

Old New Questions (2): Must I Be a Member of a Church

I. Introduction

- A. What if I were to share with you well-researched program to benefit your kids
1. Research (Duke, Michigan, Indiana, Barna, CDC) shows that this program...
 - *Increases the average life expectancy of your children by 8 years*
 - *Significantly reduces their use and risk from Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs*
 - *Lowers risk of suicide and helps them rebound from depression 70% faster*
 - *Dramatically reduce their risk for committing a crime*
 - *Improve their attitude at school and increase their school participation*
 - *Reduce the likelihood that they would binge drink in college*
 - *Provide them with a life-long moral compass in decision making*
 - *Even causes them to wear their seatbelts more often*
 2. What the program with all these benefits? Its “*active church participation*”
 - a. Despite these benefits of church membership, fewer and fewer participate
 - b. Some polls continue to say 40% attend church; the reality is closer to 20%
- B. There’s a growing number of committed believers who don’t know they should
1. They are committed to Christian faith, and actively live and talk that faith
 - a. But they are not members of any church... and very intentionally so.
 - b. They have commitments that for them (they say) work better than church
 2. Notice a couple of statements by dedicated believers who opt out on church
 - a. **Christian #1** feels closer to God and more worshipful when he is surfing
Much of the “worship” at church doesn’t feel worshipful. When I float in the ocean, I feel a genuine sense of communion with God. And the people around me in the water and surf shops need to be ministered to. Isn’t that what church is about?
 - b. **Christian #2** says his church is a close group of friends at coffee shop
I don’t belong to a church, but I spend time in Bible study and prayer with other believers at a coffee shop Saturday nights. The fellowship and study we share there is better than what I’ve experienced in church. And the coffee is better!!
- C. Today is our second installment of the study series, “*Some New Old Questions*”
1. These are old questions to which everyone once knew the answer
 - a. Time have changed, and we can’t just assume we all know the answers
 - b. Last week our question was “*Why should I accept the Bible anyway?*”
 2. This week, our question is, “*Do I really need to be part of a church?*”

II. Must I Be a Member of a Church: Why the Question?

- A. Some are suggesting that modern churches are based on common false model.
 - 1. Constantine legalized Christianity with the edict of Milan in AD 313
 - a. Soon Christianity was not only legal, it was the official religion of Rome
 - b. Pagan temples were given to churches & people were paid to convert
 - 1) For the first time, church become large group meetings in building
 - 2) Many were pagans, so the service was controlled by a professional
 - 2. So “model” for church became a theater, and that is still the case today.
 - a. People sit in rows staring at back of heads with the real show led front
 - b. There’s little interaction with others (*we don’t really want that in theater*)
 - c. That remains true in liturgical, traditional & contemporary worship
 - 3. OK, this is overly simplistic, but those who raise it do have a valid point.
 - a. You can be a member of a church for years and not connect with people
 - b. Can go to church and watch the show and never connect with people
- B. That’s different from NT churches which were small enough to meet in homes
 - 1. Paul often greets these in house churches ([Rom 16:5](#), [Col 4:15](#), [Phile 2](#))
 - a. Even Jerusalem megachurch met “*house to house*” ([Act 2:46](#), [5:42](#))
 - b. He did rent a hall in Ephesus ([Act 19:9](#)), most churches were in homes
 - 2. And becoming part of a church was certainly less complicated in NT times
 - a. Churches today have very formal ways to join (*9 month course with exam*)
 - b. Membership in [Acts 2](#) was “*Believe and baptized*” and “*the Lord added*”
 - 3. There were many other differences in the way they did church in the NT
 - a. Church didn’t own property (*that didn’t come until after Constantine*)
 - b. No set worship order (*participatory*) or time (“*wait for each other*”)
 - c. They did have church potlucks, but they were part of the assembly!
- C. So the idea is that because church is so different now, we no longer need it
 - 1. We can experience God surfing or experience community at coffee shop.
 - a. So maybe being part of church is an idea who time has come... and gone
 - b. Must I really be a part of a church in order to be a Christian today?
 - 2. This is a new OLD question; some Jewish Christians wondered same thing

