

# Must You be a "Member" of a CHURCH to be Saved?

Millions of Americans feel they get all the "church going" they need from watching television on Sundays. Local churches and pastors complain, say the "electronic church" is stealing members. Many people wonder, "Should I go to a church? Can I be saved if I am not a member of a church? Which church should I attend?"

It's time you saw the answer to all this from your own BIBLE.

Does it really matter whether you go to a church or not? Do you need to "belong" to a church to be saved?

*By Garner Ted Armstrong*

Any number have boasted, "I am not a churchgoing person, but I know I am as good or better than many of the so-called Christians I see going to church."

Others are convinced it is only by "having their letter" in a church - having their names on the church rolls, taking their families and going regularly, dutifully every Sunday to church - that they can be saved.

Are you one of these? When the church bells toll on Sunday morning, or when you see other people going by dressed "in their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes," does it nag at you with a twinge of guilt, make you wonder whether you should "be in church"?

We are all familiar with the great evangelistic campaigns. Famous evangelists command audiences up into the tens of thousands at huge outdoor football stadiums and arenas - all of this carefully prepared and rehearsed months and months before the event.

Usually, dozens of local church congregations take part, sparking membership drives, donating countless hours of time, contributing members for a massive choir, and enthusiastically involve themselves in a campaign to ensure the visiting evangelist has a tremendous turnout.

The ostensible reason behind much of this is to reach the "unchurched."

On many such occasions, a spirit of ecumenism prevails.

After a fervent appeal to "come forward," the penitent who have been moved by the evangelist's sermon are then directed to any number of "counselors," who are wearing name tags, representing this or that local church. The people are urged to "go to a church of your choice!" When one reads the Saturday church page or church directories, one frequently sees the invitation, "Come worship with us."

In the thinking of many millions of churchgoing, professing Christians, it is as if there are "many routes" to "heaven," which they imagine is the reward of the saved. The only considerations may be the location of the church, the size of the choir, the ability of the preacher, the parking lot, the organist, the soloist, or perhaps where members of their own family and/or friends attend.

Millions of churchgoing professing Christians are utterly ignorant of the true doctrines of the church they attend. For that matter, many a pastor may not be all that skilled in the intricate doctrines that form the basis of his denomination.

One could go to Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Congregationalist or other denominational churches and

hear their sermons, and yet be struck by the marked similarity of the fare they hear.

That's because most church messages tend to be on "neutral subjects," do not necessarily rebuke, exhort or admonish the congregations, and tend to stay away from strong, hard, doctrinal truths and real "meat" of the doctrinal beliefs of that church.

Isn't it time you understood what is a church, where God's church really is, what that church is like, what it is supposed to do, and how you can get into it?

### **"Church" - Just What Is It?**

**Most would answer "a building," or "a denomination of believers," or a "religious organization."**

Gradually, over the years, the original Greek word "ekklesia," which meant "called-out ones," has changed in meaning to become a building in which people meet!

Actually, the Greek word means a collective group of individuals who are called out from this present evil world by the process of repentance, conversion, water baptism, and the laying on of hands for the receiving of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised us, "I will build My church"! (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus said He would remain the living HEAD of that church; governing and ruling over that church in loving kindness, mercy, boundless forgiveness and tender care. He promised, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you."

Jesus Christ made it very clear He would NEVER leave the governing and headship of that church to any man!

Notice Jesus said He would build His church! He did not promise He would build a church named after a particular form of church government; after the day of the week the church kept; after a female prophetess, after the practice of "speaking in tongues," or after John the Baptist, or any other individual, method, mode of baptism or religious-sounding jargon.

If you count up the number of times the true Church of God is mentioned in the New Testament, you will see the expression "Church of God" far outnumbers the other descriptions of the group of called-out ones who formed the early church.

The name of the true Church of God is just that: "the Church of God"! Sometimes different appellatives were added before or after, which were merely descriptions of a particular local congregation such as "the church which is in their home," or "the Church of God which is at Corinth." However, the main term which is used most often in Holy Scriptures, giving us positive proof of the name God ordained, is always "the Church of God."

What really is that church?

By analogy, it is called "the body of Christ," "the bride of Christ," "His wife," and by many other terms.

The following analogies are used of the church: a "little flock," "the diaspora" (those of the dispersion, or "scattered ones"), "pilgrims," "sojourners," "the house of God," "God's temple," "Christ's body" and various other descriptive analogies.

An analogy is not the TRUTH. It is an illustrative story designed to help one understand a certain truth, but

quickly break down, and so are not always applicable in every point. It is very clear that the true Church of God is spoken of as "one body."

