

Question (shayla): Is attendance to a formally organized church necessary? Isn't any gathering of believers, including a home Bible study or prayer group a church?

Answer (meforshim):

The church is not a building¹, but a group of believers who have gathered together to worship the Lord.² Its purpose is the maturation of the believer. In order to achieve this goal, God gave certain gifts that, when appropriately exercised, will bring spiritual maturity.³

A group of Christians does not necessarily comprise a church any more than a pile of bricks makes a house. Until properly organized, all you have is useless chaos. Paul considered matters unfinished until elders were appointed to lead.⁴ Consider what happened in Israel when there was no authorized leadership and each man did as he saw fit.⁵ Because of the tendency of any group of humans to follow the lowest common denominator⁶, these elders must measure up to some pretty high standards. These qualifications must be not only observed by the congregation (and the local community) but publicly approved!⁷

Consider the following views of the ekklesia:

The Church as a Court

Does any of you who has a complaint against someone dare go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels--not to speak of things pertaining to this life? So if you have cases pertaining to this life, do you select those who have no standing in the church to judge? I say this to your shame! Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who will be able to arbitrate between his brothers? - 1 Corinthians 6:1-5 HCSB

The foundational truth of Christ's identity as the divine Messiah forms the basis for the existence of the single largest and most powerful human organization on earth – the ekklesia. "The what?" you may ask. "Don't you mean the 'church'?" Well...yes and no.

You see, like the term "Christian", "Church" as a word as been so used, abused and confused that many people don't even know what it means any more. Some think that a couple Christians hanging out at the local donut shop form a church. They'll even quote Jesus as saying "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there among them."⁸

The problem is that the context of that statement was actually church discipline! Our Lord gave us the whole disciplinary procedure from private rebuke to public censure. Then He authorized the ekklesia saying, "I assure you: Whatever you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is already loosed in heaven. Again, I assure you: If two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by My

¹ Isaiah 66:1; Acts 17:24

² Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 3:6

³ Hebrews 10:24-25; Ephesians 4:11-14

⁴ Titus 1:5

⁵ Judges 19

⁶ Titus 1:10-11; 2 Timothy 4:2-4

⁷ Acts 6:3, 6; 13:1-3; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 3:2-7

⁸ Matthew 18:20

Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there among them."⁹

So the verse most used by those who argue they don't have to attend church is actually supporting a formally structured and duly authorized assembly!

As with most things, to get a proper understanding of the ekklesia, you have to go back to the beginning, meaning in the Old Covenant. Every time you find the word "ekklesia" in the Septuagint, it is translating the Hebrew word "qahal".¹⁰ Qahal is not actually a "religious" term. It is used in the Old Covenant as an assembly gathered to judge or deliberate a matter. You see this in Ezekiel where the assembly gathered to judge and execute judgment.¹¹ It can be the whole assembly of all of God's people¹² or a smaller group duly appointed to represent them.¹³

Either way, a 'qahal' or 'ekklesia' must be formally structured, organized and authorized to count as a true assembly. Two or three individuals gossiping around the water cooler can make judgments but their judgment doesn't really count for anything.

The Church as an Army

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" And Jesus responded, "Simon son of Jonah, you are blessed because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the forces of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is already loosed in heaven." - Matthew 16:16-19 HCSB

One of the first times "qahal"¹⁴ is used it describes the assembly gathered to plan or execute war.¹⁵ For example, the whole 'qahal' of Israel asked for tax relief and when their request was refused, they rejected their military obligations to King Rehoboam.¹⁶

We are here to fight a spiritual war and if properly based on the right concept of our Lord's true identity, the ecclesiastical army is invincible! Christ said that the forces of Hades itself would be completely useless against her.

Although we are walking in the flesh, we do not wage war in a fleshly way, since the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds. We demolish arguments and every high-minded thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.¹⁷

Paul called Epaphroditus, Apphia and Archippus "fellow soldiers"¹⁸ and urged Timothy to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."¹⁹ It interests me that Paul fleshed out that metaphor by immediately delving into submission to proper authority and following the rules,²⁰ two things that those who don't feel they need to attend church pretty consistently struggle with.

