

Church Life

By Philip Venables

People desire to get involved with the life of a church for various reasons. Some do so because they feel they should do something for God. Others feel that if they are helping in a church it will make them to be esteemed in the local community, and there are many other reasons.

However, as in all things, we need to consult the Bible to see what God's view is on this matter. From the Bible we deduce that there is a proper order which God has established. First we need to become Christians, then we need to be baptised, then we should become members of a church, then we should live and serve as committed members. So let us initially seek to look at the first of these matters and answer the question: How do I become a Christian?

How do I become a Christian?

Many people come unstuck because they wrongly apprehend what makes someone a Christian. Therefore, let us initially answer our question negatively by establishing some of the things that do not make someone a Christian.

- Being born into a Christian family does not make you a Christian because all are brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin. (see Psalm 51:5).
- Infant baptism or christening does not make you a Christian because a baby cannot **“repent and believe in the good news”** (Mark 1:15).
- Living a good life does not make you a Christian because the LORD Jesus said **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”** (Luke 5:31b-32)
- Doing lots of impressive spiritual activities does not make you a Christian because the LORD Jesus anticipated a day when he would say to many who had done remarkable things, **“I never knew you; away from Me, you evildoers!”** (Matt. 7:23b)

These things being so, then who are Christians? Quite simply in the words of our Saviour they are people who have repented and believed the gospel. Exercising repentance towards God and faith in our LORD Jesus Christ makes someone a Christian (see Acts 20:21). Let us then look at the two

words which sum up the conversion experience; repentance and faith.

Repentance involves a grasping that you are going in a wrong direction and that you need to turn around and go in the right direction. We all have walked in the ways of sin and that is serious. We realise it is serious when we come into the holy presence of God. Isaiah did this and confessed "**Woe to me, I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips'**" (Isaiah 6:5). Peter did this and confessed to the Lord Jesus "**Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!**" (Luke 5:8b).

Repentance is vital because if we die in our sins we will eternally suffer the judgment of God on account of our sins. Revelation 21:8 gives a solemn disclosure of this as we read of the unrepentant having "**they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur.**"

As we turn from our sins we simultaneously believe the gospel concerning our LORD Jesus. The gospel is that "**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners**" (1 Tim. 1:15). For all those burdened down with their sins He says "**Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest**" (Matt. 11:28).

The LORD Jesus is the Lamb of God (fulfilling all the Old Testament prophecies) who is the taker away of the sin of the world (see John 1:29). He died on the cross to bring forgiveness. The principle is established that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (see Heb. 9:22). Now he has shed His own precious blood and there is a fountain flowing for sin and uncleanness (see Zech. 13:1). He is raised from the dead and His work is done. He has made eternal redemption (see Heb. 9:12). Let us come then believing in our LORD Jesus that we might have all our sins washed away in His blood (see Rev. 1:6).

Oh please turn and believe the gospel. The consequences of not doing so are too awful to consider; "**how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation**"! (Heb. 2:3).

Baptism

When we become Christians we start our spiritual life. The next step is to be baptised. Let us then look at the subject of baptism by asking a series of questions and seeking to answer them from the Bible.

Who should be baptised?

- Before He returned to heaven the LORD Jesus gave the great commission to His disciples saying "**Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**" (Matt. 28:19). In doing this he established that all disciples (Christians) should be baptised. This order was immediately followed by the disciples and on the day of Pentecost when **those accepted his message were baptised** (Acts 2:41a).

How should someone be baptised?

- The word used in the New Testament which is translated baptism has its root meaning in the process whereby cloth was dipped in a liquid to make sure that it was fully dyed. Thus baptism means that someone is fully immersed in water. Accordingly, in the New Testament we see that when the Ethiopian Eunuch believed the message about Jesus preached to him by Philip **both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptised him.** (Acts 8:38a).
- Also we note John was baptising in John 3:23b where "**there was plenty of water**".

Does baptism make me a Christian?

- No it does not. To become a Christian you must "**repent and believe the good news**" (Mark 1:15).

What does baptism signify?

