.”⁴⁴) Likewise, “Peter thinks of Christians collectively as a building made up of individual, living stones fitted together to form . . . a temple.”⁴⁵

As the church, like a bride on her wedding day, is glorious in splendor (Eph 5:25-27), “the holiest and most beautiful of ancient buildings were the temples.” Therefore, “it is natural for Paul” (and Peter) to think “of the church in this light.”⁴⁶ As the church exists to be a doxological temple,⁴⁷ so do its stones, its people.⁴⁸ Therefore, a Christian cannot fully function as a stone apart from the building of God. As church membership is how we “formally recognize and commit to one another as believers,”⁴⁹ church membership is how we fully function as believers. This is also seen in the next metaphor.

A Body and Parts

A second metaphor the Bible uses to describe the church is that of a body. Paul identifies the church as the body of Christ and Christ as the head of the body. (1 Cor 12; Eph 1:22-23, 4:16; Col 1:18, 2:19). In conjunction, he identifies Christians as parts, or members, of Christ’s body (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-17).

⁴³ Craig L. Blomberg, Darlene M. Seal, and Alicia Duprée, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021), 248.

⁴⁴ Blomberg, Seal, and Duprée, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 452-453.

⁴⁵ Blomberg, Seal, and Duprée, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 660.

⁴⁶ Blomberg, Seal, and Duprée, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 453.

⁴⁷ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 107-108.

⁴⁸ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 1, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 1.

⁴⁹ Leeman and Hansen, *Rediscover Church*, 75.

To the Ephesian church in particular, after expressing the privileges and praises of being in Christ,⁵⁰ Paul continues in the body of this letter by identifying his readers as the body of Christ. After giving them this visual (1:22-23), he then gives them a vision (4:1-16). As the purpose of the “building” is to be a doxological temple, the “goal of this body,” writes Benjamin L. Merkle, is for the “believers to grow up in every way into him Their goal is to become more like their Savior.” He continues, “Christ is the one who leads the church and nourishes it by supplying everything needed for growth God gifts believers so that they, having been empowered, may use their gifts for the benefit of others and the common good. The end result is that the body will grow—not just numerically but also in maturity.”⁵¹

Because this is the goal of the church, the question begs to be asked: Can a Christian, then, fully function apart from the church? No. They cannot. Not only can a member not grow apart from a body, but the body cannot grow apart from every member. “Every body needs a head . . . [and] every head needs a body.”⁵² This is why Paul says that “when each part is working properly,” this “makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16). Consequently, this also means that when two or three (or even five) are gathered in his name, this does not necessarily constitute a church.⁵³ This group is just a decomposing hand. This is because a group cannot identify as a church if it does not bear the marks, or DNA, of a church. “You cannot stop going to church and still be the church.”⁵⁴ A Christian cannot fully function as a body part apart from the body.

A Flock and Sheep

⁵⁰ Blomberg, Seal, and Duprée, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 446.

⁵¹ Benjamin L. Merkle, “Ephesians,” in *ESV Expository Commentary: Ephesians–Philemon*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 76.

⁵² DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*, 12.

⁵³ Allison also states that “local churches are led by pastors (also called elders) and served by deacons, possess and pursue purity and unity, exercise church discipline, develop strong connections with other churches, and celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper.” Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

⁵⁴ DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*, 172.

A third metaphor the Bible uses to describe the church is that of a flock. Finding its roots in the Old Testament, we see that God's people are a flock, and the Lord is its shepherd (Ps 23; Ezek 34; Is 40:11). Fulfilling this metaphor, Jesus says in the gospel of John that he is the good shepherd of the one flock of God (John 10:14-16). Also, Peter affirms this metaphor in his first epistle when he tells God's elect (whom he previously identified as stones) that, after having gone astray (cf. Is 53:6), they have come back to the Shepherd and Overseer of their souls (Pet 2:25). The church is God's flock. Jesus is its shepherd. "We are his people and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps 100:3; see also 1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28).

Mark Dever writes,

The images the biblical authors use to describe Christians and their relationship to the church in the New Testament presume that Christians are members of local churches. Paul refers to the church as a body and to Christians as "members" of it. He refers to the church as God's "household" (1 Tim 3:15), made up of brothers and sisters in the faith. Peter refers to Christians as "stones" that are part of a "spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). He also refers to Christians as "sheep" who are part of God's "flock" (1 Pet 2:25; 5:2). These images point to the fact that God intends for his people to be united together in local churches. If we are members of the body, are not we meant to be attached to the body? If we are God's children, are not we meant to fellowship with our brothers and sisters in God's house? If we are stones, aren't we supposed to be part of the building? If we are God's sheep, are not we meant to travel with the flock?⁵⁵

The answer is yes! Not only can we not fully function as Christians apart from the church. Like Dever alludes to, we cannot fully follow the shepherd without traveling with the flock.

