

*LESSON 33: "An Important First Step in Walking With the Lord:
Your Place in the Church"*

An Important First Step in Walking with the Lord

Now that you have decided to follow Christ and live a life pleasing to Him, you are probably wondering, "What do I do? How do I go from here? Which path will bring spiritual growth?"

One of the essential building blocks of spiritual growth is to become a part of a local church. The church, meaning the entire body of Christians, was established by Christ to provide you with biblically sound instruction, allow you to express genuine worship with other believers, enable you to use your God-given gifts and abilities as He intended, and keep you accountable to spiritual leadership.

But the church is not designed to only benefit the believer. The ultimate goal of the church is to bring attention and glory to the Person who unifies it: Jesus Christ. When the church operates as God intended, it serves as a powerful witness of His love and provision to a watching world.

Your Place in the Church

The first-century church had the reputation of "turning the world upside-down" with Christ's message. It was a place for devoted fellowship and valuable instruction, and it serves today as our model. God wants the church, also called in Scripture "the body of Christ", to stand out and be His light in these ever-darkening days. Any Christian who wants to please God and make a positive impact for Christ must become part of a local church.

Christ designed the church to provide you with tremendous blessing and opportunity. Involvement in the local church is necessary for your spiritual growth, and it is something you will never outgrow. God has placed spiritually gifted people in the church to both instruct you and encourage you to lead a holy life. No Christian can endure or prosper long if he lives in isolation without the support of the church. Not only do you need the Church, but the Church needs you! God has given you, as a Christian, unique gifts and abilities that will be a blessing to others.

The Bible instructs us to, "...consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together..." (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Christians need to gather for corporate (united) worship. The benefits you receive from expressing your thanksgiving and praise with other believers, publicly reading and studying the Scriptures and praying in accord cannot be duplicated or replaced. This is one of the ways God has instructed us to worship Him in "spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24).

The church provides an ideal outlet for serving Christ. God has created you with unique spiritual gifts and talents that benefit the rest of the body of Christ. Scripture explains that the

Holy Spirit displays God's power through each of us as a means of helping the entire church (1 Corinthians 12:7). No one is "left out" so to speak. If you fail to regularly fellowship in a church with other believers, you are neglecting the opportunity to use what God has given you.

Following Christ's example, the early believers shared food, clothing, and housing with each other. The Bible asks, if you see a fellow Christian who is in need and you say to him "Well, good-bye and God bless you, stay warm and eat hearty," without giving him any food or clothes, what good have you done? (James 2:16). The body of Christ should look out for its own.

Characteristics of a Healthy Church

The church is not really an organization so much as an organism. It thrives by keeping its members spiritually active and well fed. The Bible has plenty to say about the characteristics of a healthy, vibrant church, and you can measure its vitality by comparing its qualities to the characteristics of the first-century church (Acts 2:42,44-47).

A healthy church meets together regularly, places a high priority on Bible study and develops caring people who concern themselves with the well-being and spiritual development of each member. It recognizes the power of corporate prayer and worship and demonstrates Christ's love in meaningful ways. Its members desire to minister to others and seek to share God's good news with others.

In any Biblically-sound, God-centered church the following beliefs should be obvious:

The Bible is held as the inspired and only infallible authoritative word of God (2 Timothy 3:16)

God is eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (John 14:26, Matthew 28:18, 19)

Salvation is the free gift of God to all who will repent of their sins and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the only way to come into a relationship with God (John 14:6, Ephesians 2:8-9)

A healthy church is also a growing church. But growth alone should not necessarily be viewed as proof of God's blessing. The first disciples had a "gladness and a singleness of heart" about the early church. Your church home should be a place you look forward to attending not only on Sundays, but throughout the week.

Among other things a feeling of discomfort in a church can be a prompting from the Holy Spirit that the church is unscriptural. The Bible warns of false teachers and only by growing in your understanding of the Scriptures and through prayer will you be able to discern truth from error. Avoid any group that teaches doctrines, beliefs or rituals that deviate from the Bible. Many false teachers speak only parts of the truth and their messages have been aptly described as the "skin of the truth stuffed with a lie." Most cults are identifiable because they refuse to:

Adhere solely to the sixty-six books of the Bible. Instead, they add their "special revelations."

Accept that our relationship to Jesus Christ has been provided by God through His grace and is received through faith alone. Instead they practice salvation by works.

Acknowledge Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God and give Him the full recognition He merits.

Commonly known cults are Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-Day Saints or Mormons, Unification Church, Worldwide Church of God, Unitarians, Spiritists, and Scientologists.

Finding Your Place

It has been wisely said, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." Regular fellowship and participation in the church for a disciple cannot be overemphasized. As you come to church and find your place in it, you will then be in a position to give to others what God has given to us.

The church that is right for you will be a place where you can grow in your love for the Lord and serve Him by contributing to the life of the church. Remember we are all sinners doing our best to follow God's teaching. Rely on Him to show you the way.

Billy Graham offers this advice, "First, . . . I would select a church which preaches the Gospel faithfully. However, it is not enough to be sound theologically. I would choose a church which endeavors to practice what it preaches, translating its beliefs into everyday life. . ."

Remember that the model for a God-honoring church is in the Scriptures. Study God's design and pray to be led to the place He has prepared for you. God bless you as you grow in your faithfulness.

