

CHURCHES

when to join—when to leave

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Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. 1 John 5:1

The Apostle John's warm and simple observation explains why *Christian faith* and *church* go together. Faith links each believer personally to God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. And when people are linked to the same Person, they find themselves linked to each other, as well. Having Christ in common binds people together for eternity.

But for many Christians, finding a good church home is not easy. In our transient society, fewer and fewer have local church roots. Some dislike denominational labels and aren't sure what different churches stand for. Others have been disappointed or frustrated with past church experiences.

Yes, it can be very challenging to follow Christ as part of a spiritual fellowship, but that does not mean Christians are excused from working hard to do just that. God commands Christians to publicly organize themselves into a functioning kingdom and family. We are to demonstrate unity not only in our witness,¹ but in every aspect of our calling.² Such unity is not just spiritual and invisible; it is meant to be practical and very visible.

This is because Christ's church is both an organism and an organization. As an organism, it consists of all people, around the world and through all ages (including those now in heaven) who have been saved by the Lord Jesus. This is the *body of Christ*.³ It is a living Temple made up of people.⁴

But Christ's church is also an organization that supports these people. It is identified and known by its organizational structure.⁵ It makes decisions binding on its membership.⁶ It is entrusted with the gospel message – to proclaim it and preserve it for the next generation.⁷

Jesus said, *Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.*⁸ To acknowledge Jesus requires both an inner faith and a public confession.⁹ “Receiving Christ” means to publicly identify Christ as your Lord, and yourself as one of His followers in your community.¹⁰

The Lord’s will is for His people to be associated with groups of spiritual elders or overseers¹¹ whose job it is to lead¹² and to interpret the revelation given to the prophets and apostles.¹³ Christians are meant to meet together regularly for worship, instruction, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and other forms of fellowship.¹⁴ Christians should meaningfully care for one another’s needs,¹⁵ send representatives to work alongside sister churches¹⁶ and launch the gospel into places where it is not known.¹⁷ All this requires organization,¹⁸ congregational membership roles of various kinds,¹⁹ and recognition of official leadership.²⁰

Every believer, therefore, should become a part of an organized body of Christians. The body of Christ needs to be visible, tangible, and mutually accountable. Being part of a local church is far better than being a “Lone Ranger” Christian. Being part of a denomination is far better than being part of a “Lone Ranger” congregation.

Which church to choose? There are many kinds of Christian fellowships. Which to choose? Indeed, is every group that calls itself a church worthy of consideration?

From New Testament times, Christians have divided into different groups. Sometimes the fragmentation is vanity driven.²¹ More often, segments are created to be more accessible to new geographic, ethnic, social or language groups.²²

There is room for variety among Christians on a host of matters – issues that may be important, but are of *secondary* importance. Over the years, denominations have highlighted different biblical themes

or adopted unique cultural flavors. They have agreed to disagree over how much water to use in baptism, what pastors should wear, and a hundred other matters.

Churches and denominations also differ in the precise way they understand their God-given mission and the best strategy to achieve it. Each church has its own convictions about how God's grace is experienced, how the Lord is best worshiped, and how to best share the gospel with the world at large. These differences are reflected in everything from a church's music and architecture to its approach to ministry.

Some differences, however, are much more significant than others. The most important divisions in the church arise when once trusted leaders begin to steer people away from essential biblical truth. Since the days of the first apostles, there have always been leaders who think they can "improve" upon Christ's gospel. The apostles called such men *savage wolves* among the flock *who distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them*.²³ It is necessary for faithful Christians to reject these teachers or teachings²⁴ and disassociate themselves from them.²⁵ Some denominations have begun this way—not to fragment the truth, but to preserve it.

The issue of distinguishing who is and who is not faithful to the essential gospel was considered a crucial matter by Christ's apostles. Just read the short book of Jude or the second chapter of 2 Peter to see for yourself. Jesus is God's only provision of salvation, and His gospel contains specific promises and specific commands. The gospel is like the only vaccine for a deadly virus; we can't afford to get the labeling confused. That's why every Christian should belong to a church organization that responsibly upholds biblical truth.

Knowing when to leave Determining the best church for you will depend on a number of factors. If you currently are a member of a church, remember that it is not right to leave a congregation over some personal offense without first doing everything possible to seek resolution. Ask the church leadership to help, and use whatever procedures the church has established to resolve personal disputes.

However, many Christians today are reevaluating their church attachments for deeper reasons, wondering whether their denomination is responsibly upholding biblical truth. When dealing with such concerns, consider these thoughts:

A responsible Christian church will affirm the essentials of the gospel and *insist* that they be taught. A responsible Christian church will point out contradictions to the gospel, and *not allow* such errors to be taught.