Church Membership is Necessary and Biblical: It is How We Fully Follow

In a flock, the shepherd leads by calling, commanding, and sometimes using his crook or staff. For example, in Psalm 23:2, David tells us that the Lord *makes* him "lie down." Similarly, for the flock of God, the church, Jesus gives us commands for our good. Because these commands are corporate in nature (seen by the second person plural in Greek) and are meant for

⁵⁵ Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church*, 24-26.

the entirety of the flock, a Christian cannot fully follow certain commands of the shepherd without being a member of a local church.

For example, Christians cannot “serve one another through love (διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις)” (Gal 5:13) apart from the church. They cannot “encourage one another (παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους)” (1 Thes 4:18) away from the flock. It is impossible for Christians to confess their “sins to one another and pray for one another (ἐξομολογεῖσθε οὖν ἀλλήλοις τὰς ἀμαρτίας, καὶ εὐχέσθε ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων)” while supposedly following Christ alone.

Moreover, a Christian cannot follow the command of their shepherd that calls them to submit to his under shepherds—the elders of local churches (1 Pet 5:1-4). The author of Hebrews tells us, “Obey your leaders and submit to them (πεῖθεσθε τοῖς ἡγουμένοις ὑμῶν καὶ ὑπέικετε)” (Heb 13:17) as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). Again, this command comes to us in the second person plural, meant for the entire church, to be obeyed in local churches.

Dever writes, “Have you ever noticed that it is actually impossible to obey God’s commands without committing yourself to a local church?”⁵⁶ Highlighting scores of passages, he points out that the New Testament “consistently shows that the Christian life revolves around the local church.”⁵⁷ Because of this, he rightly concludes that “the only meaningful way to fulfill these commands is by carrying them out with a specific group of people.”⁵⁸ He says, “If we take obedience to God seriously, we simply cannot follow Scripture’s commands without being a member of a local church.”⁵⁹

Pastoring his flock with his letters,⁶⁰ the apostle John says something striking in connection to what we have just seen. In the first of his three epistles, he warns, “Whoever

⁵⁶ Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church?*, 20.

⁵⁷ Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church?*, 20.

⁵⁸ Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church?*, 22.

⁵⁹ Dever, *Why Should I Join a Church?*, 23.

⁶⁰ Ray Van Neste, “1 John,” in *ESV Expository Commentary: Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. 12 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 417.

makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.” In other words, “a life characterized by sin is evidence of not knowing God and of being in the clutches of the Devil.”⁶¹ Since we have seen that a Christian cannot obey the commands of Scripture apart from the local church, we can then logically conclude that a churchless Christian is sinning, committing sins of omission when they omit the assembly. Disregarding the church, they disregard the commands to serve one another, encourage one another, confess their sins to one another, and pray for one another. Van Neste reminds us that “sin is not merely connected with the Devil but originates *from* him.”⁶² Therefore, Dever’s words ring even more true. A churchless Christian may indeed “be going to hell”⁶³ since they are possibly of the Devil.

So far, we have seen that a living stone, body part, or sheep cannot fully function apart from the temple, the body, or the flock. We have also seen how a sheep cannot fully follow or obey their shepherd apart from the local flock. As we have seen how church membership is required for a Christian to fully function in their identity and follow specific commands of Scripture, we will now look at how church membership is required for a Christian to flourish in their faith.

Church Membership is Necessary and Biblical: It is How We Fully Flourish

The Lord desires that his people flourish,⁶⁴ but apart from the local church, a Christian flounders. This is (again) because of the nature of the local Christian and the nature of the local church. By examining biblical anthropology, ecclesiology, church history, and statistics, I will now demonstrate the necessity of church membership for a Christian’s flourishing.

⁶¹ Van Neste, “1 John,” 444.

⁶² Van Neste, “1 John,” 444.

⁶³ Dever *Why Should I Join a Church?*, 9.

⁶⁴ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 288. Kindle.

English and Wilkin write, “God could have made us to bear His image in any way He chose. His sovereign choice was that we should do so in a physical body. We are created both physical and spiritual, possessing both bodies and souls Humanity is the place where the material and the spiritual are joined together.”⁶⁵

Likewise, Anthony Hoekema, in his book *Created in God’s Image*, writes,

One of the most important aspects of the Christian view of man is that we must see him in his unity, as a whole person. Human beings have often been thought of as consisting of distinct and sometimes separable “parts,” which are then abstracted from the whole. So, in Christian circles, man has been thought of as consisting either of “body” and “soul,” or of “body,” “soul,” and “spirit.” Both secular scientists and Christian theologians, however, are increasingly recognizing that such an understanding of human beings is wrong, and that man must be seen in his unity⁶⁶

Arguing that man is a body and soul/spirit, Hoekema goes on to say that “though the Bible does see man as a whole, it also recognizes that a human being has two sides: the physical and non-physical,” or the visible and invisible. “Man is *one* person who can . . . be looked at from *two* sides.” Humans, he says, are a “*psychosomatic unity*.”⁶⁷ How does this relate to the fact that Christians must be a part of a local church? We will see this by looking at the spiritual disciplines.