Notice! "There is one body, and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

"One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

"One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

However, remember that the church is spoken of as a scattered group of "called-out ones," individuals, in whom is the Holy Spirit of God.

Please bear in mind the question of as to whether Ephesians 4 is trying to tell us that only one incorporation of man, a political entity sanctioned by a materialistic state government, can be the "one body" of Jesus Christ, or whether this expression is to be taken spiritually, meaning there is only one collected SPIRITUAL body, but composed of sometimes scattered, persecuted individuals who are called, collectively, "the body of Christ."

There are those who trade on this scripture, trying to use it to justify a closed church, or a closed system of government, or an exclusive organization of men to which you must give your fealty and loyalty, saying the only door to the Kingdom of God is by "belonging to" that organization!

This is blasphemous on its face, and flies directly in the face of Jesus' statement that there is "no other name given under heaven" whereby men may be saved and that HE, only, is the "door of the sheepfold" and that any man trying to steal in by any other method is a robber and an intruder.

It is just not possible to "incorporate" the totality of the body of Jesus Christ in its true spiritual meaning!

### *An Evangelistic Association*

Believe it or not, the early apostles would have been thunderstruck and dumbfounded if they could have entered a time machine and been plummeted forward to this modern 20th century to be taken on a tour of a Bible Belt city and to have seen dozens of buildings, representing dozens of different congregations and organizations, all purporting to be "the church."

Why? Because Jesus Christ did not tell them to build different churches, but gave to them the GREAT COMMISSION: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature!" He told them, "You shall be witnesses unto Me, both in Jerusalem, and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth."

Luke 24:47 gives a very succinct summarization of the "GREAT COMMISSION." Notice they were to be witnesses unto Him - HIS NAME was to be primary!

They were to go, preaching a message of repentance (Matthew 4:17, Luke 13:3, 5, Acts 2:38, Acts 3:19) and commanding people to come out of sin (Revelation 18:4), and be baptized in water (Acts 2:38, Romans 6) for the receiving of God's Holy Spirit!

They were also to give powerful warning (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) of the terrifying and troublous times that lay just ahead, crying out, "Watch and pray always that you might be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36).

The purpose for which the church was commissioned was to preach the gospel. It only began to dawn on the early apostles that they lacked certain organizational patterns when it became noticed (Acts 6) that the

widows were being neglected in "the daily ministrations." At that time, only after this neglect had been brought to their attention, the apostles had to solve the problem by ordaining deacons to serve the physical needs of the growing congregations.

How tragic and ironic it is that, as the centuries have passed, this organization of seeing to the physical needs and creature comforts of human beings has tended to supersede and completely blot out the primary purpose for the calling and commissioning of the church in the first place!

Today, one sees great, moneyed organizations of men, with elaborately intricate and detailed liturgical services, special organizations within the organization, plenty of "rank consciousness" and political structure, like a giant bureau of a huge government, bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the scattered group of persecuted, spirit-led, preaching and witnessing apostles who went about "always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus," and who said, "We ought to obey God rather than men," and who preached powerfully of the person, the death, burial and resurrection and the second coming of Jesus Christ, even in the face of threats to their lives - and martyrdom!

The early church was a group of absolute equals (12 of them) who were organized for the purpose of preaching the gospel.

As such, that first-century fledgling group far more resembled an "evangelistic association," a group of people who were associated together by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of preaching the gospel, than it did "a church" in the modern sense of the word.

Where is the true church today? Jesus Christ built His church - just as He promised He would. There are many proofs as to where that church is, what it is doing, how one may enter into that church, and how it can be recognized.

First, let's follow the simple process of elimination.

The only recognized Bible name of the church is "the Church of God." Presto! In looking over the handbook of denominations, one can safely eliminate literally hundreds of denominations and organizations which do not have that name.

Next, look at the body of beliefs, identifying signs and important scriptural truths surrounding that church.

1. Jesus Christ, not any man or organization of men, would continue to be its spiritual Head!

2. That church would be organized and governed exactly as Jesus Christ said to His disciples. He explained how the kings and potentates of the gentile nations enjoyed "lording it over them," and said, "It shall not be so among you"! Jesus went on to explain that those who would be "the greatest" should become the servants of all. In the true Church of God, one will not find rule by fear; threats, coercion, hatred, strife, the wielding of frightening power over private, individual lives.

3. The true church will be preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God as a warning/witness to the world! Read Luke 24:47. That gospel, while it is the message of the soon-coming, world-ruling government of God; a message about the governing, ruling family of God, into which governing, ruling family we must be born, is nevertheless a message which must never OMIT THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST!

