

HELP!

I NEED A CHURCH

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ISBN

Paper: 978-1-63342-081-6

epub: 978-1-63342-082-3

Kindle: 978-1-63342-083-0

Published by **Shepherd Press**

P.O. Box 24

Wapwallopen, PA 18660

www.shepherdpress.com

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INTRODUCTION

In over twenty years of working at a biblical counseling center, I have observed that the single greatest impediment to our counselees making progress is their lack of a proper relationship with a solid biblical church. Sometimes the fault is with the local church which fails to shepherd and, if necessary, discipline the sheep. Some local churches shirk their biblical responsibilities and look exclusively to outside counselors to care for their troubled members. Often, however, the problem lies with the counselees, who have never committed themselves to a solid biblical church. Consequently, when crises arise they don't have access to the resources and help God provides for his people in the local assembly of believers. Sometimes people turn to outside counselors as substitute pastors. One of the most important things a biblical counselor can do in such situations is to help counselees establish a

committed relationship with a solid local church where they can enjoy the ongoing privileges of both being cared for and caring for others. While a crisis is not the ideal time to look for a church, God may use such a trial to draw his people to a biblical church where they will be blessed (and will be a blessing) for many years to come.

There are various reasons why professing Christians are not well connected to a biblical church. We have observed situations like the following:¹

Richard and Jodie have attended a popular church for a few years, being drawn to the moving worship music, the dynamic (and funny) pastor, and the programs which their kids love. Several weeks ago, their fourteen-year-old daughter, Michelle, started sneaking out at night with her boyfriend, apparently engaging in substance abuse and immorality. Jodie tried to confront Michelle, who became very angry. The encounter turned into a shouting match. Richard tried to intervene, taking Michelle's side, saying that Jodie was too harsh. Now Jodie and Richard are hardly speaking to each other. They called the church asking for family counseling. The church office said that the pastors don't do counseling, but they refer members to Christian psychologists in the area.

Richard was hoping that the Bible had answers for their situation. Jodie was concerned about the cost of the counseling.

Dan and Darla have been married for thirty years. Active in their local church, Dan served for years as a deacon and Darla led the women's ministry. Three years ago, the church where they had been members for over twenty years experienced a terrible split. It seemed that the people on both sides were ugly and vindictive. Dan and Darla were heartbroken. It was like going through a divorce. They finally left their church. For months they didn't even bother going to church. Now they occasionally attend the mega-church in their community, arriving just as the service begins and slipping out during the last song. Both of them feel so disillusioned that they have determined never again to join a church. The risk of getting hurt again is just too great. They have even considered the possibility of having their own little worship service at home on Sundays.

James and Sally attend a growing new church which currently meets in a school. Sally sings on the worship team while James helps to lead a homegroup. Over time, however, James noticed that Sally seemed to be getting close to one of

the men on the worship team and even saw them holding hands after a rehearsal. James confronted Sally, who confessed that she and Sam, the bass player, spend hours talking and enjoy a connection that she has never felt with James. She claims they haven't had sex, but she admits they have kissed on occasion. She doesn't want to give up her "soul mate." James, after trying unsuccessfully to confront Sam, approached Phil, the Senior Pastor. At first Phil was reluctant to do anything, saying, "You don't have proof that they have committed adultery. Furthermore, Sam is our only bass player. I really can't afford to lose him." When James protested, Phil finally agreed that Sally and Sam probably shouldn't remain on the worship team. James then asked Phil if the church leadership would do anything else about the situation. Phil replied, "We are a young church. We aren't ready to start practicing church discipline yet."

John and Cindy were growing in their faith, mainly through reading solid Christian books and listening to expository sermons on the Internet. They decided that they needed to leave their seeker-sensitive mega-church and find an assembly more in keeping with their new convictions. After carefully researching online the doctrinal statements of various churches, John

and Cindy decided to join a small church which featured much deeper expository sermons. At first, John and Cindy were happy in their new church home, where people seemed much more serious about their faith. But over time a few things have started to bother them. Their new church seems to place very little emphasis on evangelism. The leaders rule with an iron hand, sometimes even trying to control church members' personal decisions about issues of Christian freedom. What most disturbs John and Cindy is that when a family leaves the church, the pastor criticizes them publicly, almost branding them as traitors. John and Cindy wonder if they have made a big mistake by joining this little church.

In this mini-book we'll be looking at what the Bible says about the local church, and we'll find answers to some of the problems faced by these couples.

Why You Need a Local Church

We have seen many of the difficulties associated with church life. Church members, including the leaders, are still sinners. Conflicts will take place. People will let you down. Feelings will get hurt. Some wonder, “Why do we need the church if we already have our own relationship with Christ?” Others criticize the institution of the local church and seek to establish alternative ministries to fill its place. If we go to the Bible, however, we find the following teachings that show why we need to be part of a local church.

The Church Is Important

Our Lord Jesus Christ established the church as the institution through which he would accomplish his work in the age between his ascension and his return.

I will build My church;² and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

(Matthew 16:18)

This is good news! In spite of the weaknesses and failings of those in the church, Jesus himself is the true church builder. Though local churches and denominations may come and go, Jesus will not allow his church to fail. When one church or denomination turns away from the gospel, Jesus raises up another.

Jesus cares deeply for his church, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28). The church is portrayed as his cherished bride (Ephesians 5:25) and his dwelling place (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). The church universal, which consists of all believers in every age, is expressed through many individual local churches. The apostle Paul also explains the importance of the local church by calling it

the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

(1 Timothy 3:15)

The local church is God's chosen agent for missions and evangelism, as illustrated by the

church in Antioch which sent Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). This work of missions focuses upon not merely gaining converts, but also establishing local churches in every city (Acts 14:23).

