

WHY SHOULD I JOIN A CHURCH?

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Because Christ said, "I will build my church." Matthew 16:18-19 *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

Many evangelical Christians struggle with the question, "Why do I have to join a church?" They feel that it is enough that they love Jesus, worship and fellowship with other Christians and give of their time and money to worthy Christian causes. Since all Christians are united to one another by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, why should a Christian tie himself down to one congregation of believers? Many evangelicals enjoy moving from church to church, being fed from a spiritual smorgasbord of ministers or ministries, but never committing to any one congregation. So popular has this method of church attendance become that some churches no longer even try to keep track of membership. They are content if the church is attracting large crowds, the offerings cover expenses and there are enough volunteers to staff the various programs from season to season.

Should we be concerned about church membership? Yes! The reason we should be concerned is because when Jesus said He would build His church, He immediately gave the keys of the kingdom to men to administer kingdom authority on earth in the church. The keys of the kingdom are that which open the kingdom of God to allow entrance to it, or shut the kingdom of God to exclude from it. There are two things that open and shut the kingdom of God: the preaching of the Word and the exercise of Christian (spiritual) discipline.

This is what we confess about the keys of the kingdom in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q83: What are the keys of the kingdom?

A83: The preaching of the Holy Gospel and Christian discipline; by these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.

Q84: How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the Holy Gospel?

A84: In this way: that, according to the command of Christ, it is proclaimed and openly witnessed to believers, one and all, that as often as they accept with true faith the promise of the Gospel, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ's merits; and on the contrary, to all unbelievers and hypocrites, that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation abide on them so long as they are not converted. According to this testimony of the Gospel, God will judge men both in this life and in that which is to come.

Q85: How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?

A85: In this way: that, according to the command of Christ, if any under the Christian name show themselves unsound either in doctrine or life, and after several brotherly admonition do not turn from their errors or evil ways, they are complained of to the Church or to its proper officers; and, if they neglect to hear them also, are by them denied the holy sacraments and thereby excluded from the Christian communion, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ; and if they promise and show real amendment, they are again received as members of Christ and His Church.

When Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to men to exercise in the church, He was setting up a visible church in the world, one with officers who are called to make judgments about who is and who is not a Christian, and who may and who may not receive the sacraments of the church. Wherever Christ is

building His church, there are ministers preaching the Word and elders exercising discipline, especially determining who may and who may not receive the sacraments of the church. This ties in closely with the marks of a true church: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline.

The fact that Christ has given the keys of the kingdom to men to exercise on earth, in the church, means that believers should submit to the ministry of the ministers and the elders of the church as they exercise those keys. Indeed, the Bible commands Christians to submit to those who are over them in the Lord, Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

Although Christ promised that Satan would not prevail against the church, Christ did not promise total immunity from Satan's efforts to destroy the church. Satan is working very hard to corrupt Christians, rob them of their joy and keep them from being effective and productive in the service of Christ. Christians who refuse the spiritual oversight and accountability of church membership are easy targets for Satan. Satan can deceive or mislead and, without church membership, there is no one to oversee and correct.

A Christian is not called to be lone crusaders, single handedly fighting the forces of evil, accountable to no one. We are called to live in committed relationships where we are accountable to one another and where those appointed by Christ keep watch over us and shepherd us according to our weaknesses and needs.

American rugged individualism is deeply engrained in our culture and even in Western evangelicalism. We must recognize that individualism is not what the Bible teaches as God's will for His people. We are spiritually united to one another and called to give visible expression to that unity in the body of Christ, the church – a church which has officers who have been given authority and to whom all must be in submission.

Those who rebel against church membership are rebelling against Christ. That is why we confess in the Belgic Confession, Article 28,

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

The man who wrote those words lived them, and died because of them. He was put to death for being a member of a Reformed church. Church membership means being in submission to Christ by being in submission to those whom Christ has placed over us. May the Lord of the church continue to build His church among us.