III. Must I Be a Member of a Church: Toward an Answer (Heb 10)

- A. Some Jewish Christians were wondering that in the book of Hebrews
1. Their world was making it very difficult for them to live for God
 - a. As Jews, they had isolated in a sea of pagans, and now it was worse
 - b. Now... an island of Christ believers in a sea of Jews in ocean of pagans
 - c. They were discouraged with “*feeble arms and weak knees*” ([Heb 12:12](#))
 2. It would be easier just to go back to synagogue— that is point of Hebrews
 - a. Hebrew writer tries to give his readers a new vision of Jesus (*bulletin*)
 - b. He then argues from OT that Jesus is better than Moses, priest, sacrifices
 - c. His conclusion sounds like a let us patch (we’ll read [Heb 10:19-25](#) later)
- B. The point I want to notice (you knew I was going here) is [Hebrews 10:24-25](#)
1. This text has been used as a club to force people to attend church.
 - a. We preached it is sin to miss church unless **provisionally hindered**
 - b. That means that God wants us to go to church except when he doesn’t
 - 1) **Story:** Guys fishing Sunday morning, “*I feel bad missing church*”
 - 2) Other says, “*I couldn’t have gone anyway— my wife is sick!*”
 2. Word “*forsake*” literally “*to abandon, to desert, to leave behind*”
 - a. It is used by Jesus on cross, “*why have you forsaken me?*” ([Matt 27:46](#))
 - b. Paul says Demas, “*loved this present world, has deserted me*” ([2 Tim 4:10](#))
 - c. The word is used in secular Greek for children who have been orphaned
 3. So “*forsaking the assembly*” isn’t missing church; it’s turning your back on it.
 - 1) That was Jewish Christians were tempted to do in the 1st century
 - 2) That is what believers do today when they aren’t part of a church
 4. Hebrew writer has in mind lofty things for his readers ([Heb 10:19-25](#))
 - a. He wants us to have confidence to enter the presence of God ([10:19](#))
 - b. He wants us to come near God with faith and a clear conscience ([10:22](#))
 - c. He wants us to trust God enough to hold unswervingly to hope ([10:23](#))
 - d. He wants us to think of others spiritual lives, no just ourselves ([10:24](#))
 - e. And he wants us to do all that by not giving up on the church! ([10:25](#))
- C. So must I be a member of a church? *Here it just as optional as pleasing God!*

IV. Conclusion

- A. What about Christian who feels God's presence surfing more than church?
1. We do experience God differently—service, prayer, nature, worship, art
 - a. What is a pretty sunset to some is a spiritual communion to others
 - b. And Hebrews does stress God's presence (“*enter the most holy place*”)
 2. Point isn't how best I experience God but how we experience Him together
 - a. You might not get much out of church today— *you might help others!*
 - 1) You being here might help someone stay faithful to God this week
 - 2) Maybe what you say to someone in the hall will make a difference
 - b. Chances are that you will get something, even if you don't realize it
 3. God calls us to a spiritual community, and its not always about us
- B. What about the Christian who meets with Christian friends at the coffee shop?
1. He's in community, encouraging and being encouraged. *Isn't that enough?*
 - a. Church doesn't have to be as formal as we've made it (*our theater model*)
 - 1) Churches meet in private homes, catacombs and even funeral homes.
(*Friend's church met in a theater lobby; “Coming Soon” poster behind the preacher*)
 - 2) Church may intentionally choose to meet in un-churchy settings.
(*One church meets in un-renovated warehouse in inner city where the people are*)
 - b. That's as much a real church as one with stained glass... or PPT projector
 2. Church can be small and informal gatherings— but it can't just be **casual**
 - a. **Hebrew 13** has two commands for us to remember leaders (**13:7, 17**)
 - b. In between these are reminders of some things leaders may help us with
“*Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings*” (**13:9**)
“*Let us, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore*” (**13:13**)
“*Do not forget to do good and to share with others*” (**13:16**)
 - c. This assumes organization and leadership that helps holds us accountable
 3. Church may be small or informal; it cannot be something that's casual!
- C. So, do I REALLY need to be part of a church? *The Bible seems to think so!*
1. Church is God's idea of how we are to support one another in our faith.
 2. Do if you are visiting here we want to ask, “*Are you a part of a church?*”
 3. If you are a member here, we also ask you “*Are you PART of the church?*”