

People have lots of different ideas about how to join a church. "The church has to take a vote." "You have to give your testimony." "You have to be baptized to join this church." "You need to place membership." "You have to attend a class on the catechism." "You need to be confirmed."

This article looks at what *the Bible* has to say about joining a church. Please study with me.

## BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

Joining a church is not the same as becoming a Christian. Becoming a "Christian" means becoming Jesus' follower or "disciple" (Acts 11:26). Jesus told his apostles (special messengers) exactly how to make disciples:

*"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen* (MATTHEW 28:18-20).

The apostles then started preaching that Jesus was both Lord and Christ (that is, "the Messiah"). When people believed this message, the apostles told them to

*". . . repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (ACTS 2:38).*

"Repenting" involves changing our minds and lives, and is a natural result of faith in Jesus. Confession is another product of faith: *"For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"* (ROMANS 10:10)

The baptism which is commanded is water baptism (see Acts 8:38; John 3:3-5) and must be done in order for us to have our sins forgiven (1 Peter 1:21-22; Colossians 2:11-14; Mark 16:16). It marks the beginning of our walk as followers of Jesus, granting us access "into" Christ. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (GALATIANS 3:27; SEE ALSO ROMANS 6:1-4).

Once we are "in Christ", we can enjoy many spiritual blessings which only Christ offers (EPHESIANS

1:3-14), and the Lord adds us to the number of saved people (ACTS 2:47). God calls saved people His "church", and there is only one church (EPHESIANS 4:4).

The Bible gives the illustration that Jesus is the head, and that we are "members" of His "body". *"And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body. . ."* (EPHESIANS 1:22-23). Paul said to "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 CORINTHIANS 1:2), *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"* (1 CORINTHIANS 12:27). We have only one head, Jesus, and we are only one body.

So before we ever "join a church", God saves us and adds us to His people (in other words, makes us members of Christ's body).

## ONE CHURCH, MANY CHURCHES

Once God makes you a member of Christ's body, you then have a new relationship with the head, Jesus, and you have a new relationship with other members of the body. Whoever hears your confession of faith and sees your baptism has a responsibility to help you adjust to your new relationships, but you, too, must join them in service to God.

On the day the gospel was preached for the first time, all the new Christians were together in one place - Jerusalem (ACTS 1:12 - 2:47). There was one church and only one congregation. In time, that congregation was persecuted, and people moved away (fled).

*"Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (ACTS 8:4). "Now those who were scattered . . . traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word. . ."* (ACTS 11:19).

Local congregations were formed wherever Christians went. Today, there are Christians all over the world and they form congregations wherever they live.

Remember, as stated above, that *"there is one body"* (EPHESIANS 4:4), only one group of saved people, one "church" (EPHESIANS 1:22-23). At the same time, there are many congregations of those saved people, or many "churches". This explains why we read phrases such as, "the churches of Christ" (ROMANS 16:16), "the churches of God" (2 THESSALONIANS 1:4), and "all the churches of the saints" (1 CORINTHIANS 14:33).

## JOINING A CHURCH

The apostle Paul (also known as Saul of Tarsus) joined a church once:

*"When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out" (ACTS 9:26-28).*

We should notice several things about this example:

- 1) He made an effort to associate with others.
- 2) The disciples knew he was trying to join them.
- 3) People knew his past, not his present, and thus were understandably skeptical.
- 4) Someone who knew he was a Christian spoke up for him.
- 5) His conversion and conduct became public knowledge.

So when you set out to join a church, make an effort - don't give up if you have trouble fitting in at first. Make it clear that you want to join the group - don't just show up and *act like a visitor* while expecting to be *treated like a member*. Be prepared to share the account of your conversion and anything that is publicly known about you.

## JUDGED BY MEN

Is it fair to be judged by others before being accepted into the group? The only Bible verse that some people seem to know is, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (MATTHEW 7:1) Notice, though, that Jesus was talking about judging *motives*. The same chapter teaches us that we should judge people's *actions*. *"Beware of false prophets. . . You will know them by their fruits. . ."* (MATTHEW 7:15-16). On another occasion, He taught, *"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."* (JOHN 7:24)

You have had the chance to evaluate (judge) the congregation before joining them; now it's their turn. And remember, they may look at the actions which they can see in order to determine that you are, in fact, a disciple. They may ask about any teaching that

you have done, your reputation, and your conversion. But a church does *not* have a right to judge your motives, criticize or embarrass you.