- In Romans 6:1-6 Paul uses the imagery conveyed by the act of baptism to show the change that takes place in a person's life when they became a Christian. This person no longer wants to live for sin, but to live for righteousness. So just as the LORD Jesus finished with sin by dying on the cross so we show our desire to be finished with sin by "**being buried with him through baptism into death**" (v4a). Then we show our commitment to living in **a new life** (v4c) when we are raised out of the water; "**just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father**" (v4b). When we are baptised we are publicly telling everyone that we are finished with living for ourselves and now want to live for God.

If I was christened or baptised before I became a Christian do I still need to be baptised?

- The aforementioned scriptures all appear to set the order of first becoming a Christian and then being baptised. Accordingly, it would seem right to stick to this order. Therefore, it is inferred that, upon becoming a true believer in the LORD Jesus we should be baptised regardless of what has happened in the past.

How long after becoming a Christian should I be baptised?

- Having heard the message concerning Jesus, the Ethiopian eunuch says to Philip "**Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?**" (Acts 8:36b). Philip then tests to confirm that the eunuch now believes (v37) and baptizes him (v38). Similarly the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost indicates that baptism follows on from conversion. Peter's words were "**Repent, and and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins**" (Acts 2:38a). When we become Christians then we should immediately move on to considering being baptised.

Where should I be baptised?

- In baptism we give a public display concerning what has happened privately in our hearts. We are telling everybody that we now belong to the LORD Jesus. Baptism should therefore take place in public.
- It should also be associated with a local church. This is because they are the people who by meeting together publicly confess that they belong to Jesus who is their LORD. In baptism we do not signify that we are lone rangers, but rather that we are now part of a great group of people, called the church who follow the LORD Jesus. This is seen 1 Cor. 10:1-2 where the nation of Israel were all together in committing themselves to the leadership of Moses. This is seen as being baptised into Moses. So whether we are baptised in a baptistry, a river or the sea it should be done in connection to a local church.

What should I do after I have been baptised?

- You should continue to witness for Him. It is interesting that baptism signified the commencement of the public service of the LORD Jesus (see Mark 1:9-15).

Similarly with Saul (Paul) after he was baptised, "**At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.**" (Acts 9:20). For ourselves one crucial aspect of continuing this witness is to be a member of a local church.

Church Membership

Having confessed faith in our LORD Jesus by being baptised the next stage for someone to consider is that of becoming a member of a church.

There are many Christian organisations around. However, it is the church which is the organisation with which all Christians are associated. In scripture God has set this institution forth as the great means to display His glory in this world. The LORD Himself said **I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it** (Matt. 16:18b).

There are two aspects to the church which must be differentiated. The first aspect is that of the “church universal”. Every true Christian is a member of this church. The other aspect is that of the church in its local manifestation. There is one universal church, but there are many local churches. The word church in fact gives the idea of being called out. So in the local church there should be those who have been called out of the world to belong to the LORD Jesus.

In a similar way to how the scripture expects all Christians to be baptised, there is also the expectation that all believers should be church members. Let us look at 1 Cor. 5 to gain some perspective on this and establish the principle of how important it is to be in local church fellowship.

In verses 1-2 we see there a man, who is a church member, has committed something evil. Upon becoming aware of this Paul calls upon the church **hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh** (v5a). Satan is the one who is **the prince of this world** (John 14:30a) and **the god of this age** (2 Cor. 4:4a). Paul is thereby saying that this man should be removed from church membership and placed in the realm where Satan dwells which is “the world”. The purpose of this is to lead the man to repent so that he can return to the blessed position of being in the local church (see 2 Cor. 2:3-11).

We learn, then, from this that there is a division between the local church where God rules (and as a loving Father provides for and protects His people) and the world where Satan rules. If someone is not a church member, for whatever reason, he is effectively, out in the world and that is serious.

Following on from this we can say that when someone commits themselves to a local church they are saying that they are committing themselves to the institution where God rules (the local assembly of Christians) and disowning affiliation to the other place, the world, where Satan rules.

Summing this up, we conclude that It is a serious thing for a Christian to decide to be a lone ranger, and refuse to join in testimony with a local assembly of Christians.

This raises the question though about which church we should join. There are so many around.

