

Membership in a Local Church

by Jim Hammock, (re-printed from Feb. 2008)

Is there a difference in the “universal” church and the “local” church? If so, how are they different and why? How does one become a member of the church of Christ, both universally and locally? What is the purpose of the local church? Must a Christian be a member of a local congregation? How does one become a member of a local congregation? Does a local congregation have the responsibility to decide who can be a member?

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, *“I will build My church.”* Jesus built his church and purchased it with his blood. It is not my church, it is not your church, it is not our church. We can’t decide how one enters it, nor do we plan the organization, worship or the work it will be involved in. Everyone who enters the church does so on God’s terms, and when an individual, based upon their faith in God, repents of their sins, confesses Christ as the son of God and is baptized for the remission of their sins, God adds them to his church. [Rom. 10:17, 10:9-10; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38]. When one follows those conditions, one becomes a member of the church of Christ, added by God. *“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* [Acts 2:47]. But this does not make him a member of a local church. We are baptized into *“one body,”* the universal church, but we *“join ourselves”* to a local church.

Local church membership involves the agreement of the individual and of the group to work together. In Acts 9, when Saul left Damascus because of a threat on his life, he went to Jerusalem and *“tried to join the disciples”* there. Why? He had already obeyed the gospel and become a Christian. The Lord had already *“added”* him to the church of Christ. So what was he trying to *“join?”* There had to be some organization there in order for Paul to *“join”* it. It was the local church of Christ made up of the believers in Jerusalem.

This is an example from scripture showing the necessity of an individual joining with other Christians to perform certain duties and be involved in certain activities, thus fulfilling the work of a local church of Christ. Another example is in Acts 18:27, where we read of brethren in Ephesus writing a letter to Achaia, exhorting them to receive Apollos [Acts 18:27].

God had certain definite purposes in mind when he planned the church which Jesus built. He did not create a church for no reason whatsoever. His purposes included:

1] To edify the members. Paul wrote that everything which is done in the assembly is to be for edification. *How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.* [1 Cor. 14:26]. Encouraging one another to obey and do the will of God. *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.* [Heb. 10:24-25].

The congregational assembly is designed to encourage us to live as we should. This is the reason that time is spent in presenting sound, apostolic doctrine [Acts 2:42; 20:7]. There is to be a presentation of God’s word designed to teach members their responsibilities before God. This is as necessary in the 21st century as it was in the 1st century.

2] To do the work of the Lord. God has given the church, as a collectivity, certain obligations. The church is to spread the word of God through financially supporting gospel preachers [2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:15-16]; it is the *“pillar and ground of the truth”* [1 Tim. 3:15]. The church is to care for the needy

among them [Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-7; 11:27-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9]. It is to function like a body with every individual part doing its part [1 Cor. 12:13-27; Eph. 4:11-16].

3] To offer worship to God. The church assembles together to sing praises to God [Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16]; to commemorate the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord (notice that the Lord's supper is to be observed "*when you come together in one place*" [1 Cor. 11:20]; offer prayer [1 Cor. 14:15]; hear the word of God preached [Acts 20:7; 2:42]; and to give of their means [1 Cor. 16:1-2].

4] To practice discipline of the membership. The congregation is expected to discipline unruly and disorderly members [1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15]. This work is to be done "*when you are gathered together*" [1 Cor. 5:4].

Fulfillment of these God given purposes can only be done through a local church arrangement. God always intended for the individual Christian to work in association with other Christians to accomplish the works given to the church. If God's work is not optional, then one's association with the church is not optional.

Let us now go back to the example of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9 for further instruction on this topic. When Saul attempted to join with the saints in Jerusalem, the record says that they were afraid of him, and would not receive him, until Barnabas explained the situation and recommended him. [Acts 9:223-26]. Once that was done, Paul joined with them in fulfilling the above listed works of a local congregation. The record says that Paul was "*with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out*" [v. 28]. Please note that the church in Jerusalem was not condemned for their original opposition. **This teaches us that there must be a desire to belong, and a willingness to receive, in order for a local membership to exist. A church cannot force a person to "join," and an individual cannot force himself upon a church.**

It is for all these reasons that the saints here at Indiana Avenue church of Christ meet with prospective members. We have an obligation to guard the flock, to keep the church pure, to avoid fellowship with error and to see that sin, division and strife do not enter in. *Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.* [1 Cor. 1:10]
Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM. I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE." Therefore "COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE, SAYS THE LORD. DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN, AND I WILL RECEIVE YOU." [2 Cor. 6:14-17]

This is why prospective members are asked questions, such as "how were you saved?" Other questions dwell on the doctrinal practices of the church of Christ where they were previously members, dealing with institutionalism and the social gospel that so many churches of Christ are now erroneously involved in. Other inquiries deal with scriptural teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage. We must also let prospective members understand that this congregation will practice scriptural discipline, and that every member is obligated to practice godly, loving and scriptural congregational discipline.

Some say this is prying, but it is actually showing love and concern for one's soul. If you were not baptized for the right reason, wouldn't you want to know that? If you had been in fellowship with error, wouldn't you want to repent of that as soon as possible? If you are in an adulterous relationship, and your soul is lost, wouldn't you want someone to teach you the truth?

Some say that the prospective member will eventually hear a sermon or be in a class that discusses these matters. We don't know that for sure, or if personal application will be made, or if they will learn the truth before it is everlastingly too late. If we have an idea that a person has been in fellowship with error, or is in an adulterous relationship, or has never been baptized for the remission of their sins, what kind of loving Christians are we if we ignore their plight?

It is our desire to be a pure, wholesome and sound congregation, a church of Christ that we read about in the New Testament. A church that does not add to nor take away from God's word and God's instructions on the work, the worship and the organization of His church.