⁹ Matthew 18:15-20; note that Jesus was alluding to the halakic practice of only judging crimes on the basis of two or three witnesses which is why a beit din must have no less than three members.

¹⁰ Strong's #6951; literally "assembly"

¹¹ Ezekiel 23:45-47

¹² 2 Chronicles 1:2

¹³ 1 Chronicles 13:1-2

¹⁴ Strong's #6951; literally "assembly"

¹⁵ Genesis 49:6 cp Ezekiel 17:17

¹⁶ 1 Kings 12:3

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

¹⁸ Philippians 2:25; Philemon 1:2

¹⁹ 2 Timothy 2:3

²⁰ 2 Timothy 2:4-5

As a Marine, I understand the power that a few well-trained, coordinated and committed people wield. Jesus understood that as well, focusing his attention on twelve good men (the size of a squad) but really working on Peter, James and John (the size of a fire team). However, He never intended them to stay that small, commanding his “force amplifiers” to go, make disciples, baptize and teach them everything.²¹

In order to ensure the faithful continuance of His teachings, He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers²² to the church and until some appropriately gifted and called leaders are appointed – any gathering of Christians is not a real church.²³

Is a handful of soldiers an army? Oh, they can do a lot of damage – but are they an army? Then neither is a handful of Christians meeting in someone’s kitchen. Until they are properly organized and authorized, they are nothing more than insurgents.

Those who fail to bring their parachurch activities under the authority of their local ekklesia DO create a lot of damage. Unfortunately, it’s usually to the cause of Christ.

The Church as a Worshipping Congregation

Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of the Cushite woman he married (for he had married a Cushite woman). They said, "Does the LORD speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?" And the LORD heard it. Moses was a very humble man, more so than any man on the face of the earth. Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "You three come out to the tent of meeting." So the three of them went out. - Numbers 12:1-4 HCSB

God is concerned about decency and order.²⁴ Since the very first act of worship, God has always been concerned about doing things the right way.²⁵ Unfortunately, since the very first act of worship, Humanity has been rebelling to that authoritative chain of command. Cain rebelled and ended up killing his brother Abel over it.²⁶

In Numbers, we read that Miriam and Aaron, out of jealousy, failed to submit to and criticized the properly gifted and called leader. Now, to get how seriously God takes this, you need to understand that they were actually PART of the chain of command! Aaron was the high priest²⁷ and Miriam was a worship leader!²⁸ God actually stated that He had sent all three to rescue the people of Israel from Egypt.²⁹

Yet when Miriam and Aaron grumbled, “Does the Lord speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?”, the Lord heard it and called them out on the matter. He reinforced Moses’ leadership and afflicted Miriam with leprosy. Once Aaron properly submitted to Moses’ God-ordained authority and addressed Moses as “my lord”, God healed her, though she still had to remain outside the camp for seven days.³⁰

The worshipping assembly was not everyone who lived among the Israelite people. Only those who met certain qualifications were allowed to enter the “qahal” and offer sacrifices.³¹ They could be neither temporary dwellers nor permanent dwellers who refused to submit to

²¹ Matthew 28:19-20

²² Ephesians 4:11-14

²³ Titus 1:5

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:40

²⁵ Genesis 4:3-7

²⁶ Genesis 4:8

²⁷ Exodus 28:1

²⁸ Exodus 15:20-21

²⁹ Micah 6:4

³⁰ Numbers 12:1-16

³¹ Deuteronomy 23:1

the laws of the land.³² In today's congregational terms that would imply "church hoppers" or "church attendees living in unrepentant sin." How much less those who fail to attend at all?

Clearly, the qahal is the qualified, authorized, submissive, worshipping and voting community.³³ Anyone may worship at any time, anywhere. We can worship God in prison! We can worship God in catacombs, open fields and cow sheds! But worship is not the sole criteria for the formation of a church, any more than shooting bullets is the sole criteria for the formation of an army!