That true church will never be ashamed of the name of Jesus Christ - not ashamed of His name before government leaders, kings, presidents, premiers, people of any stature, great or small, rich or poor, Jew or gentile!

4. The true church will understand the truth about the weekly Sabbath! It will also understand the truth about God's annual Holy Days.

5. The true church will understand the truth about the pagan holidays of this world.

6. It will understand the truth about the false doctrines of the pagan churches, including the false doctrines of the rapture, an ever-burning hell, the Trinity and dozens of others.

7. The true church will have, safely intact, the body of doctrine Jesus Christ of Nazareth Himself delivered. It will be striving to "get back to the faith once delivered to the saints," by recapturing the true understanding as well as the spirit of the early New Testament church!

8. It will be structured as closely to the structure of the early apostles as possible - meaning a sense of teamwork, of absolute equality among apostles, and an open, friendly spirit of give and take in doctrinal and procedural discussions (see Acts 15).

9. That church will be humble, led of the spirit of Jesus Christ which is "goodness, mercy, forgiveness and faith," and will be striving to emulate Jesus Christ the Lord.

There are hundreds of identifying marks one may wish to apply to the true church. Every doctrine, small or great, could be applied - as could the attributes of the Holy Spirit of God, of "love, joy and peace," and most especially the absence of hatred, rancor, avarice, cunning, greed, politics, party spirit, strife, brute force, cruelty, and a hierarchy attempting to carry out the punishments for sin. Such would be pharisaical, cultic and not of the true Church of God!

Now, following your process of elimination, how many churches do you have left who fit the foregoing description?

It is not for any one organization to boast that it, and it only, is "the true church," for history proves that there have been scattered individuals, as well as contemporary groups, which have existed side by side, whose members have both been converted, spirit-led, baptized members of "that one body," which is the body of Jesus Christ!

It is impossible to "incorporate" on a legal piece of paper filed away in a secretary's file in the office of the secretary of state in some state capital the very body of Jesus Christ!

The true Church of God is a spiritual organism, and is a body you cannot join.

No. God must put you into it by giving you a calling, granting you repentance, baptism, the laying on of hands and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. God then inducts you into that true church.

On the Day of Pentecost in 31 A.D., Peter preached a powerful sermon about repentance. The people answered, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Peter, unlike many modern evangelicals, did not say, "See a counselor, or join the church of your choice," but told them, instead, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

And then what happened? They became members of the Church of God by being baptized into that one body!

"By one spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Remember! You cannot be in the Kingdom of God without having received the Holy Spirit of God! God will only give that Spirit to those who are willing to obey Him! (Acts 5:32). 'When you receive the Spirit of God you are receiving the spirit of a sound, sane mind (2 Timothy 1:6,7), which is the very mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5) and you are then "added to the church" because God says you are among those who "should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

Notice how it was done. Following that early experience at Pentecost, "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5:14).

Make no mistake! No one can arbitrarily "join" the true Church of God. Jesus Christ says expressly, "No man can come to Me, except the Father which has sent Me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44).

Yet, this does not mean Jesus does not want to call you - does not mean He is being exclusivist or restrictive - for He also said, "Come unto Me all ye that are weary, and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," and He also said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

If you are one who has been repentant of your personal sins, meaning the transgressing of God's holy law (1 John 3:4), then Jesus Christ tells you to be baptized (Acts 2:38, Romans 6) and have an authorized representative of God's true church lay hands on you for the receiving of God's Holy Spirit.

From that time on, you need no membership identification card, no "letter" sent to and kept in church files, and no material, man-made recognition whatever. From that time on, you are automatically inducted into the "one body of Jesus Christ," which is the true Church of God!

That true Church of God will be zealously attempting to do the work of God!

It will be preaching the same gospel Jesus Christ of Nazareth gave to the disciples. It will be a church in which is found the Spirit of God; the spirit of brotherly love, harmony, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, faith and understanding.

It will probably be quite small, perhaps looked upon as weak and ineffective, even persecuted, widely scattered, and will not be a vast organization of this world!

Yet it will be "rich in faith," crying out daily to Almighty God for every need.

If you have repented, been baptized and received the Holy Spirit of God - if you know and understand what sin is, have repented of all those sins, and cry out to Jesus Christ as a daily High Priest making intercession for you if you stumble and sin as a Christian, and if you are zealously, eagerly and enthusiastically supportive of the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God as a last-minute witness and warning to a dying, sin-sick world - then you are a member of the true Church of God!

If you are not, you should be!

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