

Every Christian Needs the Church

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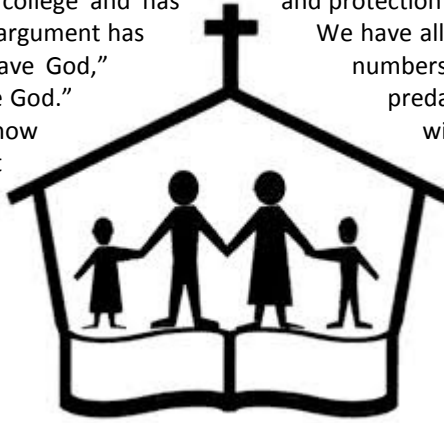
INQUIRY: I have a friend who has gone to college and has stopped meeting together with a church. Her argument has been that “you don’t need the church to have God,” and “you don’t need to ‘go to church’ to have God.” She still studies and reads on her own, but how can I explain to her that she needs to connect with the local body? She recently started going to a denominational Bible study, and so she has been counting that as “church.” But this is obviously not the same as being a part of the *ekklesia* [called out ones, or church]. How can I explain to her that she really NEEDS to be a member of a local church?

REPLY: It is definitely the case that EVERY Christian has an obligation and a need to be a vital part of a local congregation of Christ’s church. God’s people are often compared with sheep (see Psalm 23), and sheep need shepherds for their safety and well-being. Though Jesus is our “Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4), he has appointed the elders of each local congregation—each congregation being a flock of sheep—to be the shepherds who are responsible for our well-being. Paul commanded the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17) to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He has purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Peter exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Peter 5:2).

We “sheep,” on the other hand, are commanded thus: “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17). Here we see that not only are the shepherds (elders) responsible FOR us sheep, but also that we sheep are responsible TO the elders for our behavior and life-style. Just as the elders must give an account to God for how well they do their job as shepherds, so also must we Christians give an account of our lives to these leaders. All of us need to be held accountable; this is a form of spiritual discipline. Church attendance is one thing we are accountable for, since we are warned against “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:25).

Not to be a part of a local church and thus under the care of shepherds is therefore an act of direct disobedience to God’s commands; it is an act of rebellion against God’s authority, and against the authority of our Chief Shepherd himself. It is also an act of arrogance, since one is assuming that he or she does not NEED the help and guidance of spiritual leaders, and does not NEED to be held accountable to anyone. It is also an act of recklessness, in which one is closing his or her eyes to the many sources of spiritual danger that threaten us in this world (and especially in college!). When Paul was addressing the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he warned them to “be on guard,” because “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (vv. 28-29).

Sheep not only need shepherds; they also need the support



and protection that come from being part of a large group. We have all heard the aphorism that there is “safety in numbers.” We have seen nature films where predators stalk large herds of antelope or wildebeests, waiting for one member of the group to wander off by itself where it can be taken down, killed, and eaten. Similarly, Christians who try to “go it alone” are easy prey for our “adversary, the devil,” who “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

If we are not willing to accept our identity as sheep, and to abide by God’s instructions to us on how to be a part of a local flock under the care of elders, then we do not really belong to Jesus. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27). Can we say we are following Jesus if we do not listen to His voice as he speaks to us in His Word?

THE ISSUE: Is church necessary? Do we need to be a part of a local congregation in order to live a Christian life and be pleasing to God? In a previous note I answered this question with a firm YES, from the perspective of the Biblical teaching that God’s people are compared to a flock of sheep who especially need shepherds. Here I will continue to show that church membership is not optional but is in fact NECESSARY, by presenting a series of interlocking propositions.

THE ARGUMENT: All of the following propositions are based on specific Biblical teaching. If we want to be truly obedient to God’s Word, then we must be a part of His church.

