

Why Should I Join a Church?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

Why Should I Join a Church?

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Contents

One	Sanctified People, Sanctified Space	1
Two	The Body of Christ	11
Three	One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic	21
Four	Visible and Invisible	33
Five	When to Leave a Church	43
Six	To the Ends of the Earth	55

Chapter One

Sanctified People, Sanctified Space

On a trip to the Holy Land, I visited one of the most important tourist sites in Jerusalem: the Dome of the Rock. This monument is one of the holiest Islamic shrines in the world. I was intrigued that as we approached the entrance, our guide spent five to ten minutes carefully instructing us on the proper protocol for entering into this sacred place. For example, we could not escort our wives by holding on to their arms because that gesture is deemed

Why Should I Join a Church?

inappropriate for such a holy place. And, of course, we had to take our shoes off before entering.

Isn't it interesting that religions of all sorts, all over the world, have their sacred sites, their holy places? Christians often think of the church as a building, a structure, a place where people gather for worship and religious activities. For that reason (among others), many people think they can do without the church. "I don't have to gather with other people in order to be a Christian," they think. "I can worship right where I am. I don't need the church."

In our culture and in our nation, many people express disenchantment with the institutional church, and many people feel that the church has let them down and has not met their expectations. We don't often find people excitedly saying, "Oh, how I love the church!" There is a disconnect here, because we know with certainty from Scripture that Christ loves the church. And if we are of Christ, we can't possibly fail to love, or even despise, what is so loved by Him.

What I hope to do in this book is offer an apologetic or a defense of the church. I want to define what the church is, to explain what the church is made up of, and to explore the church's vocation and mission. In this way, I hope to

lay out how vital it is for Christians to be joined to a body of believers.

We can quickly discover through our study of Scripture that the church is not a building—it is people. Yet even in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, the place of worship was very important to the religion of Israel. If you recall, the tabernacle was built according to the detailed provisions and commandments of God. The articles that were placed in that structure were crafted by men who were uniquely endowed by the Holy Spirit to perform their tasks. And the garments of the priesthood of Aaron were intricately designed by God's command. The same kind of detailed consideration was articulated by God for the building of the temple.

So if the church is not a building, why should buildings mean anything to us? It seems we've lost much of the mystique of former ages regarding church buildings. Church architecture has changed. Rarely do we see a new church building constructed in the Gothic style with vaulted ceilings and flying buttresses. A lofty sense of transcendence used to be communicated by the very building itself. Most of our church buildings today are designed in a more functional way. They're built to facilitate fellowship. In many

Why Should I Join a Church?

cases, they hardly differ from civic meetinghouses. Yet if you go down the main street of any city in the United States of America and you come upon a church, you will be able to recognize it immediately; there's something different about the building. Human beings in cultures and nations all over the world—wherever people are religious, whatever religion they practice—find a way to establish sacred buildings.

Anthropologists say that the heart of every human being contains an insatiable hunger to make contact with the holy. All religions in all cultures around the world have their individual examples of *hierophanies*. A *hierophany* is an outward, visible manifestation of the sacred. We want to see a distinction between the secular and the sacred, between the profane and the holy, even in our buildings.

Theologian Mircea Eliade observed that the front door of every church in America has a symbolic significance for people; it is a threshold, a line of demarcation. As we step over that threshold, we leave behind the secular and the profane, and we enter the presence of the holy, of the sacred, of the transcendent.

Now, we have to be careful, because we remember Jesus' teaching to the woman of Samaria. She wanted to engage

Jesus in a theological dispute about the proper place of worshipping God. “Is God to be found on this mountain?” she asked, pointing to Gerizim, “or is He residing in Jerusalem?” (see John 4:20). Jesus had to free this woman of her narrow conception of the localization of God. He had to teach her that God is not contained in buildings made by hands, that God cannot be captured within defined boundaries, and that God’s presence is as much in the secular realm as it is in what we call the sacred realm. But in spite of Jesus’ warning, we cannot ignore how basic it is to our humanity that we desire to set apart certain times and places for special significance and for holiness.

But again, the church isn’t a building; the church is people. The word for *church* in the Bible comes from the Greek word *ekklēsia*. The prefix *ek-* or *ex-* means “out of” or “from.” The root of *ekklēsia* comes from the Greek word *kaleō*, which means “to call.” So the church is something or someone who is called out of something else. The *ekklēsia* consists of those who have been called by God out of the world. The church consists of those to whom God has given a divine summons, a sacred calling by which He has commanded them to cross the threshold into the area of the holy.

Why Should I Join a Church?

In the Old Testament, when God summoned the Israelites to gather for corporate worship, a shofar (ram's horn) was blown. That signaled the people to leave their daily tasks and assemble in the presence of God. Often, that solemn assembly would be initiated by a prophetic summons: "Hear, O Israel. Listen, for the Lord your God is present in your midst, and He is about to speak." Even in today's church service, we begin with a summons, a call to worship, because the church is an institution that is called to worship. It is an institution *ek kaleō*, called out of the world, and its members are those whom God has called for a vocation—to be His people and to be holy even as He is holy.