Similarly, a responsible Christian church will clearly affirm what the Bible teaches about godly living, and *clearly establish* that as its ethical standard. A responsible Christian church will not ignore biblical teaching about sin, and *will not endorse* sinful lifestyles within its fellowship or leadership.

If your church or denomination has embraced teaching or behavior that makes faithful Christians ashamed, consider whether your church is in the throes of a debate that is still undecided, or whether it has clearly made decisions that a faithful Christian cannot support in good conscience. Perhaps you can help turn it back to a more biblical course. However, if you come to the point of believing your church or denomination has become spiritually irresponsible and is not open to reform, then you should leave that fellowship.

By the way, if you decide you must leave the church where you grew up or were baptized, does that mean that your own faith is somehow called into question? Do you have to get saved all over again? What about your baptism?

Rest assured that if your convictions rest on the essentials of the gospel, your own salvation is not at issue. Your place in the *body of Christ* is not threatened. Furthermore, if your former church had a clearly Christian heritage, you need not question your baptism.

You will, however, now need to confess Christ in another denomination that is responsibly functioning as His church. You will need another organized fellowship to make your witness visible and tangible.

Finding the best church for you Whenever you are seeking a church, you will hopefully find several faithful Christian congregations and denominations to choose from. How do you determine the ones that would interest you?

Observe as much as you can when you visit a church for the first time. Sensing a church's "friendliness factor" seems easy enough, but remember that relationships take time to develop. You are looking for a fellowship with whom you can share your faith and testimony. Your first mission, therefore, is to find out what these people say they believe and how their lives reflect the sincerity of their faith. If you really share the same kind of faith, you will probably make friends over time.

You might begin by asking members why they are there. Before or after a service, find people who have been members a while and ask them, "Why do you go here?" and just listen. Do you hear the kind of response that echoes your own convictions and desires?

Then, what does the church say it believes? Check out its official statement of faith and then call or visit the Pastor. Ask him to explain points of the church's creed or practice that you don't understand. Respectfully ask him some direct questions, like, "How do you believe a person can be right with God?" or "What is the basis of authority in this church?"

You may have specific questions arising from the reason you are searching for a new church home at this time – don't be afraid to ask them. Ask the Pastor whether his views and the congregation's views are in line with the denomination, and what issues in that denomination are being debated just now. Look for a Pastor who treats you with respect and rejoices in what his church stands for.

Ask someone – the Pastor should be a good choice – to summarize the church's sense of mission. It should be simple and easy to understand, and you should be able to recognize all the things you believe the church should be about. Check the church bulletin, web site or other publications to see how the church pursues its mission.

Once you have found a selection of churches with which you *could* identify, you can then go about the process of choosing the one with which you *best* identify.

- Which church has a worship style that most helps you commune with your Lord?
- Which church is structured to most effectively help you raise your children for Christ?
- Which church offers the best opportunities for you to use your spiritual gifts and natural abilities?
- Which church simply feels right? Some spiritual qualities are hard to put into words – you just sense them.

You may want to make a list of issues (together with your spouse if you are married and if he/she is a Christian, too) and discuss them as you visit and examine different churches. Pray until your consciences agree on which is the best choice for you. Attend long enough to know whether your first impressions are valid.

What if your spouse is not a Christian? Then simply try to select the best church for you. He/she needs to see you happy and growing in Christ – that would be the best thing for his/her soul.

The same advice applies when considering your children. Choose a congregation where *you* will be involved and thrive spiritually—your children need to see a content and consistent Christian at home more than they need to have fun at church. (Usually, however, the sort of church where you will prosper will have effective ministries for them as well.)

When you have found a fellowship this way, join it and enjoy your new church home!

Endnotes

- 1 Philippians 1:27-28
- 2 Ephesians 4:1-3
- 3 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
- 4 Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-9
- 5 Philippians 1:1
- 6 Acts 15:1-31
- 7 1 Timothy 3:15; 6:20; Jude 1:1-3
- 8 Matthew 10:32
- 9 Romans 10:9-10
- 10 John 1:11-12
- 11 Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23
- 12 Hebrews 13:7-17; 1 Peter 5:1-4
- 13 Acts 15:4-6ff; 20:28-32; Titus 1:9
- 14 Acts 2:41-47; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 10:22-25
- 15 Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 3:16-18
- 16 Acts 11:21-30; Romans 16; Colossians 4:7-17
- 17 Acts 13:2-3; Philippians 4:15-19
- 18 Acts 6:1-6
- 19 Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5;
1 Timothy 5:9-10
- 20 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 4:14; 5:22; Titus 1:5-9
- 21 1 Corinthians 1:11-13
- 22 Galatians 2:7-8
- 23 Acts 20:29-30
- 24 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 1 John 2:18-19
- 25 Acts 18:4-7; 19:8-9



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