Before we do this, however, we need to understand that the term *spiritual discipline* is a misnomer. It is an inaccurate term because one cannot make a Christian’s practices purely spiritual apart from the physical, just as one cannot separate a human being into the physical and non-physical. As the stomach is involved in fasting (Matt 4:2) or bowed knees and uplifted eyes are involved in prayer (Eph 3:14; John 17:1), all the disciplines, or “habits of grace,”⁶⁸ are incarnate.

⁶⁵ English and Wilkin, *You Are a Theologian*, 91.

⁶⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 203.

⁶⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 217.

⁶⁸ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 26.

David Mathis writes, “Our God is lavish in his grace; he is free to liberally dispense his goodness without the least bit of cooperation and preparation on our part, and often he does. But he also uses regular channels. And we can routinely avail ourselves of these revealed paths of blessing—or neglect them to our detriment.”⁶⁹ One of these paths of blessing is by belonging to his body,⁷⁰ or regularly meeting together (Heb 10:25) for corporate worship.

Donald Whitney writes that while Christians are to worship God in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24), “according to Hebrews 10:25, God expects His people to participate regularly in worship gatherings with other believers, warning specifically about ‘not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.’”⁷¹ He continues, “The church of Jesus Christ is not a collection of isolationists. The New Testament describes the church with metaphors like “flock” (Acts 20:28), “body” (1 Corinthians 12:12), “structure” (Ephesians 2:21) . . . each of which implies a relationship between individual units and a larger whole.”⁷² Thus, when a Christian participates in a disembodied discipleship, that is, apart from the local church, they “needlessly and sinfully miss much of the blessing and power of God.”⁷³

Whitney says, “Hebrews 10:25 teaches that those who neglect the disciplined ‘habit’ of assembling with other believers have developed an unchristian habit. To ‘meet together’ undeniably means to gather in the physical presence of other believers.”⁷⁴ While there is a place for online worship for those who are providentially hindered,⁷⁵ those who choose not to gather with the local church are exchanging the glory of the church for images. They are removing a

⁶⁹ Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 27.

⁷⁰ Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 28.

⁷¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and updated ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 109.

⁷² Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 109.

⁷³ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 111.

⁷⁴ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 111.

⁷⁵ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 111.

dimension to their discipleship when they opt for only two. Whitney concludes, “There is an element of worship and the Christian life that can never be experienced in private worship or by watching worship. There are some graces and blessings that our Father gives only when we meet together” with other believers as His family. This is because human beings are a psychosomatic unity. They are one as the church is one.⁷⁶ Christians need both private worship and corporate worship with a local body of believers.

Disembodied discipleship is an incomplete discipleship. A Christian cannot flourish apart from the local church. As a body member dies apart from the body, a branch dies apart from the vine (John 15:4-6), a Christian cannot flourish when they cut themselves off from the local church. Disembodied discipleship is like living in the intermediate state, which, interestingly enough, is reserved only for those who have died.⁷⁷ “The local church is the primary place that God intends to make and form holistic disciples.”⁷⁸ We see this throughout church history and through modern-day statistics.

Church Membership is Necessary and Biblical: It is Supported Historically and Statistically

Since the church’s birth at Pentecost,⁷⁹ “the church,” writes Allison, “has historically sought to . . . define itself as the body of believers in Jesus Christ” who regularly meet together to “edify its members through the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments/ordinances, and missionally engages nonbelievers through evangelism and good

⁷⁶ Gregg R. Allison, “The Church’s Mere Identity,” *Southern Equip*, May 6, 2022, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/the-churchs-mere-identity/>.

⁷⁷ Gregg R. Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith: A Guide to Understanding and Teaching Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 357-364.

⁷⁸ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 52. See also the “Formational Effects of Christian Worship” in Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 342.

⁷⁹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

works.”⁸⁰ This is confirmed in the New Testament. In Acts 2:42-47, we see the believers not only practicing the ordinances but also devoting themselves to the word, to one another, and to witnessing. The result is that the church flourished—“awe came upon every soul” (v 43), God was praised, and people were added to the church daily (v 47). In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, we hear Paul give instructions pertaining to when (not if) “you come together”—a phrase he uses four times in this text. We witness this in more texts about the believers assembling, or gathering in homes and synagogues (Acts 5:42; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 1:2; Jas 2:2). The New Testament clearly affirms that Christians should be a part of a local church.