However, which church is the one for us? The answer to this must be that everyone must move carefully and prayerfully before the LORD. Three things we might say in general you should look for are:

- A church which holds to the holy scriptures as the word breathed out by God which has everything to equip a church for its construction and ongoing life (see 2 Tim. 3:16).
- A church where the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of sinners is held to and declared (see 1 Thess. 1:8a).
- A church where Jesus Christ is known to be LORD to the glory of God the Father (see Phil. 2:11b)

Having established this we must be aware that being a church member has to do with fellowship. It has to do with a sharing together in the things of God. So when someone finds a church they believe is seeking to follow the three things stated above, then it is necessary to go through a process of establishing that there really is fellowship between the individual and the church.

This process does not need to be overly formal, but needs to be undertaken otherwise church membership can just become a ticket to joining an organisation rather than, what it really is, a commitment to fellowship with a group of like-minded people.

When the church (duly led by the elders) and the individual are happy to commit themselves to one another then this is sealed by the formal joining of the church and becoming a church member.

We have considered then, the necessity for and means of becoming a church member. All this follows on from becoming a Christian. The order is in fact seen exemplified in the life of the first church at Jerusalem (see Acts 2:41-42) where the people were saved (they gladly received the word), were baptised and continued steadfastly together (as members of the church).

Living and Serving as Committed Church Members

We have now looked at the necessity for all Christians to consider becoming church members. Following on from this we need to look at how we should live as church members. Interestingly the basis on which we become church members can significantly affect the manner in which we conduct ourselves once we have come to enjoy the privileges of being a member of a church. Someone who drifts into becoming church member seemingly oblivious to what it means is likely to have little commitment to that church. On the other hand someone who makes a determined commitment to be a member of a church fellowship is likely to live as a committed church member, but what does it really mean to be committed to a church?

One helpful image for us in this context which is presented in the scripture of a local church is that of a body (see 1 Cor 12:12-31). The argument in this passage is that every part of the body is valuable and useful. No-one can argue that they are so insignificant that they have nothing to offer in the church; all have something to give. Moreover, if someone decides that they are not going to support the church and its activities then the church suffers as a result.

The principle that underlies this is that “privilege leads to responsibility”. It is a great privilege to be a part of a local testimony which is established to the glory of God.

This privilege leads to the responsibility to live a life which is appropriate for those who are in church fellowship and to serve to the end that the church will be built up.

We need to be aware therefore that the way we live is vitally important for the life of the church. Not only should we live godly in Christ Jesus in the church, but we should also do so in our homes, workplaces and communities. Any failure to do so ultimately reflects detrimentally on the name of the church and more importantly on the name of our God.

One of the sad consequences of David’s sinful acts towards Bathsheba and Uriah was that he had **“shown utter contempt for the LORD”** (2 Sam. 12:14). How sad it would be if we were to hear the church in Feltham spoken badly of because of the lax ways of one of the members. Let us therefore take heed to how we live. How great it would be if, like Peter and John, people would realise that we **“had been with Jesus”** (Acts 4:13b) because of the righteous quality of our lives.

One of the ways in which we display our commitment to the local fellowship is by supporting the services and activities of the church. Obviously some, through certain circumstances, are hindered from physically being present in church life. However, in many cases, those who are limited in this way, show their commitment by their prayerful interest in the church. Notwithstanding this we should endeavor, like that first church in Jerusalem did, **“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”** (Acts 2:42), and we should take heed to the exhortation to the Hebrews to be **not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing** (Heb10:25a).

Furthermore we should commit ourselves to the work of the church. We are not here to build mini-empires in the church like Diotrephes in 3 John:9, but rather to labour together for the faith of the gospel. In all our labours in the church let us remember that we are seeking to set forth the great gospel of our God. So whether we are cleaning the toilets, doing some painting, visiting people at home or preaching the Word we all need to focus on the fact that we are assisting in maintaining a testimony for the LORD.

One crucial way in which we support the church is in having a proper attitude towards those whom the LORD has set to have authority in the church.

Paul says **“to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work”** (1 Thess. 5:12b-13a). In this anti-authoritarian age we must be careful to assist the elders and deacons in their work. In doing this we are supporting the proper ordering in the church which is all to the LORD’S glory.

So to recap on some of the issues we have considered we note that a Christian should be baptised and a baptised Christian should be a church member. Finally we have come to the issue we have dealt with in this article that all church members have a responsibility to diligently follow the LORD in the church to which they are affiliated.

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