

Participating in Church

1) What is church?

- A) When you hear the word “church,” you probably think of a building or a denomination. Actually, the church is something very different. The church is the body of Christ. Paul said, “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1:22–23).
- B) When you were born again, you were united spiritually with Christ. You are now “in Christ” and are part of His spiritual “body.” An analogy that Jesus used is that of a vine and its branches (John 15:5). Christ is the vine, and you are a branch. You have life because you are in the vine and receive nourishment from its roots.
- C) The body of Christ, the church, is made up of everyone who is born again. We refer to this vast group of people as the “universal”¹ church. Paul said, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Corinthians 12:13–14 NASB).
- D) For obvious reasons, it’s not possible for everyone who is in the body of Christ to gather together in one place to worship. Instead, we meet together locally in smaller groups. We refer to these groups as “churches” even though there is really only one “church” (we do this following Paul’s example: “Paul, an apostle...and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:” (Galatians 1:1–2)).
- E) In summary, the church is that vast group of people who throughout history have been united spiritually with Christ and are part of His body. It includes not only those alive on the earth presently, but all those who have died and gone to heaven in the past and all those who will in the future put their faith in Jesus Christ.

2) Why do believers meet together on a regular basis?

- A) Obedience. God commands every believer to meet regularly with a local body of Christians: “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24–25 NLT).
- B) Worship. Meeting together is a visible, tangible expression of your love and worship of God. It is where you can publicly testify to your faith and bring offerings of praise, thanks and honor, which are pleasing to Him. The psalmist David said, “Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!” (Psalm 95:1–2).

¹ While the term “Catholic” is generally used to refer to the Roman Catholic Church, the word “Catholic” is derived from the Latin *catholicus* which in turn is derived from the Greek *katholikos* meaning “general” or “universal.”

- C) Fellowship. One of the most important reasons for participating in a local church is to practice love toward other believers in the form of fellowship. We are to encourage and build each other up in the faith (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We are to urge one another to good works and motivate each other to live holy lives.
- D) Prayer. The early church met regularly to learn from the apostles, break bread and pray together (Acts 2:42). When we pray with other believers, we edify each other and help bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). It's very encouraging to hear a fellow believer pray on your behalf.²
- E) Instruction. Paul told Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). This means that corporate worship is about hearing the Word, being taught what it means, and being called to obey. These activities take place most effectively in the context of a local assembly of believers.
- F) Evangelism. The church is a place where sinners can be convicted of sin and called to repentance. Paul said, "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

3) Why should I participate in a local church?

- A) Accountability. In addition to the reasons given above, the Bible teaches that you must be under the protection and guidance of the leaders of a local church. These godly men are charged to care for you through teaching, encouragement and reproof, and you are accountable to them. The Spirit said, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:7, 17).
- B) Ministry. Everyone who is born again is given a spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:7; 1 Corinthians 12:7). You are commanded to use your gift to help the body of Christ grow and flourish (1 Peter 4:10; Ephesians 4:15-16). It's important for you to understand that you go to church to *give* as well as receive. That's why this lesson is called "Participating in Church" rather than "Attending Church."

² The idea that corporate prayer is more likely to be answered than individual prayer comes largely from a misunderstanding of Matthew 18:19-20. These verses are located within the context of the procedures to be followed when the church needs to discipline a sinning member. To interpret them as promising believers a blank check for anything they may agree to ask God for is to take these verses out of context (cf. John 14:13-15 where Jesus emphasizes that we must pray in His name, that is, in harmony with His will). In addition, it is unbiblical to say that when "two or three are gathered" to pray, some kind of magical power boost is applied to our prayers. Jesus is present when two or three pray, but He is equally present when one believer prays alone. See <http://www.gotquestions.org/corporate-prayer.html> for further details.

4) What about those who are unable to go to church?

- A) For shut-ins or invalids who aren't able to go to church, there are a variety of ministries available on the internet, radio or television. God understands the circumstances of these people and recognizes the sincerity of their hearts.
- B) It's your responsibility to visit such people as often as possible so they can be encouraged and not feel like they have been forgotten (James 1:27).

5) How often should I go to church?

- A) I encourage you to go to church as much as possible. The support and fellowship you receive from the church is vital to your spiritual growth. Avoid the temptation to skip church services. Satan wants to separate you from those who love and support you. Don't give him that chance!

6) My job keeps me from participating in church. What should I do?

- A) If your job prevents you from going to church at all, I recommend that you talk with your manager and explain your need. Approach them in a spirit of humility and cooperation. Don't be demanding or superior in your attitude. See if you can work something out that is satisfactory to both sides (follow the example given in Daniel 1). Pray and ask God to help resolve the situation. If nothing can be done, I recommend that you begin looking for another job.
- B) If your job only occasionally prevents you from attending church, I recommend you keep your job and work with your manager to maximize your chances to attend church. If you notice that you are starting to miss more and more services, ask God to help you resolve the issue. If your attempts are not successful, be prepared to look for another job.
- C) Remember this—God honors those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30). He knows your needs and will provide for you. Your job situation may be a test of faith to see if you will put Him first in your life. Seek godly counsel and be willing to do whatever is necessary to attend church regularly.

7) There are so many different churches. Which one should I attend?

- A) I generally recommend that you attend the church in which you were saved. If you were born again through the witness of a friend, I recommend that you attend your friend's church. This will help make the transition easier and give you connections to people who can immediately support you.
- B) If you are unable to follow the recommendation above (you may have been converted through a friend who does not live near you), or if you are forced to seek another church for other reasons, here are some things to consider as you make your decision:

- (1) Doctrine. Be sure the church believes that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant³ Word of God and that you should obey what it teaches (John 14:15).
- (2) Theology. Be sure the church believes in the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation and the physical suffering, death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- (3) Salvation. Be sure the church believes that you are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone and that your works cannot merit your salvation.
- (4) Holiness. Be sure the church believes that you are called to live a holy life, separated from sin and the world unto God.
- (5) Preaching. Be sure the pastor preaches the Word of God and clearly explains its meaning and relevance to daily living.

³ Broadly speaking, the doctrine of inerrancy identifies Scripture as true and without error in all that it affirms, including its affirmations regarding history and the physical universe. For further detail on this issue, see the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. It is online at http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf.