**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Is Church Membership Necessary?**

Questions we want to consider on our program today are, “What is the church?” “Is the church important?” “Must one be a member of the church to be right with God?”

There are those who teach that membership in a church is not necessary, but what is necessary is a relationship with Jesus. They say, “we ought to emphasize the person of Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him. Being a member of the church is not necessary.”

Those who make such statements do not understand what the church is. Yes, it is true we are to emphasize the person of Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him, but I suggest to you that when we do that we will also emphasize the importance of the church and our membership in the church. When we truly know what the church is, we indeed will not be guilty of saying that membership in the church is not important.

First of all, what is the church? The word “church” is a Bible word and it is translated from the Greek word “ekklesia.” Ekklesia is defined as “a congregation, a gathering, or an assembly.” The church then is a gathering, or an assembly of people. The church is not a building, made of bricks and mortar. The church is people. In Acts 5:11, after Ananias and Sapphira had fallen down and died it says, *“So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.”* The church feared. Well, people fear, not bricks and mortar. In Acts 12:5 it says, *“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.”* The church prayed. People pray. Therefore, the church is people.

The people who are the church are saved people, people who have been saved from their sins by the blood of Christ. In Acts 2:47, it says in the NKJV *“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* Saved people are added to the church by the Lord. When a person obeys the gospel of Christ, he is forgiven of his sins and is saved. These are the ones’ the Lord adds to His church. Therefore, all saved people are in the church. If you are saved from your sins, then you are in the church.

Look with me also in Acts 20:28. Paul is speaking to the elders of the local church in Ephesus, and he said, *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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.”* The church of God was purchased with the blood of Christ. What does that mean? It doesn’t mean that the Lord purchased a building made of bricks and mortar. It means that the church is people who have been purchased by the blood of Christ. In 1 Cor. 6:20 Paul says to the saints in Corinth, *“For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.”* Each disciple of Christ has been bought at a price, that price is the shed blood of Jesus. And you know, the value of an item is determined by the price one is willing to pay for it. To Jesus our Lord the establishment of His church was so important that He was willing to shed His blood for it. Are we willing to say the church is not important?

And so the church is people who have been saved by the blood of Christ, people who have been purchased by the blood of Christ, and who therefore, belong to Christ. How then can a person say that the church is not necessary? If you are saved and belong to Christ then you are in the church.

The Bible also teaches that the people who make up the church are the disciples of Christ. The church and the disciples of Christ are one and the same. In Acts 8:3 it says, *“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”* Notice, Saul was making havoc of the church by dragging off men and women. The church is made up of men and women. Who are these men and women? Look with me in Acts 9:1. It says, *“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord…”* See the point. The church persecuted by Saul are the disciples of the Lord. The church of Christ and His disciples are one and the same. If you are a disciple of Christ you are in the church.

Then in Acts 9:13 those people persecuted by Saul are called the saints of the Lord. Those who make up the church are saints of the Lord. Saints are not some special group in the church, men canonized after death, as some teach, but they are people who have been sanctified by the blood of Christ, that is all Christians. To be sanctified means to be set apart from the sinful world and dedicated to God. All disciples of Christ are saints. The same point appears in 1 Cor. 1:2 where Paul says, *“To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints…”* The church then is made up of sanctified ones.

What are we saying? We are saying that the church is a group of people who are saved from their sins by the blood of Christ. They are people who belong to Christ, having been purchased by the blood of Christ. They are saints who have been sanctified by the blood of Christ, and who are disciples of Christ. We are considering the questions, is the church important? Is membership in the church necessary? Well, is being saved important? Is being a disciple of Christ important? Is being sanctified by the blood of Christ important? When we understand what the church is we then understand its importance and membership in it is necessary. And we will not be found guilty saying “we should emphasize a relationship with Jesus and not membership in the church.” No, if you have a relationship with Jesus then you are in His church. A relationship with Jesus and membership in His church are one and the same.

Now, someone may be thinking, “yes, membership in the universal church is necessary, but one does not have to be a member of any local church to be right with God.” Well, is this true?

The word “church” is used in the scriptures in these two senses, universal and local. In the universal sense it refers to all saved people. When used in the universal sense the word “church” is in the singular form. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, *“…on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”* Christ built His church, singular. This is all of God’s people.

But in other instances the Bible speaks of the church at a particular place. Thus *“the church of God which is at Corinth”* (1 Cor. 1:2) The church of God at a certain place is the people of God, the disciples of Christ, the saints at that place. There were a lot of these local groups in the days of the apostles. There was the church in Corinth, in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Antioch, in Jerusalem, etc. There were the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:11). They were located in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Paul was referring to a number of such local groups of disciples when he spoke of “the churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16.

Now, in the Scriptures each local church was a group of God’s saved people in a certain locality, and each local church met together, worshiped together, and were organized to function collectively. The universal church was not organized by our Lord for collective action, but the local church was. The Lord gave instructions for local oversight. When a church matured, men who met certain qualifications were to be appointed as elders or overseers (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) These elders were given the responsibility of overseeing and shepherding the flock which was among them, that is the church of which they were a part (1 Peter 5:1-3). The Lord made provisions for them to pool their funds to do certain works he called upon them to do. In other words, the Lord gave instructions for Christians to work together in a local church.

The question we are asking, is it necessary, in order to be right with God, for a Christian to be a member of a local church? The answer is “yes.” But let me give you the scriptural basis for that answer.

Each Christian is a part of the family of God (1 Tim. 3:15). Being a family member carries responsibilities. Every child of God has obligations to others within the family. We don’t have time to list them all, but consider with me a few. We are to love one another fervently with a pure heart (1 Peter 1:22). This love is not just to be in word, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18). We show our love in service to others We are to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). We are to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15) We are to assemble with our fellow saints to stir them unto love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25). We are to teach and admonish one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). We are to give as we have prospered on the first day of the week to do certain works (1 Cor. 16:1-2). How can we meet these responsibilities if we do not become a part of a local church and assemble and work with them? Also elders are to shepherd the flock of God among them (1 Peter 5:2). They are to watch in behalf of the souls of those within that flock (Heb. 13:17). Members have the responsibility to submit to the leadership of their elders, as they lead in the ways of the Lord (Heb. 13:17). These responsibilities can only be met by becoming a part of a local church, and the elders knowing you and you knowing the elders. If Christ did not intend for his people to be a closely-bonded family of disciples, why did he organize the local body in such a fashion?

In Acts 9:26-28 it says, *“And 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.”* When Christians move into a community they must do what Saul did here. They must try to join the disciples in that place and work with them. Now, when Saul tried to do this in Jerusalem the church there did not accept him into their fellowship at first, because they did not believe he was a disciple. You remember Saul once persecuted the church in Jerusalem. But Barnabas informed the disciples there that Saul was a Christian, and when they learned that, they accepted him into their fellowship and it says, *“he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.”* He worked with them.

Paul said in Ephesians 4:16, *“from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”*

Must a Christian become a part of a local church in the place where he lives to be right with God? Yes. He cannot properly serve the Lord without being a part of a local church.

Our time is gone for today. We thank you for listening.

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