You Need the Church

When God delivers us from the world and places us into his glorious kingdom by the gospel, in his wisdom he typically incorporates us into a community of believers. In the book of Acts we read how new converts were immediately added to a local church (Acts 2:47). The idea of a churchless Christian is unthinkable in the New Testament. Believers are referred to as sheep who are members of God's flock. As sheep we all need to be shepherded and fed. God has appointed pastors/elders/overseers³ to care for his sheep in local churches/flocks. Paul tells the Ephesian elders,

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 purchased with His own blood.

(Acts 20:28)

Some believers claim that they can be fed the Word simply by listening to sermons online or reading good books. The shepherding described in the New Testament, however, does not consist merely of preaching, but is also personal and relational. We all need loving, Christlike shepherds to keep us accountable, to help protect us from sin and error, to counsel and encourage us in times of trouble, to equip us to serve the Lord (Ephesians 4:11–12), and to minister the Word to us, both publicly and privately (Acts 20:20). While biblical counselors outside the church may use their expertise to assist a church in helping its members through a crisis, such counselors can never replace the ongoing shepherding and discipleship functions of the local church.⁴ Though it is good to praise God individually and as families, God also calls upon us to enjoy the privilege of assembling with his people in the church to worship him (Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:42; 20:7; Ephesians 5:19; Psalm 111:1). Our gathering together to worship our Savior is a taste of heaven (Revelation 5:11–14)! For a believer, to be away from worship among God's people is a source of sorrow (Psalm 42:4).

The Church Needs You

The Lord places you in the local church so you can serve him and his people. Just as every part of a human body is important, so every believer has a vital part to play in the local church body (1 Corinthians 12:7, 14–26). Through the church we enjoy the privilege of loving others by meeting practical needs (Acts 2:44–45), using our spiritual gifts to build one another up (Romans 12:4–8), and mutually encouraging one another (Romans 15:14; Ephesians 4:15; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24).

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love ... contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality ... Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:10, 13, 15)

Those who don't give themselves to a local church end up robbing their brothers and sisters of the gift that God intends for them to be to his people.

Must You Join a Church?

Many refuse to join a local church because they don't like to make commitments or be under authority. Others argue that they don't want to join a church because church membership is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. Some professing Christians, rather than committing to a particular local church, enjoy visiting different churches from week to week (or no church at all if they don't feel like getting out of bed on Sunday morning). Does the Bible speak to these situations?

Consider that while the word "Trinity" is not used in the New Testament, the concept of God's Tri-unity is clearly biblical; likewise, the term "church member" may not be explicitly used in the New Testament, but the concept behind church membership is clearly biblical. In 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul uses the word "members," in the sense of the parts of a human body, to illustrate how each believer is an integral part of the church. Church membership means that a believer is committed to a particular local church where he or she will assemble with others for worship (Hebrews 10:25), where the believer will use his or her spiritual gifts to build up the local body (1 Peter 4:10-11), whose people the believer

will love (1 John 4:7-8), and to whose leaders he or she will submit (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). The author to the Hebrews writes,

*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.*

(Hebrews 13:17)

Church leaders are told that they will give an account for the sheep that God has entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:2-3). Church membership is a means of identifying which sheep are in a particular flock for which its elders have responsibility. The practice of biblical church discipline also implies membership. Paul says that we cannot judge outsiders, but only those within the church. You can't be put out if you were never in (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). If you are a professing Christian who refuses to join a local church, who keeps watch over your soul? To whom are you accountable according to Hebrews 13:17?⁵ By not joining a church you are, in effect, conveying that you don't need accountability.

To remain aloof from commitment to the local

church is therefore to disobey Scripture. Those who want all of the benefits of church membership without taking on the commitment are essentially “dating the church,”⁶ like a man who wants the benefits of having a girlfriend without making the commitment of marriage. Others have likened these professing believers to spiritual hitchhikers who want a free ride without taking their share of responsibility.⁷

While it is clear, then, that the Bible teaches church membership, living this out may differ from church to church. Some churches have written membership covenants. It is even possible for a church with no formal membership process to identify and care for those who are committed to the body, thus creating a *de facto* membership.

Membership Has Its Privileges

The person who never commits to a local church will never fully enjoy the blessings of being an integral part of a church family. His or her opportunities for service in ministry will probably be limited. Why would a church allow a person who is uncommitted and unaccountable to teach a class or lead a ministry?

Believers in the early church were committed to one another, including during times of

personal or financial crisis (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32; 2 Corinthians 8-9). A godly local church will help its faithful members with benevolence in times of need. It is not reasonable, however, for a person to expect that a church to which he or she is not committed will be committed to him or her in the same way it is to its own members. Most churches can't offer significant help to people who are not committed and whom they don't know well, both because they don't have the resources and because of the warnings against helping those who refuse to be diligent (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13).⁸ Similarly, when church members face a spiritual crisis, the leaders of their church should be committed to invest effort sacrificially to counsel them biblically and to walk through their trial with them. Sheep that are not committed to any flock may find it much harder to get the same level of care in a crisis.⁹

Commitment to a Local Church Requires Grace

It has often been said that there is no perfect church. But nor is there any perfect church member. As the old joke goes, if you find a perfect church you shouldn't join it, because if you do it won't be perfect anymore. Whenever sinners work

together in close quarters, whether in churches or in families, conflict and disappointment will arise. However, God uses the challenges and trials which take place in these relationships to refine and sanctify us to be more like Christ (James 1:2-4). So rather than giving up and writing off our brothers and sisters, we have the privilege of reflecting God's grace as we learn to

*accept one another, just as Christ also
accepted us to the glory of God.*

(Romans 15:7)

So, having seen that being part of a church is biblical, how should we go about choosing a church? We will think about this question in the rest of this mini-book.