

The Optional Church Member – or

Am I a Member of an Optional Church?

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves – Hebrews 13:17

If the Lord gave the great commission (Matt. 28:18-20) to the apostles, and then placed those apostles in the local church (I Cor. 12:28), is it important for us to be affiliated with the local church? Am I greater than the church? Am I smarter than God? Can I pass judgment on the institution the Lord established? Many people answer this today in the affirmative, but the Lord may have a difference of opinion.

If you are reading this, and have not yet read the article on what we believe about the church, it would be worth your time to read that article first. The church in the New Testament was a local church – not a universal one. All commands given to individuals and having to do with the church can only be carried out through the local assembly.

Christ built the church (Matt. 16:18), gave instructions on conduct in the church (Matt 18:17), added to the church (Acts 2:47), provided leadership in every church (Acts 14:23), is head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22), gets glory in the church (Eph. 3:21), loved the church (Eph. 5:25), and wrote letters to the churches (Rev. 2).

Christ empowered the assembly that was in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (Acts chapter 2). No one was empowered that day who was not a part of that assembly, as far as we know. The church is the institution that God has ordained to carry out His message on earth. The church, and only the church, has authority to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism added members to the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and those members continued with that body (Acts 2:42). Understandably, it was perhaps a little easier in that day to remain a member of the correct church, since it was more difficult to find another one down the street that was more to one's liking. It didn't take long to get to that point, however.

Today, we have a curious theological anomaly among those who claim to be born-again, heaven-bound, spirit-filled children of God. We have "detached believers," or those who do not see any need to be formally affiliated with the institution God ordained to carry out his work. Those folks need to understand that they cannot be obedient to the Lord in such a condition. We will attempt to explain why. First, let's ask ourselves a few questions:

1. If God went to all the trouble of establishing the local church, putting officers in it, and providing teachers for it, would He then be satisfied if we ignore it?
2. If God provides commands for how to conduct ourselves in the house of God, would He be pleased if we decide we won't even attend?

3. If it's God's will for us to have spiritual authority over us, and that spiritual authority is invested in the local church, is God really happy with us if we won't submit ourselves to church authority?
4. Is it possible to escape God's requirements for obedience to authority, preaching the gospel, attending the house of God, being subject to church discipline, giving as we are blessed, and being taught, by simply avoiding being church members?

One may say, "Well, I'm attending here so God considers me a member." But are you really a member if you are not subject to any requirements of the membership?

OK, enough of this beating around the bush. Let's press on.

First, it was the scriptural pattern to appoint elders or overseers in EVERY church (Acts 14:23, Tit. 1:3). These elders had responsibilities that could only be carried out if they had a congregation that was to be subject to them

Eph 4:11-12 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

1 Peter 5:1-4 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight [thereof], not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over [God's] heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all [of you] be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

1 Cor 12:28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Phill. 1:1 Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

Acts 20: 17-18, 28 And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Heb 13:17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that [is] unprofitable for you.

Matt 18:17-18 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell [it] unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven

I Tim 5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer [is] worthy of his reward.

If you “visit” a church for a couple of years only because you do not want to become involved, or because you do not want to be responsible, please know that you are abdicating your responsibility as a child of God. Amazingly enough, it is oftentimes these same folks who complain that there is no spirituality in the church, and that the Holy Spirit doesn’t seem to be able to teach those church members anything. As Isaiah might say “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil.” Why is it we can always excuse ourselves for our clear disobedience to the Word of God, but can’t seem to excuse others for their spiritual lapses in judgment? We hope the Lord is more merciful to us than we are to others, no?

Elders are “over you in the Lord,” (I Thess 5:12), “watch for your souls” ((Heb 13:7, 17), “labor among you,” (I Tim 5:17) and must give an account (Heb 13:17). Now who are they to labor among? Who is spiritually subject to them? Who is supposed to obey? Over whom to they have authority? ONLY TO MEMBERS. Why? Because only members can be disciplined.

Can you be cast out of an organization that you won’t join? I don’t think so. You can just wreak your havoc and leave. But with scriptural membership and submission come scriptural discipline, and that can only be administered on scriptural members. Can you vote in a church if you are not a member? No. Can you teach in a church if you are not a member? The scriptural answer is no. Can you take the Lord’s Supper with a church of which you are not a member? The scriptural answer is, for the most part, no. Can you attend the Elks Lodge, or the Masons, or the Royal Jelly Pooh-bahs, without being a member? No. They have harsher requirements, unfortunately, than most churches.

So God says there are people that should have spiritual oversight of you. God says He has established the church for that purpose. He says it is your responsibility to obey those that He has placed over you. And He says it is your responsibility to submit to them. One of the biggest reasons people today don’t want to actually commit to church membership is that they don’t like to be submissive. Children are not submissive to parents, wives are not submissive to husbands, so churches are not submissive to God, and members or “optional members” are not submissive to the church. It’s all just a case of disobedience. Submission is a biblical concept. To refuse to submit is ungodly, unscriptural, and rebellious. Although some will try to make a case that they can serve Christ better by disobedience, I believe that will be a hard sell at the judgment. I have found very few exceptions to the Word of God just for me.

Now you may say, if you are reading this, “Well, what can I do if there are no churches around here that are scriptural?” When we say this, we are usually using our own definition of that term, so it’s difficult to assess, but here are some options.

1. Get as close as you can.
 - a. If you find a church that you can join, perhaps you can be a positive influence and have a chance to change things for the better. Please remember, however, that this takes lots of time and lots of tears. If you won’t become a member and have voting privileges, then you can’t help, anyway.
2. Start a church.
 - a. This must be done by the proper authority – another scriptural church. This idea that we have today that we can just go out on our own without anyone overseeing our ministry, and start a church, is not from the Lord.
3. Realize that you aren’t perfect, so the church probably won’t be perfect.
 - a. All the churches in the book of Revelation, with the possible exception of one, had some problems. The Lord still considered them churches.
4. Move.
 - a. How important is your spirituality? Is heaven worth a geographical move? Is eternity worth a sacrifice? Is it worth it to drive a while, or move the family, to be in a place where you’ll hear the gospel and have a chance for eternal life for those you love?

There is no excuse for continued disobedience. The biblical command is to obey and submit to church authority. If we love Christ, we’ll keep His commandments, and they are not burdensome. So let’s get with it.

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Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth Psalm 26:8