One of the most important images of the church in the Bible is that of the bride of Christ. The image is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, wherein God takes a people to Himself and makes a vow. He enters into a solemn covenant with Israel. He pledges His everlasting faithfulness to His people, and in response, the people enter into an agreement with Him and recite their vows. And so a contractual union is effected in Israel. This image of marriage is found throughout the Old Testament; God is betrothed to Israel, and when Israel is unfaithful to God, the sin of

her disobedience is presented in the language of harlotry and adultery.

In the New Testament, we find a whole new dimension to this bride imagery. In order to grasp the fullness of this metaphor, we must first understand something about marriage in the Old Testament. After reading the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, we get a broader exposition of the law in Exodus 21 called “the Holiness Code.” Chapter 21 begins with teaching that sounds foreign to our culture. We read about the laws and the rules governing the handling of indentured servants or slaves. One such law states that if a man enters into slavery or has been purchased, he must, after six years, be freed when the sabbatical year comes. If the man brought his wife with him into servitude, then when he is freed, she must be freed as well. But if the man was single when he entered his period of slavery, and his master provided a wife for him, and the wife bears children to the slave, then at the sabbatical year, the slave is freed but his wife and the children stay with the master. When we read that, we stumble, not only because of the whole concept of indentured servitude, but because it seems cruel that the master keeps the wife and children.

Why Should I Join a Church?

But we must understand that in Israel, when a man wanted to marry a woman, he had to pay what was called the bride-price. He had to pay a substantive fee, and that fee demonstrated that he had the means to take care of his bride and whatever offspring they would produce. The father would not grant the hand of his daughter until the bride-price was paid. Now in the case of Hebrew servants, the Hebrew master had the responsibility to see that the bride and the children were taken care of. Remember that, in indentured servitude, the husband became indentured in the first place because he couldn't pay his debts. He had no money, so he had to work off his debts. He certainly wouldn't have the money to take care of a wife and children in the event of his liberation, so the law of God required that the master would still be responsible for caring for the wife and the children until the time that the husband could get back on his feet and pay the bride-price.

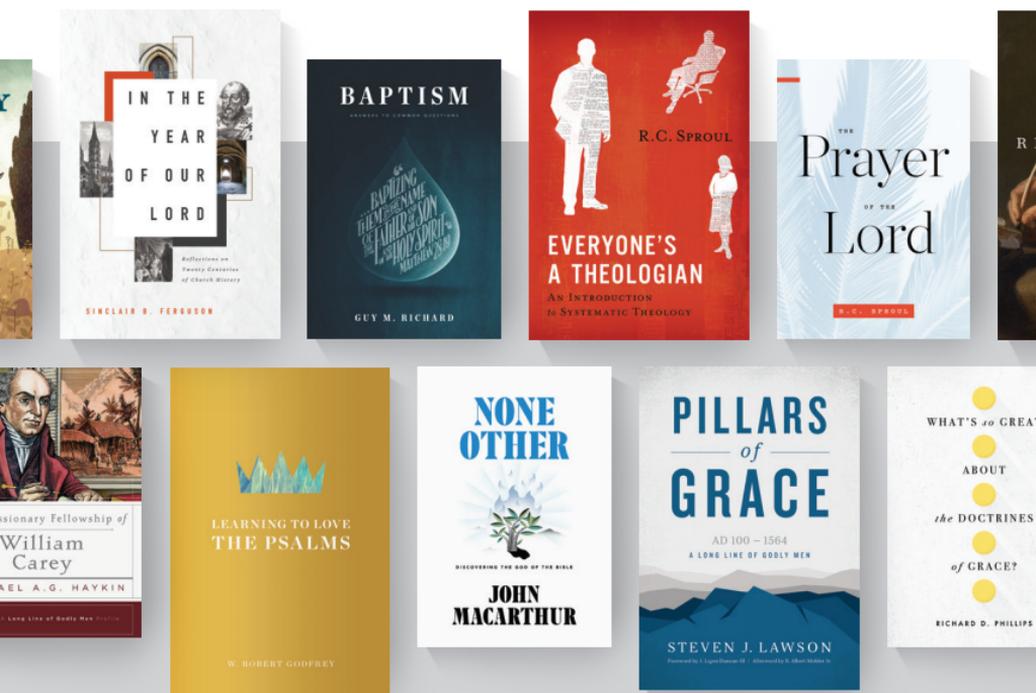
Why is this important for us? The primary reason the church is called the bride of Christ is because *Jesus purchased His bride*. He paid the ultimate bride-price, with nothing less than His own blood. Not only that, but this bride whom He purchased was not pure. In the Old Testament, if a woman pretended she was a virgin at marriage and it

Sanctified People, Sanctified Space

was discovered that she was not, severe penalties were meted out. But our Lord bought a bride who was not pure. He died for that bride. And He has promised the Father that He will present His bride at His final wedding feast in heaven without spot and wrinkle because He loves His bride. Christ loves the church and purchased it by His death.

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Who needs the church?

Many Christians dismiss the need to go to church. “It’s just a building,” they say. “I can worship anywhere. I don’t have to gather with other Christians.”

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains that the church is not merely a building—it is the people who meet there. Scripture even commands us to gather, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:25). It’s dangerous to attempt the Christian life alone. We need one another to live and worship well.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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