Church history affirms this as well. Clement of Rome writes, “Since, then, we are a holy portion, we should do everything that makes for holiness We should attach ourselves to those to whom God’s grace has been given.”⁸¹ He says that we “should gather together for worship in concord and mutual trust, and earnestly beseech him as it were with one mouth, that we may share in his great and glorious promises.”⁸² He says that “we must preserve our Christian body to its entirety . . . according to his special gifts.” Ignatius agrees. In his *Letter to Polycarp*, he says that Christians should “hold services more often.”⁸³ In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, he says that “whoever does not meet with the congregation . . . thereby demonstrates his arrogance and has separated [or judged] himself.”⁸⁴ John Calvin claimed that “for those to whom God is

⁸⁰ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 565, Kindle.

⁸¹ Clement in *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook*, ed. J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 5.

⁸² Clement, in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 6.

⁸³ Ignatius, in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 8.

⁸⁴ Ignatius, in Allison, *Historical Theology*, 568, Kindle.

Father, the Church must also be a mother.⁸⁵ Also, Bonhoeffer writes of the “grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God’s word and sacrament in this world.”⁸⁶

Throughout history, the church has been recognized as a gathering people. Even pagans recognized this. Writing to Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger told him that the Christians

used to gather on a stated day before dawn and sing to Christ as if he were a god, and that they took an oath not to involve themselves in villainy, but rather to commit no theft, no fraud, no adultery; not to break faith, nor to deny money placed with them in trust. Once these things were done, it was their custom to part and return later to eat a meal together, innocently, although they stopped this after my edict, in which I, following your mandate, forbade all secret societies.⁸⁷

Along with its creeds, church history proves that Christians, since Pentecost, have believed “in one holy catholic and apostolic church”⁸⁸ and “the communion of saints.”⁸⁹ They believed that the church is crucial for a Christians’ flourishing. Statistics support this belief.

A 2006 Pew Research Study shows that “people who attend religious services weekly or more are happier (43% very happy) than those who attend monthly or less (31%), or seldom or never (26%).”⁹⁰ A 2022 Gallup poll shows that “weekly religious service attenders are, in fact, more likely to say they are very satisfied than those who make \$100,000 or more in annual household income.”⁹¹ A Global Flourishing Study that polled 200,000 people in over 20

⁸⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 232.

⁸⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 2.

⁸⁷ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 10.96.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 48.

⁸⁹ Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision*, 40.

⁹⁰ Russell Heimlich, “Happiness and Religious Attendance,” *Pew Research Center*, December 14, 2007, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2007/12/14/happiness-and-religious-attendance>.

⁹¹ Frank Newport, “Religion and Wellbeing in the U.S.: Update,” *Gallup*, February 4, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/389510/religion-wellbeing-update.aspx>.

countries, also confirmed that “attending a religious service positively affects flourishing.”⁹² The surveys proclaim: Blessed are those who attend a local church.

Frequently Held Objections

Some will object and say, “Can I not just be a member of the universal church? Do I have to be a member of a local church?” The answer is no. Not only have we already seen that disembodied discipleship is impossible for a human being, but logically, a person cannot be a part of something bigger without also being a part of something smaller.⁹³ For example, as one cannot be a resident of a state without also being a resident of the United States, one cannot only be a member of the universal church. While it is true that “you *do not need* to join a church to be saved . . . you *do need* to join a church to be obedient to Scripture.”⁹⁴ One might object, “But there is no command in Scripture to join a local church.” This is true. However, there is also neither a command to breathe in Scripture. As Jesus came to give us life abundantly (John 10:10), it is safe to say that he expects us not to neglect to breathe until the Day he comes. While there is no explicit command to join a local church, we have seen that joining a local church is the only way we can obey explicit commands.

Conclusion

Local church membership, defined as abiding in a local congregation, is not an option for a Christian. It is required for them to fully function in their identity, fully follow their shepherd, and fully flourish in their faith. As the bride and the bridegroom are one (Gen 2:24; Eph 5:31-32) he or she who abides in him (John 15:1-8) must also abide in her.

⁹² Fiona André, “New ‘Human Flourishing’ Survey Links Frequent Religious Practice to Life Satisfaction,” *The Roys Report*, March 28, 2024, <https://julieroys.com/human-flourishing-survey-links-frequent-religious-practice-life-satisfaction>.

⁹³ Ricky Jones, “Is Church Membership Really Required?” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 27, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-church-membership-really-required/>.

⁹⁴ Leeman and Hansen, *Rediscover Church*, 77.

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 27080 WW. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.

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