## MEMBERSHIP

The term “membership” means “affiliation, association, brotherhood and fellowship”, and is used in two ways: **1)** I am a member of Jesus’ body unless I turn my back on Jesus, and **2)** I am a member of a particular local congregation unless I move away or start worshiping somewhere else. “Placing membership” is a phrase not found in Scripture, but is often used to mean telling people that you want to join a particular congregation.

**Membership is not an inanimate object,  
it is a living relationship.**

Now let’s address a common question. If I move to a new town, *do I keep my membership in my home town?* No. My “membership” moves with me, and it’s up to me to find the disciples of Jesus in the new town and try to join myself to them. I am no longer associating with the people in my home town on a regular basis, and the elders of any congregation are to “shepherd the flock of God which is among [them].” Concerning the people in my home town, we are all still members of Christ’s body, and so we share that common bond (see 1 JOHN 1:3, 7), but we are no longer members of the same congregation.

Chronic “church hopping” is not the Bible pattern. It hurts our ability to encourage others (see HEBREWS 10:24), and is a sign that we have joined none of the disciples.

Being a member of the Lord’s church is different from belonging to a health club. In a health club, you might never even *see* the other members. The entire club never gathers as a “congregation,” and the owners probably don’t care whether or not you ever come, as long as you send in your dues each month. But when you become a Christian, you have a vital role to play as a member of the body and as a member of a congregation. (Compare EPHESIANS 4:16.) You have unique abilities, and no other Christian is exactly like you. You might be a “toe”, an “eye”, or an “ear”, but no matter how you fit in, you are important to the whole body (1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31). Your presence at every assembly is expected and needed.

## SUGGESTIONS

So, how do I join a church? There is no set procedure or ritual in the Scriptures, no “magic formula”. We do not see anyone being baptized in order to join a congregation - that is not baptism’s purpose. We do not find anyone attending a class to learn a catechism or to be confirmed - the only requirement is to be a Christian. We do read about

- 1) God adding Christians to Christ’s body.
- 2) Christians joining one congregation at a time.
- 3) A congregation asking questions about a newcomer.

There are lots of ways to make it clear that I want to associate with a church. I might simply tell one of the members or elders in private. I might ask someone to make a brief announcement to the congregation for me. I might stand up in the assembly and announce it myself. I might go to the front of the assembly and tell a preacher or elder. I might read a personal statement.

A congregation has lots of ways of finding out something about me. In the example of Saul, a “character witness” was helpful to testify of his faithfulness. Another method was a letter of recommendation. This is simply a type of personal introduction, and was sometimes used by travelling Christians. But it would have been very unnecessary (and even absurd) if the individual was already known by the church (2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3). Sometimes the recommendation was sent ahead of its subject (e.g. COLOSSIANS 4:10).

So the church might request a letter or a phone call from other Christians who know me. They might have someone who knows me well put in a good word for me to the congregation. The group might meet with me after the visitors leave and talk to me about my conversion. Whatever the method, the *point* is good communication, and the *goal* is unity in the body.

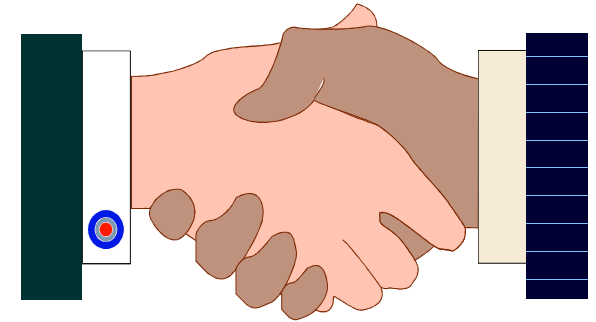
May God grant us wisdom as we try to serve Him.  
May He bless us with patience and love in our new relationships with each other.  
And may we all work together as members in the body of Christ.

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Quotes are from the New King James Version of the Bible

# HOW TO



# JOIN A CHURCH

*Presented to you by:*