The first proposition is this: You cannot live as a genuine human being without HONORING GOD. This is part of what it means to be a human being, and not just an animal. Only human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28), and thus have the ABILITY to honor their Creator. True, the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1), but not consciously. All created beings are a testimony to the power and majesty of God (Rom. 1:20), but only human beings have a conscious knowledge of God as their Creator and a personal ability to “honor Him as God” and “give thanks” (Rom. 1:21).

This is the main thing that makes us different from animals. I have seen animals in church services. I preached in an outdoor service in the Yucatan Peninsula, where chickens hunted bugs in the aisles and under the benches of the worshipers. Dr. David Grubbs tells of preaching for an outdoor service near a river in Africa, where there were 173 in attendance: 170 people and 3 hippos. I think I can safely say that the chickens and the hippos were not there to worship God! I have also seen animals voraciously enjoy the bountiful food provided by God for their sustenance. Bees and hummingbirds take nectar from flowers, and dogs gobble down pieces of meat or cheese. But only human beings know what James 1:17 means, and only human beings pause to say “Thank you, God,” before eating.

The point is that when we do not honor God, we are putting ourselves on the same level as animals. Thus to truly live as

human beings, we MUST honor God. "In all your ways, acknowledge Him" (Prov. 3:6). "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

The second proposition is this: You cannot truly honor God without HONORING JESUS CHRIST. Many people give great honor to false gods, which is idolatry. Many people who know a little bit about the Bible and about Christianity give allegiance to some "higher power" or to "the man upstairs," and think this is all they need. The problem is that the true God, the God of the Bible, is specifically the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot honor the true God without also honoring his Son, Jesus. God has so testified: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; hear Him!" (Matt. 17:5). We can come to God ONLY through Jesus. Jesus says, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:1, 6). Most significantly, Jesus says, "For not even the Father judges any one, but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (John 5:22-23). See 1 Tim. 2:5.

Saving faith is not just a general faith in a divine being, but is faith in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only God we really know is the God of the Bible, the God who is inseparable from Jesus. If you say you can honor God without honoring Jesus, what "god" is that? Where did you get your information about him? Any such deity is an idol, a human invention, in which there is no salvation.

The third proposition is this: You cannot truly honor Jesus Christ without BELONGING TO HIS CHURCH. Here we get to the heart of the present issue, i.e., the idea that we can honor God, and even honor Jesus Christ, without being a part of "the church." Many will say, "I can believe in Jesus and be a disciple of Jesus without all that church stuff." But here again we must ask, what "Jesus" is that? Where did you get your information about him? The only real Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible, and the Jesus of the Bible is inseparable from his CHURCH. The real Jesus has said, "Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). The real Jesus is "the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body" (Eph. 5:23). The church is the object of Christ's love; he "gave Himself up for her," i.e., for the church (Eph. 5:25). The church is what "He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Thus only those who are a part of HIS CHURCH are under Christ's headship and are saved by his blood.

Note that I have said here that we cannot truly honor Jesus without belonging to HIS church. Some "churches" use that word as a deliberate parody of the church of the Bible. I saw an ad in a newspaper for "The North Texas Church of Freethought: A Fellowship of Unbelievers." In another paper I saw an article about the "First Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Church." Madelyn Murray O'Hare started "Poor Richard's Church." Other groups even within Christendom use the name "church" in a sincere effort to follow Jesus, but their faith and practice deviate from the pattern of the true church found in the New

Testament. If you want to truly honor Jesus, you must be a part of a local congregation that is true to the NT teaching in the closest possible way. It is not true that "one church is as good as another."

In summary: You cannot live as a genuine human being without honoring God; you cannot honor God without also honoring Jesus Christ; and you cannot honor Jesus Christ without belonging to His church. ■

What about you?

What does your current level of commitment to the family meal (Lord's Supper) indicate about your love for the body of Christ and commitment to her mission?

What priorities competing for your attention are hindering your attendance at the family meal?

Even if you are faithfully attending the weekly supper date with the Lord and His family, how well are you motivating your brothers and sisters toward acts of love and good works (Heb. 10:24)?

What growth step are you prepared to take in attending (ministering) to the body?