

Church – Secondary but Vital

Saying that church is secondary seems to be an odd and controversial thing for believers to say, but today many people don't seem to even think it is secondary. To them church is unnecessary and irrelevant. They see no necessity of going, they don't like it when they do, and are content to "do Christianity on their own". They say they can have church in their heart, while in their easy chair or a fishing boat or tree stand.

But why would we, who are part of a church, and take it seriously, think that church is secondary instead of saying that it is of prime importance? To understand this is why I added "vital" to the title. We are to preach Christ to unbelievers, not "Come to church". For the unbeliever the church is secondary, but once saved, it becomes vital.

We all have friends or acquaintances that we have invited to church. The hope is that they will come, be touched by the Lord, receive the gospel, be born again, and then become a part of the church. This certainly happens and we rejoice when it does, but it is to misunderstand the purpose and the makeup of a genuine NT church.

What is a NT church, who are its members, and how is it different from most churches today or throughout history?

What is a NT Church?

While we often think of the church in a corporate sense, as in the "church in America, China, Nigeria, etc.", the NT references to church are almost always referring to local churches – churches in specific cities, or regions, like Ephesus, Berea, Jerusalem, or Galatia. The word referred not to a building, or a denomination (that arose much later), but simply to the collection of Christians in that vicinity who met together for worship, teaching, prayer, and observing the ordinances of water baptism and the "communion" of the Lord's supper. They had a living and real connection with all the members and used their resources to help the poor and to support gospel outreach to new areas. As persecution arose they supported surviving family members, and prayed for the brethren in areas that were particularly affected (like today in Nigeria and China). They also exercised church discipline to correct erring members, or to purge from among themselves any who had so grievously sinned that they were bringing reproach on Christ and his church.

Where did they meet? Most often in homes, eventually in dedicated buildings, sometimes in caves, barns, woods, or catacombs. The point is that the building or location was not "the church" at all. The church was a specific group of baptized believers who met regularly, regardless of the location.

The NT has constant references to the church and churches, but not to individual believers that are unassociated with a church. In the NT time that would have been considered quite abnormal (and it still should be).

Who are the Members of a NT Church?

How does one become a member of a church? In most churches, it is a matter of attending until comfortable enough to commit to "membership" and then meeting with the pastor or "minister" to indicate a desire for membership. This may be followed by an interview, class attendance, "confirmation", perhaps baptism, and then entering your name in the "membership list", and perhaps a public announcement that you are now a member. Sometimes no formalities are required at all – a person attends so often that it is assumed that they are a part of the church. Some churches will require a confession of faith, and perhaps an agreement to abide by the church rules.

But what does the Bible say? (does that matter any more? Certainly to us it does.)

Ac. 2:47 – "... And the LORD added to the church daily such as should be saved."

1 Cor. 12:18 – "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him."

While we certainly become a part of the church and participate voluntarily, we must recognize that it is God who puts us in the church, and it is as it pleases him. He doesn't save us to leave us dangling, unassociated with other believers. If we can be satisfied "doing Christianity on our own" and see no need of being an active and faithful part of a church, than we are ignorant of God's purpose, or deceived, rather selfish, and will be spiritually stunted and unfruitful. Apparently some don't really want to be Christian, but just to soothe their conscience with forgiveness of sins and the hope of making it to heaven when they die.

If we believe that God sets us in the church as it pleases him, there are implications:

1. We should not be church-hoppers, but should make a real and continuing commitment to a local church. Admittedly we must try enough churches to identify one that is faithful to the Word and Truth. Then in prayerful consideration we believe that God will direct us to where he wants us.
2. We should see our responsibility as active and faithful participation, not just attendance and check-writing.
3. We cannot leave and go elsewhere just because we get our tail in a knot, or because another place has a more dynamic speaker, better programs, louder music, more eligible marriage partners, a larger congregation, more exciting youth group, a better softball team, etc. If that is what you are looking for, you can surely find it somewhere, but what does God have to do with your decision?
4. Does this mean we can never leave? No, obviously there are reasons to change churches, as
 - a. Relocation for job, marriage, or family reasons
 - b. Relocation because of a ministry calling
 - c. If the church descends into unbelieving, erroneous, or perverse teachings and associations. Sometimes we realize that the church we joined has fundamentally changed, that it has forsaken the truth and is no longer a place of strength and Christian support, but a refuge of lies. It is commonly said we are to “bloom where planted”. This has a measure of truth, but it doesn’t mean that we should stay and be polluted, wither and die. Sometimes a love of the God and truth means we must uproot and find a new church.

Rev. 18:4 – “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”
5. If you are not a born again, believing, converted believer in Jesus Christ, than you are not really a part of any church, no matter where you go on Sunday or where your name is on a list. You are a mere attender, a goat among the sheep, and tares among the wheat.

What is the Purpose of a NT Church?

The church must be evangelistic, but since it consists of true believers, than its services are not ordinarily intended to be evangelistic. The purpose of our gathering together is not to hear endless appeals to sinners to repent, and choruses of “Just as I Am”. We are to minister to those who are already believers, to encourage, teach, and nourish them to greater effectiveness in the kingdom of God, and to greater spiritual maturity and fruitfulness.

Occasionally unbelievers do attend, and so we should always be observant and ready to lead them to Christ. But we should not see inviting people to church as a substitute for personal, every-day evangelism. It may be easier to invite people to church than to talk to them personally about Christ and the gospel, but the fact is, most unbelievers have no desire to attend church. Why should they?

None of this is to deny the benefit or effectiveness of evangelistic meetings, where the express purpose is the preaching of the gospel to the unsaved. Evangelistic meetings are not really church, and the follow-up should be to bring these new converts into the church where they can then be nurtured and fed spiritually.

So what does it mean to say that church is “Secondary but Vital”?

A true church consists of people who are already saved, and exists for individual maturity and growth, and collective service and fruitfulness. It is secondary because it comes after salvation.

Church attendance is pointless for a person who is has no intention of becoming a Christian. In fact it may just harden them with a religious spirit of self-satisfaction. Normally we should not be inviting unsaved people to church, except as a follow-on to our own witnessing and conversations with them on what it means to be a Christian. Our primary goal should be their hearing and receiving of the gospel, not just getting them in the door.

However, what comes after conversion is the absolute necessity of becoming a functioning and faithful member of a true local church. This is not a matter of preference, it is vital.