Many try to circumvent the qualifications necessary to be a church leader³⁴ by starting a little home Bible study and then using THAT as their soap box for their personal views. They can bypass the clear teachings of the apostles and the authority of the elders.³⁵ They'd rather be big fish in a small pond.

All we can say to such is, "Remember what the Lord Your God did to Miriam on the journey..."³⁶

The Church as School

And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. - 2 Timothy 2:2 HCSB

"I don't need to attend church." Some claim. "I can stay home and read my Bible. The Holy Spirit Himself teaches me." They'll even quote, "The anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. Instead, His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie; just as it has taught you, remain in Him."³⁷

However, just as they misquote Christ's reference to a *beit din*³⁸, the folks also take John's words out of context. John was warning against those who would try to deceive and urging us to rely on the Holy Spirit's ability to remind us of Christ's teachings.³⁹ In this, he was leaning on the Master's promise that when we will be handed over for the Great Persecution we will not need to worry about how we should speak or what we should say. The Holy Spirit will give us the right turn of phrase at that hour and we will not be speaking but the Spirit will be speaking through us.⁴⁰ He will be so effective that none of our adversaries will be able to resist or contradict our message.⁴¹

However, this passage cannot be misconstrued as authorization to escape the proper chain of command. Paul urged young pastor Timothy to give attention to public reading, exhortation and teaching. "Do not neglect the gift that is in you;" he said, "it was given to you through prophecy, with the laying on of hands by the council of elders."⁴² Did you notice how Timothy received his authority?

Ongoing discipleship and teaching holds a central part of the Lord's Great Commission.⁴³ That chain of custody was passed on by the authority of the Father to the Son, to the apostles, to the elders of the first century assemblies and on through, in an unbroken chain to

³² Numbers 15:15

³³ Numbers 16:3, 33 cp 18:4

³⁴ 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1

³⁵ 1 Timothy 4:14

³⁶ Deuteronomy 24:9

³⁷ 1 John 2:27

³⁸ Matthew 18:20

³⁹ John 14:26-27

⁴⁰ Matthew 10:17-20

⁴¹ Luke 21:15

⁴² 1 Timothy 4:13-16

⁴³ Matthew 28:19-20

today. What each pastor heard and was taught, was in turn taught to other faithful men who then continued teaching others also.

A crucial part of this process is the authority of the called out leaders of each local assembly to teach, reprove, rebuke, correct and train according to the Word of God.⁴⁴ It is their responsibility to rebuke false teachers and sinning sheep sharply so that they may be sound in the faith.⁴⁵ However, it must be “consistent with sound teaching”⁴⁶

There’s the rub. Without regard to the warning about teachers being judged by higher standards,⁴⁷ some wolves still desire to cut a few sheep out of the herd so that they can devour them at their leisure.⁴⁸ They just want to voice their opinions and live however they like.

“Woe to those who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who are wise in their own opinion and clever in their own sight.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

It is the considered opinion of the elders of the church that I pastor that because of these and many other scriptures that only the properly organized and authorized assembly, led by gifted, called and sanctified elders and deacons, is to be considered a church.

The Psalmist said “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”⁵⁰ Each of us has a significant contribution to make to the local body.⁵¹ Our Master attended His local congregation regularly,⁵² and when we fail to follow His example we not only fail the Body, but we run the risk of becoming cancerous!

While useful in a limited sense, para-church organizations and groups do not carry the Lord’s authorization and should submit their activities to the leadership of a local church.

Let us approach the house of God respectfully, with the purpose of listening and learning.⁵³ Let us not neglect our church meetings, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of His coming back again is drawing near.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁴⁵ Titus 1:13; 2:15

⁴⁶ Titus 2:1

⁴⁷ James 3:1

⁴⁸ 1 Timothy 1:7; 2 Peter 2:1-3

⁴⁹ Isaiah 5:20-21

⁵⁰ Psalm 122:1

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 12:13

⁵² Luke 4:16

⁵³ Ecclesiastes 5:1; Habakkuk 2:20

⁵⁴ Hebrews 10:25